

Shabbat shalom! It feels really great to be on this bimah now as your rabbi. When I accepted this post, they told me that you get good attendance on Friday nights, but I never imagined this! It's like this every week, right Cantor?

We are just getting to know each other and that will take some time. And that's fine. It will take me time to get to know the minhagim—the customs—of KBI, and it will take you some time to get to know me and get used to the different ways that I do some things. It will be an adjustment, but that's normal.

What I think we will find, though, is that we already know each other pretty well. Because although I just got here, and just moved to Ottawa, we have been through some extreme events together—even though we've been in different locations. And these experiences are ones that will stick with us and inform our actions and emotions for many years to come.

When people experience extreme events, difficult, or stressful events, and also euphoric and celebratory ones, those memories and their effects often stick with us. These events and the emotions elicited by them imprint upon us in a way that regular, mundane occurrences do not. I don't remember what I ate for lunch last week, but I do remember where I was when the Twin Towers went down on 9/11. My mother remembers vividly hearing when Kennedy was shot, even though she was just a child. I can still feel the impact of the car that rear-ended me decades ago as I sat in the back seat of my friend's car, and I still have an aversion to the singer whose song was playing on the radio. The traumatic events tend to imprint upon us with more staying power than the positive ones do. And that makes sense. Traumatic events are unanticipated and throw our world and our lives into chaos in ways that celebratory events—though impactful—do not.

We have been through some events that will forever bind us to one another, even though we experienced them separately. Covid was not an easy experience. Some of us were affected psychologically and, some of us, physically. We had to re-order our world—staying home, grappling with new work formats, schooling our children from home, gathering for Shabbat over Zoom, connecting person-to-person in such an impersonal way. We normalised being alone. We lived with the fear of this dreaded virus, until there was finally a vaccine. And then, we doubted its effectiveness or safety. In our communities, we tried to support each other in whatever safe ways we could. Some of us lost loved ones and could not attend their funerals. This trauma stays with us and binds us to one another.

Last year, we experienced another trauma—the horrors of October 7th changed our world forever. The way that communities came together to share our grief and horror, our outrage and trepidation, brought us closer to one another and to our people around the world. Looking back, we can see that on October 8th, we started asking new questions, as we realised that we were far more vulnerable than we had known, both in Israel and in the diaspora.

This recognition on its own is traumatic and it is ongoing. The things we once took for granted are no more. Can I wear my *Magen David* or *Chai* around my neck, my *mezuzah* on my door? Can I reveal to this person that I am Jewish? Can I mention Israel in this conversation? Is that stranger walking into our synagogue a friend or a foe? Can I use my identifiably Jewish name to call that uber? Make a restaurant reservation? Schedule a hair appointment? We now share a vulnerability; an uncertainty that most of us have never experienced in our lifetimes.

My first reaction to October 7th was not disbelief or shock. I was horrified, surely. I was shaken, angry, devastated—all the feelings. I cried. But I wasn't shocked with disbelief. Because I have experienced this before. And so have you.

In the Mishnah we read, "In every generation one is obligated to view oneself as though they came out of Egypt, as it says: 'Tell your child on that day saying, "בְּעֵבוֹר זֶה עָשָׂה יְהוָה לִי בְצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרַיִם: Because of this God acted for **me** when **I** came out of Egypt'" (Shemot 13:8). (Pesachim 10:5)

I came out of Egypt. And so did you.

We re-enact our Exodus every year around our Seder tables and if our kids are paying attention, they internalise it. I'll never forget when my son, now 21 years old, was about 6. My father picked him up from school and was taking him for ice cream (as zaidies do...). Just as they pulled up to the Baskin Robbins, the skies opened up and down came hail the size of your fist. They sat in the car for their own safety and in disbelief, waiting for the hail to pass. My father turned to my son and exclaimed, "Reuben! This is incredible! Have you ever seen such hail before?" As if speaking to an imbecile, my son answered, with a roll of his eyes, "Of course, Zaidie. Don't you remember? When we came out of Egypt."

בְּצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרַיִם

Retelling our stories, re-enacting them, couching them in ritual all makes us feel and remember, as if we were there. Ritual makes the lesson concrete. Some Sephardic customs make this even more experiential and explicit. If you attend a Persian or Iranian seder, while singing dayenu, you'll be lightly beaten with bunches of celery, chives, leeks, or scallions to symbolise the sting from the whip of the Egyptian taskmasters. Moroccan Sephardic Jews will hold the seder plate up over everyone's heads while announcing to each participant that they have left Egypt and are now free. Tunisian Jews take it a step further and place the tray on the head of each person to remind them that they once carried burdens on their heads as slaves in Egypt.

We all collectively experience this formative event as we retell and act out the story year after year. Repeating the ritual cements it in our psyche until we can picture the desert, and know that in fact, we have experienced this hail before.

Similarly, we all stood together at Sinai to receive Torah. As the Israelites stand at Sinai, Moses declares to them, “I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before our God יהוה and with those who are not with us here this day.” (Deut 29:13, 14)

In Midrash Shemot Rabbah, Rabbi Yitzchak elaborates, “It does not say [at the end of the verse], “with us standing today,” but rather, “with us today”; these are the souls that will be created in the future, who do not have substance, about whom “standing” is not mentioned. For even though they did not exist at that time, each one received that which was theirs.” (Shemot Rabbah 28:6)

We were all there. And our tradition has us re-enact this receiving of Torah on Mount Sinai yearly as well. We stand to hear the Ten Commandments read in shul—why? Not just out of respect for them—indeed, one could argue that these ten are not the most important commandments of all 613. If it’s for respect, shouldn’t we stand whenever any part of Torah is read? It’s all holy! No, we stand for this moment to re-enact our acceptance of Torah. We say aloud, “*Na’aseh v’nishmah*” “we will do and we will obey” just as the Israelites did when they received Torah the first time. This drama-turgy, as some call it, when repeated year after year, imprints the story in our memories and makes the story our own.

Notice that we do not refer to the players in the stories as “they”, but we say “I” and “we.” I was at Sinai. **We** will do and we will listen. God acted for **me** when I came out of Egypt. בְּצִאתִי מִמִּצְרַיִם “We should be quite mistaken,” writes Yosef Hayyim Yerushalmi in his seminal work entitled *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, “[we would be mistaken] were we to attribute this usage merely to the liberties of poetic diction. The deliberate use of “I” is more serious than that, and it points to a larger phenomenon. For whatever memories were unleashed by the commemorative rituals and liturgies were surely not a matter of intellection, but of evocation and identification. There are sufficient clues to indicate that what was suddenly drawn up from the past was not a series of facts to be contemplated at a distance, but a series of situations *into* which one could somehow be existentially drawn.” (p. 44)

And that’s the crux of it. We are existentially drawn into our narrative. It’s not some book that’s nice to read because the stories are interesting. It’s our story—each one of us. It happened to me, it happened to you, it happened to your parents, and grandparents. And if your extended family is not Jewish, it happened to you anyway. All of us were at Sinai no matter how or when we came to Judaism. The story belongs to all of us.

There used to be a rabbi at the Western Wall who would come up to students and say, “Don’t I know you?” After getting their names and cities where they were visiting from, perhaps making a connection with their rabbi or congregation from home, he’d say, “Ah, I know where I know you from. I remember you from Sinai.”

There are instances where I have felt that. I've just met you, but I know you. Shortly after October 7th, I was walking and talking with a United Church colleague. She was asking how I'm holding up and being very caring and loving. In the course of our conversation, she asked if I have any family in Israel; anyone who was directly affected. "I don't," I told her. "My mother has a cousin who lives in Jerusalem, but I don't really know him. But," I paused, "they're all my family." Those young concert goers are my cousins, the young parents in the kibbutzim were my sisters and brothers, their parents my aunts and uncles. They're not some foreign people on the other side of the world with whom we try our best to empathise. They're our family; our *mishpacha*. My colleague stopped walking and looked at me for a moment. With a look of both sadness and understanding on her face she said, "I have no idea what that is like. I am not part of a people. And I wish I was."

This took my breath away as it does now in telling it. I always knew and felt that we were fortunate and blessed to have this great global Jewish family, but in this moment—this moment of feeling intense pain, loss, and fear—this feeling of being connected to every Jew from Sinai to today, I felt not only comforted but at the same time grounded, validated, and supported. My colleague saw that, and she helped me to value it even more than I already do.

Because the thing is, we don't have to deal with this pain and fear alone. We have each other—each of whom knows how we feel without us having to explain ourselves. But we also have this deep and rich history that shows us that we are survivors; that the Jewish people lives; that we thrive, in fact. Because we have this collective memory of the traumatic events that have happened in our past, we also have the historical resilience that is ingrained into each one of us.

We can see and take comfort in the poetic prayers—*piyyutim*—written by our people in the Middle Ages when calamity befell their communities. We have the *slichot*—the penitential prayers—that were written and rewritten for each situation and generation, and which we recite today. We have the tradition of a Second Purim where communities celebrated Purim a second time to commemorate their deliverance from some terrible danger or calamity. They actually created new rituals, not only to make sure that they got their holidays in, but to put their experience into a Jewish and historical context.

Sometimes, however, there was no deliverance and celebration. In that case, the communities instituted fast days.

In 1648, in Poland and the Ukraine, a great wave pogroms erupted, led by the Cossack raider Bogdan Khmelnytsky, in which hundreds of Jewish communities were devastated, and tens of thousands were killed, sold into captivity, or left destitute. For the Jews of Eastern Europe, 1648 marked a blow whose scars were never healed.

Just like was done after the Crusades in the 11th century, several chronicles were composed as well as *slichot* prayers—penitential prayers and poems. What is interesting

is that even though the situation of the Polish Jews during those pogroms was quite different from the experience of the Jews in the Rhineland during the First Crusade, the two events became joined, and the writers depicted the slaughter of 1648 as a repetition of the events of the Crusades. The later leaders commemorated their destruction on the same day as they commemorated the Crusades.

In Poland, the community there saw an analogy with the community of Blois, whose Jewish residents in the year 1171 had been imprisoned after being accused of killing a young boy and throwing his corpse in the river Loire. No body was ever recovered. Nevertheless, all thirty-two Jews, seventeen of them women, were burned at the stake. To commemorate the massacre of 1648, the Polish Jewish leader, Yom Tov Lipmann Heller, took old prayers that had been written in the 12th century after the burning in Blois and ordained that they be recited for the pogroms of 1648. Why? Because he *remembered* what had happened 500 years earlier. Because a fast day had been declared in the 12th century, Jews 500 years later still felt the calamity of Blois and could draw on the strength of those who had survived it and commemorated it for centuries.

Heller wrote, “What has occurred now is similar to the persecutions of old, and all that happened to the forefathers has happened to their descendants...*It is all one.*” (Yerushalmi, p.50)

It is all one. We have been here before. We have survived this before. We are strong. We are resilient. We are family and we help each other through it. Not them, but us. You and me, together.

That is how collective memory works. It not only helps us keep things in perspective, but it teaches us resilience. And that, I believe, is the secret of our survival. Even if we’ve never read a piyyut, attended slichot, or heard of Second Purim, this inclination towards resilience is passed down through our story—our story of resilience and survival.

Because I came through Egypt **בְּצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרַיִם** I know what awaits me on the other side. Because I was at Sinai, I know what a gift it was that we received. I remember. Inside each one of us there is that kernel of memory—not only of our trauma but also of our survival.

We are already connected, and we always will be. We are connected not only with those of us standing here today but with all those who came before and all those yet to be.

It is all one. We are one. We are family. We are resilient. We are strong.

Am Yisrael Chai is not just a song. It’s not just a salutation. It is a declaration drawing on our collective memory which also predicts our future.

Throughout this holy day of Yom Kippur, let us meditate on our connection to our past and unearth our ancient memories that they will serve us as anchors and pillars on which to build our confidence and resolve for our future. Let us see ourselves once again

coming out of Egypt, standing together at Sinai; so that we know not only intellectually but so that we feel in our bones that we are one, that we are strong, that we are resilient survivors.

Kein y'hi ratzon. May it be God's will. Amen.

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