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JEWISH SURVIVAL AND SUCCESS

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Seeing the sanctuary full of rarely seen worshippers on Erev Rosh Hashanah reminds us of the *Barchu*—the call to worship and service to God. The *Barchu* occurs at that moment in the service when together we acknowledge how we're trying to use our lives—that we're trying to live lives in which we show kindness and uphold justice. It's a reminder that our efforts to increase kindness and justice in the world are often solitary and forlorn. We're alone in them, making them doubly difficult. So, hopefully, with the *Barchu* we bring each other into our consciousness and magnify our day-to-day commitments to make the world a better place.

The last year's events—consider also those we may imagine are coming in the year ahead—are painful reminders of the costs of contributing to kindness and justice in the world. We've witnessed Israel's vilification in the world press for defending itself in solidarity from its sworn Iranian enemies and their Hezbollah proxy, which have not minced words about their genocidal aims. We've witnessed the continuing cost of the loss of Israel's territory in what we hoped but now deeply doubt will be an important initiative for peace, not just an increase in its strategic vulnerability at the hands of Hamas. Day by day we witness the seemingly limitless and endless death and destruction in Iraq, the downward spiral into civil war, and the return of shattered and maimed young soldiers who've given their all in a war that had an infamous beginning and is likely to have an ignominious ending. We've seen dramatic and unsettling increases in anti-Semitism, both here at home and abroad. And we've noted the continued influence of the religious right in the United States, a source of support for Israel, but an ominous harbinger of our own vulnerability as Jews in America.

So what's the point of all this?

It may be that most of the time many of us tell ourselves that Judaism and congregational life are at best peripheral to our day-to-day lives, if we think of them at all. But it has occurred to us that

everything can change in the blink of an eye when history changes course. In our brief lifetimes what seemed impossible is now unquestioned history: Half of the Jewish people were murdered, by what was considered one of the most civilized and cultured countries in the world. The State of Israel was reestablished after two thousand years, surviving the combined aggression of virtually all of its Arab "neighbors." America lost a war in Vietnam, one in which it had invested more than 50,000 lives and vast treasure. The Soviet Union collapsed, in part because of the advocacy and organizing of Polish Catholics—the Pope and a labor leader.

We pray to God, or do whatever we do to sustain our hope, that our future will be safe and secure.

But what if it's not? Does it make sense to face that future more or less isolated and alone? Does it make sense to face that future without knowing the wisdom that has enabled our extraordinary survival and success as a people?

Keep in mind that whenever and wherever calamity has befallen the Jewish people, no one was exempted. Liberal Jews were not exempted. Secular Jews were not exempted. And assimilated Jews were not exempted.

The only substantive hope we have for the future, in the face of that which threatens us, lies in our Jewish diversity and unity. Our hope for survival and success, as always, lies in the diversity of our unique contributions that we marshal for our common purpose.

What is it that unites us in common purpose?

Whatever our theological differences, from unquestioning faith to unapologetic atheism, we are virtually all agreed on three points: (1) That there is a possibility for greater goodness in the world, (2) that we personally are investing some of our time, energy, material resources, and spirit to bring about that greater goodness, and (3) that the Torah is, if only by default for some, our guiding touchstone for those efforts.

Once we acknowledge those three points, it's only a short step to see that our *communal* capacity to increase goodness, both for others and ourselves, can potentially be multiplied many times over what we can accomplish as individuals. Joining together as a *kahal poalei tzedek*, a congregational community doing righteousness and justice, is the amplifying step. And acquainting ourselves with the vision and path of our Torah wisdom tradition is the illuminating step. Which brings us to Yomim Nora'im, the Days of Awe or High Holy Days.

What is the purpose of these days?

Teshuvah, of course; but what's the objective? Are we to understand that our personal happiness is to be attained by dedicating our efforts during these ten days exclusively to . . . our *personal* happiness?

Of course not, you say—since you take pride in your unselfish love of your parents, your spouse, and your children. But that's not enough to ensure our safety and security—God's protection, if you will. At these Days of Awe, like the census of our people in the wilderness, we are counted not only as individuals, but also as members of families, tribes (or nowadays congregational communities), and as a whole people. We attend High Holy Day services, then, not only to improve ourselves as individuals and family members, but as responsible citizen-members of a community and a nation.

The purpose of this *moeid*, this meeting with God, has its parallel in the morning and evening *tamid* offering in the Jerusalem Temple. It's a reminder that our survival and success as a people is not an enigma or the result of blind, dumb luck. It is the predicted and predictable outcome of our people striving upwards together in their daily lives to see the vision and walk the path of Torah.

So here we are, at the roiling confluence of historical events in our own time.

What are *we* going to do?

These Days of Awe are a time-out from our everyday lives to once again contemplate “*yirat Adoshem*.” We understand that Hebrew expression in two ways: Awe of God and Fear of God. Both are related to the experience we have of keeping God in mind or failing to keep God in mind. These days are designed to reinforce once again why and how to keep God in mind. When we keep God in mind we come to understand and be awed by the beauty and bounty of the Creation and the Creator, which enables our survival and success. When we fail to keep God in mind, we're plagued by the anxiety and fear that inevitably follow from ignoring the natural consequences of our acts, which the Torah teaches us.

For those of us who yet hope for lives of deeper meaning, purpose, and fulfillment, peace, prosperity, and contentment, *Yomim Nora'im* are not only days of awe, but of hope. Our hope is strengthened in knowing that we're not alone in our spiritual ambitions, but that we're part of a community and a people. Our hope is strengthened in reenacting the traditional rituals through which we communicate with ourselves about what we value most and how we're to practice and protect those things. Our hope is strengthened by our own acts of faith during this time, when we do *teshuvah*, repairing the damage we've caused to others and to ourselves.

God, help us to see the possibilities for greater goodness in the world, and together to lift up that goodness—as individuals, families, a community, and a people.

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