

Creating and Destroying: Parashat Korach

It took the city of New York almost seven full years to build the iconic Twin Towers, a project that began in August of 1966 and ended in July of 1973. It took an hour and forty-two minutes for the buildings to fall after being struck by two hijacked commercial airlines in the terrorist attacks of September 11.

Construction of the famed ship, the Titanic, took 26 months, with over 14,000 men working for the company Harland and Wolff to build the vast luxury liner and its sister, The Olympic. It took a small fraction of that time, 2 hours and forty minutes, for the great vessel to sink upon hitting an iceberg on just its fourth day out of port.

And although Notre Dame Cathedral, the crown jewel of France, took 182 years (!) to be constructed, it was devastated after burning for just 15 hours, now remaining closed until it can be slowly and carefully rebuilt.

How much exponentially longer does it take to create than to destroy! How very easy it is, in an instant, to wipe away all that it has taken months, years, or even decades, to cultivate and build!

Of course, it is not only in the world of manufacturing or architecture that the doing of a thing is a far lengthier process than the undoing. Gestating a human fetus takes nine full months while extinguishing a human life can occur in an instant. While we may talk about “love at first sight,” genuine connection, trust, and affection generally grow over time yet can be erased almost immediately by infidelity, cruelty, and dishonest words. We have only to look at our current experience of the last many months to see how quickly and completely life as we know it has been turned entirely upside down to understand that ending something is a much faster and easier process than beginning it. And if we weren’t already convinced of this idea, we might turn to the rhythms of our own Jewish calendar for further proof.

This past Monday and Tuesday we celebrated Rosh Hodesh Tammuz, ushering in a new Hebrew month as well as a sacred period in the Jewish year. In less than two weeks we will commemorate the fast day of Shiva Asar b'Tammuz (the 17th of Tammuz) which marks when the walls of Jerusalem were first breached, leading to the destruction of the Second Temple less than a month later. In fact, the days between Shiva Asar b'Tammuz and its sister observance, Tisha B'Av, are known as *bein ha'mtzarim* - [the time] between the straits - during which we adopt certain postures of mourning - putting weddings on hold, avoiding live music, letting our beards and our hair grow. We also read a series of special haftorot each Shabbat of these three weeks, the so called *haftorot d'puranuta* (haftorot of admonition), which remind us of the upcoming holy day with their themes of sin and punishment and their provenance (at least for the first two) from the prophet Jeremiah, the same person traditionally held to have written the Book of Eicha chanted on Tisha B'Av.

These three weeks of sadness, mourning, and admonition come to an end, and then immediately the Jewish calendar pivots in a different direction. For the next seven Shabbatot, we again read a series of special haftorot, this time called the *haftorot d'nechamata* (haftorot of consolation), which bring us through the months of Av and Elul, right up to Rosh Hashanah itself. While the themes of the *haftorot d'puranuta* focus on sin and destruction, the *haftorot d'nechamata*, all taken from the Book of Isaiah, emphasize healing and rebuilding - moving from the devastation and loss of the Temple to the optimism and promise of the High Holiday season. “*Nachamu, nachamu ami*,” we chant, “Comfort, oh comfort, my people” (Isaiah 40:1). The destruction and subsequent yearning for repair of the *Beit HaMikdash* (Temple) parallels the distancing and subsequent yearning for return back to God that has occurred over the course of this past year since we last gathered for the Days of Awe.

We notice, of course, that there are but 3 *haftorot d'puranuta* and 7 *haftorot d'nechamata* - that, once again, destroying comes quicker than rebuilding. Perhaps this is because it is unpleasant to sit in a space of pain, shame, and loss, far easier to speed through difficult warnings and rebukes towards gentle words of comfort and hope. Or perhaps it is that we wish to emphasize that *rachamim*, Divine compassion, will always be greater than *din*, Divine judgment -- a theme that we will again lift over the High Holidays when we ask for forgiveness of

which we may not truly be worthy. But I think that the rabbis, too, had one more lesson in mind when they structured the readings of these summer months so that the ratio of *puranut* to *nechama* lay in favor of the latter. They were reminding us that it is far quicker to destroy than it is to rebuild.

What a blessing it is to be back together in our beloved Milstein Sanctuary this morning, those here in person and those joining us online all coming together to create our *kehilla kedosha* - our sacred community and extended family here at TIC. How we have missed seeing the familiar, soothing sites of our bimah, hearing the stirring words of the *kedushah* and other prayers, watching the Torah lovingly taken out of the ark and processed around, then read - from its sacred scroll - the beginning of the *parasha* until its very end. How good it is to experience a service that looks and feels so much more like that to which we are accustomed, worshipers together, in one place, sitting in shul rather than in private homes. How hopeful it feels to have this period of exile brought on by the Coronavirus lift, just a bit, as we carefully re-enter our congregation and rededicate it through prayer and fellowship.

It is far quicker to destroy than to rebuild, far easier to shut something down than to open it back up, far less complicated to end than to begin - although each has its challenges, to be sure. While it was deeply painful and disorienting to watch our synagogue shut its doors so suddenly back in March, our path forward at the time was relatively clear given the strong, unified recommendations from public health and government officials. While the hardships of closing down affected each of us in different ways - b'nai mitzvah families rethinking their simcha, new mourners saying Kaddish via Zoom, the more traditional amongst us left without any real way to engage in communal Shabbat morning worship - we were all essentially in the same boat: separated from one another and doing our best to find connection online. The situation was not at all what we would have wanted but it did have some comforting elements of clarity and being on a level playing field.

Opening up our synagogue is so welcome, so joyful, so optimistic - and yet it is also so complicated! As the texts of this season remind us, there is little so painful as exile - feeling that one has been cast out of the spiritual

home that one loves and forced to live apart. The many members of our congregation who will not yet feel comfortable entering the doors of TIC for quite some time may find it both moving and also difficult to see others do what they themselves cannot. "*Hashievenu Adonai elecha v'nashuva hadesh yameinu c'kedem*" concludes the Book of Eicha, "Take us back, O Lord, let us come back." (Lamentations 5:21). This is what all of us so very desperately want at this moment!

So too, shutting down has a relatively clear path whereas opening up is filled with questions. How do we maximize participation while ensuring the highest levels of safety? How do we maintain the feeling of being one, unified community while some are virtual and others in person? What will the High Holidays be like? How do we balance the many different, unique, and idiosyncratic needs of individual members and small groups with best using our limited resources to serve the community as a whole? While closing our building took place over the course of a few short hours in March, I imagine that re-opening in a way that is safe, seamless, and inclusive may take a little bit longer to get things just right. We appreciate your partnership, patience, and wise, helpful feedback as we continue on this journey back towards home.

Just because a thing is long or challenging, however, does not mean that it's not also full of blessing. In fact, many of the metaphors used by Isaiah in the 7 *haftarot* of consolation emphasize the closeness and intimacy that exist between God and the Jewish people during these weeks of rebuilding -- a mother cradling her child, a storm-tossed ship finding safe harbor, a bride and groom delighting in one another with the fresh passion of new love. And indeed these haftarot also indicate that far from leaving Israel diminished, the experience of exile and return actually strengthens our people as God "has clothed [us] with garments of triumph and wrapped [us] in a robe of victory" (Isaiah 61:10), our "victory emerg[ing] resplendent and [our] triumph like a flaming torch" (Isaiah 62:2). Indeed, it is often true that individuals and communities emerge from times of struggle unexpectedly changed for the better - relationships deepened, values clarified, gifts no longer taken for granted, resilience and strength built up. On this first Shabbat back in our beloved sanctuary may we hope and pray that

we will use the experiences of this terrible pandemic to strive for greater unity, creativity, and understanding rather than giving in to division, narrow-mindedness, and self-interest.

And so, this morning we conclude with the words of *Shehecheyanu* - a prayer that is both associated with joy and celebration and also with novelty, recited upon wearing new clothes, eating new fruits, seeing friends we have not seen for a while, and performing a *mitzvah* that is done infrequently. We recite *Shehecheyanu* this morning because we are grateful - to be back in our spiritual home, to be able to worship a full service, to know that disease here in Westchester has dropped to such a level that this gathering is possible, to feel the promise of moving slowly back towards normal. And we recite *Shehecheyanu* this morning, also, because of all that is new - the many things that we are learning and figuring out together as we contend with the unprecedented challenges of these days. It takes far longer to build than to destroy. And yet the blessings of rebuilding make it quite worth the wait!

Please join with me: [*Shehecheyanu*].

Shabbat Shalom!