The Elephants In the Room
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A video of this sermon can be found here:
https://youtu.be/zh3Esmezlmc

One of the first things they teach aspiring rabbis in seminary about crafting a sermon is to always be mindful of the "Elephant in the Room". A simile attributed to both Mark Twain and Dostoevsky

By this Dostoevsky, Twain and my homiletics professor of course meant, when speaking you must address what everyone is thinking about, as in if there was a giant elephant (or even a small baby elephant) right here in the middle of the sanctuary or snuggled up in a corner you gotta talk about the elephant before you talk about anything else.

For the last 85 days the elephant has been and remains Israel, Gaza, Hamas, Hostages, Anti-Semitism and all their elephant like offspring.

BTW speaking of so many elephants – while a group of elephants is most commonly called a herd, the preferred term is a parade of elephants, and it does feel at times like the aforementioned topics are parading through our streets and social media feeds if not our every thought while asleep and while awake.

We, human beings, deal with a lot of elephants. It's hard to focus on something else when the urgent, disruptive or ever present is hanging over us like a cloud, casting shadows on everything, coloring our world view. But somehow we manage to. Somehow we find the strength, wisdom, perseverance to live in a world of elephants and not let it become a zoo.

What I want to explore with you tonight as we enter this New Year is how to live in a room with elephants all around and not lose our mind.

I want to look at three elephants, I'll evrn give them names, urgency, disruption and grief. I know it's not dumbo, babar and Horton - but urgency, disruption and grief will have to do.

Specifically all three elephants relate to Israel and the Jewish people right now, but more generally urgency, disruption and grief are elephants we all have experience with

and most importantly they are elephants we have all learned to live in the same room with in spite of the challenges they present.

When Sharon and I were parents of young children, particularly Judah, our first, every thought, conversation and decision we made was in the context of children and parenting. When to eat, sleep, where and how to travel, live, spend, save, work. The elephant in the room was a 15-20 pound teething bundle worry.

I'm honestly not sure how we managed to think of or do anything else but wash, feed and change our child for the first year. The fact that we did and then decided to do it again two more times still befuddles me.

All I remember from those sleepless, stress filled days and nights is the urgency of the baby elephant, I don't think I could even describe the room. The elephant controlled everything, it was driving the bus, we were the passengers pretty much just along for the ride.

We knew in time this phase would end or at least change, we'd get the wheel or at least a say in the direction of things again, eventually and I guess maybe that's actually what got us through. Babies grow up, for better or for worse it's not always going to be like it was in those first months or years and we held on to that hope as we bounced along the bumpy road holding on for dear life.

That certainty was the light at the end of an exhausting tunnel. One of the keys to dealing with the elephant is knowing that it's going to leave the room eventually or at least take a nap.

When someone you love is faced illness, the illness becomes the elephant and it shades and colors everything in your life. All is lived and loved in the context of that diagnosis and treatment, if there is a treatment. The difference between the disruptive elephant of illness and urgent elephant of child rearing is that we don't know when, how or if this elephant will leave the room.

We want the elephant to leave, we pray and plead that it will move on, rambling or parading out the doors with as little distruction as possible, but it's an elephant in a room that is our life, it's gonna make a mess no matter what.

The key to dealing with this elephant, accepting the disruption, understanding that the rules and the situation have changed, for now for sure, and maybe forever. It's an elephant they pretty much go where they want to go, you can't stop them, but you can

learn to live with them, steer them a bit and since the elephant of illness is sitting in your house we can learn from them as well.

The elephant of illness teaches us how fragile things are, but also how resourceful and resilient we can be in the face of that fragility and uncertainty. We've all faced that elephant, some have brought it with them to shul tonight. A constant companion.

You're amazing, somehow you managed to come to shul with a carrying an elephant. It weighs you down, it slows you down, it might be running you down but it hasn't crushed you yet. You are stronger than an elephant, and if not you alone, then you with your tribe of friends, family and supporters. The elephant of illness teaches us we can't do it alone, but we can do it, and we can learn along the way.

The third elephant we all face at some point is the elephant of grief and mourning. If I were to ever write a children's book I think I'd call it "The Elephant at the Shiva Minyan". The elephant of mourning sits heavily by our side, sometimes right on our chest, I don't think it's possible for elephants to sit lightly. Like illness this elephant comes without much or any warning. It leaves footprints on our heart, deep impressions of what its progenitor meant to us. Its presence is not entirely unwelcome, the elephant of grief is also the elephant of memory. You only mourn those you loved. Thank you God for my sadness for it is equal to the love I have for the ones I've lost.

We can't forget, we don't want to forget, but we also know that we can't shlep this elephant with us forever, its heavy, it's a burden, it's exhausting and the person we mourn didn't want us to be an elephant to us.

In time we make a room for the elephant, a room of its own that we can visit but don't have to inhabit every minute of every day. Judaism gives us rituals and permission to enter and to exit the room. And if we find ourselves stuck or lost Judaism even commands us how to act. The elephant of mourning is actually a blessing, because like elephants it helps us never forget.

Three elephants - urgency, disruption, grief.

These are the three elephants facing the Jewish people here and in Israel right now. We are in a crisis, we try to be proactive but we don't control the variables. The forces aligned against us are not entirely rational. They can be childlike, stubborn, self sabotaging and their behavior often illicits the same in us.

There are moments we think we have this under control and then, wham the preverbial diaper explodes and we are out of wet wipes. I'll let you fill in the rest of the analogy.

The thing to remember is that this will end. We learn to navigate through urgency, we figure it out. Sometimes it requires help and a dropping of all of our plans and assumptions but no one wants to live like this forever so we mature and find a way.

In this analogy Israel and the Palestinians are co-parents, disfunctional, divorced and most certainly hating each other and in need of counseling and a restraining order, but co-parents nonetheless. The baby is the land, and they love the land. I am counting on them both realizing that and that they can't keep going like this, it's not good for their own soul or the baby.

I'm moments of urgency, when the diaper explodes, we rise to the occasion, we have no other choice. Ayn Briyah - we have no choice, how we handle the diaper that's up to us, but we gotta handle it.

Life for Jews has been disrupted, we have been shaken and stired from our complacent and apparently false sense of security. Like with illness we have much to learn from this disruption. We must evaluate what really matters, where to put our energy and what to let go of. The serenity prayer always comes as a comfort in times of disruption. "God grant me the serenity to accept the things cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference."

There is actually a great deal that we can do to treat the body and the soul of the Jewish people as it is under assault from forces physical and metaphysical. But we must be wise in how we defend the land and its people. How we combat antisemitism and victim blaming and demonization of Jews, Judaism and Zionism. We need wisdom, we should listen to our doctors, those that truly want to help us heal and we must never give in to dispair or fatalism.

The obituary of the Jewish people has been written so many times before and we are still here. Not by might, and not by power but by ruach, by our spirit, our energy, our perseverance and wisdom have we survived.

What does this disruption have to teach us? How can we heal our body and soul? If not a complete healing then we must learn to live with the disruption, but not be defined by it.

And we are in mourning. The Jewish people were shocked and horrified on 10/7. The grief keeps coming as the terror continues to unfold for us and for the innocents caught in the cross fire. Golda Meyer once said "We can forgive the Arabs for killing our children," she said. "But we can never forgive them for forcing us to kill their children."

As we work though the five stages of grief: denial, bargaining, acceptance, anger, depression we must remember how our tradition celebrates life, how we are commanded to rise from our house of mourning, to re-enter the world. Never to forget the life and lessons of those we lost but to be blessed by them, to be inspired to live the life that they no longer can. To make their memory a blessing.

The death of so many cannot be in vain, it's upon us, as it has been for previous generations of Jews, that as we sow in tears, we must reap in joy.

It's upon us, those Jews alive right now to plant the seeds of this moment so that future generations will know of the sacrifice, and something good and sustainable will grow from this calamity and nurish them. Not in anger or resentment but with profound awe and appreciation for what we did in this moment to insure they reap in joy in the future.

Three elephants, three lessons for dealing with all that sits heavily on our collective psychice as we enter this New Year.

Urgency demands our full attention, creativity and perseverance.

Disruption can be illuminating and instructive. We are wiser and stronger than we think and we are not alone, we have each other.

Grief is a blessing as it gives us purpose, someone and something to live for.

This New Year may be a parade of elephants, but who doesn't love a parade?