

WELLSPRINGS OF HOPE

A Yom Kippur Afternoon sermon by Rabbi Herbert M. Baumgard
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The two great peoples of ancient times were the Greeks and the Hebrews. The great American psychologist William James tells us that "over the course of time, the Greeks became unmitigated pessimists". Indeed, something of this Greek pessimism creeps into our Bible in the Book of Ecclesiastes. This Greek mood came into Judaism by way of the Greek conquest of Judea around 325 BCE, but one cannot read the entire Bible without being impressed by its dominant optimism.

From the very beginning of Genesis we are told, and God beheld the world which he had created, "Vayahr ki tov, and He saw that it was good". The Book of Psalms is perhaps the best example of the Bible's essential optimism. I like to repeat often that verse which reads, "This is the day that the Lord has made, let us be glad and rejoice in it". The verse suggests that this day, today, is God's special creation. God intended for it to be good. Therefore, although the day be filled with problems, let us try to enjoy whatsoever we can. It is a wonderful philosophy, but sometimes a difficult one to follow.

The Psalmist wanted to tell us that we worry too much about tomorrow. There may indeed be problems next week or next year, but today is such a treasure, we should not let it slip by without tasting of it to the full. The Psalmist seems to suggest that it is a sin not to enjoy what God has given to us for the purpose of enjoyment.

The Book of Job in our Bible takes a different view. Its message is that we take too short a view of life, we must learn to take the long view. How could these conflicting views be in one Bible? The answer is that the Psalmist reflects the view of an earlier more secure period in Jewish History, and Job reflects a later view after the people had suffered a great deal. Which book is correct in its message? I believe that there is wisdom in each of them, and we must appropriate what is necessary to make our own life meaningful, palatable, and enjoyable.

Job, you will recall, had been tested by God. According to this dramatic play, he had lost all of his wealth; his wife and children had died; now he was plagued with personal illness that kept him miserable most of the time. Job asks the perennial question, why me?, and he demands a dialogue with God, he demands a rational explanation as to why he, a man who had sought so avidly to follow God's ways, should suffer so miserably. The play ends with majestic poetry wherein God infers that human suffering has meaning as part of the divine eternal plan. Job, we are told, accepts this premise, so the wisdom of the play is that human beings must learn to accept their suffering with the understanding that all of this has meaning in terms of God's timeless plan. Our grandmothers were very good at this high philosophy. No matter what happened, they said, "It is God's will - es ist beshert". The inference behind this simple statement is that God has a purpose for our suffering, so we endure it for His sake.

When tragedy strikes us as individuals, we tend to look inward. The message of the Book of Job is that the answer to our sorrow comes when

we lift up our eyes, when we look outward, and so it was that the Rabbi's later taught, "Never pray in a room without a window".

The Book of Job seems to ask, what is left to a person after a great tragedy?; and the Book answers, only the world is left with all of its potential. You must remember that you are still a vital part of that world. Step up and take your rightful place in it.

Winston Churchill has said, "Most people lead lives of quiet desperation". For a long time that did not seem to be true in America, where a certain amount of confidence and optimism has reigned for centuries. As America matures, however, something of this quiet desperation seems to be creeping into the life of its citizens. I find that people who should be the happiest because they have everything seem almost to be looking for reasons to be unhappy! Especially those of us in the American middle class seem to expect life to be perfect, and the least imperfection seems to throw us for a loop. Things have been so good for us that we do not seem to know how to handle the least problem when it develops.

For example, one of the things that worries a great many of our Beth Am members is the fact that their child does not get into an Ivy League college. Som of our children are made to feel that they are failures because they don't get into Harvard or Yale. I guess I am a failure then because I didn't attend an Ivy League school.

Some of our children are made miserable by their parents because they didn't make the honor roll. Can you imagine that a Jewish child didn't make the honor roll. Neither for that matter did Einstein. Relax. Maybe your child will become a world renowned scientist.

I have seen other people moping around the Beth Am campus because they can't afford to go to Aspen for Winter vacation. I have seen mothers who are insecure because their child is not wearing designer clothes, and the the mother is making the child insecure on this point.

These petty things like which side of U.S.1 you live on and what kind of car you drive are sources of considerable distress to some of us. This is proof that many of us have lost sight of the important things in life. We are not considering what is important in the long run. Job would tell us, go down to the seashore and watch the tide come in. You'll feel yourself a part of the great rhythm of the earth, and you will feel better.

But let us talk now about some serious problems. Recently, a man, not a member, was hospitalized with a fatal disease and he asked to to visit with him. The man told me with great difficulty, "My son is a homosexual. I am filled with shame and I don't know how to relate to him". I explained to this man, who was probably dying, that ten per cent of Americans are homosexuals, that homosexuality is apparently one of the ways human beings behave. "Your son", I said to this man, "is not a criminal. He is worthy of your love. Certainly God loves him". The man could not believe his ears. Here was a Rabbi telling him that his son was not a source of shame. The man tearfully thanked me and was now able to pay attention to his very serious illness, and his impending death. There are a number of Beth Am families with homosexual children. Many of them happen to be wonderful human beings. Do not think that you are alone in this matter. We do not completely understand homosexuality,

but it is one of the things that happen to human beings. As such we must learn to understand it and deal with it without rejecting the person involved.

One of the more common problems amongst our families is unmarried children. I happened to be talkint to another patient in the hospital who was concerned about her unmarried child when the nurse, who overheard our conversation, asked if she could be part of the discussion. "My daughter is married", the nurse said, "but she doesn't seem to want any children, and I so wasnt to be a grandmother." Apparently we have a wide spread phenomom here, and for Jews it is a very serious one, since we are desperately in need of children. How do we apply the wisdom of the Bible to this situation? Wee, the Psalmist advises us to rejoice in the beauty of each day, the day before us. I translate this to mean, don't forget to enjoy your children even if they are unmattied. They are precious even if they don't get married, and you should love and enjoy them for themselves! You don't have to add to their pressure by nudging them all the time. Especially if the child is a girl. She needs all the affection and assurance she can get in this society which makes a virture of being single. So the first piece of advice is enjoy your child today for what he or she is. The second piece of advice is to take also the Jobian view, the long view. You've heard of the phrase "the patience of Job". In modern times it is a much needed virtue. Wait--miracles often take place, even if they come after you're too old to appreciate them. The Book of Ecclesiastes adivses us that human spcoety works in cycles. What is a fad today, is despised tomorrow, and what is out today will be in tomorrow. The Greeks were not so dumb. I am advised by my young CIA informants that more and more young people are curtailing their sexual experimentation today and are talking about the safety of marriage. Yes, I do think that the cycle is about to turn around. Meanwhile read the Book of Job and the comic cartoon, Cathy, because both will help you to pre-serve your sanity.

Foremost amongst real human problems is chronic illness. How are we to apply the wisdom of the Psalmist and Job to a person who awakens each morning to another day of pain.

The answer to this question is best given to you by some of those who are in the midst of this kind of suffering. I know a man, a member of this congregations, who has constant back pain. He is reduced to locomotion in a wheel chair. Yet he goes everywhere in that chair. In fact, he comes to servies every Friday evening. It takes a great deal of trouble for him to get into his car, to drive to Temple, to get out of his car, to sit in a special area, yet this man does all of this, aided by his good wife. He doesn't let his disease overcome him. That's the answer--he does what he can.

The tactic of this kind of courage is that if you can't do one thing, you do another. If you can't walk, you ride a wheel chair. If you can't see, you listen to the symphony. If you can't hear, you travel and see all that you can. This is the day that the Lord hath made, let us be glad and rejoice in it. We rejoice however we can. If we can't use 100% of our body in enjoying life, let's use 50 % of it 100% of the time. How many of us know people who are completely well who don't take advantage of their health, who don't seize even 10% of their opportunities?

The truth is, dear friends, that trouble comes to most of us. The only difference among us is how do we handle the trouble. Some people waltz through a whole pack of trouble. They make a big problem seem to be small. Others are overwhelmed by the least thing. I am going to tell you a very profound story, but I am not going to explain it to you in detail. I want you to take it home and talk about it. The story is that a certain man lost all of his money in the 1929 market crash, and he became despondent. In fact, he had thoughts of suicide. A friend took this depressed man to see a Hasidic Rabbi who was famous for his ability to analyze people's problems. The unhappy man told the Rabbi his story, how he had lost his entire life's savings, how he was now penniless and without a business, how he found it almost impossible to keep going. The Rabbi listened attentively and then thought a long while. Finally he said to his client, "Und bist du Got's Ben Yachid, and are you God's only son?".

So many of us like this depressed man think that we are the only one who suffers. We think that we have been singled out for punishment. We don't understand that to be alive is to suffer in the long run, and we had best learn how to deal with failure and pain.

So many of us ask, why me? Job asked that question. Why should bad things happen to a good person like me. And the answer to that is that bad things happen to everyone if you live long enough. Our grandmothers believed that God distributes justice. He distributes rewards and punishment and God has, our grandmother said, eternal reasons for His actions. I do not believe that God is omnipotent, all powerful, or that he causes everything that happens. The airplane crashes because there was a flaw in the engine, not because God willed it to crash. The man fails in business because he had the wrong product or because he didn't run his business properly. I had open chest surgery because my arteries were clogged because I am my father's son and he had clogged arteries, not because God wanted to afflict me with this problem. God is the creative force in the world that makes for morality, but he is not omnipotent, and he needs our help. That's what Judaism is all about. It is the religion that teaches us to help God in perfecting the world.

Judaism also teaches us that almost nothing in life is perfect and we have to learn to accept the imperfections and the problems that come to us. We have to deal with them as courageously and as optimistically as we can. The greatest sin taught the Rebbe is to forget that you are the beloved child of the King. Are you ill? You are still the beloved child of the King and he wants you to use your resources to get well. Are you bankrupt? You are still the beloved child of the King and he wants you to earn a decent living.

Finally, let me say that if you employ the kind of courage recommended by both the Psalmist and Job, you will discover that you are not alone. When we face life's problems with courage we find that there is a force which comes to our aid, we find that we are surprisingly strengthened once we move forward. As God said to Moses in the desert, "If you have the courage to undertake the task, I will be with you." The battle of life does not always end in victory, but what matters in the end is not

that we win or lose a particular battle, but what matters is that we make the positive decision, the life-affirming decision, and that we work in that mood and faith. God is with us even in our defeats, in our tragedies and in our illness, for does not Isaiah tell us in God's words, concerning his people Israel, "In all of their affliction, I was afflicted". God suffer with us when we are alone in our suffering. God works with us. We are not alone in attempting to deal with our suffering.

The Psalmist believed what Isaiah knew. That is why the Psalmist could say this day, such at it is, is the day that God has made, let us be glad and rejoice in it.