

**WE INTERRUPT YOUR REGULARLY SCHEDULED
PROGRAM
TO BRING YOU THIS IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT**
Rabbi Zoe Klein Miles – High Holy Days – 2020

There was a new moon in the sky last night,
As there always is on Erev Rosh Hashana,
Sliver of reflected light,
A door in the dark, opening just a crack,

Shall we peek outside the door, see what the New Year brings?
We linger in this moment, as Noah must have lingered
Before stepping out of the ark,
Hovering between moving forward, and turning back.

What did he see when he looked out the door?
A muddied land mired in death and sorrow,
Or hills bathed in rainbowed light,
Promising plentiful vineyards tomorrow.

Was he energized to build the new world,
An opportunity to reorient the human compass
toward godliness,
In harmony with the animal kingdoms
Who shared their ship,
Or was he too fatigued, sea-tossed and grieving
To take the next step?

The door has just cracked open upon the new year,
And as we stand at the threshold, we scan our souls,
Our wounds and our callouses,
Our damage, our growth.

Frightened of supermarkets, cinemas and stores,
Even after the vaccine, how will we step out the door?

Anxious about every handshake and embrace?
Overflowing with gratitude, generosity, grace?
How will we move from this place.



We interrupt your regularly scheduled program,
We interrupt your rhythmically forward motion
Your momentum toward that promotion
Your trip across the ocean
For which you've scrapped and saved
And counted the days
We interrupt your wedding
Invitations you now won't be sending,
Bedding from the registry you won't soon be getting,
We interrupt those fragile friendships so newly formed
We interrupt grandparents flying in to hold the newly born,
We interrupt your internship hard-won,
We interrupt your senior graduation,
We interrupt your birthday celebration,
We interrupt your child's early development,
We interrupt acknowledgment of your retirement,
We interrupt the recent nascent romance,
May we cut into your dance, intercept the advance,
Create a little distance...
We interrupt your familiar thread-worn routines,
We interrupt your lifelong visions and dreams

Put the projects on pause,
Furlough your jobs,
Put a pin in your purpose, test your resolve,
Close beaches, parks and salons,
Anchor you at home, to isolate alone,
and postpone, postpone, postpone, postpone
until when? Future date unknown.

This year, do our hearts really need pounding?
They've already been broken.
Must we hear the shofar blast?
Haven't we already awoken?

The words of the central prayer of the High Holy Days
Are less abstract now.

On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed,
And on Yom Kippur it is sealed.
Who shall live and who shall die,
Who by water and who by fire,
Who by sword and who by wild beast,
Who by earthquake and who by plague,
Who shall be at peace and who shall be pursued,
Who shall become rich and who shall be impoverished...

We've lived the terrifying prayer.
Each line translates into a digital feed
Scrolling past our mind's eye
We hear "by fire" and flash to the Australian wildfires,
Or the fires now in California,
We hear "by sword," and "wild beast" and hear guns, brutality,
the beastliness of a man crushing another's neck with his knee,
"Who by plague" and we see virus riding our breath,
Inflaming our airways, cutting down souls, around the globe,
"Who shall be pursued," stirs images of rising anti-Semitism,

Swastikas spray-painted on synagogues. Other peoples and ethnicities pursued because of their color or creed, the tormented Uygurs in China. We hear “Who shall be impoverished,” and see the millions laid off, Struggling, unemployed.

We arrive today at this spiritual oasis,
At this ancient wellspring,
Thirsting for connection,
For centering, replenishing.

Looking to gather up the pieces,
When so much has fallen apart,
Looking to gather together
Even when worshiping apart.

What can we draw out from the treasury of our tradition
That is relevant, resonant, to where we are now?

It turns out, there is a lot of treasure to be found.

Judaism, writ large, is a story of resilience.
The Jewish people are exemplars of resilience,
Rising up from extensive trauma again and again.
How understandable it would have been
For the Jew to shrink and retreat,
Into monastic quietude,
To separate ourselves,
To be meek, mild, placid.

Instead we rebound with renewed commitment
To our covenant
To bettering the world,
Our responsibility redoubled.
One would think a people so often targeted
Might keep their heads down,

Would seek less attention,
But... *we'd like to interrupt your regularly scheduled program
Of taking advantage of the widow, the orphan, the stranger and the
needy,*
For an important announcement from the Jewish people:
We are going to raise our voices,
We are going to shout down your Hamans,
We remember that we were slaves in the land of Egypt,
That our great temple in Jerusalem was destroyed not once, but twice,
That pogroms bloodied our shtetls across Europe,
That we were persecuted for hundreds of years of Inquisition,
That millions of our family were systematically annihilated
While the world watched,
That we continue to be scapegoated in every societal downturn
Locally and around the world,
We remember these things, and never forget,
But instead of internalizing our victimhood
And citing it as a defensible reason for laying low,
And being afraid,
We use it to fuel
A revolution of civil rights,
An evolution of humanity,
Of humankindness.

Judaism is a story of remarkable resilience and renewal.

The name Israel, as you know, comes from the story in Genesis, when Jacob wrestles with an angel. They wrestled all night, and the angel wrenched Jacob's hip at the socket. And as dawn was breaking, the angel cried to be let go, but Jacob said: "I will not let you go until you bless me."

So the angel blessed him, and said: "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have wrestled with beings divine and human, and have prevailed." (Genesis 32:25-29)

In other words, in the midst of a long night of battle,
Of pain and terror, grief and rage,
Limping, beaten, nearly broken,
We take hold of the struggle and we say,
“I am not going to let go until I wrest a blessing out of this.”

We make meaning out of randomness,
Conjure sparks of light out of darkness,
Squeeze lessons and blessings out of struggle.
It's how we got our name.

I am thinking of Adam Cohen's bar mitzvah,
Which was nothing like the family had imagined,
To be in the backyard rather than the sanctuary,
With most of the guests attending through Zoom,
I loved when Adam's father Alex said to him,
“You took the lemons that life gave you,
and not only made lemonade with them,
But you made lemon meringue pie, and lemon mimosas.”

It was nothing like the family had imagined,
And it was so much more than any of us could have dreamed.

Each of the families who have walked through the b'nai process
Taught us something about resilience,
And creativity.
Creating sacred space in their homes,
Using card tables, piles of books, or the washing machine
Covered in white tablecloth as the podium,
Laundry basket as an ark,
The whole B'nai Mitzvah spectacular
Now distilled down to its essence,
Social distancing means deemphasizing the party,
The caterer and open bar, dance floor and decorations,

Clarified, refined, into something beautiful and pure,
All focus on a holy rite of passage,
A young student stepping through the gate of transition,
Torah in their arms.

There was one service,
Where the wifi went out just as the service began,
The student had an allergic reaction, and her mouth swelled,
And she couldn't find any of her material,
That on top of having to give up on the idea of
A big celebration with all of her friends
And family flying in from all over the country,
And even with every set back,
My goodness, it was so beautiful,
And authentic, natural, true...
A first in a list of many firsts, this bat mitzvah student
Led her service with bare feet,
On the warm green grass, in a blooming garden,
And watching her, I thought of how Moses was commanded
To take off his shoes before the burning bush,
For it was holy ground.

She shined.
And I thought, this too is holy ground.

There is a story in the Talmud (Midrash Avot d'Rabbi Nathan 4:5) that says once Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai was walking with his disciple, Rabbi Yehoshua in Jerusalem. Rabbi Yehoshua looked at the ruins of the Holy Temple and said "Alas for us!! The place that atoned for the sins of the people Israel lies in ruins!"

Rabbi Yohannan ben Zakkai comforted him, saying: "Be not grieved. There is an equivalent way of gaining atonement... through deeds of loving-kindness."

In other words, in the wake of the catastrophe of the great Temple in Jerusalem being destroyed, the sages were already rewriting the rules for how we connect with God. No longer through animal sacrifice, rather through deeds of loving-kindness.

And you see it in many places throughout the Talmud. Rabbi Elazar said: Charity and justice are greater than offering all of the sacrifices. (Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 49)

(Makkot 24b:1-5) Another story tells of Rabbi Akiva and his companions, and they see a fox scampering out of the place that had once been the Holy of Holies. The companions began weeping, and Rabbi Akiva laughed. When they ask why, he explains that it was prophesied that the Temple Mount would be plowed like a field, and also that there will yet be people happily growing old in Jerusalem. Now that the first prophecy has come true, he said, and the Temple has indeed been plowed like a field and a home to foxes, the second prophecy will also come true.

Rather than surrender, assimilate, be done, the sages had the resilience, courage and confidence, to pivot. Let's make charity, justice and deeds of loving-kindness even greater than sacrifice! Rabbi Akiva even laughed, not out of insensitivity, but out of a vision that was long enough to see past his own generation, into the distant future. He saw that this was part of a plan. They were able, in that pitch night, to find that sliver of light, the new moon cracking open the dark like a door.

And when they opened the new door, they didn't let themselves sink in the muddied land mired in death and sorrow. They said, now that our center of worship is gone, our tradition will become decentralized. Had they been too rigid, that would have been the end. But they were resilient. They moved like reeds dancing in storms. They planted new ideas on hills bathed in rainbowed light, promising plentiful vineyards tomorrow.

They created synagogues, community centers. And rather than a sacred central altar, they made the dining room table sacred. They charged the people with ritually washing their hands before eating bread, just like the priests did before offering sacrifices. They charged the people with saying a blessing before eating and grace after. In other words, dinner together was transformed into an offering.

Judaism is a home-based religion. Think about your strongest Jewish memories, and they are Passover Seders at your grandparents' home, Hanukkah with cousins, Shabbat and holiday meals with family.

For most of our history, we had no homeland. Instead we became experts in creating holy space within our own dwellings.

And so yes, this is holy ground.

And where you are too, right now,
you are on holy ground.

If you have a mezuzah on your front door, blow it a kiss.

Jacob, before he wrestled with the angel,
Also had a dream. He was sleeping on the side of the road,
With a rock as a pillow, and he dreamt of a ladder reaching into the
heavens,

And angels were going up and down the ladder.

And Jacob said, "God was in this place, and I did not know it." (Genesis 28:16)

Look around you. What does it feel like to say out loud,
"God is in this place, and I did not know it."

What is resilience?

It is having a rock for a pillow, and still seeing angels.

Fred Rogers once wrote about how scary the world can be for children, but that his mother taught him: “Always look for the helpers. There’s always someone who is trying to help.” He said that he did, and he “came to see that the world is full of doctors and nurses, police and firemen, volunteers, neighbors and friends who are ready to jump in to help when things go wrong.”

What is resilience?

Yea though we walk through the valley of death, our eyes still recognize the angels. And maybe, sometimes, we are one of them.

What is resilience?

Limping, nearly broken,
Taking hold of the adversity, and saying,
“I am not letting go until you bless me.”
I am not closing this chapter
Until I extract a blessing from it.
I’m not shelving this volume
Until I find the moral of the story.
Make meaning out of this mess.

(You know that moment in movies when someone thought they were just a regular schmo and they discover that they actually possess superpowers? Or they are the heirs of some remote kingdom? This is kind of that moment. You are the descendants champion wrestlers, and blessing wranglers. You are agents of hope, exemplars of resilience.)

What is the blessing what you are going to wrestle out of this moment in history?

What is the blessing, and how will you act upon it?

The rabbis saw the destruction of the temple and said,
The blessing is that we can still pursue justice, charity and acts of kindness.

What blessing will you wrangle out of the wreckage?

Speak your blessing out loud. Write it. Share it with someone.
Find it, and then don't let it dissipate.
Speak it, activate it.
Bring it to life.

What is resilience?

It is the found in Israel's National Anthem:

Our hope is not yet lost,
It is two thousand years old,
To be a free people in our land
The land of Zion and Jerusalem.

Two thousand years is a mighty long time.
To be a Jew is to be, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks said, "an agent of hope
In a world serially threatened by despair,"
And that hope is long,
Reaching past our own generation,
Or our children's, and children's children, into the distant future.

Judaism, writ large, is a story of resilience.
The Jewish people are exemplars of resilience,
And the secret of our resilience...is hope.

Mired in despair, one cannot move, one cannot bend with the wind,
dance with the storm.
But hope is motivation. And we have a history of holding onto hope,
long, long, long after others would have abandoned it.



We interrupt your regularly scheduled program to bring you this important announcement.

There was a new moon in the sky last night,
And it is waxing its way toward Yom Kippur.

Our individual arks have all docked here
At this High Holy season which rises out of our streaming days
Like Mount Ararat.

God is in this place, and we did not know it,
Here, in the interruptions.

Little interruptions:
An old friend appearing, out of the blue,
A surprise visit,
The dog nosing your leg for a walk,

And big interruptions:
A cry for help,
A doctor calling with results,
Birth,
Death.
Falling in love.

The rabbis teach that God speaks to each person differently.
You hear the important announcement differently than I hear the
announcement.

We interrupt your regularly scheduled program to bring *you*, specifically
you, this unique announcement:

Perhaps you hear God's announcement in the air and the ocean, the
forest and permafrost, the environment, the climate, calling you to take a
stand.

Perhaps you hear God's announcement in the voices of children scared
silent by constant terror, calling you to fight for them.

Perhaps you hear God's announcement in your own voice, calling you to
self-care.

We pound on our hearts to jumpstart our resilience.

We listen to the shofar to open our earways

To be able to hear the announcement...

God has been trying to interrupt the chaotic static

To get a word in edgewise.

There was a new moon in the sky last night,

Sliver of reflected light,

A door in the dark, opening just a crack,

And we step through, together,

The holy day administers a

Dose of ancient hope.

We take it, we'll make it,

Resilient, grateful,

Unlatch the gate,

Vaccinated.

Activated,

We've waited and waited,

God has heard our cry,

We are the redeemed Israelites,

We take hold of our blessings...
And march out of the dark
And into the dawn,
Heartful and headstrong,
Holy ground below,
Superpower within,
We can do this.

Let the new year begin.