

“Against Survivalism and Nostalgia: The Verticality of Yom Kippur”

Shaul Magid, Fire Island Synagogue
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“We are in an existential crisis” We Jews hear this a lot these days, even as no one quite explains what it means. I think the great Jewish existential crisis is Yom Kippur. The problem is that we don’t see it that way. It’s when we enter a notion, guided by liturgy, where our very existence is put into question, or at least that is the posture we are being asked to take. This resonates with the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer, ‘who will live, and who will die...’. If we allow ourselves in that moment to inhale the implications therein, *that* is a true existential crisis. But many of us don’t see it that way, but this is the basic message as I understand it. In some way, it passes by quickly because we reach the crescendo of the prayer, and also the day, with atonement (teshuva, tefilah, zedaka).

I want to dwell for a bit on this notion of a perennial “existential crisis,” and how it functions in our own self perception as Jews and as a religious minority in America.

I begin by suggesting that, in fact, Judaism built on a covenant, seems to obviate *against* the existential crisis. Let us recall that throughout the Pentateuch, including a series of passages we read a few weeks ago in parshat Ki Tavo, God promises the Israelites that God will make them a treasured people (*al segulah*). The entire covenant is built on the premise that God will not allow Israel to disappear. And throughout most of Jewish history, Jews seemed to believe that.

Modernity of course struck a dagger into that belief, as it did to most of traditional Judaism, even by those who continued to practice it. Interestingly, while Orthodoxy maintained a set of beliefs and practices with which they claimed authenticity, the belief in the this covenantal principle seemed to fade, often in an undetected way.

In many ways, and understandably so, the Holocaust shattered that covenantal principle entirely, except for very few. The horror of our collective death, the Nazi genocide and its aftermath made it almost impossible for most Jews to maintain the principle that God will protect us. This is part because in that dark moment of history, God didn’t. And so, the arresting passage at the end of Ellie Weisel’s *Night* that it is God hanging on the gallows, makes sense. Why believe in a God

that would allow six million innocent souls to die. It is easier, as Weisel intimates, that God is, in fact, dead.

And thus began a kind of new Jewish industry in the 1960s called “Post-Holocaust Theology.” Twentieth century Death of God Theology upon which some post-Holocaust Theology was founded, was actually created by Christian theologian Thomas Altizer and then taken up by Jewish theologian Richard Rubenstein in his ground-breaking 1966 book *After Auschwitz*. We needn’t get into the details except to claim that while it made for a few decades of creative Jewish theological thinking, it mostly did not take. Even the trauma of the Holocaust could not make Jews quit God, even as it may have brought us to quit the covenantal promise. And so, God remained alive in the hearts of many Jews, but what was sacrificed was the principle that God would not abandon us. Perhaps it was a less trustworthy God, a less loving God, but God nonetheless, and on Yom Kippur we enter an alternative universe hoping, in fact, praying, that God remains bound by God’s covenant, even if we don’t believe in it.

I once heard a joke the Slovakian philosopher Slavoj Zizek. A student of a famous philosopher comes to visit his teacher. When he knocks on the door, he notices a horseshoe above the entrance. He asks his teacher, “What is the horseshoe for?” and the philosopher answers, “Good luck.” The student, quite surprised responds, “Excuse me sir, but you are a rationalist philosopher, you can’t tell you me you believe in that?” The philosopher responds, “Of course I don’t believe in it, but they tell me it works even if you *don’t* believe in it.” This illustrates how some Jews approach Yom Kippur.

We Jews are a wily people and thus in some way we have survived part of the unspeakable trauma of the Holocaust, we have re-built our communities, had families, successfully became a part of our country of residence, and even founded a Jewish state. Challenges remained, skepticism endured, but we have survived.

And then came October 7th. The lasting impact of 10/7 is not yet known, but the claims, truth as they are, that this was the greatest Jewish tragedy since the Holocaust is true in ways often not spoken. Yes, the death toll was one indication. But there was something deeper, more “existential.” The whole purpose of founding a Jewish state was so that something like 10/7 would not, could not, ever happen. Setting aside context, conditions, and military failures, it simply could not, should not, have happened. In some way, it was therefore even more shocking

than the Holocaust. One certainly cannot compare the magnitude, and the unmitigated evil of the Nazi genocide, but it did take place when the Jews when living as a minority, when the Jews were vulnerable to the other nations. 10/7, on the other hand, happened when Jews were the sovereign, the majority, when Jews had the weapons and expertise to defend itself against its enemies. In this sense, the “existential crisis” born from 10/7 is even more palpable than the Holocaust. And as we just passed the one-year mark of that tragedy we are still in the early stages of absorbing how we can move forward.

Yet even in this early stage something seems to be rising to the surface: a new iteration of survivalism that I spoke briefly about on RH. Survivalism is a category of Jewish existence that sociologists Jonathan Woocher coined in his 1986 book *Sacred Survival: The Civil Religion of American Jews*. Then in 1998 Ernest Krauz and Gitta Tulea published a collection entitled, *Jewish Survival: The Identity Problem at the Close of the Twentieth Century*. I literally have a shelf of books in my office with titles like these. I will spare you the bibliography, but you get the point.

In his 1986 book Woocher, who tragically died quite young some years ago, uses sociological data to show that in place of Judaism, Jews, now seeing themselves simply as a “people” have begun to focus on survival as their primary mode of identity. Given that “survival” is somewhat dissonant, the term “continuity” is often an apt replacement. In the 10th century Saadia Gaon said “the Jews exist for the sake of Torah,” implying that if Jews abandoned Torah, the reason for their existence disappears. This even inspired a 1995 book by Rabbi Michael Goldberg, *Why Should Jews Survive: Looking Past the Holocaust toward a Jewish Future*. Goldberg was afraid about what he calls a “Holocaust cult” or Ian Lustik recently called “Holocaustia” as an impediment, not a tactic, for healthy Jewish survival. But this is not only our collective response to the Holocaust. In 1915 the Jewish social and political thinker Chaim Zhitlowsky (1865-1943) wrote, “the basis of our life in America will not be the Jewish religion, but rather our Jewish nationality.”

I want to take this whole survivalist turn in a slightly different direction. On one level, who doesn’t want to survive, we all come here today with that question in mind, “who will live, and who will die.” We all hope to be written in the Book of Life. But desiring to survive, a natural inclination of all living things, is different than survivalism in part because survivalism suggests

two things: first, it flattens one's existence to the bare minimum. And second, it seems to suggest, at least, that our survival is totally dependent on us. Survivalism is a worldview whereby our lives begin and end with the bottom line, simply to live. As rational creatures, we can create "isms" but as survivalists we are no better than almost all other creatures who, in fact, often seem to be better survivalists than we are. We often forget that we are relative newcomers to this planet.

While I can't know for sure, I do not think Jews 500 years ago worried about survival as a people. And the sages in the Talmud don't speak much about the survival of the Jews, in part because they believed in a covenant that assured that. What they do obsess about, is the survival of Torah. "Will the Torah survive?" is a question they periodically ponder, with considerable anxiety. Now of course the survival of Torah depends on the survival of the Jews, but the sages knew quite well that the survival of the Jews needn't insure the survival of Torah. This may have been precisely their anxiety. And, in fact, part of the "ism" of *survivalism* suggests, at least, that the survival of the Jews can supersede the survival of Torah. But if that is true, then we come back to the question of Saadia Gaon: why do the Jews exist? That is, the covenant does not simply promote the survival of the Jews, it gives that survival a purpose without which, survival becomes superfluous, or at least banal.

What I would like to explore this Kol Nidre evening is the price we pay by becoming survivalists. That is, if we as a people emerge from the Shoah traumatized, wounded, no longer believing that God will save us from annihilation, and if we choose a variety of alternatives to instantiate that survivalism, what is the cost?

I have been thinking about this not in a political register but an artistic one. In the past few years I have published a number of studies on what I call "Judeopessimism" an attempt to understand how we have been relating to antisemitism as a constitutive aspect of Jewish existence.

Judeopessimism is a term I invented, borrowing from the more developed notion of Afropessimism, an idea in Black Studies that anti-Black racism is not a consequence of slavery or even racism more generally, but is an integral part of what we might call "western civilization. (a term I do not like, but that is another matter). As such, Afropessimists like Frank Wilderson argue, anti-Blackness can never be eradicated from our society. To erase anti-Black racism, Afropessimists say, would be to dismantle civilization.

This has initiated a fierce debate in Black Studies on the veracity of this theory. Two schools of thought have emerged I want to mention. The first is called Black Optimism and the second is called Black Futurism. Black futurism is mostly an aesthetic and artistic movement. We can find it in some interpretations of Charlie Parker and John Coltrane (they were not Black futurists but they are sometimes viewed as precursors) and in more contemporary musicians such as Sun Ra. We can see it in films such as John Sayles 1984 film “Brother from Another Planet” and more recently films like “Black Panther.”

One of the fascinating things about Black futurism is that, like the music of Coltrane, it doesn't stay within the lines. That is, it ventures beyond the standard ways a collective views itself and its future. There may be two reasons for this that could relate to the Jewish question. First, from an Afropessimistic perspective, it doesn't try to *solve* anything because the problem of blackness can't be solved. That is, the constitutive notion of racism becomes artistically liberating because it allows experimentation outside the orbit of pragmatic problem-solving. Another reason, related to the first, is that Blacks in American don't think about survival the way Jews do. Blacks don't live with the same fear of actual disappearance (they fear erasure and marginalization but not disappearance). And the reason is mostly physical, Jews can assimilate and disappear, and thus there is an obsession with survival. Black can't assimilate in that way and thus they may remain oppressed, but they will remain distinct.

But what about us? So much of our lives are founded on survival, or to use the more sterile term, “continuity.” How does that impact our creativity. I was thinking a lot about this after Basya and I released *Kabbalachia*. What and how does it contribute to music more generally and to Jewish life in particular? And what is the difference? In a book called *Rethinking Modern Judaism*, Arnie Eisen, who was until a few years ago the chancellor at JTS, has a chapter called “Mitzvah as Nostalgia.” Its an interesting understanding of how we Jews today perform mitzvot, not as acts of obligation or commandment, but as nostalgic gestures, acts that in some way connect us to the past. Mitzvah as an act that we hope cultivates continuity. We may not believe, we may no longer live inside a covenant where God will assure our survival, and thus we act to maximize the possibility of our own survival. I think this captures the way many of us see mitzvot. They are nostalgic performances to ease our anxiety about the ways we may be contributing to our own disappearance. No one wants to be the last one out to turn out the lights.

I also think nostalgia informs much of Jewish creativity. Certainly liturgically, but that is appropriate because liturgy needs to be familiar for it to be successful. Repetition is a functional quality of piety. When we pray we aren't looking for newness in the liturgy as much as enabling the familiarity, in words and song, to spark something inside of us that is new in these artists. And not only Jewish nostalgia. Remember it was Irving Berlin who wrote "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas," perhaps the most nostalgic American song ever written. We Jews are expert nostalgists.

I am thinking more broadly about why we as Jews, a people full of creative energy, don't produce John Coltranes and Sun Ra. We have great artists and musicians, but the more Jewish they are, the more they produce nostalgia and infrequently break through into what could be called a futurism? There are exceptions of course but even a great artist like Chagall, or great writers like Singer or even Phillip Roth, or more recently Nathan Englander, so much of their creativity is nostalgic and not futuristic. There is a fear of letting go, of being untethered to a past that still speaks and is given voice. There is an interesting quote from the Jewish historian Eran Kaplan in his book *The Jewish Radical Right* in part about the Revisionist Zionist leader Zev Jabotinsky. "Jabotinsky described jazz as a revolutionary artistic genre that breaks the strict rules of traditional harmonies and allows the individual to escape the boundaries imposed by culture. But after he finished extolling the virtues of improvisational music, he declared that his personal musical taste tended to be more classical..." (Kaplan, *The Jewish Radical Right*, 21). There is a way that comment can be a metaphor for what I'm suggesting here.

This is a much more complicated subject than we have time for on Kol Nidre, but I raise it to make a point; are we limiting ourselves by being tethered to this anxiety of survival. Let's say a prophet came and said, "Jews, don't worry, you won't disappear, now go and make some edgy art." Would we? Or would we not believe such a prophet because we no longer believe in the very fundamentals that would make his prophecy possible.

A few weeks ago I spoke at a conference called "Leaving Orthodoxy" at The Center for Jewish History in Manhattan. It was fascinating for a variety of reasons. Most of the participants and many of the attendees were from ultra-Orthodox homes, mostly Hasidic, who had left that world behind. The creativity in many of those young people was truly astonishing. Music, poetry (much of it in Yiddish), art (numerous exhibits adorned the halls of the center), and film (the

celebrated actor Luzer Twersky was the MC). It made me think a few things. First, if this is the creativity that has seeped out of that world, one can only imagine the resources of those who remain inside. But also, closer to my point tonight, they do not seem to have our anxiety of survival. For a variety of reasons. Either, in some cases, they no longer care if the Jews survived, they had left that world behind, the world they simply call, “the community.” In some cases, they don’t really feel a visceral responsibility to the “Jewish people.” For some others, they are just trying to re-build their lives. Or, ironically, what I sense of this lack of anxiety is because they still retain a kind of faith in a covenant they had abandoned. In either case, I felt they were creatively liberated in ways that most of us are not, either because they believe less than us, or because they believe more than us.

My point here is not to criticize either side as much as to attempt to theorize where we stand as a people, choices we’ve made because of often unexamined ways that we have been taught and have absorbed the worlds we inherited from our proximate ancestors. In a sense Zhitlowsky was right in 1915, for many of us “nationalism” or as some prefer “peoplehood” has become what Jonathan Woocher called our “civil religion,” in some way replacing Judaism. And the turn from religion to peoplehood contributes to the survivalism of which I speak. In some way, this emerges from the kinds of things we were exposed to in our postwar American world.

For example, it’s a bit ironic that Shalom Alekhem writes his Tevya the Milkman stories that became “Fiddler on the Roof” serialized in the Yiddish press in Russia, as a parody, and yet for so many of us it has become our nostalgic frame of reference. I don’t think Tevya was really anxious that the Jews would disappear. He was certainly afraid *his world* would disappear, which it did, and in part that was Shalom Alekhem’s point in writing the stories. The Tevya stories were Shalom Alekhem’s lament of a world in the final stages of erasure, but not a lament on the end of the Jews. But we all read him on the other side of the Shoah and thus many of us viewed it through different lenses. Tevya’s world is gone, but we are still here. So now we turn our anxiety not to our world, which is not on the verge of disappearing, but on our very existence.

So, in case anyone is asking themselves, why all this discussion of survivalism, nostalgia, futurism, on the evening of Kol Nidre, my point is to suggest that when we enter the world that we call Yom Kippur, and yes, it is a world, we enter a world quite different than the world we presently inhabit. It is a world that begins on Kol Nidre and ends 25 hours later with Neilah. And

here I think the Toraic mandate to fast is quite instructive. Fasting is not only an act of deprivation; it is an act of resistance. It is physical resistance to the world. But resistance from what exactly? For many of our ancestors, it was the resistance to the fear of physical safety, not survival in a broad sense, but the very precariousness that many, certainly not all, of our ancestors faced. But for us, perhaps, it is a resistance to our contemporary survivalism. This is because YK is a day where we acknowledge, or at the very least, entertain, the possibility that our survival is dependent on something outside of us. In that sense YK is liberating, it liberates us from leading our Jewish lives as if we are on the brink of annihilation, that we are always one step away from the precipice. Because when we occupy that space, we limit ourselves to the anxiety produced by thinking we are essentially alone, and our survival depends solely on our actions.

Has nationalism, or peoplehood, essentially replaced religion for today's Jews, as Zhitlowsky predicted in 1915. In some way, rightly or wrongly, depending on where each of us stands, yes it has, and accompanying that is an anxiety to use nostalgia as a tool, or crutch, protect our future by remaining tethered (one might venture to say, trapped) in our past. In this way, we have become a horizontal people, whereas the Torah urges us to become a vertical people. That is, a people that remains tethered to a covenantal verticality whereby we remain steadfast in believing that our survival is not solely our responsibility.

This sounds dissonant, I know, in part because we have created structures that are founded on the horizontal nature of self-sufficiency that deems the verticality of Torah anathema, naïve, or dissonant. And yes, I know, as both Madonna and Dylan both said, "we live in a material world," and it is hard to see beyond that. The liturgical phrase codified in our rabbinic corpus, "who will save us, *avinu sh b'shamayim*," has become, "we can only save ourselves." I understand that, even though as one who has devoted his entire adult life to the Jewish tradition, I lament that we have come to that because, like the sages, I too fear the Torah will be forgotten. This is precisely *because* the Torah *can* be forgotten even in the midst of the Torah being observed. The rabbis have a clever dictum to describe such a phenomenon: "immersing in a mikveh with a non-kosher animal in your hand."

So, in a sense, what I am advocating for is a kind of Judeo-futurism (I borrow this from my student Becca Leviss), an ability to fantasize, theorize, create in a way that isn't bound by the

fear, and anxiety, of impending doom. What a liberating force to create without fear, to innovate, to make new worlds out of shards of the past. Afrofuturism can be our model. But for us, perhaps, this artistic liberation comes from shifting our perspective from the horizontal to the vertical. To free ourselves from the bonds of our own false notion of independence.

One big opportunity of such vertical shifting is Yom Kippur. It is hard for a survivalist to truly enter the mythic world of YK because survivalists are horizontalists. But the very germ-cell of YK is that it is a time where we acknowledge that our very existence depends on our verticality. It is not determined by nostalgia, continuity, or the might of our hands. Our existence is in the hands of something beyond us, something that demands of us fidelity to the principles of love of the creator and creation, a good conscience, care for the widow and orphan, and a desire to make a better world. As John Lennon famously said, "Imagine." That is not a naïve dream of a distant time, a childish fantasy of someone who doesn't understand the realities of our world. Rather it is, I submit, Judaism, the treasure-trove we received from our ancestors. And to truly enter that modality, into that melody, we need to abandon the horizontal perspective of survival. That is the true challenge of Yom Kippur, to become a vertical people, if only for 25 hours. And that challenge, at least for me, makes fasting seem easy.