

## The Sources of Our Comfort

Rosh Hashanah Eve 5778

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Joe Storthz grew up in this congregation; his siblings and other dear relatives are in our midst, so many here know his story. Earlier this month, he recounted his losses to NPR's *Here and Now*: Joe's mother died in the spring. His beloved wife Karen died of pancreatic cancer at only 62. Then, last month, his home of twenty-seven years was devastated by Hurricane Harvey's flood waters.

In that national radio interview, though, Joe did not dwell on his losses. Alluding to the approaching High Holy Days, Joe mentioned that we examine our lives at this time of year. If he ever wondered why we are here, Joe says, he now knows: "We are here for each other."

Joe lived those words as the flood waters rose from Braes Bayou, engulfing his home. When he learned that his elderly neighbors were trapped in their home, he waded over in waist-deep water, but could not pry the door open. Along came a kayaker, and then a helicopter dropped a rescue worker with a raft. Together, they wedged open the door. Inside were a 96 year-old man, a navy veteran, floating on the dining room table; and his 89 year old wife, sitting in her wheel-chair, shivering in knee-deep contaminated water. Joe and his fellow rescuers saved the elderly couple's lives.

Joe's story is heartbreaking and inspiring at the same time. Joe speaks of flood-damaged family photographs, drying out on the patio, only to be covered in fire ants, walking across the images of his loved ones, many of them of blessed memory.<sup>i</sup> Joe's words describe anguish, but his voice never suggests defeat. He shares his renewed purpose in life amidst his countless losses. Even while tearing out his own floor boards and wallboard to the studs, he has found comfort in reaching out to help those with greater needs.

Being a Houston native, I was immobilized, watching from a distance, as my beloved hometown was ravaged, friends and relatives' homes destroyed. Folks in Houston, though, were anything but paralyzed. They sprang into action, helping their neighbors and people that they had never met. The waters hadn't receded before the Jewish Community Center became a staging ground for distributing free cleaning supplies to thousands who drove up to receive them. Never mind that the JCC itself was devastated. Never mind that many volunteers literally took

a break from ripping out soiled flooring and walls in their own homes to give their time to others in need.

After Harvey, Joe Storthz's rabbi, David Lyon, remarked, "You shrug, and you join hands." He means that we can only learn to live with our losses when we reach out to help others, and when we accept the lovingkindness of the people in our lives.

Texans, Floridians and Caribbeans facing hurricanes are not alone in needing comfort as the New Year begins. Our prayer book, after celebrating that some among us "are full of peace and gratitude," acknowledges: "Some hearts ache with sorrow; disappointments weigh heavily . . . Families have been broken; loved ones lie on a bed of pain; death has taken a cherished loved one. . . . Some hearts are embittered: ideals are betrayed and mocked, answers sought in vain, life has lost its meaning and value."<sup>ii</sup>

The sorrows, the fear, the anger, the resentment, and the anxiety in this room are palpable, as they are in every American synagogue tonight, in every house of worship in this great nation, and in every home.

"Some hearts ache with sorrow," bereaved after a death or walking an uncertain future with a dear one who is ill.

"Disappointments weight heavily" on those whose personal and professional lives haven't turned out as they had hoped.

"Ideals are mocked and betrayed." On all sides of America's widening political divide, individuals and communities are experiencing bitterness, anger, and fear.

Some ask: Does our nation still stand for freedom and equality? Have the words on the Statue of Liberty become hollow? After a brutal Presidential election, after Charlottesville, after "Muslim bans," equivocal presidential condemnations of white supremacy, assault-by-tweet on transgender patriots in uniform, and the list goes on, many wonder if "real Americans" still include people of color, or immigrants, or LGBTQ Americans, or Muslims, even Jews.

Others felt briefly vindicated by a Presidential election that rejected the country's direction over the previous eight years, only to find the newly-elected President – and, by extension, their own values – derided. Many ask if American democracy is betrayed when a new leader isn't given a chance, when statements are parsed to find fault – and, for Reform Jews who support the President, an

increasingly offensive suggestion that their religious faith and their vision for America are irreconcilable.

Whatever our views, and whatever our personal situation, we might have gathered for a joyous celebration tonight – welcoming a new year, *l’shanah tovah*, happy new year, all that and a glass of wine at the gala reception – but we are fearful, unnerved, and upset. We are all in need of comfort.

And so, we come to our Temple. God commands, “Build me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them.”<sup>iii</sup> God does not seek to dwell in this physical space, its glory notwithstanding. Instead, God is eager to inhabit our hearts. The great Jewish thinker Martin Buber asks, “Where does God dwell? Wherever we let God in.”<sup>iv</sup>

Tonight, let us invite God into our hearts, and then may we find comfort.

God is in our hearts when we make life better for the people who share our community, our nation, and our planet. And take it from the folks in Houston: Helping other people is comforting. Devoting one’s self, even briefly, to the welfare of another takes our minds off of our own problems or puts our challenges into perspective.

God is in our hearts when we recognize God in others. A completely different story, also coincidentally from Texas; this time, Austin: “The week after Charlottesville, . . . a group of volunteers from Reform congregation Beth Shalom’s Welcome Committee held a dinner at a Greek buffet restaurant. . . . Through extensive volunteer efforts and hours and love, the volunteers had helped to resettle a family from Afghanistan, and they were holding this dinner to help celebrate the culmination of the family’s settling-in process. [W]hen it came time to leave, there was a bit of a stir at the cash register. The committee of eighteen plus the five members of the Afghani family discovered that a stranger in the restaurant, who had by then left, had paid for their entire dinner: knowing what they were celebrating – knowing, in fact, that they were a synagogue celebrating its resettling of Afghani immigrants. And then the proprietor of the restaurant informed the humbled group that the stranger who had left without leaving a name or note was a Palestinian immigrant to Austin.”<sup>v</sup> God’s presence brought comfort to that Greek restaurant in those challenging post-Charlottesville days – as God was invited into the hearts of Jewish volunteers, of Afghani refugees, and of an anonymous Palestinian-American perpetrator of kindness.

In the charged environment that is America today, too many of us have shut ourselves off from people who are different from us. We seek comfort in like-mindedness, in our cozy echo-chambers. Earlier this month, a terrific turnout of our members attended “Love Thy Neighbor,” an annual bridge-building event that brings our community together across a multitude of religious and ethnic lines. The multi-faith youth group, the interfaith friendship camp choir, and the multi-ethnic potluck vegetarian dinner invite God, however differently perceived, into hundreds of hearts, offering opportunities to build relationships across all kinds of distinctions. No diverse group is perfectly varied, though; and this one was missing political diversity, at least for the most part. We all need to work to achieve that. We may find comfort when we invite God into our lives by experiencing shared humanity, breaking bread and even engaging in civil disagreement with people not at all like ourselves.

Tonight, with *Mishkan HaNefesh* in our hands, with magnificent music, with poetry and prayer, we seek comfort in the words of our tradition. We invite God into our hearts, each of us individually, and as a community. Let us leave this place tonight, our souls soothed, ready to face the New Year with faith.

Let us find comfort in this prayer, taken from a poem by Rabbi Karyn Kedar:

Because there is hate, dear God,  
help us heal our broken and fractured world.

Because there is fear, dear God,  
grant courage and faith to those in need.

Because there is pain, dear God,  
bring healing to the shattered and wounded.

Because there is hope, dear God,  
teach us to be a force for justice and kindness.

Because there is love, dear God,  
help us to be a beacon of light and compassion.

As it is written,  
be strong and let your heart have courage<sup>vi</sup>  
depart from evil, do good, seek peace and pursue it.<sup>viiiviii</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> "Houston Homeowner Reflects On Cleanup After Harvey," *Here and Now*, WBUR, audio recording accessed at wbur.org, September 11, 2017.

<sup>ii</sup> Robert I. Kahn, adapted by Chaim Stern, in Elyse D Frishman, Editor, *Mishkan T'filah*, New York: CCAR Press, 2007, p. 184.

<sup>iii</sup> Exodus 25:8

<sup>iv</sup> Martin Buber, *The Way of Man*.

<sup>v</sup> As told by Rabbi David Stern, Temple Emanu El, Dallas.

<sup>vi</sup> Joshua 31:6.

<sup>vii</sup> Psalm 34:15

<sup>viii</sup> All stanzas here excerpted from Rabbi Karyn Kedar, *A Prayer of Courage and Consolation*.