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The Meaning of the Moment

What will today look like in hindsight? When we look back years from now, how will we view these turbulent times? How will we understand why we were here, and what we were meant to do?

Joel just read from Torah: "When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they grew frightened, 'What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us!'" Midrash Tanhuma asks: “What did they see that made them afraid? As they were returning from burying their father, they saw that Joseph turned off the road and went to look at the pit into which his brothers had cast him.” His brothers thought that Joseph was dwelling on the terrible deed they had done to him years before.

What *was* Joseph thinking as he peered into that fateful hole? In what way did he remember that bleak moment? The midrash answers: "Joseph stood up and prayed, 'Blessed is God who performed a miracle for me in this place!'" There, gazing into a barren crater, the place of his greatest danger

and fear, Joseph looks back and sees not damage, but blessing, meaning, purpose. In retrospect, he is able to piece together the harrowing events of his life into a story that reveals God's intent. "Although you intended me harm," he says, "Elohim Chashavah l'tovah/ God intended it for good, to bring about the present result— L'hachayot Am Rov/ to keep alive many people" (Genesis 50:20).

How many of us have lived through desperate and confusing moments only to look back years later and see within them blessing, or the seeds of who we've become, or a step in a journey we could not have predicted?

Today, the markets are careening from bad to worse. Our bedrock industries are seeking bailout, and median prices have taken the worst tumble since the Great Depression. The Madoff catastrophe has stolen the life savings of some of our most generous donors. Membership rolls are dwindling, donations are drying up, our capital campaigns are stalled; and our members, our people, are in fear and pain, some waiting for the axe to fall, some already without work worrying over how to pay the mortgage.

And even some of us here are in free fall. Rabbis are being asked to cut their own salaries, congregations are slashing budgets, organizations are

in danger of closing their doors. Those of us in placement this spring are entering one of the tightest rabbinic markets in memory. After five years of school, and tens of thousands of dollars in debt, we may not be able to work as the rabbis we have been preparing to be. No one knows how deep this pit is, we have not yet reached bottom.

None of us likes to fall, none of us likes to find ourselves at the bottom of a pit, but each of us has something to give to this moment. Victor Frankl wrote, "The meaning of our existence is not invented by ourselves, but rather detected…What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general, but rather the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment."[1] What is our meaning in this moment? What are we here to do? We do not yet have the wisdom of hindsight, but perhaps there is a way for each of us to discern what this moment is for. As Mordechai said to Esther as he spurred her to action at the brink of disaster, "Mi Yodea im la'et kazot higa'at la'malchut? /Who knows if it was just for this moment that you arrived at majesty?"

[1] Man's Search for Meaning, p.157, 171

Who knows if it was just for this moment that *we* arrived at majesty? Perhaps this is the moment to find and reveal our God-given majesty, to bring forth what we uniquely have to offer the world.

In her book, *New York Jews and the Great Depression*, Beth Wenger reports that in the 1930's synagogues found that the financial crisis was matched by a spiritual depression and dwindling attendance which, remarkably, led to an effort by rabbis to revitalize synagogue life by making synagogues more relevant to Jews facing trying economic times, including a reassessment of congregational priorities, and a reevaluation of the synagogue's structure, communal role and spiritual agenda.[2]

We live in a moment crying out for revitalization. Synagogues, organized Judaism, and even Israel have become increasingly marginal or irrelevant to most Jews in America. Even within our synagogues, our congregants are distanced by language, idiom, and belief from our liturgy and sacred texts. And perhaps most debilitating, our Jewish communities share few sustaining Jewish practices. Without a way of life that embodies the words that we pray and learn, what do those words mean?

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[2] Wenger, New York Jews and the Great Depression; Yale Press, New Haven, CT; 124-126

Perhaps within this crisis there is opportunity –opportunity for the majestic rethinking that we need. Mi Yodea, perhaps some of us are already seizing this moment to engage in thoughtful change that opens the doors of our synagogues wide, that makes them breathe with new life, that makes them hum with the questions and yearnings and visions of our time.

Mi Yodea, perhaps others of us, those who don't end up serving in synagogues or on college campuses, will expand our religious and communal enterprise beyond the walls of our synagogue buildings, into homes, outdoor spaces, and virtual places along the lines of the Riverway Project, the innovations coming out of Re-Imagine, Synagogue 3000 and alternative minyanim, and sites like NextBook. Perhaps we will restructure our institutions into local fields of collaboration that engage more Jews than ever before in projects inspired by Me'ah or the Melton mini-school or ReBoot.

Mi Yodea, perhaps we will find ourselves uniquely situated to help people who are falling to find their majesty, to see their own majestic nature, and to feel inspired to give it to the world.

Perhaps we will invite Jews who (unemployed) suddenly have time on their hands, or who are adjusting to smaller homes and smaller budgets, to

gather together to ask each other “what is enough?”, helping one another change our patterns of consumption, responding not only to our own changed circumstances, but to the crisis of our ravaged earth, the unsustainable pace of life, and the inequality that mars our world.

Let’s engage liberal Jews to reweave a rich and textured Jewish way of life that speaks to these times, offering new responses to the 3,000 year old question: Given the commanding presence of YHVH, how ought we live? This question may lead us to new *halakhot*, new ways of life, that respond to the conditions of our world, the pull of our tradition, and the call of God.

In two weeks we will inaugurate a new president, one who plans to stabilize the economy on a foundation of greater equality, to make health care accessible to every American, to reverse the devastation of our ecosystem, to end a tragic war, and to broker a two state solution in an ever more explosive Middle East.

Our new president will need us. He will need us to rise to new heights, to bring forth the majesty within us. He will need us to speak and to act for a lasting peace in Israel, for a thoughtful and swift end to the Iraq war, and for investment to reweave our safety net, to convert our energy

infrastructure, to transform our health care system. He will need us to challenge our congregants, our members, our students, our fellow Jews to find their majesty, to find what they have to give to our country, to our people, and to our world.

None of us likes to fall. None of us likes to be at the bottom of a pit. But Mi Yodea, may it be that years from now, when we look back on these months, we stand up and pray "Blessed is God, who performed a miracle for me at this place!" "Elohim chashavah l'tova. God intended it for good." Chazak Chazak v'nitchazek.