

Sermon For Rosh HaShanah Evening
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Temple Beth El of Boca Raton
By Rabbi Daniel Levin

Six months ago on March 11, Chihiro Kanno and her teammates on the Takata high school swimming team in Rikuzentakata were just beginning their practice when the 9.0 earthquake struck. Following their normal evacuation drill, the team left the pool and headed to the town's community center. But that was when everything changed.

The tsunami slammed into the building, and Chihiro was swept into a small store room. She clung to the hand of one friend desperately trying to pull her to safety. But the force of the water was too great, and it tore the two girls apart.

"I was underwater," she said. "My back touched the floor. Above me was wreckage. I dodged it and swam up. There was a small space between the ceiling and the water, I could breathe there."

Her friend, whose hand was ripped from hers, was one of seven who were swept away in tsunami. These seven were among the more than 27,000 people who perished or are missing following the earthquake and tsunami.

Sakaya Sugawara was just 15 when the tsunami tore apart her house. "I was in the stairway," she recalls. "My mother was upstairs. My grandmother and great grandmother were downstairs with my dog. I heard a huge sound from the ground. Instantly, my house broke apart. I thought, 'Oh, I will die now.'" Sayaka and her mother, Riko Sugawara, were pulled by the first tsunami waves out of their home and into the school's outdoor swimming pool.

"The rubble was piled on top of me and I could feel the water pulling back," she said. "My mother was next to me, alive and talking. Her right leg was under the rubble and she couldn't move. She told me to go." Sayaka's face shows no emotion as she recounts the moment. "I told her, 'Okay, I'll go now.' She then said, 'Don't go!' But I still left."

Just as she pulled herself out of the rubble another tsunami wave hit, throwing her high into the air and onto the school's red rooftop. Here the story becomes fuzzy -- she believes two days passed before rescuers pulled her to safety.

In the weeks that followed, search teams recovered the bodies of Sayaka's mother and grandmother. Her great-

grandmother's body remains missing. All of her closest guardians died, except for an elderly grandfather. "Don't feel sorry for me," she says. "Feel sorry for the elementary school kids who lost their parents or a kid who doesn't even have a grandfather, like me. Don't feel sorry for me."

On this Rosh HaShanah evening, as we reflect back on the year that has passed, it is difficult not to think of the enormity of this tragedy. And beyond that, it is difficult not to think of the extraordinary range of tragedy we witness across the globe - fathers and mothers who will watch their children die of starvation in the midst of a famine in Africa that will claim the lives of 750,000 people; flood waters around the world that will carry away homes, crops, and loved ones; wars that will claim the lives of thousands, drought that will claim the lives of many more.

Considering each of these disasters, and the depth of pain each inflicts on so many, can any of us pretend not to feel some measure of the broken-heartedness that reverberates from the painful and often silent cries of the afflicted? God knows there are many who have been overwhelmed by different kinds of tsunamis - the painful loss of a loved one, the loss of a business or persistent unemployment, the dissolution of a marriage and the break-up of a home.

As we begin the New Year, we look out at a world that seems terribly dark. It is dark for us as a people, as we see militant Islam and hate seem to capture ever greater numbers of people under its spell. It is dark for us as a nation as we struggle with an economic downturn that grips so many with suffering and fear. It is dark for many as individuals who are suffering personal loss and heartbreak.

Jewish time always begins in the dark. We begin our celebration of the New Year in the darkness of the evening, not in the light of morning. The Torah tells us that in the beginning, the world itself was dark and void. As the well-known teacher of Jewish mysticism Estelle Frankel wrote, "darkness is the womb from which all life emerges."¹ Most often it seems, it is when our world is shrouded in the deepest darkness, in the midst of existential crisis that we feel compelled to ask the most fundamental questions of meaning and faith. It is in the dark that our work for the New Year begins. It is in the dark, ultimately, that life itself begins.

I think about Sakaya Sugawara on the roof of the school, lying there in the darkness of night, wondering what would

¹ Estelle Frankel. *Sacred Therapy*. London: Shambhala, 2003, p. 19.

become of her and her life. I think about each one of us who know what it is to lay awake in the dark, asking ourselves the same question. When life seems broken, when our hearts are broken, when we find ourselves alone in the dark, wondering what the future will hold, wondering where we go from here.

Jewish tradition guides us on Rosh HaShanah to consider the fragile nature of our existence. Tomorrow we will be asked to wonder, "Who shall live and who shall die; who shall see ripe age, and who shall not. Who by fire and who by water; who by sword and who by beast; who by earthquake and who by plague ... Who shall be secure and who shall be driven; who shall be tranquil and who shall be troubled; who shall be poor and who shall be rich; who shall be humbled and who exalted."

Imagine what it would feel like for Chihiro to hear the words: "who by water?" Imagine what it would feel like for Sakaya to hear the words "who by earthquake?" Imagine a Somali family hearing "who by hunger?" Imagine someone who just lost her job hearing "who shall be secure?" Imagine someone whose parents have separated hearing "who shall be troubled?" When you hear those words, what hits you the hardest?

None of us are immune from the tragic vicissitudes of life. There are times when every one of us will suddenly see our world plunged into darkness. How do we find a path out of the darkness? How do we make our way toward the light?

The liturgy provides the answer: "U-Teshuva, U-Tefilah, U-Tzedakah Ma'avirin et Roa HaGezerah - But Teshuva, Tefilah, and Tzedakah allow us to transcend the decree.

Traditionally, the rabbis understood this formula as the steps necessary to avert the wrath of God's judgment. But I believe God's judgment is not found in our afflictions. I do not believe that God chose to save Chihiro and not her friend. I do not believe that God chose to save Sakaya and not her mother. I believe God is, as the Psalmist said, the Healer of the Broken-hearted, the light that shines in the dark, the guide who will lead us in the process of Teshuva, Tefilah and Tzedakah.

What is Teshuva? Generally we see this translated as repentance, but Teshuva is a much different process than simply looking back on past actions with regret. The root of the word Teshuva is Shuv, which means return. The process of Teshuva is one which invites us to return to the core root and essence of our very being. Teshuva asks us to return to a path that leads us forward.

In the face of tragedy, we cannot help but cling to our vision of what once was. We look back on the life we used to lead, when things were more secure and certain. We wish we could return to the life we used to lead, but this is not the kind of return that Teshuva asks us to consider. Teshuva asks us not to return to what we were, but to look deep within to understand who it is that we really need to become.

Rabbi Isaac of Acco, a kabbalist who lived in the fourteenth century once told a story of a man who became smitten with a beautiful princess. She became the sole object and focus of his attention. He was an unlearned man, and he could not imagine a meaningful life or future without her. Only with her, he imagined, could he live the life he wanted. Only with her, he thought, could he be happy and fulfilled.

One day, as her entourage was passing by, the man ran up to her. He professed his love for her and pleaded with her that they might be together. She replied that the only place she would be together with him was in the graveyard.

Not understanding, he went to the cemetery to wait for her. He waited all day, and still she did not come. Each day he would come and wait in the cemetery, and each day he grew more somber, more sad, and more disappointed.

But with each passing day, the man began to listen to the voices of those who came to lay their loved ones to rest. He listened as children related the ways in which their parents acted with selfless love, generosity, and compassion. He listened to the stories of wisdom gleaned from lives of loved-ones. His heart broke as he felt the anguish of those who were shattered by the pain of tragic loss.

Over time, he came to realize that the life he was meant to lead had nothing to do with the princess. Instead, he came to realize that his life's meaning and purpose was to live his life embodying the virtues of the greatest examples of goodness he had learned, to share the wisdom that was shared with him, to live in a way that honored the lives of those who had died in tragedy.

Sometimes our suffering makes it difficult to understand ourselves. Each of us is covered in garments. In the light of day, and out in public, we cover up, to protect ourselves from the outside world, to hide what lies underneath. But the Hebrew word for clothing, *Beget*, is connected directly to the Hebrew word *Bagad*, which means betrayal. Too often the garments we wear hide the true essence of ourselves that lies beneath. The garments betray who we really are, not simply to each other, but often to ourselves.

In the dark, however, the garments are stripped away. The darkness is holy because ironically, it is only in the dark that we are able to fully reveal our true selves. The darkness permits our gaze to see beyond the external realities that so often consume our attention in order to focus on the true nature of our selves that lies within.

Teshuva is the process of returning to the right and the good, returning to the highest vision of our selves we can imagine, returning to a process of integrating the world in which we find ourselves with the wisdom and truths of the tradition from which we come. It is fundamentally Teshuva that will help us to rebuild our broken lives, and heal our broken hearts.

Tefilah, or worship, is the next step we take after Teshuva. In the aftermath of a tragedy, in the shock and drama of the sudden shift in our reality, it is more easy to focus on that sense of good and right. But as time goes by, we tend to withdraw back into old habits and comfortable patterns. The clarity we saw in the midst of the tragedy becomes clouded and dimmed.

Just three months after the earthquake and tsunami, Ashinaga, an organization based in Tokyo that assists children who have lost parents or were orphaned in natural disasters, brought four teenagers whose parents died in the disaster to New York City. In Times Square, the students raised money and awareness for the hundreds of other children who were in desperate need of assistance. Staff from Ashinaga reported that while they were blessed with significant support immediately after the tsunamis, three months later it was as if the world forgot.

How often do we hear the lament of how quickly the sense of unity and common purpose we saw after 9-11 dissolved back into the same cynical partisan dysfunction and rancor? How often is it that in the aftermath of a loss, we resolve to make different choices, to live by different standards, to take a different path, but then, soon after, we revert back to our same old selves? How long does it take after we make our New Year resolutions on Rosh HaShanah for us to set them aside?

Tefilah represents making the concerted effort to constantly remind ourselves of what path we need to take. I once knew a woman who attended an AA meeting on a weekly basis. Every week, she would introduce herself the same way, "My name is XXX and I am a grateful recovering alcoholic. I just want to thank God that I didn't have a drink today, because if I had taken a drink today I wouldn't have had just one, but I would

have had ten or twenty, and I would probably be dead. I'm just so grateful I didn't have a drink today." After several weeks, I approached her after the meeting and said, "can I ask you a question? How long have you had your sobriety?"

"Thirty three years," she said. But she explained that for thirty three years, it was a daily concentrated effort to make sure she didn't take a drink. One day at a time, she said, can add up to thirty three years of the life I really wanted to lead.

Rebuilding from a tragedy takes time. Six months after the tsunamis in Japan, crews are still clearing rubble, three years after our banking system nearly collapsed, our economy is still in trouble, twenty years after the fall of the Berlin wall, still the eastern block struggles to create meaningful democracies. If we want to move from the darkness of tragedy into the life we truly want, then we need to build structures in our life so that we keep our focus on what truly matters, and not lose sight of our goal.

But the last element of the road map to recovery is tzedakah. Usually we translate tzedakah as charity, but the root of the word is tzedek which means justice. When we who have much give to those who have little, the scales of justice come into better balance. Tzedakah demands that we not simply search for a vision of a better life, or meditate on a vision of our better selves, but to make that vision a reality in our daily lives, to act with purposeful and deliberate righteousness.

Yukiko Horie is an English teacher at Takata High School in Rikuzentakata and also one of the swim coaches. When the tsunami struck she was in the school building and not with the nine members of the swim team who sought refuge in the community center.

"At night I can't sleep," she says, "I imagine many things because I was not with them in that building. How horrible it was. The fear. How cold was the water. How scared [they were],"

Now Yukiko is working with the other teachers to open a new, temporary school for the surviving children. She says she tries to be strong for her students.

"These days I am thinking if they were here, the swimming members, what they will tell me," Yukiko says. "I imagine, maybe they will ask me to try not to be so sad, to just stand up. I think they will tell me that. So that's my strength ... I have a responsibility to step forward."

So too for us who gather together on this Rosh HaShanah. Despite the tsunamis that overwhelm us, and the destruction they leave behind, we too have a responsibility to step forward from the darkness into the light. We cannot always avert the dramatic tragedies that come from a broken world. But we can respond to them with acts of Tikkun that will mend not only our broken lives, but help to heal our broken hearts. With each piece of brokenness we repair with our good deeds and acts of righteousness, we help to heal God's broken heart too.

May our appreciation for the fragility of our existence help us to appreciate the gift of life itself. Let us see that the darkness which harkens the beginning of the New Year is holy in and of itself. Let us not resist the darkness that surrounds us, but use it to find the thin rays of light of God's healing presence, a light that will guide us, one step at a time, to Teshuva, Tefilah, Tzedakah and Shalom - a world inside and out that is healed and at peace.