



**“Dor Hamidbar- The Wilderness Generation”
Rosh Hashanah Sermon, Day 1, 5783/2022
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The wonderful Hebrew poet Zelda wrote a poem about names- about how each person carries many names based on their experiences, their behaviors, their gifts and their limitations. She writes:

Each of us has a name
given by God
and given by our parents

Each of us has a name
given by our stature and our smile
and given by what we wear

Each of us has a name
given by the mountains
and given by our walls

Each of us has a name
given by the stars
and given by our neighbors

Each of us has a name
given by our sins
and given by our longing

Each of us has a name
given by our enemies
and given by our love...

Now- Today on this Rosh Hashanah of 5783, I say to us all

Each generation has a name,
given by our blindness
and given by our vision



HIGH HOLIDAYS 2022/5783

Each generation has a name
Given by rising seas
And melting glaciers

Each generation has a name
Given by our hatred
and given by our love

Each generation has a name
Given by self-interest
And given by altruism

Each generation has a name
Given by our fears
Given by our dreams
and given by our imagination.

What of our generation? It might be called *Dor Hamidbar*- the Wilderness Generation- for like our ancestors who wandered through a wilderness for 40 years before entering a new land and a new way of living on the earth, we too find ourselves in a time of profound transition in which so many of the usual guideposts and guard-rails have been obscured.

We live amidst an ever-growing whirlwind of opinions, information and disinformation. All of it-pulling at the seams of our democracy. Amid this din of voices, this wind of words, that draws our attention, it is easy to lose our way, to lose our footing, our sense of direction. In Hebrew the word for wilderness is *midbar*, a word which has, as its root the word for speech- *dibbur*, as if to suggest that unbounded speech can create a wilderness- a wild place lacking boundaries and clear direction.

But while these times are truly unprecedented in so many ways, still, we Yidn, have been gifted a deep spiritual heritage - an inheritance of accumulated wisdom that has served us as a bulwark against chaotic and threatening times. Judaism offers many spiritual tools with which to navigate this chaotic wilderness we find ourselves inhabiting.

In Judaism we have many mitzvot that are easy to understand. Their relevance is accessible and eternal. For instance, love your neighbor as yourself- the golden rule, appeals to our sense of logic as well as to our hearts. Provide for the widow, orphan and stranger also appeals to our



HIGH HOLIDAYS 2022/5783

natural sense of compassion and justice. But Judaism also contains many mysterious mitzvot called *hukkim* for which we are not given any rational explanation, (such as not to wear material woven from wool and linen mixed together and not to eat certain animals). No explanation whatsoever is given in our Torah.

Of these mysterious mitzvot Rabbi Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl (an 18th cent. Hasidic Master) teaches that unlike mitzvot which we readily understand, these statutes require something extra from us- and that is the quality of faith- *emunah*. For there is no reason to observe these mitzvot other than that they are required by God. These *hukkim*, give us the opportunity to develop and exercise the quality of faith.

In the Torah it states- *im b'hukkotai teileikhu*- if you will walk according to my hukkim- my statutes... (Lev. 26:3) and R. Menachem Nachum teaches here that walking by these statutes implies that faith itself provides the legs upon which we can walk through any storm, through any wilderness. Faith is our powerful spiritual tool that has enabled us, as a people, to walk through unbearable circumstances.

You may recall the powerful and painful Holocaust story of Jews, walking in long lines toward the gas chambers of Auschwitz and as they walked they sang these words:

Ani ma'amin - I believe,

Ani ma'amin - I believe,

Ani ma'amin, b'emunah sh'leimah...with complete faith, b'viat ha-mashiach, b'viat ha-mashiach ani ma'amin... I have faith in the coming of a complete redemption.

How was this possible?

How could these innocent souls, facing imminent death, anchor themselves in the **faith** in a redeemed world?

Some might see this as a form of denial or a kind of naivete but I call it an exercise of profound spiritual muscle. Let us look at this more closely.

The Talmud teaches: *Hakol b'yidei shamayim, hutz mi yirat shamayim*. Everything is essentially out of our hands, out of our control, except for our **attitude** toward our situation. We always have the ability to control our inner state, even when chaos reigns.

Traditionally, we have been taught that, as Jews, faith should form the foundation of our lives. In my own experience, and that of most Jews in America today, faith is not even part of our



conversation. Who among us has not at times, wrestled with or rejected faith in God, faith in the goodness of humanity or faith in the possibility of a redeemed world?

After the Holocaust, after Newtown, after Uvalde and any number of current atrocities, who does not struggle with faith?

In these strange and chaotic times, when the reliable structures in our society and the natural world appear to be in jeopardy, it can be difficult to sustain a sense of hope and the faith that change and healing are possible. It is natural to fall into a kind of skeptical paralysis fueled by despair. But that is the most perilous condition because in that state, no change is possible.

In the Torah portion we just read, we find Hagar, bereft at the possibility of losing her son. Her eyes are closed to any alternative outcomes. She can only see his imminent death. She lays him down and moves away from him. Our text continues, that God opens her eyes and then, she is able to see a spring of fresh water beside her. It was there all along, but she was unable to find it, because her despair overcame her sense of hope.

Dr. MLK Jr. once said, "Faith is taking the first *step*, even when you don't see the whole *staircase*."

Sir Edmund Hillary was the first man to conquer Mt. Everest though he failed in his first attempt. Speaking to the Science Academy in England after his first unsuccessful climb, Hillary stopped in the middle, paused a pregnant pause, turned toward the large mural of Everest, on the wall and addressed the mountain, saying: "Next time I will succeed- for I am still growing and you have stopped growing."

Faith provides fuel and direction for overcoming impossible obstacles.

In Hebrew the word for faith is *emunah* and it shares the same linguistic root as the word *Amein*, which we utter repeatedly throughout all of our services. When we say *amein*, we are saying, "I have faith in what I just heard, I affirm all that was just spoken and I commit myself to be **faith-ful** to these values."

Emunah - Faith is an inner conviction that there is a greater truth that transcends all circumstances.



HIGH HOLIDAYS 2022/5783

Each time we utter the word *amein*, we testify to our faith in that greater Truth.

Each time we come together as a sacred community and say *amein* together, we build a sacred container, an ark of faith within which to weather the storms of our times.

Faith does not ask us to deny the real challenges we are facing.

Faith does not ask us to bury our heads in the sand.

Faith asks us simply to remember the holy, the goodness and the beauty that exists in our world.

Faith remembers that every human heart carries a spark of the divine.

Faith recognizes our ability to continue growing.

Faith finds seeds of hope, glimmers of light in the darkness
and by this light sees the possibilities for redemption.

Faith opens a space for dreaming a new world into being.

Today, in the unfolding story of nations and individuals we are witnessing the power of faith among the people of Ukraine. Despite the tremendous odds against them, their solid faith in their ability to defend their land fuels their daily struggles and their victories.

Faith provides the fuel and direction for overcoming impossible obstacles.

Each generation has a name. It was those of the wilderness generation - *Dor Hamidbar* - in our Torah, who could not enter the Promised Land. Their greatest shortcoming was their lack of faith, their narrowness of vision.

Let us, together, today, and in the days to come open our eyes wider, expand our vision of what is possible.

Let us support, develop and fuel our collective faith in one another.

Each generation has a name
Given by our fears and
Given by our dreams



HIGH HOLIDAYS 2022/5783

Given by our vision and given by our imagination. Let us be the generation that builds an ark of faith, faith in our future- faith in humanity- faith in eternal Love.

May we remember that we are always carried by something greater than ourselves.

And now- A Song to Seal these words- a quote from Isaiah 46:4
v'ad seivah, ani esbol - I will carry you through it all, through all life's changes.