

Temple Beth Torah Joins Congregation B'nai Brith, Santa Barbara, for a United Shabbat

March 23, 2018

Parshat Tzav, Shabbat Ha Gadol

Sermon: Rabbi Lisa Hochberg-Miller

Shabbat shalom, I am sure I have said this a hundred times tonight, but it bears repeating- I – we, from Temple Beth Torah in Ventura, are delighted to be here. If there is any take-away question to contemplate after tonight, perhaps a worthy question might be, why do we wait for disasters to bring our Jewish communities together, rather than moments of celebration? Perhaps it's like prayer- when things are good, I don't remember to pray so much, its only when we are facing the challenges of life that the words, "O God" seem to come much more quickly to our lips.

Maybe in our coming together we have begun to change that human response of coming together for emergencies to the better human response of coming together in joy, in purpose, and simply in gratitude.

Thank you, Rabbi Cohen, for inviting me to speak tonight. You know, this Shabbat is Shabbat HaGadol, the great Sabbath which falls prior to Passover, and in past centuries this was one of only two Sabbaths, along with Shabbat Shuvah right before Yom Kippur, when the rabbi would traditionally sermonize. The rabbi was expected to give a long and lengthy discourse on the laws of Passover...so I thought I 'd honor that tradition....! Actually, what you can expect to hear might have less to do with the leavening in your kitchen and more with what inflates the human soul...

Last month when Rabbi Cohen spoke at TBT, it felt like he invited us into a theological conversation, one that probably had started in your community in December with the fire, and continued painfully in January, with the mudslides and deaths. We too have had conversations seeking to understand where God fits into the devastation we have seen. The week after the fire, when we resumed Torah School, we gathered with our 3-6th graders on Wed. afternoon for t'filah. We led them through the birkat haGomel, the prayer on page 371 of the prayerbook we are holding thanking God for delivering us from harm. Afterwards, one student asked, "why are we praising God? We should be praising the firefighters, who saved our homes." He, like many of us, couldn't find God in the equation of what he had just experienced. He saw fire fighters, he saw the local police, the national guard standing on Temple's street corner. He saw them busy at work... ***but what good did God do?***

The answer to that question is—in part-- to understand of course, where to, and where not to, look for God. Everything about our sacred texts tells us to look for God in the world of nature. The whole earth is full of God's glory, says Isaiah. We welcome Shabbat with these words from Psalm 95: "In God's hands are the depths of the earth, the peaks of the mountains are God's, God's is the sea, God made it, and the land, which God's

hands fashioned.“ So many of us feel closest to God in Nature- I imagine Rabbi Cohen and Marion love to backpack in part because immersing in nature is immersing in a closeness with God. We see Nature as an expression of God’s creative power. But we do not believe God uses nature as a moralizing force. Nature is not a tool used by God to wreak havoc on humanity for our shortcomings, of which we have many. We know this, but sometimes we are so overwhelmed when we are confronted by nature’s power that it is hard to believe this. I spoke with a congregant whose house was spared, but who could look at the scorch marks that stopped one foot from her back patio beams. Yet, her troublesome neighbor, who had sued them over their backyard fence, made them miserable, had lost his house entirely. In the enormity of destruction, sometimes we have to remind ourselves that God does not use nature as a moralizing tool in the world. We are the ones who overlay a moral veneer on what we see and experience.

To the student who asked, why are we thanking God, we spoke about where God was found in this natural disaster- in the compassionate response of strangers to each other, in the bravery of firefighters and first responders to help out. God was found in the humanity that elevated every one of us out of our own heads and our own little worlds to call ourselves to greater purpose- sending blankets to the fairgrounds, inviting friends and people we hardly knew to live with us, distributing masks, and water and food where it might help people we did not remember were our neighbors. For the last few months I have been emailing with a woman named Lori who I do not know...except that she belongs to Kol Ami, a Reform congregation in New York. The first week of December, the URJ was holding the Biennial in Boston, and those who participated from her congregation were given \$60 American Express cards, stamped with the emblem of the URJ and Keren Kayemet L’yisrael. Lori had asked every URJ delegate from her temple to contribute their gift card, and she sent them to me. Every few weeks, a few more cards show up. I don’t have to tell you where God’s presence was during the fire, and the following health-endangering weeks of unbreathable air, and the mudslide, and now during the clean-up. Rabbi Harold Schulweis writes in his poem, “Between”, “God is not in me, nor in You, but between us...God is known not alone, but in relationship. Not as separate, lonely power, but revealed through our kinship, our friendship, through our healing and binding and raising up of each other.” We saw it. We felt it. We were it, during those days.

But those answers, to be very, very honest, do not seem complete enough. We still wrestle with how to know God, and feel God’s protection in our lives, knowing that we live in a world of nature which is not preoccupied with keeping us safe. Or worse, a world of human nature, where the goodness of humanity does not keep us safe from the man-made evils of human nature. When disaster strikes-- natural or human-caused- - we feel vulnerable, helpless, powerless. So the question is how do we respond to

disaster, whether than disaster is a mountain melting like wax over a town, or a society where 20% of our teen children fear going to school everyday because of gun violence? And the answer is one and the same- “through our healing and binding and raising up of each other.” Tomorrow, here in Santa Barbara and Ventura, as well as 837 communities *worldwide*, our children will lead the way in reminding us that if human nature can be destructive, it is also human nature to care for others more than fear others, that it is also human nature to temper our wants with an awareness of our responsibilities to community, and that it is human nature to value human life as the most precious of gifts. Just as we respond to natural disaster by retrofitting hospitals, reinforcing bridges, and hillsides and dams, so we respond to human disaster by retrofitting our laws, reinforcing our values, and strengthening the society—*and the God--* that exists Between Us.

And I love that all this plays out on Shabbat HaGadol, for this *will* be a great Sabbath where, in the words of tomorrow’s haftarah prophet Malachi, the hearts of parents will return to their children, and the hearts of the children will be reconciled to their parents. (*v’hay-sheev lev avot al banim v’lev banim al avotam 3:24*) As multiple generations take to the streets tomorrow to honor the cries of anguish we have heard from society’s children, it *will* be a great day, one we pray that heralds the redemption from the violence that none of us wants to live among. From our children, we will learn to take the chametz out of the way we have inflated society, and listen to their plea for the simple human values of life and care and tolerance, of sitting each in our own place with none to make us afraid.

Where is God when we face the disasters of our world? Malachi reassures us of God’s constancy, and ours:

For I am Adonai, I have not changed... *Ke Ani Adonai, lo shanee-ti--* and you are the Children of Jacob- and you have not ceased to be. (3:6)

Malachi teaches us that when we stop defrauding God- when we stop giving God our second best, when we stop saying it is useless to serve God, what do we gain by walking in awe of God, then God will “open the floodgates of the sky for you and pour down boundless blessing.”

These are the days to bring the best of what is in our heart forth, so that the blessings may rain down upon all of our community, and all of society. Shabbat shalom.