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It's About Us: Comfort--*Nechemta*

Preparing for this year's High Holydays,
I found myself a little bit down.
So many thoughts about our failed and struggling institutions,
about our disappointing leaders,
about war, strife and its attendant horror near and far,
about our seemingly intractable human shortcomings.
Even though that is all real and very much on our minds,
the High Holydays are supposed to be about hope--
and about what the Rabbis called *nechemta*—comfort.
So I'd like to walk on that path this morning.
Nechemta. Where can we find it in a troubled world?

How many have heard of the photographer Clyde Butcher?
Whether you've heard of him or not, if you live down here,
you've seen his subjects.
If you patronize nearby art galleries or even bookstores,
you've likely seen his work.
He is something of a local, focusing on places like
Florida Bay, the Everglades and the state's rivers and forests.
His pictures, and if you are familiar with them you will agree,
can be breathtaking.
Mindy has been a fan for some time and I've lately become one.
But there was something about him we didn't know until recently.
To quote from the endpaper of his book "Millennium."
"Wilderness, to me, is a spiritual necessity.
When my son was killed by a drunk driver it was to the wilderness
I fled in hopes of regaining my serenity and equilibrium.
The mysterious spiritual experience of being close to nature
helped restore my soul..."

That was powerful to us, and maybe to you too.
If we open ourselves to the beauty of nature, of Creation, as Butcher did,
perhaps we can find healing, be it from loss of whatever magnitude
or just from the daily trials of life.
We live in the Florida Keys for heavens sake.
Why do we need visitors and shop signs to remind us,
that it is, in fact, "another day in paradise?"
It's almost as if we are too preoccupied to notice.
Some Jewish understanding may explain this.
It has to do with our eyes.

Our eyes are many things.

We've heard they can be "windows to the soul."
 We use them for witnessing testimony in court.
 They have inspired countless poems and love affairs.
 But eyes can also lead us astray.
 This may sound counterintuitive.
 We follow our eyes all the time.
 When Chico challenges Groucho, in one of the classic Marx Bros. movies,
 "Who are you going to believe, me or your own eyes?"
 We recognize the absurdity of it right away.
 Of course we're going to believe our own eyes.
 What else is there to believe?
 The Bible and Talmud have thoughts on this.
 Whenever they describe people doing "what is right in their own eyes,"
 it's a lead pipe lock that things are going in the wrong direction.
 (e.g. Judges 21:25)
 Similarly, in the commandment to wear *tzitzit*, the fringes on the *talit*,
 we are told it is to remember the *mitzvot* and not
 simply go wherever our eyes lead us. (Num. 15: 29)
 All this is a way of saying that while seeing is the sense we rely upon most
 and beautiful though our eyes may be,
 what they see can be shallow, and even misleading.

If you are running a commercial website today, the unit of currency is "eyeballs."
 How many eyeballs looked at this page?
 How many more can we get to look at the next one?
 What kind of clickbait should we use?
 That's a great word, "clickbait."
 It is perfectly descriptive, the "bait" that catches the eye and
 tells the finger to click.
 And as the science of this gets better, and it will,
 they will become better and better at getting the eye's attention.
 They are already pretty good at it.
 The movies and TV have been practicing for years.
 They understand, as did our ancient sages, that an eyeball's attention
 is pretty easy to get, and it doesn't always know what's best for it.

All this is a way of saying that even if we live in paradise,
 if it is going to touch our soul,
 we need to look with more than our eyes.
 Clyde Butcher's photographs point us in that direction.
 You can tell that he doesn't just "see" creation,
 he contemplates it, ponders it, composes it, breathes it.
 He also travels in it. For hours, days and weeks at a time.
 All this to make sure it gets into him deeper than his eyeballs.
 All this to get nature into his being.
 It is why he can write that it restores his soul.

Mindy and I spent some time on the water back in the Bay this summer.

We were out of sight of land-based civilization for hours at a time.
 I could tell it reached my soul because, ridiculous as it sounds,
 when we're heading back and I could see the first houses of Islamorada
 in the distance, I started to think, "Back to the rat race." As if.

We have a neighbor whose family has been in the Keys for generations.
 He's an older fellow and we asked him one evening
 if he wanted to watch the sunset with us.
 He said, "Do you have any idea how many sunsets I've had to watch?"
 He was joking I think, but it made me think.
 The only way that watching a sunset gets old is
 if you are only looking at it with your eyes.

So how do we get past that?

Again, we can try to spend some time "out there."
 Quiet time, when the phone won't chirp, when there is less
 conversation; when there is not much else to do but take it in.
 Given a chance, Creation will find its way past our eyeballs.
 Meditation is also good.
 Find a place with a beautiful view and relieve the mind of everything else.
 It takes a bit of a practice and no one masters it completely,
 but it's a good way to get to a deeper place.

Finally, prayer.

If you don't have a few hours to be in the wilderness or even
 a few minutes for mediation, you can pray in a few seconds.
 In Jewish tradition there are prayers for just about everything we can
 experience in nature, from sunsets to rainbows to the sea itself.
 If you know them or care to look them up, by all means use them.
 But just as good and sometimes better, we can make up our own prayer.
 Start with some gratitude.
 "Thank you God, for..." whatever you are experiencing at the moment.
 Or use some Hebrew. "*Barukh ata Adonai...* and then follow with whatever,
 "for this beautiful sky," "for the shade and the breeze."
 We get the idea.
 It will take us past our eyeballs and into a place from which
 we can heal, breathe, and be restored
 from whatever pain this broken world has given us.

We can also get *nechemta* from perspective.

I was in Israel during the last intifada, some ten years ago now.
 It was very bad. Cafes, buses, hotels, you name it were being blown up
 by suicide bombers. Civilian casualties were high. And so was fear.
 I met a young American woman who had recently made *aliyah*
 and I asked her how she was holding up.
 There was no question she was rattled,
 like most of the country this year with the constant *tzeva adom*—
 red alerts, that sent everyone running for shelter.
 She told me she sought counsel from one of the *vatikim*, an "old timer"

who had been in the country since before it was founded.
 He told her, "*Avarnu al yoter garoa*—We've been through worse,
 and we will get through this."
 She said hearing that helped her more than anything else.

Looking at the world today, as troubled as it is,
 I do think of those who have gone through worse.
 My parents' generation,
 who survived the Great Depression and Second World War.
 My grandparents' generation, who came from Europe
 and had to make it as penniless immigrants,
 or perhaps had to survive the First World War in a trench.
 Not to mention the generations before that, who somehow endured
 war, famine, plagues, poverty, persecution
 without electricity, antibiotics, insurance, civil rights or due process.
 The ones for whom life really was, as Hobbes put it,
 "nasty, brutish and short."
 People somehow managed to cope with all that.
 And we will manage to cope with all this.
 "*Avarnu al yoter garoa*—We have been through worse."

One of the things that helped them get through was Faith.
 Now, some of our ancestors' faith is non-transferable to us.
 Without going into detail there were things they believed that
 we either can't or won't.
 But Faith itself still works.

It starts with the bedrock belief that I/we will prevail.
 Unlike much else in life, Faith is free.
 And whatever else is going on in the world, Faith is ultimately personal.
 Its questions are simple:
 Do I believe in myself? In my life path? In my family? In my loved ones?
 Sure there are bumps along the way.
 Harrumph, it should only be bumps—
 there are typhoons, earthquakes and train wrecks.
 But if we can keep faith through it all—
 in ourselves, in our path, in whatever God,
 or whatever higher power we keep close,
 we too can prevail.

Faith doesn't answer every question but it still helps us get through life.
 Life may not be nasty, brutish and short for most of us,
 but that doesn't mean it's not unfair or absurd. It often is.
 And if you are looking for Faith to give you the meaning of life
 I can save you some time.
 The only meaning life has is the meaning we give it.
 But Faith in that can carry us a long way.
 Living with more of it in the new year will bring *nechemta*, I promise you.

The same can be said for Friendship.

This is an incredible ability we have: to make and keep, friends.
We've all looked at schools of fish, herds of animals, flocks of birds
and wondered, why do they stay together?

The answer of course is for protection.

They are much safer in groups than they would be alone.
It's pretty much the same for us.

We are safer when we are with others.

Not necessarily from predators, as it is with the animals
But safer from loneliness, despair, depression, sadness.

Many studies have shown

the more social and sociable we are,
the more that friendship and community are part of our life,
the happier we are, the healthier we are, the longer we live.

Today, with all the social media,

from email to Facebook to Instagram to all the rest I can't keep up with,
it has never been easier to maintain friendships.

May I suggest a Jewish New Years' resolution:

to keep in closer contact with our friends, past and present,
and lay the groundwork for life with new friends in the future.

It will be a great comfort, I can assure you.

Finally this morning, love--the greatest *nechemta* of all.

What can we say about love?

As the old song goes, it "makes the world go round."

As the not so old song goes, it's "all you need."

Everybody wants love. But not everybody understands it.

Love is a lot of things. None of them are cheap and none of them are easy.

Love is demanding. Love requires devotion. True love is holy.

The Torah takes love seriously

V'ahavta et H' Elokecha—Love the Lord your God...

V'ahavta l're'echa kamocho—Love your neighbor as yourself...

V'ahavta et ha-ger—Love the stranger, as you were strangers in Egypt.

Amazing. We're commanded to love, not only God, but people--

whether they are like us or whether they are unlike us.

People who are close to us and people who are far from us.

All this is nothing if not demanding.

Yet we use the word to describe feelings that are hardly on that level.

"I love ice cream," "I love *Mad Men*," "I love fantasy football."

We also use it as a cover for lust, even when we know better.

Small wonder many people don't find it.

In Judaism, the highest form of love,

whether it is love of another person or love of God, is service.

"I love you," according to the Torah,

is another way of saying “I serve you.”

If you say you love me it means, you serve me.

If this particular shoe fits the relationship in question,
then to the Jewish way of thinking, it's love.

This can play out in real life as follows.

When your beloved asks, “Will you do this for me?”

The proper response is “Yes, I'll do that--and what more can I do?”

And in these egalitarian times, needless to say

it applies to both partners in the relationship.

I've given that snippet to numerous couples under the *chuppa*.

And it often gets some laughter that's maybe a little nervous.

So okay, we can acknowledge that it's an ideal.

But it is good to have ideals.

And the ideal here is to serve.

Love is accessible to all of us.

In the midst of all the mysteries we don't understand,

In the face of all the problems we may never solve,

We still have the ability to love--to serve,

to elevate ourselves and others in the process,

and by so doing make our lives not only bearable, but worth living.

So if I may be so bold, how's your love life?

However it is, I can pretty much give you a rabbi's promise

That the more you make it about serving, the better it will be.

Whether we are loving other people, or loving God.

Like our personal relationships, our relationship with God can be complicated.

God is not an easy partner.

God is difficult to understand. God is not easy to deal with.

Sometimes, as in any love affair, people will say “Enough,”

and walk away from God.

Believe me I understand.

But that relationship too can be salvaged by service.

So let's ask, “What else can I do for you, O One who dwells on high?”

We know that answer too.

It's 613 chapters long but there are several short versions.

“Do justice, practice kindness, walk with humility.”

“Love those around you as you love yourself.”

“Don't do anything to anyone else that you wouldn't want done to you.”

Whether it's God or man or woman or child, when we serve, we know love.

When we know love, we know blessing.

When we know blessing, we know comfort, *nechemta* and peace.

It may very well be that the world is off its rocker.

But when we look with depth, think with perspective and

live with faith, friendship and love,
We can stay on ours.

G'mar tov and l'shana tovah.