

“At the Edge of Destruction and Creation”

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“Something’s not right.” It’s the message that pops up on my email when the internet connection is shaky or the program has trouble loading. I had never really noticed the alert- until around March. This was not just because there seems to be so much more email during the pandemic. Sometime in March, I was struck by the profundity of the message. Since then, everytime it has popped up, I find myself emphatically agreeing...“You’ve got that right, Gmail. Something’s not right.”

So much that is not right has been revealed in the past 6 months. It feels like we have faced a constant barrage of wrongs: The assaults on democracy, the brazen displays of racist policing, the explosion of hunger and evictions, the inequity revealed by a plague that disproportionately impacts black and brown people in our country, the staggering death toll- a daily report of loss to which we have grown accustomed. So, yes, a lot is not right.

Today, on our Jewish calendar we welcome a new year, a fresh start, ordinarily a time of unburdening, of hope and optimism, but what does that mean when we stand in the midst of so many wrongs and so much uncertainty? When we’ve seen so much hardship and destruction, and we don’t know what comes next. When it can feel foolhardy to have hope, naive to believe in the potential that the new year brings.

But in spite of everything, I have to believe that we can summon hope for the New Year. You see, I’ve been working on a little quarantine project myself-- the doctors say it's a girl. Due on October 6th. And, so now, more than ever, I have to believe that we can make meaning from

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this chaos, that we can choose a path to a better future. As we stand at this inflection point...I believe there is the possibility for collective creation amidst all of this destruction.

Because moments like this, moments of disruption, chaos, instability...these moments offer us the chance to create the world anew.

Jewish history is no stranger to disruption. Let me take you back to the destruction of the 2nd Temple in 70 CE. To give you the cliff notes version...The Temple in Jerusalem was the center of Jewish life, maintained by the priests, the average Jew made pilgrimage there three times a year. The Babylonians had destroyed the 1st Temple almost 700 years earlier in 586 BCE and the Jews had gone into exile. But after returning to Jerusalem, rebuilding the Temple and briefly taking control of the city, in 70 CE the Romans triumphed over the Jews. They destroyed the Temple, exiled the Jews, and put a permanent end to Temple-based, centralized Judaism.

For the Jews of the 1st century CE, it was the end of the world as they knew it. We still mark the anniversary of the destruction as a day of fasting and mourning, called Tisha B'Av. But it was out of this destruction, out of this crash, as contemporary Rabbi Benay Lappe calls it, that rabbinic Judaism took hold.¹

The Judaism that we practice today was imagined by a group of disaffected rabbis who even before the Temple was destroyed saw that their Judaism was no longer working, that it was no longer sustainable. They imagined a Judaism that could be more democratic, that could expand, make learning available to more people. And when the world as they knew it was destroyed, they decided to try something radical and new.

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CBWIEAR_GQY

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In her talk on rabbinic Judaism, Rabbi Lappe cites historians who say that 90% of Jews who lived during the destruction of the Temple faded away- they stopped being Jewish. And I get it, they had experienced traumatic loss. It wasn't just the Temple that was destroyed, it was their whole lives. They lost hope. So they chose the path of least resistance and left their Judaism behind. They joined the Romans and allowed the destruction to dictate their identity.

But 10% made a different choice, and they chose, in the midst of the destruction...to create. They endured change, they endured discomfort, and out of the destruction they created a resilient Judaism that has survived through the adversity of centuries. The Judaism that brings us together this September morning in the year 2020.

Out of destruction, they chose creation.

When we recall the destruction of the Temple on Tisha B'av- we chant Eicha, also known as Lamentations. Eicha...how...how did the world as we know it come to be destroyed? Our mourning expressed in this question...how? Eicha is the sound of lament, and when we confront destruction and pain and suffering, we have to lament.

The past 6 months have been filled with necessary lament. For the big stuff and the small stuff. So many moments missed, gatherings denied, celebrations postponed. So much injustice revealed. So many lives lost. We ask, “Eicha...how did this happen?” “Eicha...How did we get here?” “Eicha...How did we lose so much?”

The word Eicha shows up again in the Jewish textual cannon, a few months after we observe Tisha B'Av...this time in Bereshit, the first portion of the first book of the Torah. It's spelled *aleph, yud, kaf, hey* in Hebrew. But when we see this word in Bereshit, it appears with slightly different vowels.

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Standing in the garden of Eden, in the immediate aftermath of creation, after the whole incident with the forbidden fruit and the snake...Adam and Eve discover themselves to be naked and they hide from God. God calls out to them, “Ayeka-- Where are you?” Same letters as Eicha, but this time, it is not the sound of lament. It's a strange question. Surely, God knows where they are...God is God, afterall. But the question “Ayeka,” is not for God, it is for Adam and Eve.

Ayeka is a question of action. When God asks Ayeka...God is asking, “Where does this moment find you? What does this moment demand of you?” Adam and Eve stand at the crossroads of creation and destruction...in a newly imagined world, about to be ousted from paradise... and God asks them “Ayeka... Where are you?” “I began creating this imperfect world for you, now what are you going to create?”

We stand at a similar crossroads, at the intersection of destruction and creation, of despair and potential. A time for lament, and a time for creation. After the destruction of the Temple, 10% of the community looked around and understood that the Judaism they had known was gone. They were honest enough to admit that it was flawed...and when the status quo was no longer an option, when everything they knew had been destroyed...they created their world anew. Standing in the ashes of the Temple, they did not just lament all that was ending, they took action.

When nothing is as it was, then we can re-imagine what will be.

On this day of new beginnings, the birthday of the world, we cannot just lament all that we've lost. We cannot be paralyzed by the fear of all that is unknown. Now is the time for us to answer the question, “Ayeka?” Where are you? Am I where I want to be? Is this the world I want to inhabit? Is this the world I want to pass on to the next generation? What do I need to change

about *my* life, about *my* community, about *my* country? We cannot simply claw our way back to normal, and so we have the chance to create the world anew.

This is hard, this is frightening, and this is precisely what this unique moment asks of each of us. As Rev. William Barber said in his remarks at the Poor People’s Campaign mass meeting in June, “We were born at the right time, and we are rising together at the right time. Each person with us today...each of you must know that this may be the reason you were born. Now might be the very moment that called you into being...Now is the time, this is the place, and we are the people.”²

There will be Eicha days, when we’re tired and overburdened, when the best we can do is sit on the couch. When we understand the exhaustion of the 90%, who faded away after the destruction of the temple, chose resignation rather than rebuilding. Days when rebuilding feels impossible, when the distance learning platform is down, or you’ve had one too many Zoom meetings, or the loneliness and uncertainty is overwhelming. There will be Eicha days when you feel sad, and tired and overwhelmed. But, hopefully, there will be days where you can find enough energy, enough hope, enough strength to imagine something different and you can begin building.

When Adam and Eve went forth from Eden, when the rabbis began debating Jewish law in the study hall, when freed slaves ran for congress at the dawn of reconstruction, when Jewish refugees found safe haven on American shores, when workers organized after the triangle shirtwaist factory, when two weeks after Bloody Sunday, John Lewis put on his raincoat and his backpack...and marched across the bridge in Selma. In the face of loss, in the face of destruction,

² Rev. William Barber II. Mass Poor People’s Assembly and Moral March on Washington: A Digital Justice Gathering. Speech on June 20, 2020.

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in the face of Eicha...they chose to create. They got the undeniable message, that “something’s not right” and they did something about it.

Our task is to be rebuilders, to be creators. When we are asked “Ayeka?” Where are you? We must respond, “Here I am.”

When we blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, we say “Hayom Harat Olam.” This is generally translated as “Today is the birthday of the world.” But another way to understand this text, perhaps slightly more faithful to the Hebrew, is to say “Today the world is pregnant”...Today the world stands on the cusp of a new beginning, with all of the uncertainty, the potential, the fear, and the hope contained in that translation. At the dawn of 5781, the world, this world, this fragile, flawed, broken world is filled with potential. What will we create?