

How Long? How Long, O God?

Shabbat Chol HaMoeid Pesach 5780

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This Shabbat marks the fifth week of worshipping together via live stream, but the first from home rather than from our holy Temple Sanctuary. No sooner did we get used to gathering virtually—no longer able to hug, shake hands, or even elbow bump and wave—than we now have to acclimate ourselves to worship without even being able to see the sacred surroundings, visual cues that add meaning.

That first week, I talked about being a planner. I said I wasn't sure what we would be doing at Temple past the next Thursday, even though I'm the type of guy who usually has commitments on his calendar for two years from next Thursday. Slowly if imperceptibly, we are all getting used to a great deal of uncertainty—about our health; about our jobs, schools, and finances; about our summer plans—above all, about when this pandemic and all its attendant disruption will end.

On the one hand, getting used to a “new normal” is healthy. The better we adjust to life as it is at this moment, the less catastrophic our daily lives feel, and that's certainly good for our mental health. The more we get used to staying home and physically distant from most of the people who usually fill our lives, the more careful we are likely to be about the social distancing required to keep ourselves healthy.

Nevertheless, I was haunted this week by words in our Passover Haggadah: “When the Israelites had grown accustomed to their tasks, when the Hebrews began to labor without complaint, then God knew that it was time that they be liberated...As long as there was no prospect of freedom, God knew the Israelites would not awaken to the bitterness of bondage.”ⁱ Might we, like Israelites before us, prolong our own suffering by getting used to it?

Rabbi Dr. Andrea Weiss, Provost of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, urges us to look to the Psalms. Time and again, the psalmists cry out in agony, “How long, how long, Adonai?” Time and again, the psalms answer with faith and comfort. Perhaps if we, too, will permit ourselves to experience the misery—to have that long, “ugly” cry; to let out that primal scream of suffering, even if nobody can hear; to vent our frustration at the computer keys now stuck from overuse—we may then turn to our faith and find solace.

Rabbi Weiss provided colleagues with numerous Psalms that ask, *Ad matai*, “How Long, O Adonai, ...?”ⁱⁱ The question is rhetorical. The writer is anguished.

Has God forgotten him? Has God abandoned her to enemies? The specifics of Psalm 6 resonate with our current predicament: “Have mercy on me, Adonai, for I am stricken...And my life is hard stricken. And you, Adonai, how long?”ⁱⁱⁱ

Rabbi Weiss cites the noted scholar, Walter Brueggemann, who referred to these examples as “psalms of disorientation.” His description will ring familiar to us: “The condition of disorientation ‘may be a visible issue like a marriage failure, the loss of a job, a financial reverse, the diagnosis of the doctor...Or it may be disturbance of a public kind...the sense that the world is falling apart before our very eyes...

“All—or any—of these is the awareness that life is not whole, that it is not the romantic well-being that we may have been comforted with as children and that is so shamefully and shrewdly reflected in television ads...The Psalter is a collection over a long period of time of the eloquent, passionate songs and prayers of people who are at the desperate edge of their lives.”^{iv}

We are indeed stricken, a fact we would do well to acknowledge. Yes, we should make the best of any situation. At the same time, denial is unhealthy. We do miss the human touch. We do worry about Coronavirus: Will we or our loved ones get sick? We do harbor fears about our finances—our jobs, our education, our businesses, our institutions, our retirement. We are rightfully concerned about the potential post-traumatic impact of this isolation on ourselves—and even more, our children. More than a few of our congregants are suffering isolation from beloved parents, even spouses, who are living in facilities where families cannot currently visit. And imagine the loneliness of those folks in the facilities, many of whom may not leave their rooms—and, for that matter, of all who live alone at this time of isolation. With the psalmist, we all wonder: “How long?” When will life return to normal? And what will that “newer normal” look like?

Psalms of disorientation, thankfully, do not end with despair. They typically conclude instead with what Rabbi Weiss calls an “affirmation of trust and [a] vow to praise”^v God when help has come. Psalm 13, for example, begins, “How long, O Adonai, will You forget me always?”^{vi} It ends: “But in your kindness do I trust, my heart exults in Your rescue. Let me sing to Adonai, who healed me.”^{vii}

Rabbi Weiss tells us that Walter Brueggemann points to these hopeful conclusions as “Psalms of Reorientation,” writing of “the surprising move from disorientation to a new orientation that is quite unlike the old status quo. This is not an automatic movement that can be presumed...or predicted. Nor is it a return to the old form, a return to normalcy as though nothing had happened. It is rather ‘all

things new.’ When it happens, it is always a surprise, always a gift of graciousness, always an experience that evokes gratitude.”^{viii}

In the midst of crisis and suffering, envisioning that future is difficult, if not impossible. Thankfully, our tradition guides us.

I’ve often remarked that our Passover celebration mentions, but does not focus on, the 430 years that Torah tells us our ancestors endured in Egypt.^{ix} Nor do we linger to contemplate the near genocide perpetrated by Pharaoh and his people, throwing every newborn baby Israelite boy into the Nile^x. Instead, we celebrate our people’s liberation. And we rejoice, even though that freedom is not complete. Only on the seventh and last day of Passover do we commemorate the parting of the Red Sea. Even then, our people will wander in the desert for forty years before reaching the Promised Land. Still, they will not build a Temple for hundreds of years; and it will be destroyed, not once but twice. Even in this era of the greatest freedom of our people has ever known, both in North America and in Israel, we are acutely aware that we live in an unredeemed world. When we open the door to Elijah, we are opening our lives and our minds to the possibility of a perfect world that our minds cannot even contemplate.

When I announced the sermon title tonight, I heard the plea: “If you know how this is going to end, don’t wait until Friday night to tell us!” No, neither God nor anybody else has told me when this catastrophe will end. But Judaism reminds us: We have been distressed in the past. We have cried out to God. And we have been answered with freedom. May we soon know a liberation—greater, perhaps, than any we have ever known.

Amen.

ⁱ Herbert Bronstein, Editor, *A Passover Haggadah*, Revised Edition, New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1994. (First published in 1974.)

ⁱⁱ Psalms 6:4, 13:2-3, 74:10, 79:5, 80:5, 89:47, 90:13, 94:3. In Psalm 13, the Hebrew is *ad anah*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Psalms 6:4.

^{iv} Rabbi Andrea Weiss, Ph.D., lecture slide, citing Brueggemann, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion continuing education, March 31, 2020.

^v This terminology, and others in this paragraph, are provided by Rabbi Weiss.

^{vi} Psalms 13:2.

^{vii} Psalm 13:6.

^{viii} Rabbi Andrea Weiss, Ph.D., lecture slide, citing Brueggemann, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion continuing education, March 31, 2020.

^{ix} Exodus 12:40.

^x Exodus 1:22.