



UNLIKE ANY OTHER YEAR IN OUR LIVES

A reflection for the High Holidays

BY RABBI SUZANNE OFFIT

The New Year is nearly upon us, and in this past year, our world has been unimaginably transformed by a global pandemic, making it unlike any other year in our lives.

COVID-19 has travelled from person to person to every corner of the globe, making it abundantly clear what we have always believed—that every human being on earth is linked to every other.

As a rabbi and a hospital palliative care chaplain, I look to some of the profound lessons I have learned in my training and in my role accompanying patients and families dealing with serious illness. A common wisdom of chaplaincy is “Don’t just do something. Stand there!” This inverted spin on a familiar call to action was an early and defining teaching in my training many years ago. As chaplains, we don’t jump to “fix” problems; rather, we sit... listen... witness... accompany... and learn. “Be curious and compassionate,” I instruct my own students today.

This wisdom has echoed in my ears these past months, as I have virtually sat at the bedsides of COVID patients and their families, listening to their fears and accompanying their loved ones on their sad and painful journeys.

In the Book of Job, the Jewish emblem of suffering, which recounts one man’s experience grappling with immeasurable losses of family and fortune, we learn that accusations and rationalizations are neither helpful nor useful. Witnessing the story and accompanying those in dark places: this is the best we can provide in that moment. “You are not alone” is the first remedy for those in the terrifying abyss of suffering.

I see you. I hear you.

Do not avert your eyes, Jewish tradition teaches us. Do not stand idly by the suffering of your neighbor. We are obligated to see and feel and inhabit those spaces of discomfort and sadness, even spaces of destruction and disgrace. We are obligated to bear witness.

In my work as an American Jewish World Service Board member, I often use these lessons when I visit our grantees, hear their stories and see them in their world. In February of this year, I traveled with AJWS to India—just weeks before we realized we were in the midst of a deadly pandemic. I went on this journey with a curious mind and desire to be close to and touch the lives of the people we support. What I found there, as I do at the bedsides of the people I care for, was profound human connection—that sacred bridge that unites all of us in our universal desire for love, health and opportunity.

One day, as I looked out the window of my taxi on a crowded Delhi avenue, I saw a family overflowing out of a tuk tuk—a small motorcycle-driven cart. My closed window was the only thing that both separated and connected us. I looked first deep into the dark, curious eyes of the young boy balanced on his father’s thigh angled outside the vehicle and over the passing pavement. Then I saw his brothers, his sisters and his mother, too. “How can so many people fit safely in that small space?” I thought in that moment, and throughout my AJWS travels in India. I imagined that little boy might be thinking, “Why is that woman

all alone in that big car?" The girls were draped in beautiful, colorful, flowing fabrics in contrast to my fitted white blouse. The father stayed focused on the traffic ahead with that universal look of concern and anticipation.

Inches apart. Worlds apart.

Who knew then that a few short weeks later, our fates would connect us again during a global pandemic? Soon, that family and my family would be caught in the twisting, isolating, anxiety-producing web of lack—lacking knowledge, lacking certainty, lacking control. I am aware that this family, unlike mine, may now also be enduring this crisis without many of the concrete, basic necessities for survival: food, housing, clean drinking water, the protections of hygiene and medicine. And yet, in many ways our experiences of fear and the threat of disease are exactly the same. This family and I—all of us—are connected by this pandemic.

This year, even those of us used to living in a place of comfort, strength and security have had a front-row view of the horrors of sickness and suffering. This year, many Americans are experiencing for the first time in their lives some of the same struggles and insecurities faced by the communities AJWS supports in 19 countries around the world. This global pandemic has revealed the deep dark truths of human suffering. In plain sight, we easily see the powerful human forces that strip away or deny dignities to millions of others throughout the world.

No matter where we live or who we are, we are surrounded by uncertainty, fear and pain. The question now at the start of the New Year is, how can we respond? How can we make a path into tomorrow that is better than today?

As we all commit to action in the New Year, my hope is that these experiences may make us more compassionate and more open-hearted in our shared experiences in a world with COVID. As more Americans than ever face their own mortality and the mortality of loved ones, let that help us grow our muscles of empathy and generosity.

It is that reaching out to connect with another soul that enables us to grow beyond our own worries and to find meaning and purpose in our days. It is that stepping into a relationship with that suffering soul that helps us find our own expansive hope and serves to unwind the strictures that keep us focused ever inward and paralyzed with despair.

My support of AJWS reminds me that extending my own heart and hand with compassion to my fellow human beings does, indeed, break the strictures and structures of despair. And sometimes, compassion requires action. AJWS is making a difference by sending life-saving aid to more than 450 grassroots organizations around the world so they can protect their communities from COVID and fight human rights abuses that are arising during this crisis. We see and hear those in crisis, and they are not alone.

As we enter the New Year, the world has changed. Our lives have changed. And yet, the AJWS mission has not changed. AJWS is still dedicated, motivated and focused more than ever on global inequities in the 19 countries where we work. AJWS in 5781 must be and will be stronger than ever.

It all begins with human connection: In India, before the family on the tuk tuk and I in my car were separated by traffic and destination on that crowded Delhi avenue, I looked again into that young boy's eyes and smiled at him with all my heart. He smiled back at me.

My blessing for the New Year is that each of us—separated in our own homes and by the divides of geography, identity and circumstance—may come together in compassion and action to survive this crisis and create together a healthier, more just and equitable world.



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