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The Jewish Way
Erev Rosh Hashanah 2017/5778
By Rabbi Diana Fersko

Shanah Tovah.

I was in Greece last spring visiting with refugees displaced by the civil war in Syria. There I witnessed just a tiny sliver of what true human suffering looks like. We saw children the same age as my children who were orphans. We saw a disproportionate number of young people—just normal children not any less talented than your children. We saw teenagers, just like your teenagers, who abandoned their own parents for the mere possibility of a greater life.

Given the unimaginable suffering around the world, of which I had just brief emotional access to, I left Greece with an explosion of feelings, but one feeling in particular really surprised me. I left with an experience of intense gratitude.

It was the kind of gratitude that was consuming and humbling.

I was embarrassed that it took staring into the eyes of young refugees to wake me up to the true blessings of our existence.

Thank you God, for granting me freedom and safety. Thank you God, for permitting my family to be secure.

Thank you God for allowing this amazing synagogue community to fulfill the commandment to remember the stranger, the widow, and the orphan.

And it was interesting to come back. To readjust to life on the upper west side. If I made a list of all of the different emotions our community encountered this year, to be honest, I wouldn't say gratitude is in the top five. And that makes sense. Just think about what's happened this year, it's sort of mind boggling. The right to gay marriage, which so many people in this room celebrated, is vulnerable. The right to choose, which so many people in this room take for granted, is under consistent and effective attack. Immigrants and dreamers fear deportation. Climate change is still up for debate. A possible Nuclear War with North Korea regularly makes headlines. There was a Nazi white supremacist march in our country and we were told there were 'fine people' on 'both sides.'

So yes of course we are angry, we are anxious, and we've become really active. We have every right to be.

Judaism supports all of those reactions, but it also argues for one other response. The religious response to turmoil in the world is...gratitude.

We are commanded to be thankful even and especially in tough times.

It's counterintuitive, I know. But the rabbis understood that gratitude is so much more than saying thank you, it's a form of spiritual resistance.

It's a tool for internal coping with external chaos.

It's the way we assert that our moral core will not be swayed by outside forces.

"For every breath a person takes you should thank God," that's what the Rabbis taught and they lived in a horrible time, much worse than our own.

So tonight I say thank you. Thank you God for making us Americans. Thank you God for granting us the freedom to vocalize opposition. Thank you God for giving me this platform in front of this tremendous congregation to preach my beliefs.

Turbulent times are precisely the moment to double down on our core values. We cannot allow our political reactions to replace our religious ones. Given our current country, I'd say gratitude is more urgent now than ever.

And if you think about it, there's really no alternative. Without gratitude, we become spoiled. We luxuriate in our ability to criticize without consequence. We compromise our ability to be compassionate.

We indulge our fantasy that we are experts in every area, more clever, more educated, more correct than everyone else.

Without gratitude we become overly-privileged complainers.

We often feel badly (pause) for ourselves.

Without gratitude we lose perspective on our world and on our place in the world.

Do you think you could look into the eyes of a young refugee, who had seen her brother murdered and her parents arrested, and feel anything but overwhelmed by how blessed we really are?

Of course, at times, we are all ungrateful—even Adam, the first human, was ungrateful. The Rabbis teach that the real reason for exile from Eden was his ingratitude. Think about it, you know the story—God says: "Adam, why did you eat from the tree after I told you not to? Adam answers like this: "The woman, YOU God, gave me, SHE gave me the fruit." Adam first blames God and then blames Eve. Really Adam, you live in paradise, with Eve, who is bone of your bone, flesh of your flesh, and you have God itself watching over you, and that's your best answer? You blame your Creator and your partner for what you did? Take some responsibility,

you ungrateful person.

The punishment for his ingratitude was being kicked out of Eden. God just couldn't be with him any more. I don't think we're going to be kicked out of the Upper West Side for being ungrateful, but ingratitude is a kind of spiritual exile of the self. Next time you find yourself flummoxed by the news, try reminding yourself of all you do have. It might make you feel just a little better. Thank you God for filling our Torah with a profound moral tradition, thank you God for making us Jews.

The only problem with preaching gratitude is that it can be really hard to be grateful, and not just because of the news. I watched a man this year mourn the loss of his wife of over 50 years.

At the burial we said Kaddish. Yitgadal, v'yitkadash, shmei rabbah... The content of Kaddish, as you may know, is not about death, it's about proclaiming God's glory, about being thankful for God. I watched this man, grieving for his beloved partner who had been taken late in life, but still, too soon, struggling to get the words out. At that moment, he did not want to thank God. He wanted to lash out at God. But gratitude is the Jewish way, it's one of our valued responses to a world filled with turbulence, tragedy, and trauma. It reminds us we do not have everything and we do not deserve everything but we appreciate what we do have.

Being grateful is hard. Just look around this room, there is definitely someone richer, thinner, more successful, younger, wiser, healthier, happier than you are. It's easy, especially in New York, to feel covetous and that you are lacking, that you are never enough. We experience acutely that we could always do more, something is always missing. We could be better. A better parent, a better person, a better employee, a better boss, a better friend. We could have a better body, we could take better care of ourselves, we could work more, we could work less. We could be more successful, we could have more.

Being grateful is easy to say it but with our country faltering and our personal lives lacking, I know, it's pretty hard to do.

Let me make a suggestion to help. There's a reason that in Hebrew gratitude is called Hakarat Hatov, noticing the good. Every high holiday season, I notice a lot of good in the people in this room. Do you? I notice that families bring their extended families here to worship together. I notice that on Yom Kippur, a day when we do not eat, we make sure others can by collecting non-perishable food items. I notice that we live stream our services so that people who can't physically leave their homes, can be a part of our community. I notice that we call homebound elderly every year and blow the shofar into the phone, pretty loudly, because it's a mitzvah to hear the shofar blast.

Sitting here—I see little things out there—like congregants helping other congregants when they can't find the page or one mother holding another mother's baby just to give her a moment's rest. Did you notice any of these good things or maybe some others?

So I know that Central Park is not the Garden of Eden, but it's not that far off either. We have so much. We have amazing families, safe schools, plenty of food, and an assumption of personal security. We have Fairway. Sometimes, instead of perfecting and refining our lives, can we just sit back and look around and say thank you God? Next time you find yourself infuriated by reading the paper, don't be reactive, only, also be religious, it might bring you some relief.

PIrkei Avot asks who is rich? Answer—Those who rejoice in their own lot. We think about this season as a time to atone, to say what we did wrong, to want to be better and to work on improving ourselves, and it is. But sometimes we also need to let up, we're not all sin, much of us, the majority of us, is good, very good, in fact. What would it be like if we spent the next ten days just noticing good things around us? If you really practiced being thankful, what sort of spiritual existence might that create?

The matriarch Leah named her fourth son Yehudah which loosely means I am grateful. And we are named Yehudim, the Jews, the grateful ones. We have so much to say thank you for this year.

For the compassionate teachers in our Early Childhood Center who comfort crying children and their parents, I say Dayenu. That alone would be enough for us.

For the unbelievable people that populate our community who spend their days working and their nights volunteering in our homeless shelter, I say Dayenu.

For the countless congregants who bring meals to mourners and visit the sick, I say Dayenu.

For the parents who make Jewish education a priority for their children, I say Dayenu.

For the fact that most of the time when people get sick, they get better, I say Dayenu.

For the adults who engage in Torah learning, Dayenu.

For the gift of Shabbat, Dayenu.

Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav taught that gratitude rejoices with her sister, joy, and is always ready to light a candle and have a party. Well today is a party, it's the birthday of the world for goodness sake. I hope in 5778 we can all RSVP yes and celebrate together. May we be filled with joy, goodness, and gratitude, for this very sweet new year. Shanah Tovah.