

Rebuilding – New Orleans
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Chaye Sarah 5768

Due to the generosity of the Kestenbaum and Tobin families this past week, I had the incredible fortune of transporting a Torah from our congregation to a congregation in New Orleans. It was a small congregation in the small town of Metairie, LA which had lost everything in Hurricane Katrina – all 3000 of their prayer books, humashim and seven sifrei torah. The congregation was unable to pay the rabbi's salary and consequently he was forced to find other employment. However, this congregation, like so many individuals in that region, decided they must rebuild. The first order of business was to find a rabbi and on the day we were bringing them the torah they were installing their new rabbi.

As we traveled to Robert E. Lee Blvd from Lakefront Airport in New Orleans, to the building that once housed Congregation Beth Israel in Metairie, we saw some of the devastation that still exists over two years after Katrina made landfall just outside the city itself. Robert E. Lee Blvd. cuts east / west across New Orleans, over one levee after another, and we could see the places where the levies just gave way. The most remarkable image – an image I'll never forget -- were the big red "X's" on the doors of so many homes. These marks were accompanied by a number. The "X" meant the Army Corp of Engineers had inspected the home and determined whether occupancy was safe. The number at the bottom of the "X" indicated the number of people who had died in that residence. The most bizarre thing is some of the homes had been rebuilt while others had not. It seems so random. A beautiful home right next door to an abandoned home, right next door to a home with a FEMA trailer in front so the family who once lived in the house has somewhere to live while they try and rebuild. It is so haphazard. Some people have left and are never going to return. Some have a plan to come back if property values return. Some are already back to relative normalcy.

The city had a great plan to rebuild the airport and it has done an incredible job of creating incentives for airlines to use their new facility, but there is no real plan for rebuilding. There are entire communities with no direction for rebuilding, but not this small Jewish community who, on this particular Sunday, was out in mass to show their support for this little congregation that could. Jews of every stripe, of every movement were there. As we danced with the Torah I held hands with a Lubavitch rabbi and a Reform rabbi. There is one thing we are really good at as Jews – picking up afterwards. Surviving, living, thriving. As we stood among the devastation of the old synagogue, Jackie Gothard, President of Beth Israel Congregation, told us "It's only a building and it's only a flood-- it isn't anti Semitism, it isn't hatred—it's just nature." Judaism has set out a plan to live with the sadness in our lives, and if it's true of our Jewish communities and our Judaism, it is also true of our own personal lives. If it's true of our physical beings, so able to adapt during the hardest of times, then it's also true of our inner spiritual lives. There is always a plan. We call that plan "halakha," the path of Jewish living.

In this morning's reading we open with the death of Sarah and we see Abraham trying to secure a place of burial for his beloved wife. In a series of almost frenetic interchanges, Abraham seems to put all of her affairs in order so that she may be laid to rest. Abraham's response to Sarah's death is not to curl up in a ball and become a hermit. No, Abraham is a go-getter. He is focused

on the tasks at hand. He is a creator of a nation. He is a builder, he is a doer. At this most difficult of times, Abraham turns to those around him and utters three beautiful words, “*V’ekbira meiti milfanai*,” “let me bury my dead.” (Genesis 23:4) Nothing else matters. I don’t care about cost, I don’t care about anything else, just “let me bury my dead.”...then he breaks down and cries. All responses are normal and appropriate.

The Rabbis respond. “*Mi she’meito mutal lifanav patur mikol mitzvoth ha’amurot ba’torah.*” (T. Brachot 18a) As long as a person’s loved one needs to be buried, everything else is put on hold. Even the mitzvoth. In an ultimate act of ingenuity, the rabbis even suspend the system to preserve the system. All other obligations are put on hold and we realign our priorities. There is one sentence in the Talmud where they transform a single event into a plan, into a way of life. Through halakha, we make both purposeful, meaningful living and the extraordinary possible. The rabbis say to us and to anyone who will experience loss or a moment equally exquisite, “Just emulate Abraham.” Then you can get on with your life just as Abraham does. Abraham marries off his son Isaac and life goes on. The sadness doesn’t paralyze him because he responds to it and continues on and so can we. There is a plan. Abraham does something. He rebuilds. And he starts anew, creates a new life.

Rabbi Soloveichik teaches, “The peak of religious ethical perfection to which Judaism aspires is man as creator. When God created the world, He provided the opportunity for the work of His hands – man – to participate in His creation. The Creator as it were, impaired reality in order that mortal man could repair its flaws and perfect it. (Halakhik Man p. 101) Life challenges us to create. In the difficulty and in the darkness God asks for our input. God demands that we solve the dilemma. Halakha is a creative enterprise and when the rabbis read the story of Abraham, they react creatively, even in the face of death. When others would throw up their hands in despair and surrender to the moment, the rabbis develop an infrastructure for living. So, we continue but more than continue we thrive and become holy.

Soloveichik continues, “If man wishes to attain the rank of holiness, he must become a creator of worlds. If man never creates, never brings into being anything new, anything original, then he cannot be holy unto his God. That passive type who is derelict in fulfilling his task of creation cannot become holy.” (p. 108) When we create, we innovate, when we put plans into action we become holy. Jewish law helps us to build our lives with a plan and then execute. Jewish law is innovative and vibrant and that is exactly what our rabbis have done throughout the centuries. Time and time again, our sages, our rabbis have taken the principles from the Torah and applied them to their circumstance, and by doing so, they have allowed halakha to evolve. That is the creative genius of the rabbis. That is the force that has kept us alive. That is the power that has kept Judaism relevant. For rabbis, the struggle is to remain loyal to our tradition while at the same time progressive. The evolution of Jewish law is a struggle for the very survival of a system in which we have placed our faith, our hopes our dreams.

That is why the talmud teaches that there will come a time when “even what a veteran student will one day set forth before his teacher what was already said to Moses at Sinai. (B. Megillah 19b) Because the system requires us to discover what we believe to be there all along. Like the scientist who uncovers a genetic code, the rabbis continue to learn and discover. To find what

was there but we didn't know it. Like medicine which relies on discovery, so too does Jewish living.

On Sunday we went to the installation of the Rabbi Uri Topolovsky as the new rabbi of Beth Israel congregation and to bring them a torah. And we turned to their new rabbi and we said we entrust our torah to you, we entrust torah to you. And then we sat down to listen as a Reform rabbi offered torah and a Lubavitch rabbi offered torah and an Orthodox rabbi offered torah. And speech after speech, not by design but by discovery each rabbi spoke not of the destruction nor of the analogy to the flood of Noah though that seemed like the obvious parallel, no, they spoke of creation. They spoke of the new congregation that would emerge under the guidance and leadership of this young caring rabbi. They spoke of light that dispels the darkness and they spoke of articulating a vision.

On Sunday we watched as a rabbi was installed as leader of a community and we brought him a torah. A rabbi is installed and we brought him the tools and we encouraged him to look inside for a plan. Torah, halakha is the plan and we are finding everyday new ways to apply its eternal message. As Danny Siegel writes in our siddur, I offer the following prayer.

May your eyes sparkle with the light of Torah,
And your ears hear the music of its words.

May the space between each letter of the scrolls,
Bring warmth and comfort to your soul.

May the syllables draw holiness from your heart,
And may this holiness be gentle and soothing to you and all of God's creatures.

May your study be passionate, and meaning bear more meanings
Until life arrays itself to you as a dazzling wedding feast.

And may your conversations, even of the commonplace,
Be a blessing to all who listen to your words and see Torah glowing in your face.