

When God began creating the heaven and earth, the earth was *tohu va'vohu*, unformed and void. There was darkness over the deep and the wind of God swept over the water.

And 5,779 years ago, our story goes, God took the universe in its primal, chaotic, unruly, and frenzied state, and organized it.

With declarations of “Let there be...” and acknowledging, “It was good,” God spent three days creating the environment in which the components of the world could exist.

First, light and darkness, day and night.

Second, waters above and waters below.

Third, earth and vegetation.

And then for the next three days, God created the objects and beings to put in each of those respective places.

Day Four, placing in the light and dark: sun, moon, and stars.

Day Five, populating the waters above with birds and the waters below with sea creatures.

And Day Six, to fill the land, animals and, finally, people.

From *tohu va'vohu*, chaos, God brought order. And after everything was in its proper place, God could relax and take in creation. Even if only for a moment.

This story of creation is clean, neatly wrapped up. There's a fairly consistent pattern that becomes predictable as everything is put in where it's supposed to be.

God finished God's work, completed speaking the land into being, and on the seventh day God declared the day holy and rested. The first Shabbat.

That first Shabbat must have been wonderful for God. To stop working, look at the magnificence of Your creation, and know everything was perfect. Wow. A breath of relief. And of pride.

But, perfection lasted only a moment.

Because there were people, and snakes, and apples.

There were emotions—rage, jealousy, embarrassment, and joy.

There was awareness and pain and hurt and knowledge.

There was murder, a flood, a rebirth of the world, a rainbow.

There were parents and children. They loved and they hurt. They tried to do right. They faltered.

And *even God* was angry and jealous time-and-again.

There was Egypt and slavery and plagues and freedom and complaining and commandments and Torah.

There was a Promised Land and the path to that promise wound its way through war and fear and missteps.

There was a Temple.

There was its destruction.

It was built again.

And destroyed again.

There was Diaspora and expulsion and Enlightenment and pogroms.  
There were periods of prosperity and periods of near defeat.

There was the Holocaust. There was Israel. There were good times for Jews. And there was anti-semitism.

And then there are the stories that each person faced, that each one of us faces. Our own struggles, successes, challenges, defeats, and victories. They are ours, our family's, our community's, our synagogue's, our country's, our world-wide Jewish community's. Our world's.

That first Shabbat was the only one where everything was left in true *shalom*—wholeness and peace. The one day there could be *real*, worry-free, care-free, rest.

And, yet, we've held onto the idea of Shabbat for thousands of years.

One summer I had campers who created a mural, seven panels depicting each day of creation. The final one, a person lying in a hammock, napping, shaded by the trees above.

That last panel, that is the ideal of Shabbat we hold onto. Taking a moment to just *be* in the world, replicating the first and last moment of our story's perfection.

It is a taste of what we strive for even if its achievement is truly impossible.

We read the story of creation on the second day of *Rosh HaShanah* in honor of this holiday that celebrates the creation of our world.

A reminder, perhaps, that each and every week we actually have the opportunity to return to the very beginning. Even if everything is not in its proper place, and we sure know it isn't and hasn't been for a very long time, we are allowed to do as God did on that first day—stop and pause and rest, in honor of the first Shabbat in which there really wasn't anything to worry about. “

*Ki sheishet yamim asah Adonai, et hashamayim v'et ha'aretz, u'vayom hashvi'i shavat va'yinafash*—“For in six days God created the heavens and earth and all that was in them, and on the seventh day God rested and was refreshed.”<sup>i</sup>

The other story we read on *Rosh HaShanah*, the one we will read tomorrow, on the other hand, is deeply agitational and painful.

There is little calming about, and little resolution in, the *Akeidah*. For some it is a story of *true* faith, and for others, a narrative of horrific *blind* faith.

Abraham follows God's command to take his son Isaac, walk for three days to a place designated by God, tie his son up, and sacrifice him. And only when he holds the knife over his son does an angel intervene.

“Avraham, Avraham, you don't need to do this for you have proven you are God-fearing.” At which point Abraham slaughters a ram instead and God promises that Abraham's devotion will lead to his descendants being many and blessed.<sup>ii</sup>

The *Akeidah* is anything *but* neatly wrapped up. It begs questions of us:

How could a parent do this to a child?

Why would God test someone like this?

Should we argue with God if God makes unreasonable requests of us?

Is experiencing, and even causing, pain part of what it means to have faith?

What does it mean when our faith and values contradict each other?

The *Akeidah* leaves us unsettled as we grapple with its complications. It calls us to question and wonder and to try to uncover potentially deeper meanings.

It makes us simultaneously angry, confused, and, perhaps, we are even grateful for its imperfections.

But it comes with a lot of baggage.

The emotions generated by the *creation* story are emblematic of how we'd *like* to feel entering Shabbat.

The emotions generated by the *Akeidah* are emblematic of how most of us *do* feel when we enter Shabbat.

The purpose of this place, of a synagogue, and I dare say, the purpose of Judaism, is to allow us to hold these two stories at the same time—the very ideal *and* the very real—and find our experiences reflected in both.

There is a quote about newspapers that has often been adapted to religion, “The purpose of religion is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.”

I believe this is true.

Each time I get up here to offer words or a teaching, I need to determine whether I'm supposed to be pastor or preacher—whether I'm to offer words of comfort or to afflict by espousing the rhetoric of our prophets to do justice and to be unsatisfied with the world as it is.

Over the past several years, some have joined our congregation *because* we afflict the comfortable—because you needed a place that was agitating people into responding to the injustices of the world around you.

In that same vein, others have *left* this place because they sought a place of comfort and we are, quote, “too political.”

What does “too political” really mean? Does it mean, “I disagree with the Jewish values you are preaching?”

Often, yes.

But I think it sometimes also means, “I am seeking a place of *comfort*. The world around me is always agitational, and I need a *sanctuary*.”

Every year since 2007 the American Psychological Association has conducted a Stress in America survey. The survey explores what keeps Americans up at night and how they deal with stress in their lives.<sup>iii</sup> Between August 2016 and January 2017, the overall average reported level of stress increased significantly for the first time since the survey began. On a 1-10 scale, the average reported stress rose from 4.8 to 5.1.<sup>iv</sup>

Some highlights of this study showed that of those surveyed:

- 49% reported the outcome of the election as a significant source of stress.<sup>v</sup>
- 57% reported the current political climate as a significant source of stress.<sup>vi</sup>
- And, coming in at the top of the list, 63% reported the future of our nation as a significant source of stress.<sup>vii</sup> 63%! (And in case you are wondering, broken down by political affiliation: it was reported at a rate of 73% for Democrats, 56% for Republicans, and 59% for Independents.)<sup>viii</sup>
- 59% of individuals said they consider this the lowest point in our nation’s history that they can remember (and this includes those who lived through World War II, Vietnam, the Cuban Missile Crisis, 9/11, and high profile mass shootings).<sup>ix</sup>
- And 59% of those surveyed have took some form of action over that past year to address the issues of concern to them.<sup>x</sup>

I have to wonder, if such a high percentage of the nation is reporting the political climate and the future of our nation as major stressors, what does that mean for those of us, here, in the Greater Washington Area? What does it mean for those of us working and living and learning during this time in-and-around our nation's capital? How much additional stress must we be experiencing?

Regardless of political affiliation, the *climate* here has been difficult, for some *painful*. We work much longer than 9-5 on the issues facing our world, then we go home and read and watch the news, and then we have our volunteer commitments, our families, and, and, and... And *then* we come here, to synagogue, and are called to action—reminded of our Jewish call to not stand idly by, to love our neighbor, to welcome the stranger, to find the *tzelem Elohim*, image of God, in every person.

Forget about afflicting the comfortable, many of us have been in a constant state of discomfort and are also being regularly afflicted *in this space*. And it's not for naught. It's because we need to live out our Jewish values, to be our best moral selves, to strive to do whatever small part we can in bringing about change.

Most *Shabbatot* in June I spent, along with many of you, praying with my legs. The Poor People's Campaign. Pride Weekend. The Families Belong Together rally.

For me, these Shabbat observances *were* empowering. They gave me a way to live the Jewish values I preach. In many ways, they *felt* like Shabbat, in that the experiences of being amongst Jewish community standing together demanding a better world than the one we live in now was *rejuvenating*.

But, one out-of-town colleague asked as we gathered at a pre-rally service, "How do you *really* feel about doing this on Shabbat? I don't think I like it as part of synagogue programming."

I'm proud and have no shame and feel that it was deeply Jewish that we took part in those rallies, and still, his question resonates with me.

When we march every weekend, I wonder, do we lose that ideal of the first Shabbat? Do we forego the opportunity—the *obligation*—to be in God's image for a moment, lying in the hammock napping, proud of the work we have done all week?

When every sermon and every synagogue meeting calls us to action and advocacy—the tension and stress that plague us—all of us, regardless of our stance on various issues—daily follow us into this building, where is our opportunity to be refreshed?

Stress in America is extraordinarily high. Like Isaac, in the *Akeidah*, we often feel bound and helpless, that there are powers larger than ourselves, human and otherwise, moving *us* along without the ability to do anything to change the course on which we travel. Unlike Isaac, we refuse to lay there helpless. We know our call is to act and to change the narrative.

If we're living the *Akeidah* during the week, then when we come into this space on Shabbat, *or other times during the week*, sometimes we need the nice, neat creation story that offers a critical message, "Look, you've done all you can to put everything where it's supposed to be *this week*. Now, just stop for a bit. Take a break. Relax. The work will be there again tomorrow. But, for now, we rest so that we can be refreshed."

The effects of excessive chronic stress can be devastating to our psychological and physical health. Being constantly afflicted can lead to anxiety, insomnia, muscle pain, high blood pressure, and a weakened immune system.<sup>xi</sup>

We need the synagogue to be a place that restores our soul, not a place that detracts from our physical and emotional well-being.

Even God, at the *completion* of something *good*, the creation of the *entire* world, needed to rest in order to be refreshed. Even God gets depleted!

If even God needs to have God's soul restored, all the more so do we.

And if we can't emulate God in our sacred, both the hard work *and* the opportunity to be restored, *where can we?*

We need to make sure that we are not only a sanctuary congregation—providing support to those who are most vulnerable—but that as a congregation we can enter this space and it can be a sanctuary for *us*, a sacred space that holds us, embraces us, and comforts us amidst the affliction of the outside world.

I'm not suggesting that we stop our sacred justice work. For yet another year, the exemplary work of our *Tikkun Olam* Committee has spurred us into fulfilling the commandments to welcome the stranger, not stand idly by, and love our neighbor. For their tireless work and for their bringing us into acts of justice, we owe so much gratitude. They *demand* of us that we are afflicted.

In *addition* to acts of justice we *also* need to make sure we are caring for ourselves, our souls, that we are allowing this place to *also* be a sanctuary *from* righteous stress and agitation.

We've donated diapers and school supplies, collected food for *Manna* (don't forget to bring your food bags back with you next week), we've protested, and rallied.

We *also* need to do *more* to offer opportunities to nourish and restore our souls, and, in turn, our bodies and our mind.

Our *Mitzvah* Corps is doing an exceptional job of getting us (re)started on this sacred work. Leading up to the holidays, every member of our board of trustees reached out to a group of our members simply to wish them a *Shana Tova*, and to check in on one-another. To see how we're doing.

Some of those calls resulted in pastoral information of which we were unaware. And following those calls, Karen Lowe, through the *Mitzvah* Corps, organized congregant visits to our homebound members as well as, following Rabbi Feshbach's tradition, lined up a number of you wonderful *shofar* blowers to make calls tomorrow afternoon to sound the *shofar* for those who can't be here. The *Mitzvah* Corps recognizes that we all need to be held and supported. That it's not just the troubles of the world we need to focus on, but also those in our immediate community who need some extra care.

By the way, if this is something that interests you but you don't yet feel skilled or quite comfortable visiting those who are homebound, the *Mitzvah* Corps will be offering two opportunities to learn how to make home visits. Consider joining them on either Sunday October 6 from 9 to 11 or on Tuesday, October 16 from 7-9 pm.

Caring for our own members is only one piece of the work we need to do. The other part is caring for ourselves.

For those of you who are looking to learn how to manage stress, stay-tuned for our *Kehillat* Shalom Adult Learning opportunities this year which will focus on issues of self-care and mental health.

And, you may need this place not only to be the place where you help others relieve stress and where you learn skills and strategies on how to relieve your own, but you may need to *come into this space to get away from all of it*, a real rest from the outside world. We are working to create several times over the course of the year when we will offer evenings or afternoons of programming and activities during which we will focus on putting everything else on pause: opportunities to choose from yoga, cooking, sing-a-longs, movies, meditation, and more.

If you have something you'd like to see, or have a session *you* would like to offer, please let me know.

We aren't going to stop being a place that afflicts the comfortable. We can't be. The *Akeidah* reminds us that the world is just too complicated.

But, we are going to try our best in 5779 to be a place that offers comfort for our afflicted selves as well, to give ourselves a small taste of what it meant to breathe a sigh of relief after the hard work of creation was completed, to come in here and find sanctuary, a place to relax, a place to pause, a place to experience Shabbat, a place to restore our souls.

May 5779 be a year of health and strength, *shavat v'yinafash*, of rest and renewal.

*Shanah Tovah.*

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<sup>i</sup> Exodus 31:17

<sup>ii</sup> Genesis 22.

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2017/state-nation.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2017/02/stressed-nation.aspx>

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2017/state-nation.pdf>

<sup>vi</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>vii</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>viii</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>ix</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>x</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>xi</sup> <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/understanding-chronic-stress.aspx>