

## Dealing with Adversity

The events in Charlottesville last month forced us to look into the eyes of hate and prejudice, and we were all triggered. To see Nazi flags paraded on American soil felt like our worst nightmare. And to then hear the highest leader of our land equate those Nazis with those who were standing up for love and equality... it was our worst fears playing out before us.

“I imagine that one of the reasons that people cling to their hate and prejudice so stubbornly is because they sense that once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with their own pain.” (James Baldwin)

What does it mean to deal with our own pain?  
And what are the consequences of ignoring that pain? Numbing that pain, denying that pain?

In Charlottesville, we saw the consequences of the denial of pain, of pain turned outwards as hatred.

It's tempting to stand in righteous judgment of those white supremacists and Neo-Nazis and leave it at that.

On these High Holy Days, let me suggest that we take the next step of learning from that adversity, stepping for a moment away from judgment to deal with our own pain. On these High Holy Days, we come together and let the world be a mirror that sends us to our work.

According to Rabbi Burt Jacobson, The Baal Shem Tov (sometimes called The Besht) offered his students a three-part process of dealing with adversity:

1. Surrender to adversity (Hach'na'ah)
2. Discernment of the Presence of God in that adversity, (Havdalah)
3. And the Sweetening of Suffering (Ham'ta'kah)

Surrendering to adversity means looking into its face without flinching, without turning away, and without hardening our hearts in reactivity. Righteous anger as a response to injustice is fine and appropriate to the moment. It's the fire that will fuel our righteous action. But when does that same anger become the vehicle for our avoidance of the pain? When is it taking the place of this Beshtian ideal of surrender to adversity, surrender to what is? When is that anger sending us to the same realm of Judgment that wounded us in the first place? Surrendering to adversity means knowing that we are in God's hands. We live inside a mystery that is so much wider than anything we could have imagined.

Surrender means feeling your pain fully without resisting it. The pain that comes from resisting pain can make it so much worse because we muddle the situation with our shame, denial, judgment and anger. Here's a practice then: Look at that Nazi flag waving; look into the face of that white supremacist, the face that is contorted in hatred. Let the pain well up from the depths of vulnerability and compassion. And then accept this moment as it is.

The Besht takes it a step further and says, "Through accepting pain in a spirit of joy your pain (TZaRaH) becomes transformed into acceptance (RaTZaH). That spirit of joy can only be accessed through a soul-perspective. The soul is saying, "Oh good! Oh joy! What a wonderful opportunity for growth! I picked just the right time to incarnate. This world is perfect!"

And through that soul-perspective we come to the work of Havdalah-discerning the Presence of God even in the midst of our experience of adversity. Psalm 138 says, אִם־אֵלֶּךָ בְּקֶרֶב צָרָה תִּחְיֶינִי, *Im aylech b'kerev tzarah, t'chayayni* , Even when I walk in the midst of trouble, You are giving me Life. Right in the middle of all this *Tzuris*, if I can keep my heart open, it's possible to turn, to receive the miraculous Life-force, to feel it pouring in- enlivening and renewing me. I'm tempted to say that this renewal happens in spite of my pain... but the Baal Shem might correct me and say, no, it is *davka* because of that pain. One of his principles was, "*HaRa hu kisay el HaTov* Adversity is the throne of Goodness."

Only after looking into the face of adversity, can we activate the fullness of heart to choose Life and Blessing. Our choice compels us to look for and find the Divine spark everywhere and anywhere.

Psalm 34 says מִי־ הָאִישׁ הֶחֱפֵץ חַיִּים אֲהֵב יָמִים לְרֵאוֹת טוֹב

*Mi ha-ish hechafetz Chayyim, Ohev yomim lirot tov? (Psalm 34:13)*

Who is the one that has a passion for Life, loving every day, seeing the Good? Our choosing Life, even in the face of adversity, awakens the passion that will send us to look for the good, the God-spark everywhere and anywhere.

In finding that Divine spark, we come to the last step of the process, which is called *Ham'ta'kah* Sweetening. My *Tzuris*, the trouble of my life forces me to find my depths, forces me to connect, sends me on a journey of discovery. In the book of Exodus our map towards liberation, we leave Egypt, and then experience one crisis after the next as the trouble we left follows us. Then our eyes are opened to miracle as the sea parts and we walk on dry land in the midst of our trouble. We have a grand celebration of song and dance, and then set out into the wilderness. In just 3 days we are complaining again. We are thirsty and

irritable because the waters we come to are bitter. It is our own accumulated bitterness that we are tasting.

Then Moses, the part of us that represents our soul's wisdom, throws a tree into those waters and they are sweetened. Perhaps it is the Tree of Life which is the symbol of ultimate connection between the Infinite and the Finite. That Tree is the necessary ingredient in the work of sweetening.

Those waters must be sweetened if we are to continue our journey of liberation. If we don't do that work of sweetening the bitter waters, then we will be held hostage by that bitterness, and it will grow into cynicism, sarcasm, hostility, numbness or despair.

And that's why we're here together on Rosh Hashanah. To do this work of sweetening. After facing and surrendering to the adversity, discerning the Divine spark that is hidden there in the midst of trouble, we look into our hearts and admit to our own bitterness. We call it into the light, expose that bitterness to our song, to our love.

If we do this work well, then, at the Kiddush, we will dip the apples from the Tree of Life into honey and we'll embrace each other with sticky hands and open hearts.