

Rosh Hashanah 5772
Adversity
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While walking through the amusement park, I witnessed a sea of happy faces and heard many pleasant sounds of glee. Young children enjoying kiddie rides, some children winning large stuffed animals at the arcade, enthusiastic oohs and ahhs as the waves in the wave pool increased to great heights.

Yet, the sound that couldn't be ignored was that of the screams. Were they joy or fear---likely both as the rollercoaster flipped passengers upside down and all around. One of my friends spent the whole day riding each rollercoaster. For him, this was pure pleasure. Me, I stuck with the water rides—a little bit of excitement but not that stomach dropping sensation I've experienced on a rollercoaster.

Navigating an amusement park may be within our control. We can choose which rides to try and when to take a break for ice cream or cotton candy. But our lives don't always afford us the opportunity to avoid the scary ride once or even multiple times. And if we forget to wear sunscreen or neglect to take Dramamine---we may find ourselves in pain or nauseated. Some things are within our control, but we know that many things are not. As we welcome the New Year 5772, we recognize that we made it through last year's ride and hope we are prepared to begin this year's adventures.

Hinenu. We are here. We made it to the New Year, 5772.
We arrived at Rosh Hashanah ---a year older; and we are all survivors—having been written into the metaphoric Book of Life---B'rosh Hashanah yikateivun---on Rosh Hashanah it is written...

But how are we feeling as we arrive at this New Year?
Which "rides" did we enjoy and which ones upset our stomachs?

For some of us, 5771 was a very happy year. A year of simchas and nachas. A year of career development; family growth and satisfaction. Although, even with all of the good, there has likely been at least a moment or twenty of disappointment, minor or intense.

For others, the past year was very challenging. Death of a loved one; illness; unemployment; divorce; unfairness in the workplace; personal violence; damage to homes; Many of us have been stuck in the mud recently---figuratively or literally, with clean up from Hurricane/Tropical Storm Irene.

When the water alarm went off during the recent hurricane—it was a wake-up call. There is a shock value of challenge or catastrophe, which can send us into overdrive mode or overload our system and shut us down.

We wait with anticipation to hear the shofar blown on Rosh Hashanah, and especially at the end of the Neilah service on Yom Kippur. It is a call for us to arouse our slumbering consciences---to stand up for justice---to dedicate ourselves to continual teshuva and to repair of the world as we enter the new year.

Every year we hear three types of shofar blasts: tekiah, shevarim and teruah. Each of these blasts can be reimagined as echoing a story from the Torah. Our ancestors faced different and similar challenges to the ones we face today. They weren't concerned about cyberbullying and a tough economy, but their human experiences have eternal lessons.

Reimagining these shofar blasts, we also recognize that

1] the sharp blast of tekiah is analogous to a jarring experience in our lives when we wake up to a different reality and must truly pay attention to challenges at hand.

[Tekiah: Look at Hagar]

Yesterday's Torah reading highlighted the story of Hagar (Gen 21), Abraham and Sarah's maidservant who, as we know, bore his first son, Ishmael. When Sarah became jealous, she convinced Abraham to banish Hagar and Ishmael out into the wilderness. While there, Hagar despaired, how could she possibly take care of her son. How could they survive their plight.

This past year, many of us have been Hagar. We have felt overwhelmed by our fate. We have felt hopeless and unable not only to take care of ourselves, but also our dependents.

An angel of God appeared to Hagar and told her not to fear for God heard the lad's cry. "*Hahaziki et yadayk bo*-Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand." Rabbi Harold Kushner translated the words as "Give yourself strength through him," noting the word *Hahaziki* has the word *Hazak* in it. *Hazak* means strength.

Hagar was able to find strength for herself by helping her son. When we are mired in difficult situations---sometimes the most helpful thing we can do is to help someone else.

In this New Year, this Yom Hazikaron, may we remember that when we face challenges, we can sometimes reach out our hands in strength and those not caught up in difficult situations can reach out to others in need.

2] The next shofar call, Shevarim, is three short blasts and we can relate that to the saying that bad things come in threes. We make it through one challenge, only to find ourselves facing another, and another.

[Shevarim: Joseph]

A shevarim---that broken sound repeated three times can be seen in the travails of Joseph. After the death of his mother at a young age, Joseph who was favored by his father became an object of disdain to his older brothers. His dream interpreting irritated them and catapulted him into slavery. We know that he eventually rose out of the depths of this

dark time, but how did his faith in God sustain him? How could he cope when he spent two years in a prison cell?

God is with us in our suffering:

This is the perspective taken by Rabbi Harold Kushner in his book *When Bad Things Happen To Good People*. "If God is a God of justice and not of power, then God can still be on our side when bad things happen to us. God can know that we are good and honest people who deserve better. Our misfortunes are none of God's doing, and so we can turn to God for help. We will turn to God, not to be judged or forgiven, not to be rewarded or punished, but to be strengthened and comforted." (p.44)

3] Teruah

And when the mud just seems to stick---and we can't get it off---it's as if the Teruah has gone awry and the alarm of challenge attacks us---blasting continuously.

Even the most optimistic person can find himself defeated and unable to function when faced with perpetual challenges---and we know some people can function under great strain.

[Teruah: Abraham]

Abraham Faced multiple challenges----akin to the continual blast of a teruah. From the Midrashic story of smashing his father's idols---and risking the safety of home to his call to go forth to a new land, Abraham was challenged repeatedly.

On his journey, God shared with Abraham the plight of Sodom and Gemora. To this challenge, Abraham spoke up ---bargaining and complaining bitterly. Yet, in another difficult situation, where he was told to pretend Sarah, his wife, was only his sister, he did not speak up. And, as we all know, in the story of the Akeida, the binding of Isaac, Abraham was quiet. Was he exhausted from the constant challenges in his life?

Some of us have had a year filled with enormous challenges: personal, communal and global as we still experience a rough economy and fragility in the Middle East among other issues. In the midst of one, we find ourselves confronted with another and the aching has not abated. It is a year to which we are eager to bid farewell. But with all of our burdens, in reflecting backward and forward, we might find a glimpse of good. The friends that rallied around us. Advice from experienced professionals. Others willing to take a risk on us.

We read in the first verse of the Akeidah, *Vay'hi achar had'varim ha-eyleh v'ha-Elohim nisah et-Avraham vayomer eylav Avraham vayomer hineni*. Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test. God said to him. "Abraham," and he answered, "Here I am." [Gen. 22:1]

The Hebrew word *nisah* is translated as "tried" or "tested." The first part of the word, *nes*, means miracle. I don't think our trials or challenges in life are actually

miracles in disguise. But, there is truth known by many of us of the miracles we find in the midst of great challenge.

The Old Mule

Once upon a time a farmer owned an old mule who tripped and fell into the farmer's well. The farmer heard the mule braying and was unable to figure out how to bring up the old animal. It grieved him that he could not pull the animal out. He'd been a good worker around the farm. Although the farmer sympathized with the mule, he called his neighbors together and told them what had happened. He had them help haul dirt to bury the old mule in the well and quietly put him out of his misery.

At first, the old mule was puzzled, but as the farmer and his neighbors continued shoveling and the dirt hit his back, he had a thought: he ought to shake off the dirt and step up. And he did just that.

"Shake it off and step up...shake it off and step up...shake it off and step up." Even though he took painful blows of dirt and fought panic, the mule just kept right on shaking it off and stepping up!

It wasn't long before the old mule stepped up and over the lip of that well. What could have buried him actually blessed him...all because of the manner in which he handled his adversity.

*The shofar lives within each of us---we can turn it from a reminder of pain and sacrifice—into our call to others---to help and be helped
To make a difference in another's life and in the world (Tikun Atzmam—
heal ourselves and Tikun Olam—heal the world)*

In the Talmud (Berachot 5b), we learn about a rabbi who is a famous healer. His skills are so grand that the light from the skin of his arm can heal another. Yet, his great healing powers for others do not shield him from the challenges of life.

Rabbi Yochanan once fell ill and Rabbi Chanina went in to visit him. Rabbi Chanina said: "Are your sufferings welcome to you?"

Rabbi Yochanan said no – which might seem an obvious answer! Rabbi Chanina replied: "Give me your hand."

Rabbi Yochanan gave him his hand and Rabbi Chanina raised him.

The Talmud then asks: Why couldn't Rabbi Yochanan raise himself?

The reply: The prisoner cannot free himself from jail.

In other words, we are not always able to help ourselves. We need others. When we are suffering, we need others to reach out to us. For Rabbi Yochanan, his illness was very limiting. As we know, when we are suffering---whether from the common cold to life-

threatening illness to living with chronic physical or mental illness, to mourning the loss of a loved one, we can feel isolated.

It is beautiful to note how Rabbi Chanina helped Rabbi Yochanan improve. He took his hand. He not only visited his ailing friend, he literally reached out to him. Rabbi Chanina made his presence known and felt to Rabbi Yochanan.

This past year, we beings created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God, have been healers and we have been ill. This past year, we have suffered and we have helped alleviate suffering. We now enter the new year----awakened by the individual, multiple or continuous blasts of the shofar in our lives.

We know that we are part of a Jewish community and are not alone in our suffering. Others care and we care. God cares.

Attitude

The longer I live, the more I realize the impact attitude has on life.

Attitude to me is more important than facts.

It is more important than the past, than education,
than money, than circumstances, than failures,
than successes, than what other people think or say or do.

It is more important than appearance, giftedness or skill.

It will make or break a company...a church...a home.

The remarkable thing is we have a choice everyday
regarding the attitude we will embrace for the day.

We cannot change our past. We cannot change the fact
that people will act in a certain way.

We cannot change the inevitable.

The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have,
and that is our attitude.

I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me and
90% how I react to it.

And so it is with you.

We are in charge of our attitudes.

~Charles Swindoll

[invite everyone to hold hands]

Dear God,

We begin this New Year 5772 with joy and fear. We are happy to have reached a New Year. Excited about special occasions ahead. But we are fearful of the challenges that lay beyond---personal, communal and global. These are challenging times in which we live.

God, we turn to you for compassion and strength. And we turn to one another for compassion and strength. We know the power of reaching out person to person ---hand in hand, yad b'yad. And we know from experience when we are too weak to do the reaching and pray for the strength to accept help when offered.

We pray the coming year is full of the blessings of health, happiness, peace and prosperity. We pray that we will, with God's help, reach out to others in need and accept a hand when we are in need.

Tekiah Gedola---let the shofar's long blast lead us into a new year full of strength and wholeness.

Ken y'hi ratzaon. May this be God's will.

Amen.