

I planned to start writing this sermon last Saturday night, but found myself frozen. Instead, I spent the evening refreshing the news on my phone, hoping for any small indication that those held hostage at Temple Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas would be okay.

As I connected with friends, family and colleagues, we all tried to process our fear as individuals, as a community and as klei kodesh, spiritual leaders. I was transported back in time to October 27, 2018, to a hotel room in Philadelphia, a five hour drive from Pittsburgh. I was at the hotel over Shabbat to attend Ethan's cousin's wedding, and it was less than a month before our first child was born. When I learned of the shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue, I wondered: could I ever feel safe bringing my daughter to shul? What am I willing to risk in order to come to synagogue?

On January 11, 2020, as some of you may remember, just as Rabbi Tucker and I were serenading the Bat Mitzvah with the priestly blessing, our security system malfunctioned and our synagogue went into lockdown. We all scrambled and tried our best under impossible circumstances to follow the security measures we had learned.

I dissociated – I vividly remember that feeling of watching myself from outside of myself. Only once I returned to my body and mind did I remember that my mother and fourteen-month-old were in the sanctuary, too. I left TIC that day asking myself, whom am I willing to put at risk by coming to shul?

I still have flashbacks to that morning's service, and I imagine that some of you do as well. Several months ago, when a group of our lay leaders and staff attended an emergency preparedness training, I came to realize that while Security training and lock down drills are absolutely essential, they too can be triggering.

Each of these traumas alone is too much to bear. How can we cope and commit to continued service attendance when these terrible experiences that shake us to our core, keep happening? We know this isn't how coming to synagogue should feel. Anti-semitism and violence are not okay, and we are not okay.

Two weeks ago, I had the privilege of attending an in-person conference of Conservative rabbis, hosted by JTS. An outstanding course I took there was about intentional decision making. Our group met four times during the week and was facilitated by Dr. Linda Stone Fish, a professor of family therapy at Syracuse University, who specializes in issues of trauma. In four sessions, our group of thirteen Conservative rabbis from around the country learned about and reflected together on the ways that trauma, fear and anxiety can cloud people's thinking.

In one of our sessions, Dr. Stone Fish introduced us to Polyvagal Theory, an understanding of the ways that our nervous systems connect to our behavior and communication patterns. I am no expert, but I found the material to be compelling on communal, individual, and spiritual levels. I believe this approach can help shed some light both on our parasha and on the events of last Shabbat.

The polyvagal chart contains a map of three different zones that affect our nervous system, indicated by the colors: red, yellow and green. The bottom section of the chart is the green zone, which contains calmness, groundedness, curiosity, openness, mindfulness and compassion. Dr. Stone Fish nicknamed this arena “tend and befriend,” the headspace in which most of us would prefer to live our lives. When we are in the green zone, we thrive. We are the best versions of ourselves: cool, collected, and caring – toward ourselves and with others.

Moving up to the yellow section, we find frustration, irritation, anxiety, anger, fear and panic. When we are in the yellow zone, our blood pressure and heart rate increase. We are more likely to be defensive and not prioritize our relationships. This yellow arena is where we go into fight or flight mode.

And at the top of the chart, is red. The red zone is where we freeze. We feel helpless, hopeless, trapped, depressed, ashamed or numb. Here, we essentially collapse and break down. Our nervous system works hard to conserve energy, and our body even releases endorphins that help raise our pain threshold. At this level, our heart rate and blood pressure actually decrease. We find ourselves unable to make eye contact or pay attention to what is going on around us. We dissociate. This red zone is where we go when we are traumatized.

As I learned about the polyvagal chart last week, I wondered where the Israelites would fall on that map during the revelation at Sinai. Prior to receiving the Decalogue, the Israelites seemed open and eager to God’s presence and words. But when God spoke and the mountain burst into flames, it was terrifying. The Israelites begged Moses: let not God speak to us, lest we die.¹

אֱלֹהֵי דִבָּר עָמְנוּ אֱלֹהִים - פְּרִינָמוֹת:

Because the Israelites feared for their lives, it seems that they were, at the very least, in the yellow zone on the polyvagal chart. Perhaps Revelation at Sinai was actually a traumatic event that even pushed the Israelites toward red.

¹ Exodus 20:16

In the Babylonian Talmud Tractate Shabbat,² Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi described that when God began to speak each commandment, the Israelites' souls left their bodies and they had to be repeatedly revived. He continued: with each new utterance, the Israelites ran twelve rabbinic miles away, and angels had to escort them back each time.

If my math is correct, according to this Talmudic passage, the Israelites felt such a need to flee that they ran the equivalent of nearly six consecutive marathons! And if my internet research is trustworthy, that's the distance of climbing to the summit of Mount Everest and back down again, excluding snow depth. That's some flight response. And especially if the Israelites died each time God spoke, there is no doubt that they were in the red section of the chart, their nervous systems in complete overdrive.

But conceiving of revelation only as a traumatic event is problematic. I need Judaism to offer me a more compassionate understanding of God and the ways that God interacts with the world. And as a clergy person, I will not risk promoting the idea that God is a violent, one-dimensional character. For this reason, I was relieved to learn a Midrash in Shemot Rabba³ that offers a different take. This Midrash depicts revelation as follows:

“Come and see how God’s voice would go out among all of Israel! Each and every person would hear God’s voice according to their own strength...and even Moses according to his strength, as it is stated in Parashat Yitro, that Moses would speak, and God would answer him, “Bekol,” with a voice⁴” - a voice that Moses could withstand.

The Midrash then quotes Psalm 29 which we just sang as we returned the Torah to the ark, “kol Adonai Bakoach,” - “the voice of God is in strength.” This midrash explains that because the psalmist doesn't specify whose strength, "in strength" therefore must refer to the strength of each and every individual. The text continues, and Rabbi Yose bar Chanina compares the receiving of the Ten Commandments to receiving manna in the wilderness. Just as the manna, which had varying tastes and textures according to the needs of each and every person, all the more so, God's strong voice certainly morphed for each and every individual so that they could all experience God's presence together.

This midrash paints a beautiful picture of the Israelites being open to receiving the Ten Commandments, each in their own way, according to their abilities, even Moses! If God's voice was indeed able to reach every individual, wherever they were at that

² 88b

³ 5:9

⁴ Exodus 19:19

moment, that sounds like an ideal experience of receiving God's presence as a community.

Let's now apply the lens of the polyvagal chart. This midrash could depict all of the Israelites as being in the green zone, completely open to receiving God's presence. It is more plausible, however, that like any group of individuals, the Israelites instead found themselves scattered all over the map at the time of revelation. But God's voice was still able to meet them wherever they were.

Reflecting back on the horrific antisemitism in Colleyville last Shabbat brings to mind two distinct images of Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker: first, his generosity in offering tea and a welcoming conversation to a stranger seeking shelter. And second, his bravery and strategic success in throwing a chair, which allowed the remaining hostages to escape, physically unscathed.

To offer tea to a stranger, Rabbi Cytron-Walker must have been in his green zone: open, curious, and compassionate. And to have the presence of mind to orchestrate an escape after so many terrifying hours of captivity, he must have been close enough to his green zone to think clearly and make good decisions. In addition to the comprehensive security training he also received.

These days, most of us live somewhere in the yellow zone, in a state of at least mild anxiety. This may even have been the case pre-pandemic, as a side-effect of living in our modern world. The pandemic has certainly put us at heightened levels of anxiety for an extended period of time, never knowing what's around the corner.

We can learn from Rabbi Cytron-Walker how essential it is for us to recognize when we have strayed from our green zones. It is only in the green arena that we can be radically welcoming to a stranger, and when we are in that very same green zone, it is far more likely that we can make careful and deliberate decisions about what to do when we are in danger.

The Israelites could not have truly received the commandments had they been living in unrelenting fear of God's power. But when we have the possibility to encounter something amazing, any type of revelation, be it big or small, intellectual or spiritual, it can be extremely helpful to cultivate an awareness of where we fall on the polyvagal chart, and perhaps even how we got there. We must develop tools that can help bring us back to the green zone, and those mechanisms will be different for each of us.

With time, new traumas will be added to our list. Our questions will only multiply. But shul should be a place where we can "tend and befriend." Showing up, in person or via

livestream, ought to help us reach a place of groundedness and mindfulness. Synagogue should be an environment that inspires us to be the best versions of ourselves, curious and compassionate. When traumas happen in synagogues, even when they are far away, on some level, we too feel as though our own safe haven has been threatened. Surely, we must continue to strengthen our security measures and train and practice for the worst, but we can't risk losing the benefits of coming to shul. Our best response is to keep showing up.

Shabbat Shalom,
Cantor, Rabbi Shoshi Levin Goldberg