

Yom Kippur Morning Derasha 5782 Jumping Worms

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Did you know about jumping worms invading Southbury? First, a caveat. In my family the last year was one of stress and loss on multiple fronts – death, illness, disappointment and uncertainty. Then came the jumping worms. These slimy creatures, sometimes referred to amongst other designations as “crazy worms” or “snake worms” are a real plague. They pillage nutrients and are responsible for deforestation in Wisconsin, Minnesota and other states. Admittedly, when the history of these years is written it probably won't commence: “Then came the jumping worms.” But here in Southbury they destroyed the soil in my wife Ellen's garden. We suspect they were stowaways on a pre-cut, pre-bundled package of straw from Maine Ellen had purchased to blanket her garlic. They hatched, embedded themselves into the earth, devoured the compost and stunted her crops. Check the internet or *The New York Times* (though not right now). There's no simple remedy for jumping worms. Amidst a parade of bad news this last straw, actually, a tiny cocoon hitchhiking on a piece of straw, exasperated my spouse. She lamented: “now this – it's almost biblical.”

Apparently, Ellen's been paying attention to the readings of Yom Kippur. This afternoon's *haftarah* features a worm destroying the plant protecting Jonah, to his deep sorrow. So too, there's always the backdrop of the successive plagues in Egypt. We also read in the Bible how when facing unremitting adversity Job's wife wanted to pack it in, to curse God and die. In contrast Ellen persevered. Piece by piece her entire garden was banished, and layers of soil excavated and removed. But for the very reasons its predecessor had been established – health, time in the sun, the joy of nurturance, she made the decision to try again. Ellen painstakingly designed her new one on graph paper, and scoured the internet for discount prices on acceptable chicken wire, ground cloth and raised beds. During the late spring we erected this new *Gan Ellen*, with an assist from our visiting daughters Ariel and Mia, and from yours truly.

The *Song of Songs* exults: “My beloved is gone down to the garden.” Back in business the yield this summer has been good, albeit no bumper crop. There's been no sightings of jumping worms inside the garden. But our reconnaissance has spotted them further away, so we may just be playing for time, its own lesson.

As with so many afflictions it could have been worse. It's like when anticipating losing power during Henri I ran the tap to fill our large bathtub. While watching the water flow down I started to brood over our decision not to buy a generator. Scolding myself I realized I should be grateful for having a bathtub and water to fill it. There's a joke about the defendant who's just been sentenced by a judge. He asks his lawyer, “What happens now?” The lawyer tells him, “You go to jail.” The guy inquires: “And you?” The lawyer responds: “I go to lunch.”

Abandonment, discomfort, isolation: life offers no shortage of negative outcomes. In this litany jumping worms might symbolize life's unexpected blows. They remind us of unforeseen, lurking danger, unintended consequences and unanticipated pathogens; how stability can change in a

heartbeat. The Yiddish proverb summarizes our fate: “No one gets off this earth without *tzuris*, without troubles.” We all know anxiety and heartbreak, each in their kind. As your Rabbi I know how many here are truly hurting. There is pain and sorrow. So how might cope with our *tzuris*? Will, as sung today, “Return, prayer and *tzedakah*” really temper our harsh decrees?

Jews, of course, have always wrestled over what to do and what it all means. Long before Hamlet the Talmud tells us of a debate nearly 2,000 years ago. *The School of Shammai argued: It would have been better for humans not to exist. The School of Hillel countered: It’s better for humans to exist than not to. After two-and-a-half years they put the point to a vote. They decided it would have been better for humans not to exist, but since we do, each should examine one’s actions. (Eruvin 13b)*

Is life worth it? One side thinks God made a mistake. The School of Shammai’s position is that we suffer and we inflict far more pain than healing upon others and this world. They have a point. But the school of Hillel, by contrast, focuses on our capacity to love and the good we do; the comfort we offer and the knowledge we impart. They say ‘better to be than not to be.’ The compromise reached appears on the surface to favor Shammai, “It would have been better for humans not to exist.” But Hillel gets the last word and tempers the pessimism. Since we do exist each should examine one’s actions. That is, we possess the capacity to improve ourselves and our surroundings. We live in a world where hope is not lost.

It’s like those jumping worms. Setbacks abound and we can’t magically pray them away; they also exist within an unknowable Divine scheme. Yet however exasperated or exhausted, we can improve our coping skills, resources and equilibrium. Today we are asked to do so utilizing a venerable formula.

It’s good advice. Research demonstrates that spirituality, generosity and empathy advance good health. Through heightened self-awareness and action we can make the most of the gift of life bequeathed to us. And notice how Judaism doesn’t dismiss the cascade of woes we experience, or the cache of jumping worms. Judaism validates our stress and suffering, while offering a larger context, inviting us to focus or refocus on what matters most: the ways that notwithstanding life’s obstacles we might give and engender blessing.

Consider Jewish history. No group ever saw more cruelty than Holocaust survivors. Yet rather than forsaking this world they had families and sought to rebuild it; rather than ducking their identities as Jews they stayed committed. Why? My teacher Dr. Eugene Borowitz, of blessed memory, points us towards an answer. He wrote that our intuitive sense that *life ought to be better* induces us into making it better. He acknowledged that we may believe little, but particularly after the Holocaust we believe more than that the world is empty of values. The *Shoah* reminds us that how we lead our lives is of ultimate significance.

In leading our lives it’s recommended – at least from this *Bima!* – that we attend services and address God. Not that God needs prayer – the *Kaddish* explains that God is beyond anything we might say. Instead, it’s about our articulating and reinforcing messages about God: that God is

not a person or thing, God's a being and process. God is invisible to the eye, yet can be heard in the heart. Prayer enables us to direct our thoughts past ourselves, past hubris and towards eternity. Recall that Shammai-Hillel vote warning us about human behavior. Prayer trains our sights to marvel at the universe's existence, and fosters an awareness in us of an interconnectedness transcending our own species. Prayer can sensitize us and strengthen us.

Jewish prayer centers on a partnership with *Adonai*. In this afternoon's *haftarah* Jonah, (that other Jew whose plant was plagued by a worm and died) tellingly describes himself as "*Ivri anochi, v'et Adonai... ani yarei.*" "I am a Hebrew, I worship *Adonai*." Let me unpack this. The word "*Ivri/Hebrew*" translates as one who traversed a boundary and discovered Israel's God. Abraham, our founder, was the first *Ivri*. *Adonai* is the Torah's name for God as the force of freedom, and the source of compassion and forgiveness. Our various blessings begin: *Baruch Atah Adonai*, Blessed are You, *Adonai* to highlight that very sense of the sacred. So when Jonah says "I'm a hebrew, I worship *Adonai*" he's revealing a lot about himself. He's telling us he siding himself within a cadre avowing God wants people to be free, and to have opportunities for growth. That's significant. Other systems accept human rights and human potential as transitory man-made options that might be bestowed or withdrawn at the whim of another. But Jonah's says God implants within each of us a unique consciousness, with liberty and choice being inherent, sacred God-given rights. Later we'll read how Jonah learns that our circumstances may vary, but we are no accident. The Holy One didn't make a mistake in creating us since through examining our deeds we can make life better.

There's another well-known compromise between Hillel and Shammai, this one over the ritual of how to affix a *mezuzah*. One said vertical, the other horizontal. They agreed to hanging it on an angle facing in. The lesson: let us position ourselves to lean-in to faith.

Perhaps you're here on Yom Kippur for that very purpose, to piously follow the teaching of this morning's Torah reading and "choose life" by "loving *Adonai*"? Or perhaps you're here out of tradition or habit, or to support other family members. Another old joke: Cohen goes to *shul* to talk to God. Schwartz goes to talk to Cohen. Here there are no litmus tests. Whatever your motive I thank you for attending, and for supporting this congregation and its mission. In a tough world and a time of uncertainty and alienation the synagogue does something extraordinary and much needed: we provide a potential to affirm morals and solidarity and for those who wish to stretch out our arms and return to God, like a child to her mother.

Will it make us feel better? Unfairness is a mysterious part of the system. Still, rather than succumbing to despair we might yet find reason to trust in the Source of life, and there gain solace or uplift and meaning. A new Reform prayerbook insightfully quotes the playwright Bertolt Brecht:

*In the dark times,
Will there also be singing?
Yes, there will also be singing
About the dark times.*

All of our narratives have dark times and overwhelming circumstances. Today may we raise our voices to sing about how in repairing fractured worlds, we determine to be, and what not to be.

“And God put the human in the garden, to till it and tend it.” Says the Torah. Thanks to Ellen, the girls, yours truly and a landscaper with a backhoe, here in Southbury we successfully fought back a jumping worm invasion within a small plot of land. Or so we think. At least for now. Summoning and sharing with others your own examples of making life better, I pray we might all be inspired to remediate the perils stalking us – as best we can – and avow blessing within the process. Psalm 90 concludes with a plea for God to “Establish the work of our hands that it may long endure.” Worms and all, may the gardens we construct – or at least lend a hand to help to build – be sustained and even flourish as testimonies to resilience, faith and connection.

Cain yehi Ratzon. Be this God’s will.