

Who Do We Want to Be When We Emerge from Our Caves?

Rabbi Daniel Gropper

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Community Synagogue of Rye

O.k. Let's just come out and say it. This is strange. You're sitting on your couch with a prayer book - or a pdf of one; possibly wearing shoes, possibly not; watching me give a sermon. And I only have faith that this sermon might move you or inspire you or stir you. I have no idea how this will land. It's the best we can do under the circumstances. We appreciate your understanding and your willingness to adapt, over and over and over again during these past months.

As the saying goes, "blessed are the flexible. They don't get bent out of shape."

This morning, I will explore a Talmudic tale that serves as a lens for our lives right now and asks, "How and who do we want to be once this pandemic ends?" On Rosh Hashanah, we typically explore the Akeida, Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac; a story of a father and son that ends badly... for everyone. This tale is also about a father and son, but one where the father helps the son to become more compassionate and understanding. It is known as Rabbi Shimon and the cave.

In a conversation between Rabbis about the Roman influence on life, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai is less than complimentary about the Romans who are then ruling Israel. He is denounced, and sentenced to death.

Rabbi Shimon and his son, Rabbi Elazar, flee to a cave where they live in isolation for 12 years, sustained by only water, carob fruit and the study of Torah. After those dozen years, they learn that their sentence is over, that they can come out of hiding.

When Shimon and Elazar emerged, and saw people going about their daily business, they responded with disgust. Rabbi Shimon said: "These people abandon eternal life of Torah study and engage in temporal life for their own sustenance." And like something out of a DC or Marvel movie, the Talmud relates that every place that Shimon and Elazar directed their eyes was immediately burned. Really!? Heat seeking laser jets struck from their eyes? It's doubtful. But imagine an angry gaze, how it pierces, how it destroys.

These two were angry. They stood in judgment of people who were working hard, just to earn a living. They had spent a dozen years contemplating existential and metaphysical questions and everyone else had the audacity to live a life that was... normal!? They were incensed.

How did the Holy One respond? Like a parent saying "back to your room," "A Divine Voice emerged and said: Did you emerge from the cave in order to destroy My world? Return to your cave," In other words, if all you got out of that solitude is self-righteousness and indignation, then you don't deserve to be set free.

One year later, Shimon and Elazar re-emerged. This time, things were different. They were less angry, more curious. It just happened to be a Friday and Shabbat would soon be upon them..

Shimon and Elazar spotted an elderly man shlepping two bundles of myrtle branches. They asked him what he was doing. "It's Shabbat.," he answered. "I'm collecting myrtle to beautify my home." "Why two bundles when one will suffice," they asked. "Because we are commanded to remember AND to observe Shabbat."

Rabbi Shimon said to his son: See how beloved the mitzvot are to Israel, when it comes to observing God's commandments, they go the extra mile. Shimon and Elazar learned. It seems like the extra time in the cave taught them the most valuable lesson of all: that empathy for others and acceptance of diversity can create what the late Congressman Jon Lewis referred to as, "the beloved community."

As we have lived in our own proverbial caves, we have found ways to nourish ourselves: whether meditation and yoga, Netflix watch parties, cooking and baking, Zoom happy hours or just spending more time with our families. But how will we be when we emerge from this pandemic? Will we burn with judgment or will we be more accepting? Will we be self-absorbed, wishing to quickly fill our own cups or, will we commit to serve others for the benefit of all?

Will the events that occurred during our quarantine influence us or will we seek only to return to "business as usual?" As our mouths and noses were covered, and we learned to look into each other's eyes, to that place where the depth of humanity resides, will we continue to do so or will we replace those masks with other ones that allow us to hide our true essence and allow us to hide from the realities of our world?

Two very different moments in history—each with very different outcomes— allow us to reflect on these questions.

One hundred years ago, during the 1918 Spanish Flu epidemic, desperate to create a sense of order, public health officials prohibited public gatherings, closed schools and houses of worship, and placed restrictions on funeral services.

And when the 1918 lockdown ended, people rushed to regain their sense of normalcy: While Americans had proved remarkably compliant with health officials' initial demands, they grew weary of them and threw them off too soon. Many communities faced a subsequent wave of the illness.

As Twain said, "History might not repeat but it does rhyme."

There was some progress. After the flu pandemic, Americans never returned to the common drinking cup. They frowned on public spitting. Basic education on sanitation and personal hygiene succeeded. But the deaths of 675,000 Americans did not spur a remaking of the health-care system. The pandemic did not disturb the social and economic inequities it had made visible. Our nation did not put its best foot forward. Perhaps this is why there is so little written

about that pandemic. Our society emerged the way Shimon and Eleazar emerged after their first foray in the cave. They took all that energy of cohesion and cooperation and burned it all up.

Contrast this with our response during and after World War II. As the war raged, Americans rationed, bought war bonds, planted victory gardens, canned vegetables. Speed limits were reduced to 35 miles per hour. Posters encouraged carpooling and the conservation of resources: "When you ride alone, you ride with Hitler," they said. That war sowed seeds for a more idealistic world because people understood what it meant to sacrifice for a common cause, to work as one.

After the war, the government created the GI Bill, the Marshall Plan to restore Europe, and retooled U.S. factories for consumer goods. A middle class arose and with it, unprecedented home ownership. Although we must acknowledge, that while in Post World War II America the ethos of community - supported by both the public and private sector was high, these efforts did not benefit everyone.

Remember back in March, when we retreated to our homes and stockpiled and hoarded toilet paper, disinfectant, and paper towels? We feared and panicked, focusing relentlessly on ourselves at the cost of other people. Heaven alone knows why someone felt they needed 600 rolls of toilet paper. Bring to mind the scenes of people flouting the mask recommendations and the physical distancing guidelines, the social media posts of those intentionally violating their coronavirus quarantines while boldly stating, "I have a right to my freedom." Well, no, actually, we do not have a right to our own freedom if exercising it harms or seriously endangers others. With rights come responsibilities.

On the other hand, we've seen some beautiful examples of kindness: shopping for others and picking up medicines; calling on homebound seniors to alleviate the scourge of loneliness; ordinary citizens taking to their balconies to applaud the bravery of our brilliant healthcare workers; millions taking to the streets to call for an end to the systemic racism that plagues not only this nation but much of our world. These acts should give us hope for how we might emerge from our caves in ways that are compassionate and empathetic; engaged and courageous.

As a Jewish people, we should understand the value of banding together during challenging times. This communal cohesion, of putting "we" before "I" is our Jewish story. There are no Jewish hermits and that is proven in the way our ancestors talked about our experiences. Here is a little of what they said: "WE were slaves to Pharaoh." "all that God has spoken, WE will do." "By the rivers of Babylon, there WE sat, sat and wept, as WE thought of Zion." "WE, members of the People's Council, representatives of the Jewish Community of *Eretz-Israel*, hereby declare the establishment of a Jewish state in *Eretz-Israel*.

We are hopelessly communal. This has been our strength for 4000 years. It sustained us in the past. It is what will strengthen us going forward.

I hope we can emerge from this long dark night with an enhanced sense of "we," with a greater sense of empathy and compassion. How do we do it?

As you know, I like to offer practical suggestions on Rosh HaShanah, things you might discuss over lunch. With that in mind, I offer five points to ponder, five suggestions for a deeper,

more meaningful emergence (and a prayer that the day may soon come for our cave dwelling to end).

First, Appreciate the "we" of global human solidarity. There are few times when every person in every country on the planet suffers the same fears, dangers, and risks. Let us live with an enhanced awareness of this interdependence between and among us and think about how we can be there for each other. More about this on Yom Kippur.

Second. Understand the "we" of national identity. I need not remind you there's a big election coming. I hope you've made plans to vote. While we tend to divide ourselves as blue or red, Democrat or Republican, the truth is we are all Americans. When it comes to real fundamentals like life and health, what unites us is greater than what divides us. We are one. Isn't it time to start acting like it? Let us work to find the uniqueness, infinite worth and equality in every citizen, especially those who think and vote differently than we do. Let us learn to really listen to the other.¹

Third, Find the "we" in humility. One tiny virus has brought humanity to its knees. From here on, we should never underestimate our vulnerability. Our morning prayers begin with a prayer for the body, to remind us of that and to practice gratitude for this vessel that carries our soul. Making the choice to be vulnerable like saying 'I love you' first, taking a risk, or investing in a relationship that may or may not work out - actually gives us a stronger sense of belonging to a greater community² of we.

Fourth. Build on the "we" of service. A Talmudic text points to acts of service that are without measure. Honoring one's parents, comforting the bereaved, being hospitable, visiting the sick, performing acts of loving kindness. These are all without measure because you can never do them enough. By living a life of service, we remind ourselves how others depend on us. And by serving others we serve ourselves, as The Buddha declared, "If you light a lamp for someone else it will also brighten your path."

Finally, search for the "we" of hope. If Jewish history teaches us anything, it is the difference between optimism and hope. "Optimism is the belief that things will get better," Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says. "Hope is the belief that, together, we can make things better."

Hope sustained us for 2000 years of exile. Hope inspired young Jews to plant trees and drain swamps in Pre-Israel Palestine. They even named the Israeli national anthem after it: Hatikvah. Despite a history that includes awful suffering, Jews, as a people, have never given up hope. A communal sense of hope can sustain and strengthen us for the long road ahead.

Global human solidarity, national identity, humility, service, hope. Five dimensions to enhance our sense of we.

An old Henny Youngman joke sums it up. Scientists have determined that the world is going to be destroyed by catastrophic flooding in two weeks. Not one inch of land will remain.

¹ https://www.ted.com/talks/robb_willer_how_to_have_better_political_conversations

² "Why be Vulnerable," NY Times., Aug. 13, 2020

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/13/style/vulnerability-is-hard.html?searchResultPosition=4>

The earth will be totally under water. There is nothing that can be done to prevent this catastrophe. So, all the great religions convene their leaders and call on them to prepare their adherents for the end. Some preach repentance and speak of an afterlife. Others speak of acceptance and equanimity. But the Rabbis gather their people and deliver the following message: "We have two weeks to learn how to live under water."

Of course, the key to the joke is the word "we." The punchline reminds us that despair only debilitates, that together we are stronger, that every crisis brings an opportunity to imagine a brighter tomorrow, even if that tomorrow is different from our yesterday.

And when it is time to emerge from our caves, may it be a shofar that calls us, calling us to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God, living more with a sense of "we" and less with a sense of "I." May that call ring forth, soon and speedily in our day and may then we heed its call. Amen. L'Shana Tova!