

Financial pressures, and budgetary constraints, balance sheets, cutbacks – all of these have all been much very much on my mind lately, and probably on yours as well. It is safe to say that the year which has just ended has been a hard one. Harder certainly for some than for others: While most of us in this room may be lucky enough to be doing “all right,” I know from personal conversations that many in this room have lost jobs in the past year, or have lived with the very real threat of job loss as a constant companion. Collectively, however, we are profoundly fortunate compared to many in this country who have been struggling through these difficult economic times. A year ago when we gathered for Rosh ha-Shanah, most of us had little awareness of the looming economic crisis that was just beginning to make headlines, or certainly of its extent and depth. It’s interesting to note that, retrospectively, economists say that the current recession actually began in December of 2007 – toward the start of the *previous* year, long before most of us were aware the bottom was beginning to fall out of the economy. Already there is a lesson here about the limitations of our own judgments and perceptions – about things seeming to go well in our lives when the ground is already beginning to shift underneath us; or conversely, how we experience hard times even when our lives have already begun to turn in a better direction. On the economic front, the latter appears to be the situation now – we’re told job loss is slowing, capital markets have opened up, housing prices are stabilizing... and yet often it doesn’t feel that way in our own lives, where job insecurity, cutbacks on spending, postponed retirements, and anxiety seem to mark our daily experience.

Now these may seem like a discouraging comments to make when welcoming a new year, but in fact that’s not the case. On the contrary, our liturgy, our prayers, the entire *theme* of the holiday is precisely that there are great forces swirling around and beyond us – “who will live and who will die, who will be poor and who will be rich” – and that in entering the new year we are moving into the unknown; and yet we do so with trust and with love, and with the assurance that paradoxically our actions – *our* teshuvah, *our* tefillah, *our* tzedakah – can make a difference in the face of the unknown, can have some bearing on our fate. We are *not*, Judaism teaches us, simply objects of vast unknown forces – whether disease and natural disaster on the one hand, or far-off distribution chains and the Florida housing market on the other. We *are* these, they *do* affect us and we would be foolish to think otherwise; but we are also so much more. We are the product of the choices we make and the lessons we learn; and our *responses* to crisis define us far more than the forces which may buffer us. And so if we harbor a degree of trepidation about what the new year holds in store for us, this is understandable and natural. At some level it’s even desirable, it’s the approach we should take to entering *every* new year if we’re doing it right, if we’re paying attention – not because we want to be overcome by fear but because we should cultivate an awareness that the new year always brings the unknown: the good, we pray, but sometimes the difficult and challenging as well.

In helping us confront challenging times, Judaism has a resilience born out of our historical experience. We are a people that has known suffering – time and again throughout history. And yet often the response to that suffering has been to turn it into a source of courage and strength. We retell the story of Hannah and her sons at Chanukah; tortured by the Greeks they displayed a loyalty to their people and to God in the very face of death that continues to inspire and amaze. We retell the stories of Jewish tribulations at the hands of the Roman Empire on the afternoon of Yom Kippur and on Yom ha-Atzma’ut to steel us with the examples of the martyrs’ faith and courage. We recount the pogroms and tales of the early immigrant experience in this country to foster appreciation of those who sacrificed so greatly to earn the blessings we enjoy today. A generation rose from the ashes of Eastern Europe and rebuilt an ancient state, a miracle in our own times. And tomorrow we chant the story of the *akedah*, the binding of Isaac by his father Abraham at God’s command, which became a vital motif for Jews who gave their own lives – and the lives of their children – during the Crusades.

But we don’t recall our people’s suffering only to gain strength and resolve, but to provide meaning and purpose as well. So we retell the story of our near-annihilation at the hands of Haman on Purim to remind us that reversals come in all sizes and guises. We recall the story of the Maccabees to remind ourselves that through conviction and faith we can help bring light to the darkness. We relive the

experience of Egyptian slavery every year at Passover in order to inspire gratitude for our redemption but also the awareness that we must use our experience of oppression to work on behalf of those throughout the world who are still oppressed; as it says in the Book of Exodus: “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you yourselves were strangers in the Land of Egypt” (Ex. 22:20) and “you know the heart of a stranger.” (23:9) Judaism, truly, is a system for making meaning of the inevitable difficulties we face in life – whether on the individual, interpersonal, or national level – by using them to deepen our understanding of the world and our desire to serve others.

And it’s worked. From its earliest days down to the present, the Jewish people have a tremendous record of creating ways to care for others – not just on an interpersonal basis but, perhaps more importantly, on an institutional level as well. So in the Torah we read of systems designed to ensure that a permanent underclass would not arise in the Land of Israel – of periodic forgiveness of debts and even returning land periodically to those who might have had to sell it, to ensure that they would once again have means of earning a livelihood. The rabbis created mandatory guidelines for giving tzedakah but also public welfare funds and soup kitchens to distribute food to the needy. In the middle ages, Jews lived in autonomous communities and created communal institutions that provided for the needy, cared for the sick, would pay ransom for a Jew who had been taken hostage (incidentally a not infrequent occurrence), and even provide the dowry and underwrite the wedding of a destitute bride. When Jews came to America, they brought their self-help institutions with them in the form of organizations such as HIAS (the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society), burial societies, and free-loan organizations. In our own time, in addition to government programs designed to help those in financial trouble we still have an array of Jewish organizations, often successor institutions to those founded by turn-of-the-last-century immigrants, that help Jews and non-Jews such as Federation, Jewish Family and Children’s Services, and JEVS – and please remember that I am always available to help anyone be in touch with these organizations and get you the help you need.

In addition to providing ethical guidance and a rich legacy of caring for others, Judaism provides us emotional resources in challenging times by helping us understand ourselves as part of something larger than ourselves and our own individual lives. A little more than six months ago, a letter was sent to the entire congregation from our president Rick Dzubow, our education chair Amy Grossman, and myself laying out a vision of how our community responds to economic need. We created programs designed to address anxiety about job loss and drops in family income by bringing in social workers and trainers. We created a jobs bank and also set aside funds to cover necessary dues reductions for member families whose financial situations wouldn’t allow them to meet our regular dues commitments – and while it has put a strain on our budget, I am proud to say that not one family has been turned away from membership because of difficulty in paying dues. And, to my mind, most importantly, we have met this recession by talking about it openly, addressing it, acknowledging that there are fellow congregants and friends who are hurting, who have experienced the shock of losing a job and the discouragement of searching long for a new one, that many of us have had to make difficult choices, and that we have all been affected by the prevailing atmosphere of anxiety and uncertainty. By addressing these issues openly, rather than sweeping them under the rug, pretending that business is continuing as usual, we can provide support for those who have been affected, let them know that they are not alone, let them know that their struggles and anxiety should not be viewed as sources of shame or stigma.

Ours, after all, is a community that has a tremendous track record of caring for one another – of offering compassion and understanding and empathy. We are made up of people who reach out, pick up the phone, stop by to listen and console. We are a community that understands that what happens to any of us affects all of us, and so is our collective responsibility. At times that are challenging at best and can seem overwhelming and disorienting at worst, it is impossible to overstate the importance of a home like this: a place where we can take comfort, draw support, find refuge from the misplaced priorities and judgments of our society, fortify and renew ourselves against the challenges we face, and reconnect with

why we are here on this earth. After all, we come together in communities to join with people whose values and priorities mirror our own and make us stronger and better than we would be individually; and I am proud that the values of this community have shown so brightly at a time of deep distress for so many.

And these *are* challenging times, which leads to the question: What guidance can Judaism offer us in times such as these? Besides the inspiring track record of how the Jewish community has cared for its own and for others in times of need, what wisdom can our tradition offer us in our own lives when times get tough?

I think one important lesson that Judaism offers is the need to accept our lack of control and make peace with it. Job loss, anxiety, the need to cut back on our immediate plans and our longer-term dreams – all of these can make us feel powerless. And loss of income, in a very real way, makes us doubt our ability to provide for ourselves and our families. These are uncomfortable feelings, even scary: many of us want to feel like we're "in control of the situation" and become anxious when we don't. But we're *not* in control, whatever we might like to tell ourselves. An accident, an illness, a bad economy, plain dumb bad luck – any of these can strike us at any time. And if we are too wedded to the illusion of our own control, these events can be devastating. The *stronger* position is the one our tradition teaches: to recognize that our lack of control is built into the fabric of the universe, into what it means to be human. We're not God, and when we ascribe to ourselves powers of control, foresight, and understanding we don't really have, we're setting ourselves up for a fall. Judaism encourages us to acknowledge that power and control do not lie in our hands; "all things," the rabbis tell us, "are in the hand of heaven except the fear of heaven." When we make this jump we free ourselves from the crushing pressure of believing that we can actually be what poet William Ernest Henley termed, the "master of [our] fate, the captain of [our] soul." We're not, and we're better off for knowing it.

Next lesson: You are who you are. Sounds simple, but many of us don't really understand who we truly *are*, and so instead we define our self worth, even our very identities by what we *do* – "I'm a doctor," "I'm a lawyer," "I'm a consultant" – and these are threatened when we can't do it. But Judaism teaches us not to measure or define ourselves by what we do, but by who we are. All of us, the Torah tells us, are created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the divine image, and are therefore infinitely precious just by virtue of who we are, without needing to create or accomplish anything. Sure, striving and accomplishing is good – we're supposed to do these things. But our tradition balances the six days of striving with the one day of accepting: Shabbat, on which we rest and on which we don't seek to alter or remake the world. Shabbat provides a much-needed corrective, balancing *doing* with *being*, and the key message of the day is that holiness and redemption are found by accepting ourselves within the context of Creation – not through how many e-mails we write, how many cases we win or, particularly, how much we make.

Another lesson: Get some perspective. Judaism provides us a philosophical and spiritual framework for understanding and making meaning of the world by offering us a wider point of view – one that, on the one hand, places great value and importance on the experience and dignity of individual human beings and, on the other, tries to reorient us toward our proper place in the cosmos so we don't come to make too much of ourselves. "For my sake the world is created" – this saying from the Talmud is supposed to form a crucial part of our perspective in affirming our fundamental, underlying worth and the ultimate significance of the decisions we make. A Hasidic injunction says that a person should carry these words in his or her pocket at all times. But in the other pocket the same person is to carry a slip of paper with the words "I am but dust and ashes": a reminder of our origins and our destination, of the insignificance of our individual lives when viewed against the broad backdrop of existence: a spiritual smack upside the head from reality. The lesson of these two teachings taken together is: don't take yourself so seriously, don't despair or moan or imagine your unhappiness to be unique. Rather reflect in gratitude on all you have been given, on the unimaginable privilege of the simple fact of being, and the capacity you have to make a difference in other people's lives. Make the right choices for, if the world was created for your sake alone, nothing could be

more important than honoring that purpose; and yet keep enough perspective that you don't despair when the going gets tough.

Which leads to the next lesson: When times are hard, we gain immeasurably by sharing what we have with those who have even less. We all, I think, understand that giving is a good thing to do – but we often tend to view it as a luxury that can be indulged when times are good and set aside when money is tighter. Judaism, on the other hand, understands *tzedakah* not as an optional act of generosity but as an obligation that is incumbent on the giver, *and* which benefits the donor as much as the recipient. As the rabbis insist: “More than the wealthy person does for the poor [in giving *tzedakah*] the poor person does for the wealthy.” (Vayikra Rabba 34:8) We gain not only because we may receive tangible rewards for our beneficence as any number of texts and stories suggest, but more importantly because of the spiritual benefits we reap. At a time of a heightened sense of hardship, we overcome our sense of isolation and self-pity by reaching out and recognizing our kinship and commonality with those in need, in the process reaffirming their underlying humanity – and our own. In reaching within to find previously untapped stores of generosity, we allow the gift of that blessing to flow into so many other parts of our lives.

Finally – and I'm cutting myself off here for time; believe me, I could go on – Judaism teaches us that there are always new possibilities: “*gam zeh ya'avur*,” “this too will pass.” The current situation may feel scary, constraining. But it won't last forever. We're a 3500 year-old people. And sometimes opportunities present themselves in the midst of crises that we would not be open to seeing or accepting at more settled times. Sometimes it is the very *shaking*, the tearing down that opens up new avenues to us, forces us to reevaluate, and helps us discern the invitation that lies within each challenge.

The New Year, after all, is a time for new beginnings: for recognizing that old patterns can break, that new opportunities await, that renewal is a perpetual promise if we can only be open to accepting it. The New Year is a doorway, and we cannot know what awaits on the other side. We can walk through it oblivious to the moment and its import, or we can choose to enter mindfully, open to receiving what it offers. My prayer is that we may enter the New Year with deliberation and respect, with wonder and awe, with gratitude and fortitude and hope – and that we may all accept with trust the challenges and opportunities for which we have been written.