Kol Nidre Sermon
5774

Elie Wiesel, the Nobel Prize winning writer and Holocaust survivor is someone who you might expect to have lost quite a bit of faith in his life. Born in Romania before World War II, Wiesel experienced hatred, death and the worst of sadness firsthand, and by the time he was a teenager he was sent by the Nazis to the Auschwitz death camp. It was there that he saw the evil that people are capable of inflicting on others, and it was there that he also saw glimmers of hope in the way people cared for each other and tried their best to survive through the suffering. When Wiesel was finally freed, he managed to take his experiences and turn them into stories, and his novels, poems and plays, and his endless activism eventually earned him the Nobel Peace Prize for bringing his message of "peace, atonement and human dignity" to humanity.

What is most amazing is that after experiencing the worst of suffering, seeing the very worst of human nature and evil, Wiesel did not turn away from his faith. He didn't give on people, and did not flee from living a life of meaning. Instead he moved on from this terrible trauma, and through his writing, he gave hope to others. Yet, the process that led Weisel to this place of healing and strength, to be able to turn tragedy to hope was filled with the many of the same feelings of guilt, blame and sadness that we all encounter when we experience suffering. Getting to a place of hope is not always easy.

In his play the Trial of God, Weisel paints an extremely powerful image of the challenge of holding on to hope when so much is pulling us to question life and give up. It is all based on a life changing experience he had during his time at Auschwitz. Soon after entering the camp, Wiesel was befriended by a Talmud Teacher who took him in, and taught him whenever they had a chance. One night the teacher took

Wiesel back to his barracks where Weisel was was confronted with something that he never expected to see: there was his Talmud teacher, along with two teachers of Jewish law. But these men were not studying. They were not teaching. They were not even praying. The scholars were putting God on trial. In Auschwitz, in a place that symbolized more than anywhere the horrible pain and suffering which can exist in the world, a place where hope did often seem far too distant, these men had created in Wiesel's words, a "Rabbinic court of law to indict the Almighty". And Wiesel was the only witness.

Like any court case, the scholars brought in witnesses, they gathered evidence and came to conclusions. After several nights, they came to a unanimous verdict: "God almighty, creator of heaven and earth was found guilty of crimes against creation and humankind". The judges concluded that too much of the suffering in the world was unfair and cruel, that to have good people suffer meant that God could no longer be good. There in the death camp, with the smell of burning flesh in the air, there was just too much pain to believe in a God, to believe in a world that was still inherently good. Guilty as charged. But now what were the scholars to do?

As Wiesel describes it, after the verdict was given, and after an "infinity of silence" the scholar of Talmud looked at the stars in sky, paused and said "it's time for evening prayers" and all the members of the court recited Maariv, the evening service.

In the most powerful way these men looked at the heavens and saw the deep brokenness and unending suffering in the world, and accepted that there was no running away from this reality of life. The pain of the world was unbearable, as was the truth of the evils inherent in people. Yet, even though they were living through some of the worst of this suffering, they saw only one choice--to confront the suffering head on by going on with life and moving ahead. The stars and the moon were still there, and they still had mouths to speak. So it was time to pray.

Wiesel's personal experience of trauma is unique, but the way that he challenged the suffering in the world and questioned whether suffering always happens for a reason is something that is all too common. While in Wiesel's story the scholars are challenging God, this process of dealing with and recovering from suffering, pain and trauma is something that extends far beyond theology and belief. In many ways it is as much a part of life as are those moments of joy and blessing which we also hope to receive.

It is the simple question of a cancer patient lying in a hospital bed who asks what they have done, what reason they are the ones who must be struck with sickness. It is the tears of someone whose partner has left them, or whose relationship has been broken. It is in the waning hope of someone who has lost a job or the daily yearnings of someone stuck without a home or food to survive, or even in the common sadness of the ups and downs of daily life. And it is in the questioning that takes place when we open the paper to see why we continue to have wars, why leaders inflict pain on their own people, or why our environment and our natural world are being destroyed.

Of course sometimes *there is* an answer to our suffering, someone or something who we can blame, and we know quite well that too much that happens in our world is simply our fault. But other times, often during the most personal of experiences, we are left alone with no reasons, with no cause and effect for what happens to us.

The "trial" that we must encounter in our daily lives is about how we come to terms with the pain and suffering we see, and even more, about how *we* can move on.

Theodicy, the question of why suffering and pain exists in the world, is an ancient concept, and one which has been well discussed both in Jewish tradition and beyond. From the Biblical book of Job, to Harold Kushner's bestseller "Why Bad Things Happen to Good People", to the Coen Brothers powerful 2009 film "A Serious

Man", no one has been immune to these painful and complicated questions. These ideas make great literature and are creative fodder for gut wrenching stories of about life and relationships. Yet, once the questions have been asked, the philosophies shared and the sources cited, we do not always hear what we should do next. How *do* we move on from trauma? How do we take what we have learned about ourselves, and turn it into something positive? We try to map out life as a system of cause and effect, and this works well for us until something unexpected, something painful happens. Then we don't know where to go, how we can take from our suffering and grow. This is where things get tough.

We do have a clear liturgical response in these Holy Days to this deep sense of discomfort we have with the meaning of and the reason for suffering in the world, in a prayer which has the both has the power to make sense in its simplistic view of life, but also seems inherently wrong and unfair. Unetaneh Tokef, which is said as part of the Musaf service on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur has words are both familiar, but also are deeply difficult to accept and take in:

On Rosh Hashanah it will be inscribed and on Yom Kippur it will be sealed -
how many will pass from the earth
and how many will be created;
who will live and who will die;
who will die at their predestined time
and who before their time;
who by water and who by fire,
who by sword, who by beast, who by famine,
who by thirst, who by upheaval, who by plague…

And then those final words:

וּתְשׁוּבָה וּתְפִלָּה וּצְדָקָה מַעֲבִירִין אֶת רעַ הַגְּזֵרָ

But Repentance, Prayer, and Charity avert the severe Decree!"

For those who believe in predestined fate, and punishment for sin, these words might be comforting. Yet unfortunately, for many, they instead are deeply problematic, or even antithetical to the entire notion of living a life of meaning and faith. We don't want to live a life so easily laid out that what happens to us can be summarized in a few brief lines, *life* is so much more complicated.

On its most basic level Unetaneh Tokef seems to preach a philosophy of reward and punishment. Yet through pointing out the toughest of questions, we are also asked to not fully take seriously the simplicity of this kind of belief system. We know, as the author of this poem must have known, that life often involves far less control from above and there does not always need to be a reason or a plan for what happens to us. Again, we must take responsibility for some of the good and evil in the world, since so much is caused by human action. For everything else, there simply is not an answer.

Much of the poem quotes from Biblical sources, and it is telling that it quotes the Book of Job more than any other other. It is this challenging Biblical book that provides us with a familiar story of suffering, but leads us to leads us to a place of acceptance, if not some resemblance of hope after suffering.

Job, who "feared God" and was "blameless and upright", was blessed with wealth and by all definitions was a happy person, a symbol of all of us who do our best in life. As the story goes, Satan, the representation of evil in the world, confronts God and says Job is good because he only has blessings. So God is convinced to make a bet with Satan to test Job and make him suffer. As a blameless man, even with suffering, Job should of course accept his fate and respond positively. Satan sends great winds to destroy his house and kill his children, he has robbers steal his cattle. But despite all of this, Job, does not sin or get angry at God.

Job stays strong, and after Satan moves from hurting his property to his body, causing a disease to take over and cause Job pain, he still holds on. But then, when Job's friends come to comfort him, Job (in the form of a poem) turns from acceptance of God's actions to rage. His first words: "perish the day on which I was born," says it all. Even the "blameless man" has had enough, and is finally left no choice but to ask the question we have been exploring, asking why he was made to suffer.

Although a full discussion of the book of Job would take days, many readers of the book are left with the same conclusions that through all of the suffering and frustrations, the answer is "that there is no answer". This of course, is not a good enough response, and it leaves us back where we started. Yet, the story also allows us to explore the reality that while the suffering is what seems most *wrong*, when suffering is often without reason, and sometime without blame, our *response* to the suffering is what can be done *right*.

Harold Kushner makes this point in his commentary on the story of Job, where he writes that the idea of God and Godliness is proven in how we are empowered to cope with suffering. He writes: "This helps me understand why in so many religious traditions God is symbolized by fire. Fire is not a thing; it is not an object. It is a process, liberating the energy hidden in a piece of wood or a lump of coal and turning it into something useful. But while fire can be warm and life sustaining, it can also be destructive, not because fire is evil but because fire follows laws of its own."

Kushner's description allows us moves beyond our need to believe or not believe in a controlling God, to have faith in a higher power, or even have our own theology of life. It allows us, and asks us, to instead put our focus on how we will make use of the reality of what we experience. How will we take the meaning which we gain from what we encounter and turn it into something useful? How can we take the energy of our suffering, and like the fire, liberate it into something that can help us grow? This is the ultimate response to suffering, and once we have asked the questions, tried to find a cause in every negative or positive, held on to God, or left God entirely, this is what is left for us to do.

And this is where I'd like to take us back for a moment to our prayer, Unetaneh Tokef. To those final words of the poem, after we have seen it laid out in front of us how we will all live and die, we are told that Teshuva, Tefillah and Tzedakah, repentance, Prayer and Charity and Justice will avert the divine decree. We have to do these holy acts of remembering our place in the world and helping others as a way of fixing what is broken by simply doing good. But even more it is about that final step of accepting suffering. Moving on.

This word, maavarim, to avert the divine decree. The root also means to "go beyond" or "transcendence". So what the prayer is asking us to do is to recognize that we really have no chance of averting any decree, an act which has no reason--no matter what we do, no matter how hard we try, we will all experience suffering in our lives, we will all die, and we will never fully understand the reasons why.

So what we must do instead is move beyond, to transcend the idea that we have the ability to understand, that we as people can make sense of the mysteries of the world. This process of moving beyond may actually take more work, more spiritual preparation than simply assigning blame for what happens to us--assigning blame on things we did or didn't do, to others, or to God. To move beyond simply means to, to avar, to be with, sit with the fact that the world doesn't make sense, that there is pain and suffering. We are being told that we can't live in the past, and we can't even always simply rely on a hope for the future. We must do our best to accept, and live in the present knowing that each day, each moment might be our last. On the High Holidays we are shoved into this encounter with death, and these questions which have the power to throw our lives and beliefs into disarray. They compel us to break our patterns and ask if we died tomorrow, would we be happy with who we are. It is about the response to suffering.

If we looked at the themes of these Days of Awe, then we might be confronted with the simple truth that what we do, right or wrong, does have a very real effect on our lives and those around us. Just a few days ago we sat together as a community for Rosh Hashanah, Yom Hadin, the day of judgement, and we began the process of personal repentance and community healing. And as we do on these days we talked and continue to talk about the idea of sin, the places where we have done wrong, where we have "missed the mark" in our lives and our relationships. But sin is not just about right and wrong, it is, as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said, "the refusal of humanity to become who we are". There is of course an important and necessary place for repentance, apologies and forgiveness, yet there is some important truth to this: sin at its essence means we simply are not living up to who are meant to be. And it is the times of pain when we need this reminder the most, to be true to ourselves. We should never let suffering, whether caused by others or by the unexplainable workings of the universe, to cause us to lose our sense of self.

If there is a lesson to be learned on these days of awe, it is that we have to take responsibility for what happens in our lives, but we also have to be responsible enough to know that it is not all on us. When we need help, we need to reach out to others and ask for support, and when we see others who are broken we need to do what we can to help. Acceptance of who we are is being fully present to our needs and those of others around us.

No, giving more charity or praying more won't necessarily save us from suffering. Neither will making sure we have apologized to everyone who needs an apology. In essence Unetaneh Tokef is arguing again that God is guilty, that we are guilty, that everything, every experience, every moment, every joy every sadness is guilty when we do not move beyond the suffering, and of the sins, to fully connect and to take control of what comes next. And if this is true, then what we are being asked to do as we are being judged and as we are judging the world, is to stand up, walk out of this holy space, this holy courtroom and say that we have had enough. When we have healed from the pain, recovered from the sadness, we must stand up a do what is necessary.

There is an incredible passage in the Talmud, in the tractate Avodah Zarah (18b), where the rabbis are debating whether Jews should be allowed to attend Roman arena where the gladiators would be fighting wild animals and each other. In these exhibitions, it would be up to the spectators to decide the fate of the victim--thumbs up the victim would be spared for another day, thumbs down the victim would die. The rabbis decide that we should never go to such an evil place, because it goes against all our values of goodness and compassion. Yet Rabbi Nathan retorts that in fact we should grow so that when the mob stands up to seal the fate of the victim, those who have compassion in their hearts can rise up as one and scream to save his life. To not go to the arena would only be ignoring the reality of the pain and suffering that is possible. If when we encounter suffering in the world, we make sure to not just question but to stand up and use what we have gained from our pain to make change then we are truly responding to suffering with hope.

We look at the suffering, and we scream, we go to fight, then the we know that we at least did not sit back watch our world fall apart. We know that we can join others, be part of a community. We know that we are not alone, that we can support each other and protest together, and we fight for what is right. If we tonight put God on trial, just as we put ourselves on trial, we may indeed , find our imperfect world, our broken society guilty as charged. But we must resist the temptation to then give up on life and on each other. We have no other choice but to take the outcome of our pain and our joys, to look at parts of our lives and those of our world that we cannot accept as right, and find new ways of being. We have a responsibility to move ahead, to grow--we don't want to keep the trial going. As one of Wiesel's characters concludes: "We are not going to have enough time for our deliberations. The verdict will be announced by someone else, at a later stage. For the trial will continue without us".

God may be guilty, just as we are guilty. So let's prove the verdict wrong and enter our new year strengthened as we renew the call to care deeply for each other and ourselves and as we fix what is broken in our world. We will always suffer, but we can also always grow.

Gmar Chatimah Tova