AS KING LEAR

Temple Israel, First Day Rosh Hashanah 2021

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I'm sorry if the parking lot was a bit dirty. It was under water Wednesday night thanks to Hurricane Ida. And I'm still upset about Henri. All of our lives have been upended as we continue to negotiate Covid-19. All summer I was looking forward to a short two-night getaway to the Berkshires. I had bought tickets to see Christopher Lloyd star as King Lear with Shakespeare and Company in Lenox, Massachusetts. King Lear has been my favorite Shakespeare play since taking AP English as an eleventh grader many years ago. More than three decades have passed and I have yet to see Lear on the stage. How perfect was Christopher Lloyd for the role! He was a crazy old man way back in the "Back to the Future" movies. He was the crazy Klingon captain in "Star Trek III: The Search of Spock." I booked front row seats to the outdoor performance in the beautiful Berkshire woods, anticipating how Lloyd would create the unravelling of King Lear's mind as he faced the tempest of betrayal, ruin and loneliness. I could already imagine his eyes popping out as he would wander the stage with only his fool for company as the sound of thunder would be heard through the loudspeakers recreating the paradigmatic storm that marks so many of Shakespeare's tragedies. But a real storm intervened as forecasts of heavy rain, thunder and lightning, the remnants of Henri, caused the theatre company to cancel the show just a few hours before it was to begin. Because of covid protocols and the rise of the Delta variant they were not going to bring the show indoors.

The refund of the cost of the tickets did not cover the two nights in the hotel. But it was not a total loss as it is always wonderful to go away as a family for a couple days. Yet I was so disappointed. Angry at Henri. Angry at Covid. Angry at myself for not booking the tickets for earlier in the summer when I would have had more options to make up for the cancellation. Okay, this was not the greatest tragedy

in the world given what the last year and half was like, but it was very annoying at the time. They sent me the link for a recording of a livestream that I was able to watch, noting about fifty people gathered around the outdoor stage, noting particularly the seat that was to be mine, noting the beautiful evening weather that I did not enjoy. "Why are you torturing yourself, Papa?" Laurence and Ariel said to me, watching me watch the performance on my computer with a grimace on my face. True, the show was continuing for one more week and, while sold out, they promised to call me if there were any openings. They did call me twice, but only on the nights that I was not able to get there. And an hour before show-time when Ridgewood is two and a half hours away from Lenox. *Nothing will come of nothing,* as Lear says (Act I, scene 1).

A traditional sermon is often built around a text, usually from the Torah reading, or on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, from the mahzor, the high holy day prayer book. I have often done that, but occasionally I use other sources. Some of you may remember the time when I drew on Supreme Court decisions of the prior year. Today, I want to draw on King Lear. If *nothing can be made out of nothing* (Act I, scene 4), then perhaps something can be made out of something.

The whole world has been numbed by the tragedy of the pandemic. Over four and a half million people across the globe have died from this disease in such a short time, and the number continues to grow. *The weight of this sad time we must obey; Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.* (Act V, scene 3). We have tried so hard at Temple Israel, as has every synagogue, to figure out the best way to come together these high holy days. We have striven to make things as safe as possible following medical guidance. *Kill thy physician,* the Earl of Kent warns, *and thy fee bestow upon the foul disease. Revoke thy doom.* (Act I, scene 1). The whole world has been hit with this disaster, but we persevere, we follow the guidelines, we behave prudently and we find our strength.

But it has been hard. Easier than a year ago. But we still have a long way to go to come back. When Lear emerges from his madness and is reunited with his daughter Cordelia, the one who remained loyal and steadfast despite his anger, he looks forward to a quarantine with her as they both face arrest: *Come, let's away to prison. We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage…so we'll live. And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh at gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too: Who loses and who wins, who's in, who's out; As if we were God's spies.* (Act V, scene 3). We have all sought to find the blessings behind the catastrophe, to enjoy the extra time at home with family that we envied in the past. More time to read, to binge-watch. A bit too much time to eat. But we had time to see the world around us, if only our small part of it, as life slowed down. Is that what Shakespeare meant to be "God's spies" to see the world through God's eyes, not missing the things we too often miss?

We have also learned to live with anxiety and fear. *Is it but this?* asks the King of France. *A tardiness in nature which often leaves the history unspoke that it intends to do?* (Act I, scene 1). In Shakespeare, nature is a reflection of history. When unexplained events happen in the outside world they are signs of disruption within society. As observed by the Earl of Gloucester: *These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us. Though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects. Love cools, friendships fall off, brothers divide. In cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked 'twixt son and father* (Act I, scene 2). We witnessed that as well, passions, anger, and an unfathomable insurrection in our own capital. The world seems to have gone so crazy around us that we hesitate to leave our places of shelter, our homes and quarantines. *Shut up your doors,* the duke of Cornwall says to us, *'tis a wild night…Come out o' th' storm* (Act II, scene 4). Even our actual storms are stronger than ever. *O ruin'd piece of nature!* Gloucester bewails. *This great world shall so wear out to naught* (Act IV, scene 6). Will the world we know wash away? How will we bring it to endure?

The storm that King Lear must survive wandering alone is marked by the storm of his inner nature as he loses hold of his wits. *We are not ourselves,* he recognizes, *when nature, being oppress'd, commands the mind to suffer with the body* (Act II, scene 4). And further: *Thou thinkest 'tis much that this contentious storm invades us to the skin. So 'tis to thee; But where the greater malady is fix'd, the lesser is scarce felt…When the mind's free, the body's delicate. The tempest in my mind doth from my senses take all feeling else save what beats there* (Act III, scene 4). The thing about the madness of King Lear is that it is what brings him to true understanding. He was a naïve old man, blind to the realities of the dangerous world around him. The story of Lear is that he thought he could retire in peace, become a kind of King Emeritus, and divide his realm between his three daughters. First his daughter Goneril and then Regan flatter him with testimonies of love, while Cordelia sees through their falsehoods and refuses to play her part. Lear banishes her and invests Goneril and Regan with power, which is soon turned against him and eventually against each other. When Lear leaves his daughters to wander through the wild and loses his sanity, he sees, through his madness, the insanity of the world around him. You might be familiar with the saying, *In a mad world only the mad are sane.* That is actually a translation of a line in Japanese from Akira Kurusawa's "Ran," an extraordinary film that adapts the Lear story to feudal Japan. But that is the quandary: sometimes when we are loosened from the way we normally see things, we can suddenly see things clearly.

There is a story in the Talmud (Pesahim 50a) that Rav Yosef the son of Rabbi Joshua ben Levi was near death but then recovered. His father asked him what he saw when he was about to die. עולם הפוך ראיתי, he says, "I saw an upside down world." No, not like in "Stranger Things." עליונים למטה ותחתונים למעלה, "those who tower above were below and those who sit below were above," by which we understand that those who enjoy greatness in this world were humbled in the next whereas those who lived humbly in this world were exalted in the next. אמר לו, replied his father to him: בני, עולם ברור ראית, "my son, you have seen the world clearly."

It is sometimes easier to truly see the world around us when our eyes are shut. In King Lear, the Earl of Gloucester is "blinded" by the lies of his bastard son Edmund against his elder son Edgar, until he sees things clearly after being literally blinded when Edmund condemns him as a traitor in supporting Lear and Cordelia and the King of France against Lear's daughters Goneril and Regan. Only when Gloucester loses his sight can he truly see what was happening around him.

Rabbi Marc Angel, in a beautiful reflection on Rosh Hashanah, explains that today our task is to shut our eyes so that we truly see the world around us. "With our eyes open," he writes, "a dozen roses are twelve beautiful flowers. With our eyes shut, they may be full of memories and associations—roses given or received on our first date; roses at our wedding; roses growing in our childhood home's backyard; roses on our grandmother's Shabbat table. On Rosh Hashanah we close our eyes and think back on who we are and who we want to be. Where have we fallen short and how we can do better.

King Lear is also about aging and mortality. *'Tis our fast intent,* Lear says when he reveals his plan to divide the kingdom among his daughters, *to shake all cares and business from our age, conferring them on younger strengths while we, unburthen'd crawl toward death* (Act I scene 1). The image of crawling toward death foreshadows the literal crawling in the wild that the king finds himself doing during the storm and amidst his madness. At first, when he reveals his intentions, his daughter Regan associates his naivety with old age and disease: *'Tis the infirmity of his age* (Act I, scene 1). But that is an "infirmity" that we all encounter today of all days. Rosh Hashanah is called the birthday of the world. That means we are all a year older. When we recite the Unetaneh Tokef in the next hour we ask, before the open ark, מי יחיה ומי ימות, who shall live and who shall die in this new year. We wish each other a sweet and healthy new year because we recognize that there is an alternative scenario. And when we open the ark next week on Yom Kippur for the Sh'ma Koleinu, which means "hear our voices," we specifically make note of the "infirmity of our age": אל תשליכנו לעת זקנה, ככלות כוחינו אל תעזבינו, "Do not cast us away as we grow

old, do not desert us as our energy wanes." That line is not about growing old, it's about recognizing our mortality. For we are all mortal. We have surely realized that through the time of Covid.

Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise, the Fool says to Lear (Act I, scene 5). How many times have we said to one another, or to ourselves, "If I only knew then what I know now." The themes of repentance and forgiveness that our so central to our High Holy Day liturgy are not because we traffic in the currency of guilt and shame. Those themes are meant to wake us up, to help us to see clearly who we are, to redeem ourselves so that we can live a full life in the new year, and to appreciate that time is precious. Let's try to get wise now before it is too late. *Does any here know me?* Lear asks in an existentialist moment. *This is not Lear. Does Lear walk thus? Speak thus? Where are his eyes? Either his notion weakens, or his discernings are lethargied. Ha! Waking? 'Tis not so. Who is it that can tell me who I am?* (Act I, scene 4). Can we all really recognize ourselves? Do we measure up to whom we want to be?

But to see who we really are and repair ourselves, our relationships, our world, we need humility and flexibility, yet we tend to be more naturally stubborn and rigid. That is the tragedy of Lear and his daughter Cordelia. At the beginning of the play, when she sees her father's folly, her own stubbornness prevents her from communicating with her father. *Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave my heart into my mouth* (Act I, scene 1). That is hard to do, but what we all must try to do today when we open our prayer books to pray and to sing, to heave our hearts into our mouths. Or even more so, when we speak to our loved ones to apologize for offenses given, we must heave our hearts into our mouths. In a high holy day reflection called "How Do We Keep Going in the Face of Such Massive Losses," Rabbi Elliot Kukla writes: "Our ancestors, like us, lived in times of chaos and change. Tears are a central High Holy Day theme. All the traditional Torah and Haftarah readings for Rosh Hashanah speak of weeping. The shofar itself is a symbol of tears. Our sages teach us that the ram's horn we blow in Rosh Hashanah must be bent to reflect our own bodies bent over in grief."

Lear's tragedy was that his pride and rigidity prevented him from seeing clearly and reconciling with Cordelia, or with his loyal friend and vassal the Earl of Kent. *On thine allegiance hear me!* he yells at Kent before banishing him for pleading that he show mercy to Cordelia. *That thou hast sought to make us break our vow which we durst never yet, and with stain'd pride to come betwixt our sentence and our power* (Act I, scene 1). His inability to change his mind, to use his power to undo his sentence of judgment, was his failure as a king, as well as a father. We sang earlier when we closed the ark *Avinu Malkeinu,* our father our king! We appeal to God during these High Holy Days as a parent and sovereign who should exercise understanding, forgiveness, clemency and love.

In the end, Lear learns how to cry. The king who would not bend crawls around as a madman. When he is finally reunited with Cordelia he screams out of his sleep and madness as he looks upon her: *You do me wrong to take me out o' th' grave. Thou art a soul in bliss; but I am bound upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears do scold like molten lead* (Act IV, scene 7). Again, it is through his madness that he gains clarity. Cordelia does, through her enduring love, redeem her father from the grave. And it is through his scolding tears that he finds redemption and—at least momentary—happiness. To make a comparison with a far lower plane of culture—although one that was also so influential for me in my youth—there is the scene at the end of "The Return of the Jedi" when Luke Skywalker is trying to rescue his dying father from the doomed battle station pleading "I have to save you" and Darth Vader replies, "You already have, my son, you already have."

But William Shakespeare was not going to end his tragedies like George Lucas or other Hollywood directors would. While in the original English source for the legend that Shakespeare worked from Lear and Cordelia are restored to power, Shakespeare has them die as the play comes to a close. First Cordelia, and then Lear out of grief. *Howl, howl, howl, howl! O you are men of stone!* Lear cries out. *Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so that heaven's vault should crack* (Act V, scene 3). That is what we strive

to do when we pray on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. People of stone do not pray. We can use our tongues and eyes to move God, to cause heaven's vault to crack.

It is no accident that Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are immediately followed by the festival of Sukkot. What we know as our High Holy Days were originally rites of purification before the week-long festival where the lulav and etrog, the palm branch and citron, are taken up and processed in psalms and praise, an ancient rain dance if there ever was one. To "cause heaven's vault to crack" is to elicit tears from God, or in other words, to open up the sky so that it rains. Okay, we had enough rain last week to last for a while, but rain in its season is the only way to live. Rabbi Haim David Halevi, the late Sephardic chief rabbi of Tel Aviv, taught that the high holy days are symbolized by the shofar, which is bent as a reminder that we must bow ourselves in humility. But soon comes the festival of Sukkot, when we take up the lulav, the palm branch, which must be straight and never bent. The lulav teaches us to be strong and tall, to move on from the humility symbolized by the shofar to self-confidence and optimism. Living through covid, we were said to be strong, New Jersey strong, Bergen strong, Ridgewood strong. We must cry out and weep for the pain of loss, but then pick ourselves up and look towards the future.

What? asks the hero Edgar toward the close of King Lear: *in ill thoughts again? Men must endure their going hence, even as their coming hither* (Act V, scene 2).

Let us a have a sweet and healthy and good new year. Shanah tovah.