

Rabbi Melanie Aron

June 30, 2018

Superpowers

Among our preschool set, the hot topic of discussion this summer is the superpowers of superheroes. The children query each other, “Which is the superpower you would rather have—to become invisible or to breathe under water? To control the weather or to have superhuman strength?” They make up new superheroes for themselves, with their own chosen superpowers: able to eat anything or able to sing loud enough to break down buildings.

God’s superpower in this week’s Torah portion is the ability to turn curses into blessings, and as we retell the story of that superpower, we are meant to absorb it into ourselves as well.

Writing about this portion, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks compares the Chinese ideogram for crisis, which we are told also means opportunity (as we remember from the recession of 2008), with the Hebrew word *mashber*, which means crisis or nadir, as well as child-birth chair. Israel, *Yisrael*, he reminds us, is the one who struggled but ultimately prevailed.

God is, in the words of Nehemiah, the one who redeems what is lost or broken, whether that be an individual or an entire people in exile. When we visited our sister congregation in Israel, the progressive community of Rosh Pina, we talked about the verse in the Hallel Psalms from which their name was chosen: “*even ma-asu haabonim, hayetah lerosh pinah,*” the stone which the builders rejected, has become the chief cornerstone.

The choice of this name back in the late 19th century expressed not only the early founders' hope that their community would be pivotal to further growth in the land of Israel, but also their experience of being rejected for their Judaism by the various communities from which they came.

Some look at Jewish history as the story of one tragedy after another—destruction, diaspora, expulsion, inquisition, pogroms—but others who write Jewish history stress that every tragedy begat new creativity.

The destruction of the first Temple was the crucible in which the prophetic writings as we know them were formed. The destruction of the second Temple led to Yavneh and its scholars, to the Mishnah and Talmud, and to Judaism as we know it today.

Each expulsion was followed by flourishing in a new community. You can trace a line from the debacle of the false Messiah Shabbetai Tzvi to the rise of Hasidism and from the experience of the *Conversos* to the inception of Reform Judaism.

Remember the verse from Exodus quoted in the Haggadah, Exodus 1:12: “But the more they were oppressed, the more they increased and spread out.”

On the Jewish calendar, today is the 17th of Tammuz, though those who observe this fast will do so tomorrow, not on Shabbat. This is the day on which the walls of the ancient city of Jerusalem were breached by their attackers, leading three weeks later to the destruction of the Temple. At this time of year, traditional Jews reflect on this tragedy of Jewish history; reflecting on tragedy, however, also means reflecting on resilience and on finding the strength to rise up after defeat.

The contemporary historian Deborah Lipstadt gives a famous talk, "Israel: The Ever Dying People," in which she traces all the times people have said, "This is the final blow. The people of Israel are no more," beginning with Merneptah, the Egyptian Pharaoh, who reigned from 1213-1203 BCE. But her talk could just as well be titled "Israel, The Ever Surviving People."

When we enter the synagogue, we are supposed to say:

Mah Tovu Ohalechah Yaakov,

Mishkenotecha Yisrael.

"How lovely are your tents, O Jacob.

Your dwelling places, O Israel."

For rabbinic Judaism, these tents were synagogues and these dwelling places classrooms in which children and adults studied our heritage. We say *Mah Tovu* to remember that these institutions, not the politicians or the army, safeguard our community.

This week the message of *Mah Tovu* for me will be this very Jewish superpower: To wring a blessing out of a curse, to find benediction in malediction, to make the best out of the worst, and to seek opportunity in catastrophe.