

*Building Our Spiritual Muscles Through Emunah
to Embrace the Brokenness of Our World
Rabbi Claudia Kreiman
Kol Nidre 5783*

As some of you might recall, in December 2019, we hosted an event here at TBZ in honor of Hanukkah and the installation of new solar panels on our rooftop.

Our communal gathering featured a conversation between two TBZ members: Rabbi Ebn Leader (my spouse) and environmental lawyer and current Board member, Mark Barnett.

In my recollection of the discussion, Ebn took a rather pessimistic viewpoint, speaking about the need to embrace the emerging catastrophe of the climate crisis and prepare for mass upheaval and destruction. In his remarks, he emphasized the need to strengthen ourselves spiritually to cope with great instability and loss.

Mark, on the other hand, spoke much more optimistically about various opportunities before us to reverse and/or ameliorate the damage and move in a more sustainable direction. He emphasized new developments in green tech which were a reason to be hopeful for the future.

At the time, I resonated much more with Mark's position (which of course, I told Ebn more than once!). I felt that we had to continue to fight for widespread change and maintain a spirit of optimism.

This past year, however, something changed in me. As I sat to write my sermons for these High Holy Days, I had a very hard time, calling forth hope and trust. I just couldn't summon my usual "can do" attitude, my usual "everything is going to be alright".

In living through the many catastrophes of the past year, through the many moments of desperation and fear, injustice and war, growing hatred and repeated tragedy, I felt

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maybe it is time to embrace the brokenness of the world, and focus our energy in strengthening our inner spiritual muscles to live in a world that will forever be broken; a world that is impossible to fix.

I know this is not what you want to hear from me today. But perhaps there is another way to frame this: How can we walk through a world that continues to disappoint us, a world that we thought could be better but it isn't? A world that is too far from what we imagine and hoped? A world that keeps breaking our hearts.

How can we balance spiritual longing with humble acceptance?

It feels hard to name all the pain and sorrow we have endured this past year, but I know we must:

When Russia invaded Ukraine in early 2022, I watched with horror as hospitals, schools, and homes were reduced to rubble; I watched as millions of people, mostly women and children, fled the violence in frigid temperatures — often without food or water and without knowing where they would sleep at night. I thought to myself, **“How could this be happening?”**

When the news broke about the shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, I couldn't stop thinking of the day of the Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting, ten years before. **I held my head and, in tears, prayed asking how was this even possible?**

When the Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade, I kept thinking, “How is it possible to dismantle almost 50 years of rights and progress?” As my friend Dr. Judith Rosenbaum wrote: “We were born in 1973, the same year the Supreme Court decided Roe v. Wade. We are the first generation of American women for whom abortion has always been explicitly legal. The stories of back-alley abortions, of women blindfolded and assaulted by purported doctors, of deaths by self-induced abortion, of abortion speak outs and arrests — these were history, our mothers' activism, before our time”.¹

¹ <https://www.wbur.org/cognoscenti/2022/06/27/abortion-supreme-court-decision-judith-rosenbaum>

How come we are returning to such a dangerous time?

Over the last several months, I have woken up so many mornings with an immediate and profound sense of sadness, especially for my children and so many other young people growing up in this time of layered tragedy.

And yet... I continue to wonder if there might be a way (or ways) for us to walk a middle path between quietism and activism. I keep holding fiercely on the belief that we don't give up. So, how do we hold both? How do we hold the acceptance of a world that breaks our hearts again and again and the ideal that we are partners with God, and that we can bring healing.

In exploring this tension, I have been meditating on the Kabbalistic symbols of *Netzach* and *Hod*. These two Hebrew terms are understood by our mystical forebearers as a couplet, existing in dynamic tension with each other (and other spiritual potencies). *Netzach* is commonly understood as the symbol for tenacity, endurance, overcoming, and victory.

In the words of Rabbi Arthur Green²: “*Netzach* seeks to remake the world... It is a great force for goodness, that which inspires us to go forth and right the world's wrongs, to reform the social order, to fulfill the dream of perfection.”

Hod, on the other hand, is the Kabbalistic symbol for humility, gratitude, acceptance, and surrender.

As Rabbi Green further remarks, *Hod* teaches us to accept ourselves and others as we are, and be grateful for life as it is. In the realm of *Hod*, we find beauty by opening our “inner eye” to the gifts of the *given*.

Holding *Netzach* and *Hod* in balance is no easy task. When should we lean into our feelings of agitation and seek to change and overcome?

² Arthur Green, EHYEH, A Kabbalah for Tomorrow, page 53

And when should we accept the “hand we have been dealt” and seek to cultivate gratitude for what is?

For me, the answer lies in a third realm: *emunah* — faith, trust, or belief.

Emunah, as I understand it, is the capacity to hold brokenness and beauty at the same time.

Emunah is perhaps about acceptance. It is about holding what exists – holding what *is* – with love and integrity. But *Emunah* is also about believing that what is — can be something else, something better. It is about letting go of control and at the same time knowing what we can change and what we cannot. *Emunah*, is perhaps the capacity to hold the brokenness and the hope at the same time. To accept that which can not be fixed, that which hurts, that which bleeds, that which breaks our heart and at the same time hold onto our strength and capacity to make this world better, not because we can fix everything but because it is through us that God manifests in the world. *Emunah* calls us, in the words of the Serenity Prayer, to “accept what we cannot change,” and pursue change when and where it is possible.

The 18th century Hassidic Master, the *Me’or Eynayim*, Rabbi Menachem Nahum Twersky of Chernobyl writes: “...even during the times of darkness that are called “night”, if we recall our capacity to know that there is a great awesome God Who created something from Nothing and Who holds all things in their power. Then certainly night will become as bright as day, and we will depart from darkness”³

I know that in my life, in the moments of profound darkness, in the moments that are called “night”, the *emunah* – the faith, the belief, the knowledge that day will come – has held me.

For me, in those moments of darkness, the manifestation of God’s presence has come mostly through being part of community. The strength, the love, the healing power of

³ *Me’or Eynaim, Shemot*, translated by Rabbi Jonathan Slater

friends and community who have held me, who have literally fed me when in pain and grief, has felt as God's hand.

In moments of darkness, I encounter God through love.

Emunah - as I said on Rosh Hashanah - is a manifestation of love, *Ahava*. It is the capacity to love, no matter what. It is to love the world, to love humanity, to love God, no matter how hard it is, no matter how disappointed or angry we are, no matter how heartbroken we are. It is to love even when it is hard. And the belief that love is possible is what helps us walk through a broken world, with acceptance but without giving up.

To have *emunah* is to keep believing in the power of love and in the power of joy.

... and joy is perhaps our best way to tap into love and into *emunah*. In the words of Rev. Dr Jaqui Lewis, the first Black senior minister at the progressive multicultural Middle Church in Manhattan, in her stunning book *Fierce Love*: "To cultivate and claim joy is itself an act of resistance. It's worthwhile daily spiritual practice. Joy will keep your heart pumping with love, your mind cooking with ideas, and your body jazzed with resilience for this journey called life".⁴

As we continue to live during times when the world seems to crumble before us, when tragedy and destruction and suffering seems to be again and again our reality, as we embrace it with tears and heartbreak, we must build our spiritual muscle, our capacity to know that there is a great and awesome God, through joy, through community, through love, through *emunah*.

The communities, the realites, we build together hold us and remind us that there is goodness, that there is beauty, that there is love and redemption in each and everyone of us, and that, as with the embracing of the broken heart, we also embrace God's existence in all that is and the possibilities ahead.

⁴ Page 189

As we sing “*Ya’aleh Koleinu*”—“Let **our** voices rise” — let **us open our eyes and our hearts to find light in the darkness**; and may we raise each other up as we forge a new way forward together.

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