

Rabbi Lisa Edwards  
Shabbat Nitzavim/Vayeilech (last Shabbat of 5769)  
8th anniversary of 9/11  
9.11.09/23 Elul 5769

Flipping through one of my alumni magazines recently (I went to 5 schools “of higher learning” so I get a lot of alumni magazines), I came across the name of a guy who had been one of my closest friends my sophomore and junior year in college. Oh my gosh, I said to myself, I haven’t thought about Mike in years – decades really – I wonder if he’s on Facebook. I got all excited thinking to contact him when I realized I was looking not at the “news from alums” column for my class, but at the obituary listings. Mike died of cancer, it said, over a year ago.

The wild fires in LA, the 5th anniversary of Katrina last week, the 8th anniversary of 9/11 today, Rosh Hashanah next Shabbat...it’s easy to explain why I’ve been feeling vulnerable lately, a little on the anxious side. But nothing made me feel so vulnerable as flipping through that alumni magazine last week and finding out that Mike is dead. I feel vulnerable because he was my age and dead from cancer – but more than that – just vulnerable thinking how very much by chance, people – important people -- come and go from our lives...how people can mean the world to us one year, and we can lose touch completely the next year and forever after.

And yet, even so, even out of touch, it’s worth noticing that those people can still mean a lot to us – it’s still true that they helped us become who we are, we can still care very much about them. It’s not a terrible thing, not necessarily even a sad thing, that they’re not “in” our lives anymore – we don’t have to search FACEBOOK looking for everyone we ever knew – those people can still be part of our lives, part of who we are, even though our lives and theirs have gone off in separate directions.

But sometimes it is helpful ...or just sweet ... to pull some of those people back in; sometimes there is room for them still - or again - in our lives, whether in memory only or in reality . . . and not just people either.

This Shabbat - tonight and tomorrow -- is the last of the seven sabbaths of consolation – the seven sabbaths that come between Tisha B’av – the saddest and lowest point on the Jewish calendar - and Rosh Hashanah – the most majestic day on the Jewish calendar.

Among the special haftarot sometimes read on this Shabbat – the last of the seven, the one before Rosh Hashanah – is a passage from the Book of the prophet Isaiah that begins:

Seek the Eternal in the way God can be found; call out while God is near. [Dirshu Adonai b’hee-matz-oh]1 [Is. 55:6]

Maybe this Hebrew month of Elul and the Days of Awe that follow it are kind of the Jewish version of searching for friends on Facebook, or at least looking for God -- Seek the Eternal in the way God can be found” [Dirshu Adonai b’hee-matz-oh]2 [Is. 55:6]

"Call out while God is near." And our sages chose to read that verse right now, this week, this Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah because, they say, God is very near right now in this season of tshuvah - of turning, of tefilah - of prayer, of tzedakah-of just action. God is near right now and about to come even nearer, about to come as close as God ever gets--right into our hearts.

How does this happen? Is it just because this is the time of year for it? Once a year, ready or not, God comes near? The Torah portions for this week before Rosh Hashanah – Nitzavim/Vayeilech suggest otherwise, suggest God comes near because we allow it, IF we allow it; God comes near IF we turn toward God.

“When all these things befall you,” says God in our Torah portion – “the blessing and the curse that I have set before you – and you take them to heart...and you return to God your God... God your God... will take you back in love.” [Deut. 30:2-3]

God’s invitation to us to return, and God’s promise to return to us in love, uses the Hebrew root we’ve been using a lot this month of Elul, this month of preparation for the Days of Awe: the root is shuv, as in tshuvah, repentance, return, turning, self-reflection – the assignment Jewish tradition

gives us during this month of getting ready.

"Then God will open up your heart . . . to love God with all your heart and with all your soul in order that you may live," says our Torah portion [Deut. 30:6]. This is not about living a long life; this is about really living as opposed to simply staying alive. It's about taking it all in -- the good and the bad -- it's about taking it in, rather than coming up surprised.

Our friend Jeff Bernhardt has an article in this week's Jewish Journal reminding us that in order to get the most from the Days of Awe, each of us needs to prepare for it in some way. Don't be intimidated, says Jeff, there are lots of ways to do this. You can read his article for some suggestions. And a passage from our Torah portion this week also reminds us that such preparation need not be intimidating:

"This instruction which I enjoin upon you today is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach... No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to do it...I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life -- that you and your children may live..."[Deut. 30:11-14,19]

When I read the two sentence obituary of my friend Mike, I wanted to know more about the life he had chosen and lost, so I googled him. But it turns out Michael T. Carroll is not only a common name, it's also the name of a firefighter who died in the line of duty at the World Trade Center on 9/11. So this week, looking for my Mike, turned instead into finding out a little bit more about 9/11 and the personal stories of that day and its aftermath. The Carroll family lost two sons that day -- both NYC firefighters -- Firefighter Michael T. Carroll and his brother, Peter Carroll. Like my Mike, both these men were loving husbands and fathers. And judging from the website postings about them, their families still ache from missing them. One of Peter Carroll's sons is now a NYC firefighter. Though Mike and Mike and Peter are all dead now, it would seem that they were men who chose life.

This week of commemorating 9/11, I also looked up the drash I gave on the Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah in 2001, just four days after the 9/11 attacks. What struck us then is still what strikes us today about that day, and about life in general, especially at this time of year, so I want to end tonight as I ended then:

While it's true that in the space where had stood the once tallest towers in the world there seemed now to be nothing,

once we looked down instead of up,

yes even in the terrible rubble and smoke,

what we saw was far from nothing -- it was something amazing -- the best of humanity coming from the worst of humanity:

it was the rescuers and the ordinary citizens doing extraordinary acts;

it was the quiet interactions of people one on one;

it was the kindness with which people treated one another everywhere all day on Tuesday and since;

it was the outpouring of support and sympathy from all over the world (even from some unexpected places and persons);

it was the quiet vigils, and the prayer gatherings, the hand holding and the hugs;

it was all those inspiring stories that are being told of simple acts and astounding feats of courage and strength and resolve.

It was the rush of so many to say, yes bring judgment against the perpetrators but do not become terrorists ourselves in our rush to judgment.

Do not forget our humanity in the face of their inhumanity.

Do not forget what unites us in the face of such attempts to divide us.

Do not forget love in the face of such hatred.

....

It's such a tenuous time, such a sad time, such a frightening time, not the best time perhaps to be walking into the Days of Awe . . . or maybe it is, maybe it's just the right time to be turning within --searching our hearts for the best within ourselves;

maybe it's just the right time to be gathering together with people we care for, turning our hearts to one another;  
maybe it's just the right time to be turning our hearts toward God, inviting God to turn to us. . .  
in our fear, in our sorrow, in our anger, in our love.

Shabbat Shalom