**Letting Go of Anger**

Let’s just get it out of the way: this is not how we expected to be celebrating Rosh Hashanah this year. The light at the end of the tunnel turned out to be the headlight of an oncoming train. We thought the pandemic would be over by now, and things would be back to normal. We were wrong.

I imagine that, like me, many of you have felt particularly out of balance this summer, as a very hopeful spring with an end in sight turned into a science lesson on virus variants and a reminder that we are not as in control of things as we usually believe. We are hopeful, confused, frustrated, sad and angry, sometimes in surprising combinations. I don’t believe that I have ever in my life experienced, for such an extended period of time, these continuous, sometimes daily changes in my emotions. It took me a while to understand that everything I was feeling was related to grief. It is grief over the deaths we have suffered, to be sure. And it is also grief for the many other losses we have endured over the past eighteen months, both tangible and intangible.

You are likely familiar with the 5 stages of grief originally outlined by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. She said that in grief we pass through denial and isolation, then anger, bargaining, depression, and finally, acceptance. We each experience these stages in different ways, for different lengths of time. We may take two steps forward and one backward. Some of us skip a stage entirely. A few hover at one stage, usually either anger or depression, for a long time and those are very difficult places to be. But over my 34 years as a rabbi, I’ve seen that this truly is the arc of emotions through which grieving takes us. It took me a while to figure it out, but I finally understand that the out of balance feelings I’ve had this summer, and really over the past year and a half are all part of a protracted grieving process. And, because the losses are ongoing, it is a process that involves moving both forward and backward.

I certainly started out in denial about the pandemic. It took me longer than it should have to understand the magnitude of what was happening. And once we shut down, we quite literally moved into isolation. Some of us were alone in our homes; some were with spouses; others surrounded by family. Yet we still felt isolated, disconnected from one another, and from our regular lives.

The isolation was eased somewhat by the technology we are fortunate to have, and even more by the outreach of so many within our congregational family. If we ever questioned the importance of being part of a community, this pandemic has erased all doubts. Being part of the Temple family has been one of the bright spots in a dark time.

For me, the denial and isolation quickly gave way to anger at the situation we were in. Anger that my kids’ all had to leave wonderful experiences and come home, two from college and one from her long-awaited senior class trip to Israel. I was angry that my daughter had no prom and that my son’s freshman year at college was cut short. I was angry that we couldn’t be together as a congregation. I was angry that so many rabbis would not go to the cemetery leaving families in need. Most of all, I was angry at the devastation: lives lost, jobs lost, medical workers stretched to the breaking point.

I stayed angry for a long time. I didn’t think I had gotten to the depression stage; I certainly didn’t feel particularly sad, except when I thought of what had been lost. But I did begin to find it difficult to get motivated each day, and looking back now I understand that this is one of the symptoms of depression.

I definitely did not get to the fourth stage -bargaining. You can’t bargain with a virus. And though I prayed – a lot – this doesn’t feel like something over which you can hondle with God.

And now, though I have of course accepted the fact that we are in a pandemic that will last longer than most of us expected, I find, however, that this acceptance has not given me the sense of peace that it usually provides to one who is grieving. In fact, as the arc of the pandemic itself has gone backward, I have experienced loss all over again, and I find myself back in the early stages of grieving once more.

Lately I find myself once again angry a lot. I am angry because we were far along the road to being done with this and now, we aren’t. I am angry because it seems that the reason we aren’t is that there is so much vaccine hesitation in this country. And I’m angry at the people who are hesitant. We’re told that the reason variants like Delta get a foothold is because there are not enough of us vaccinated, so it seems clear that it’s the fault of the unvaccinated that we are all sitting here spread out, still wearing masks. And so when my ability to go to restaurants and on vacation is suddenly curtailed again I look for someone to blame.

[I know that there are people who are legitimately hesitant. For example, there are large swaths of the African-American community who have good reason not to trust the US medical establishment. And there are folks who have underlying conditions that make the choice of vaccination less clear. These are not the people with whom I’m angry.

And I have to tell you, I am angry at myself for being angry. It’s true that my reaction to the vaccine hesitant is in keeping with human nature. When something goes wrong in our lives our first reaction is often to look to apportion blame, whether to ourselves, more likely to someone else, or even to God. Someone’s got to be responsible.

But it isn’t pretty, this desire to apportion blame. There is sometimes a righteous satisfaction to it especially if we’re not blaming ourselves, but it isn’t pretty, especially when it is accompanied by a visceral anger accompanied by dislike and sometimes even bordering on hatred. I know only one thing about “those people,” that they are vaccine hesitant, and I discover myself not only being angry, but strongly disliking them. This is the making of a stereotype, a caricature, in which we allow one trait - sometimes real but sometimes imagined - to be all that we use to make a judgment about a person or a group. It’s a dangerous path to go down. We have seen stereotypes and caricatures used against us. It leads us to think in black-and-white without shades of gray, without nuance.

One of the few positives of this pandemic has been long family dinners with even longer conversations. A few weeks ago, we were discussing my visceral reaction to the vaccine hesitant over dinner, when my son said, “I think that for many of the anti-vaxxers it’s not really their fault that they feel this way. They are victims too; victims of the misinformation that they are being fed by their leaders, by news organizations and by the Internet. That’s who we should be mad at.”

I wasn’t about to let go of my righteous anger that quickly. The conversation went on to include the question of personal responsibility, of thinking for yourself and not accepting everything someone says at face value. But still he insisted that if you haven’t been taught how to think for yourself and if you have trust in your leaders - which is what we would all like to be able to do - and if you pick a news source specifically because you already generally agree with what it says, as most of us do, how can you be blamed for coming to what others might consider to be the wrong decision?

I’ve been thinking about that conversation a lot over the past couple of weeks. I’m still angry, and I’m not ready to absolve folks who have a choice, and make a decision that negatively impacts the lives of so many others. And yet…

And yet, my son’s words do ring true. I can be unhappy with a decision someone has made without also automatically disliking them. We do it all the time with people we know. Perhaps we ought to extend that courtesy to those we know very little about. I can be angry at the result of someone’s choice without categorizing them, stereotyping them. That is the path out of the polarization in our society that the pandemic has only deepened.

We come to the High Holydays hoping -expecting - to be judged not on the basis of one thing we have or have not done in our lives this year. We hope – we expect – that the judgement will take into account everything about who we are, about the actions we’ve taken and the decisions we’ve made. If we are so presumptuous as to try to judge others – and most of us are so presumptuous – should we not at least do our best to uphold the same standard?

I know that this is easy to say, and much harder to do, and frankly, tonight I am preaching to myself at least as much as I am speaking to you. I want to let go of the anger because I don’t like how it feels, nor where it takes me, and also because in this case it is extraordinarily useless in effecting change. My anger will not convince anyone to change their decision, and it doesn’t put me in the frame of mind to even have the conversation. So how do I – how do we – let go of anger and judgement that leads to dislike, not just on this issue, but more broadly? How do we learn to stop categorizing people and deciding how we feel about them based on that single category? One way is to constantly remind ourselves that all people are complex, nuanced beings who cannot be reduced to one issue, one action, one decision.

As a parable for that idea, I’d like to leave you tonight with an adapted version of a story I learned and shared many years ago. I learned it from M. Scott Peck, though he did not write it, and has no idea who did. It’s called “The Rabbi’s Gift.”

The story is told of a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Once a great order, over the years all its branch houses had closed, and it had become decimated to the extent that there were only five monks left in the decaying mother house: The Abbott and four others, all over 70 in age. Clearly it was a dying order. In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a Rabbi from a nearby town used each year for prayer and contemplation. As the Abbot agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to him one year to ask the Rabbi if by some possible chance he could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

The Rabbi welcomed the Abbott into his hut. But when the Abbott explained the purpose of his visit, the Rabbi could only commiserate with him. “I know how it is,” he explained. “The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore.” So, the old Abbott and the old Rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and quietly spoke of deep things. The time came when the Abbott had to leave. They embraced each other.

“It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years,” the Abbott said, “but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?” “No, I am sorry,” the Rabbi responded. “I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you.” When the Abbott return to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, “well, what did the Rabbi say?” “He couldn’t help,” the Abbott answered. “We just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving - it was something cryptic - was that the Messiah is one of us. I don’t know what he meant.”

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the Rabbi’s words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that’s the case, which one? Do you suppose he meant the Abbott? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant father Abbott. He has been our leader for more than a generation.

On the other hand, he might have meant brother Thomas. Thomas is certainly a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Though he does have some very dark moods.

Certainly, he could not have meant brother Elred! Elred gets so angry at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people’s sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the Rabbi did mean brother Elred.

But surely not brother Philip. Philip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Philip is the Messiah.

Of course, the Rabbi didn’t mean me. He couldn’t possibly have meant me. I’m just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? Oh God, not me. I couldn’t be that worthy, could I?

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might he the Messiah. And on the off, off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect. Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed this aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends. Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. So, within a few years the monastery once again became a thriving order and, thanks to the Rabbi’s gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.

My friends, you and I are each much more than we seem. And so is every other person out there. May we hold that message close to our hearts. May we resist the urge to see others as caricatures based on one trait or one idea. May we disagree without dislike. May we move past anger to conversation, and then perhaps to reconciliation. And may the New Year 5782 be one of reopening and reunion, of respect and renewal, and this year, especially, one of health and of peace.