

Finding Peace Amidst the Tohu and Vohu

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Rabbi Isaac once told a parable of a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a *birah doleket*, a great palace, in flames. He wondered, as he watched the blaze, “Is it possible that this palace is without someone to look after it?” At that moment, someone peered out of a window. Looking down at the man, they said, “I am the owner of this palace!” So it was with Abraham, our ancestor, when he went out wandering away from his home in Haran to an unknown place. He wondered, “Is it possible that the world should be without someone to look after it?” That there is no one minding the shop? The Holy One peered out at Abraham and said, “I am the world’s owner!”¹

I have felt lately like our palace is burning.

On this night, according to our lore, 5,779 years ago, our universe came into being. The opening lines of the Torah take us back to that moment. “In the beginning, G!d created the heavens and the earth.” We all know that part...but the following verse gets less attention. The earth was *tohu v’vohu*. The words are so rich in Hebrew I hesitate in how to translate them. Chaos and void, wild, untamed, emptiness, formlessness, wilderness. Our creation story unfolds, and G!d brings into being a different aspect of existence on each of the days that follow. Order is imposed upon the chaos – this is the usual reading of this opening chapter of the Torah. But how does that sound to you? Look around our universe. Does

¹ Bereshit Rabbah 39:1

it look particularly *orderly* to you? Does it look the way you want it to look? Does it feel more broken these days than whole? G!d says of each day of creation, “and it was good.” Well- yes, there is so much to be grateful for in this magnificent existence. But I don’t know that I’d call it orderly.

If the world appears to you to be in good order, I do apologize for challenging... but I ask. That chaos and void that the world was founded upon, *tohu v’vohu*, where did it go? Did they magically disappear? The Torah doesn’t tell us, but we know that nothing disappears. I believe that the *tohu* and *vohu* remain, undergirding all of creation. The days that follow *do* try to introduce some order to the chaos. A system is imposed upon the void. But underneath our world is uncertainty, unbridled chaos and confusion. Sometimes we don’t see so much of it; other times it is *all* we can see.

Our Torah verse about chaos and void became quite the point of contention in our early history. If *tohu* and *vohu* were present when G!d started creating the world, how did they get there? We could excuse a perfect G!d, as we often try to do, and say that G!d simply stumbled upon the raw materials. But if we subscribe to a theology in which G!d is truly the creator of everything and IS everything, G!d must have also created the muck, the chaos upon which G!d would then create. If G!d has always been, then G!d is intrinsically connected to this mess of nothingness. That void was present at creation and always will be.

One midrash, an early rabbinic commentary, tells the story of a philosopher challenging Rabbi Gamaliel. The challenger pushes the rabbi: Your G!d is so great-Sure, G!d created the universe, but there were already materials to work from! *Tohu* and *vohu*, darkness, water, wind and the depths. The philosopher is sure he

has the rabbi on this one. What rabbi would argue that *tohu* and *vohu* were created by G!d? How will the rabbi reconcile THAT?! He'll have to cave and admit that there *must* have been something there before, and that this G!d didn't create *everything*. The rabbi answers, a little miffed, quoting my favorite verse from the prophet Isaiah. "G!d says, I am the creator of light *and* darkness, the creator of peace and of evil."² Yes, G!d is responsible for the chaos as well as the beauty in the world. The poles of darkness and light, peace and evil- emphasize that G!d is truly the Oneness in the universe, and encompasses everything from one pole to the other. Thanks to my son - when we were talking about this sermon, he pointed me to the character Vision in the Marvel movie, Avengers: Age of Ultron. The android says, "Humans are odd. They think that order and chaos are somehow opposites..."

So now our palace story might make a little more sense. The palace is on fire, and G!d peers out to assure us that, indeed, G!d is minding the palace. But it's a flaming mess and it has always been. Ever since G!d created out of *tohu* and *vohu*. By this point, the only surprise should be...that it still surprises us.

Think back over the past year. In what ways has it felt to you that our palace is on fire? Think over just the past week! Many of us have been living with an undercurrent of panic about the state of the country and our earth. Even if we wouldn't all agree on the details, I have felt a common thread of *tzuris*, the Yiddish word for "trouble" that sounds just like what it is. In many of the conversations I've had over the past year at Sha'ar Zahav, and in my life outside of synagogue, either what is happening in the world has been a focal point, or it is the elephant in the room. Anything else we may have going on in our lives -a loss,

² Bereshit Rabbah 1:9

loneliness, big life transitions- seem to be exacerbated by this generalized angst. My colleague, Rabbi Yael Ridberg, writes, “We have less patience...we bicker with family members more, (if we have kids, we) yell at them too often. The daily assault on what we know to be just and right has left us with an overwhelming sense of incredulity, fragility, and even paralysis.” I, too, have seen how some of us have been stopped in our tracks, unable to move, constantly overwhelmed. Others are moving at a frenetic pace, unrelenting social justice warriors.

If Judaism can offer us anything, it should be guidance for how to survive in a chaotic world. Sadly, we are no strangers to chaos: Jewish communities have been responding to crisis throughout our history. It is written into our sacred stories.

In the biblical book of Job, when Job has lost everything, his friends visit him one by one. They each try to present a tidy theology for him to swallow. Job rejects their attempts. In the end, he gives up on creating a neat theology. He says, essentially, I’m ok with the chaos.³

There is the observance of *Tisha B’av* every year, a day on the Jewish calendar that recalls the chaos of the destruction of our Temple in Jerusalem and is now a day to recall *all* the turmoil in Jewish history.

A mystical, *Kabbalistic* story of creation includes a cosmic accident—a shattering that mythically represents the chaos around us. This image of cosmic brokenness was created as Jews were fleeing the mayhem of medieval Europe.

³ Rabbi Chai Levy’s telling.

Living in chaos is not even new in our lifetimes. The last time I wrote a High Holyday sermon about chaos was 9/11 which we'll remember this Tuesday. For anyone here who has experienced persecution, institutionalized racism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, the enormity of loss during the AIDS crisis, the numerous calamities of the last century... this is not new.

Many of us feel like we are living in a time of uncertainty. Some because of the political climate, others because of personal trials, illness or losses in our lives. We can't possibly know what's coming. That is the wisdom of the delightfully morbid *Unetanetokef* prayer in our High Holyday liturgy. Who, in the coming year, will live, and who will die? We have no idea and have no control over it! What could be more unsettling than that?!

All these examples of dealing with chaos from our tradition have something in common. They ask us to confront an uncomfortable reality and not to run in fear from it. They remind us that we can't control chaos, it's our foundation. And --we do not despair. We don't have to love it, but we see it as part of the whole. And then we live as meaningfully with that knowledge as we can. Perhaps our task this Rosh Hashanah is to figure out how to stay grounded and even thrive amidst chaos- when it feels the world is falling apart. In no way does this mean that we should be complacent. Viktor Frankl wrote in his masterpiece about surviving the death camps, *Man's Search for Meaning*, "...[we are not talking about] freedom from conditions," of course, it is impossible for us to live devoid of the conditions of our lives. But we have the "...freedom to take a stand toward the conditions."

Taking a stand doesn't mean we have to cause ourselves suffering. How do we go about deescalating our anxiety rather than internalizing the wilderness and void? How do we go on,

knowing the *tohu* and *vohu* are right there underneath the surface? How do we change the narrative around the victimhood of chaos to decrease our own suffering?

I want to offer two gifts that our tradition carries deep within its story. The first gift is regular spiritual practice. The other is to take part in sacred community.

One of my teachers, theologian Art Green, was talking about why he thinks that over the past several decades so many have become spiritual seekers.⁴ His answer is that we are asking--is there something back in the spiritual systems of the past, somewhere in the religions and philosophies that we have largely walked away from, that might help guide us in our present moment? Wisdom that might keep us from destroying ourselves? To keep us from being engulfed in the fiery palace?

Organized religion at its best, he says, offers a system of “providing disciplinary tools to help create regular patterns of spiritual awareness.” So why develop a spiritual practice? He says that he chooses to follow Jewish practices not because G!d says to (since few of us believe in that kind of G!d these days), but because they are a “gift from our tradition for disciplining and regularizing his spiritual life. The discipline of spiritual practice helps us find meaning both in the monotony of life and when we find ourselves living amidst chaos.

Sociologist Peter Berger coined the term, the “Sacred canopy” He envisioned a canopy surrounding us that helps bring order out of chaos. We need to order our reality, to find *shalom* amidst the *tohu v’vohu*.

⁴ Daniel Libenson, host. *Judaism Unbound* Podcast, Episode 179, 133: “God is One” with author Arthur Green. I strongly recommend listening to this entire podcast. Maybe twice.

What is in our toolbox of resilience? Our storehouse of spiritual lifelines? I want to draw attention to a few.

-We can stay grounded by practicing mindfulness, living with awe, awareness, intention, in Hebrew *kavanah*.

-That can be expressed through gratitude practice, taking our upcoming class on Mussar, a Jewish character trait toolbox, or doing yoga with me on Friday nights.

-Shabbat practice is a *weekly* gift! A respite from the world if we allow it to be. If we go back to the creation story, we begin with wilderness and void. Then comes some attempt at ordering the universe, even though we know that tohu and vohu will keep rearing their ugly heads. Then comes the seventh day. Shabbat. Perhaps the gift of Shabbat was an acknowledgment by G!d that we would constantly be tottering between chaos and order and we would need a break from it all, a time when it really can be, “all good.”

There is a teaching that on Shabbat, we have to fool ourselves a bit. We have to live as if all of our work were done, as if the world is perfect. Just for a day. Then it can go back to being a fiery mess.⁵ That’s not escapism-it’s resiliency!

What might be *your* spiritual lifelines? What gifts will help you regularize your spiritual life? Daily spiritual practice doesn’t have to mean saying prayers or meditating. It can mean giving yourself permission to laugh for 5 minutes a day, express yourself creatively in art, music, movement. It may mean making room in your life for things that may seem frivolous. All of these are spiritual practices that help build our capacity to not be

⁵ Yitz Greenberg-*The Jewish Way* “Shabbat”

traumatized by the turmoil around us. Pick something. Anything. Just do something...every day.⁶

Yes, of course you can do this on your own... But...it's so much deeper when it is grounded in community...

So we arrive at the second gift. It is countercultural. It goes against our ideals of independence and self-sufficiency! It is the opposite of what is happening in our world! It is...a community! A place where people are accepted for who they are. In an increasingly siloed world, community is about connection! We seek refuge in a space that was CREATED to accept everybody. It is important to spend some time in places where the ideals you want to see in the world are lived out. Perhaps SZ is one of those places for you.

It is also in community that we feel we are not alone as we do the work of *tikkun olam*, repairing as much of the chaos around us as we can. We need to be rejuvenated in community so we can keep doing the work that needs to be done.

If one of these suggestions sticks in your head, try that this year! Even just one little thing. Maybe, by acknowledging chaos as part of the fiber of the universe, we can lessen the internal panic we feel as a result of it.

We know we are living in the *tohu* and *vohu*. But we have a choice to not be consumed by it.

Note: I use G!d for the abbreviation of the Divine to express the sense of awe we naturally feel in our lives but often don't know how to name.

⁶ Thanks to Jonathan Omer-Man (and many others) for this simple yet perfect teaching.