

Seeds of Strength

In 1928, Edna St. Vincent Millay, a famous lyrical poet, wrote a poem entitled Dirge without Music. On the heels of a multi-year illness, she crafted the following:

I am not resigned to the shutting away of loving hearts in the hard ground. So it is, and so it will be, for so it has been, time out of mind:

“Into the darkness they go, the wise and the lovely.

Crowned With lilies and with laurel they go...I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.”

Today, I say the same. In the midst of a world shocked by a global pandemic, I do not approve. I am not resigned.

I am not resigned:

To the deaths- thousands of lives lost, lights extinguished

I am not resigned

To the fear- afraid of others, afraid of their actions, afraid for our families and for ourselves

I am not resigned

To the unattainable standards set- unable to succeed at work, while balancing life at home and feeling as if we are incapable of succeeding there as well

I am not resigned

To the absences - people we love - who we long to be with, to hug, to laugh with, to comfort. In the face of our own mortality, losing time with them

I am not resigned

To the endless days - empty and unstructured time looming before us - one day after another

I am not resigned

To the dehumanization of others - each person matters, - each life matters - as our own tradition teaches, the life of one person is equal to the entire world.

I am not resigned

To the uncertainty- the endless questions, what is best for me? What is best for my family? Can I go to the store? Can I sit at a restaurant, and if so, outside or inside? Should my kids be in school?

Questions with no clear answers, without a black or white, right or wrong responses

I am not resigned. And I do not approve.

I know I am not alone in feeling this way.

Where does this hurt go? This anger? This loss? This fear? This exhaustion? This boredom? We cannot just push it down, ignoring it, hoping it will go away. For it will not, it cannot. It only festers and boils within. Instead, I believe we must acknowledge it...all of it, saying out loud our list of grievances.

In the next few moments, I invite you to do just that with me. We will read a list of the emotions that we have experienced and continue to experience as we live through this pandemic: We will use the royal we, as we do throughout our commemoration of the high holy days, leaving no person alone with their feelings. We share our feelings, some are personal, some relate to our neighbors more than to us. But, together we take ownership of this litany, an alphabet of our emotions, an illustration of our lives during the Covid epidemic.

We are Afraid

We are Baffled

We are Cautious

We are Distanced from others

We are Engaging in new ways

We are Fatigued

We are Generous

We feel Helpless
We feel Ignored
We feel Jostled between competing responsibilities
We feel Kinships with those we may never have anticipated
We are Lonely
We are Masked
We are in Need
We are Overwhelmed
We feel Paranoid
We are Quiet
We are Reflecting
We are Screaming at the top of our lungs
We are Trying our best
We are Uncertain
We are Visiting at a distance of 6 feet
We feel as if we are Wasting our time here on earth
We are Xoompin (going over bumps)
We are Yearning for a sense of normalcy
We are Zooming

I pause and invite you to add any unspoken emotions that you carry with you today that you have carried with you throughout these last few months.

We hold onto those ups and downs, those struggles and triumphs, these emotions that wash over us. They are a part of this moment. They are essential markers of this time.

And, yet, we are not abandoned emoting and distressed. For our tradition guides us on another path.

There is a fascinating passage that occurs in our Torah directly after God shared the commandments with the people. God finishes up the grand announcement and remarks in what seems an off handed way, ‘You have stayed long enough at this mountain ...’” (Deut. 1:6).

Interesting, it is this very statement that Moses chooses to emphasize in his retelling in the book of Deuteronomy of what happened at Mt Sinai. Of all the choices that could have been made, why did Moses choose to use this quote of God’s? And why did God say it in the first place?

We could imagine Moses referring to a moment where God reminded the people to listen up, to pay attention, to embrace all that they had been given. But that is not what Moses chooses in this passage. So, we come back to our question, why does Moses reference God's quote of "you have stayed long enough." That question seems to warrant another: what is God referring to at this moment? God speaks of Mount Sinai and revelation. At the end of revelation, once the people have received the commandments, God tells them it is time to move on. They have listened, they have been commanded, now they must advance to something else. In short, the words have been spoken, the people have heard enough, go forward. And yet, God is not saying, of course, forget what you have listened to here. Instead, God is saying the path forward is yours. I have provided what I can, now it is up to you to decide what to bring along and what to leave behind. The declaration may come from God. But the decision of what to carry forward is solely the people's.

What do they hold onto and what do they let go of? The same question can be asked of us, right now, as we wander this desert. What do we hold on to and what do we let go of?

Do we carry forward the sadness, felt by us, felt by our neighbors, felt by individuals all over the world, knowing our appreciation of joy in the future will be that much stronger? Having experienced this low point, realizing the sweet in our lives feels all the sweeter.

Do we grasp onto the uncertainty, and with trepidation allow ourselves for once to understand that we are not in control of everything, instead letting go maybe just a little, allowing the world to go on as it does?

Do we cling to the moments of selflessness and compassion, individuals willing to risk their own lives, or a simple gesture of checking in on another human being or a worker choosing to show

up each day for her job so others can benefit; these moments guiding us to live our lives with more empathy and generosity?

Do we embrace some boredom understanding for once that business may lead to distraction, but not fulfillment? The answers may vary, the answers should vary from one of us to another. And that is what makes them remarkable as well.

A story is told about a woman who one day finds herself lost and wandering in the desert. She is quite thirsty and getting more so by the moment. She feels her stomach grumble and her body aches for sleep. She looks to the left and to the right, in front of her and back, and all she sees is sand. So she does the only thing she can do at that moment. She continues to walk. Praying she will find a destination. Slowly, she begins to notice something just ahead of her. She moves faster and faster, seeing some water, hoping it is not just a mirage. And then she arrives at the most beautiful oasis she has ever seen. A tree with long branches for shade, hangs over a small, but beautiful pond. The woman sits beneath the tree, lavishing in the shade, drinking of the water and eating the fruits of the tree. She sits there for a while, sleeps a little and realizes, eventually, she must move on, must find her way out the desert. So she gathers a few branches if she needs to make a fire, collects some extra fruit and fills an empty bottle with water. She takes a few steps, gazing out at the long way ahead and realizes that she longs to take more from this place, this rejuvenating sanctuary, than just something to sustain her survival. From one of the fruits she has eaten, she gathers seeds. Seeds she will spread when she arrives at her destination, when she has made it out of the desert, trees to grow and nourish her and others for years to come, a token that she will carry with her, a reminder of the good, helping her get through the most difficult times, to a better road ahead.

We find ourselves this year, on this holy day, walking through our own desert. Unsure of the path we travel, unable to see the end in sight. We look to the left, we look to the right, we look in front and in back of us, and it feels as if endless sand stretches before us as well. The journey of a pandemic seems long and arduous, painful and overwhelming, an endless maze before us. And we may wonder, where is our oasis?

In her wanderings, the woman in the desert found sustenance and protection and relief. She found HER oasis. Maybe our oasis is not what we are expecting at all. Maybe our break in the desert, our shelter from the hot rays of the sun, is this moment, these days of awe, this opportunity to reflect and consider what is most important to us; what matters, truly matters, in our lives. Not in spite of the fear, in spite of the death, the anger, the uncertainty, but because of it.

As the woman in the desert stepped back into the scorching sunlight, she brought seeds along with her to plant, so they could grow and sustain her and others. Let these reflections, these nuggets of wisdom we find for ourselves uncovering during these days of awe, be our seeds. Seeds of joy from the pain we carry. Seeds of compassion from the kindness we witness. Seeds of ceding control, some level of letting go. Seeds of finding fulfillment not in constant motion, but in sitting still and understanding what matters most in our lives.

We do not know what tomorrow will bring, we cannot know. The Covid epidemic has only made that reality more clear. And so, we embrace what we can, we choose what we can. What do we carry forward? I invite each of you in the coming days to reflect on this very question. For if we leave this period in our lives, the era of Covid, this desert, without wondering what we choose to learn, to grow from, to embrace, how much more truly will be lost, how much more truly will be for naught? May we sit in the shade of our oasis, knowing that our journey in the sun will

continue, this epidemic is not over, however also knowing that the seeds which we discover in the coming days can carry, strengthen and sustain us, guide us and uplift us, in the midst of the desert and beyond.

Shana Tova!