ב"ה

2023 High Holiday Message from Rabbi Jason Rubenstein to the Slifka Center Community

I hope my words find you and those you love well. These words are reaching you as New Haven stirs again with the possibilities of a new year of learning and teaching: moving trucks populate the shoulders of Orange Street to welcome graduate students and their belongings; teams of dining workers train together for the opening of the residential colleges; invitations are being finalized for visiting speakers throughout the semester. And along with it all, we prepare to end another Jewish year well and begin anew, as our ancestors have for a hundred generations, with purpose and conviction.

As we age and (hopefully) mature, the texture of repentance changes with us. We come to recognize the youthful ideal that we could and should remake ourselves, wiping away our faults and replacing them with virtues through a sheer act of will - as fantasy (or nightmare). Each year, among the many things we learn, is the solidity of our selves: we come to recognize the stability, across decades and different roles, of our patterns of thought and ways of walking; of those situations in which we transcend or stumble; of what we need to metabolize our grief and our joy. This isn't to say that we cannot or don't change, consciously or otherwise - we are constantly growing in some ways and shrinking in others, often long before we ourselves are aware of these changes.

And so it should not surprise us that, according to our rabbis of blessed memory, the work of repentance and self-improvement (which is both annual and constant) centers not on changing who and what we are, but on learning who and what we are - and then acting with that awareness in mind. Our rabbis convey this lesson, at once relief and challenge, in their unexpected, implausible, brilliant reading of the book of Jonah.

Our Rabbis' critical insight into the story of Jonah - the warning to the city of Nineveh; Jonah's attempted flight from his mission; his engulfment in and disgorgement by a whale; ultimate delivery of his prophetic burden and salvation of the city - is that Jonah is not the character who commands our attention. Prophets, even reluctant ones, are among the most frequent characters of the Bible: Jonah's travail is told at greater length, but doesn't cover ground beyond that broken by Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Elijah.

The unique, captivating character of the book of Jonah is the (anonymous) king of Nineveh. Jonah does not even address him directly, much less confront him: when the town's residents convey the prophet's message of impending doom to the king, he orders an immediate halt to all activities of daily living. He then leads his people in communal fasting, prayer, and repentance - saving them and their city in their midst. Among the targets of Biblical prophecy, this king is exceptional in the extreme - he could not be more different from the refractory kings who ignored, harassed, and imprisoned Jeremiah and Elijah.

And it is here that our Rabbis' brilliance flashes in a single, playfully radical assertion: the king of Nineveh is none other than Pharaoh of the Exodus. Working in a minority tradition that Pharaoh did not drown in the Sea along with his army, but survived to witness the devastation of the army and nation he led, our rabbis then write the next chapter of this failed leader's life. What does one do, what could one do, having not only seen the collapse of one's people, but having caused it?

In our rabbis' telling, this man again rises through the ranks of leadership - there is an acknowledgement, begrudging perhaps, of the skills and talents of our greatest foe - and then, at the critical moment, mines his past failure for wisdom that saves thousands. We do not know whether this man is still stubborn, but we know that he has learned the cost of his stubbornness, and that he is able to save his people from Divine threat because of, and not despite, his earlier failings.

When I think of the members of this community, and particularly our students, I want them - and I know this will sound strange - to walk in Pharaoh's footsteps. Each of us is rich in not only promise, virtues, and talents - but also in failures. In this sense we are like the Pharaoh of the Bible: we have not always been good stewards of the things we have cared about, and of the people we have cared for. This is difficult to confront, and the difficulty of confronting it without wallowing in self-hatred is the first and hardest part of penitence.

We have a chance to evolve from the Pharaoh of the Bible to the Pharaoh of the rabbis, from the disastrous leader of Egypt to the saving leader of Nineveh, when we correctly discern how, when, and where we've failed - and use those lessons again. This doesn't mean we have necessarily become different people along the way, only that we have acquired, sometimes at great cost, the ability to truly see the effects of our actions on those around us.

This learning, of what life with others means, and what it requires of us, is the thread that unites everything that students experience and create at Slifka. There is no lesson more important, or more omnipresent, than the ways we matter to one another: it is what draws students to Shabbat dinners week after week, it is what inspires students to exert themselves in leadership on behalf of the community, and it is the heart of every pastoral conversation.

It is nothing less than this - helping Jewish students grow into people who delight in Jewish community, and who are willing and able to bear its burdens when necessary - that you are supporting when you support Slifka Center. On behalf of all of them - and those who, like Nineveh's residents, will reap the benefits of the wisdom they acquire here - thank you.

Over my five years here, I have come to appreciate in new and ever-deeper ways the nobility of our work of introducing Jewish students to the life-expanding richness of their past. This past begins with the Torah, and it includes the complexity of the first eighteen years of their own lives. But it is the links between - of our brilliant, audacious Rabbis (who rewrite the meaning of our shared past, making it new and old all at once); and of you, the community of alumni, parents, and supporters - that constitute the tradition our students enter into, and which they are already in the process of re-creating anew.

It is one of the great honors of my life to work with my colleagues here at Slifka Center to partner with you in making the past accessible, inspiring, and new to today's Yale students - who will in turn do the same for those who come after them. Thank you.

May this new year hold only goodness and blessing for you and those you care about, as you search out the fruits of the past that are coming into ripeness at this season.

Shanah tovah,
Jason

Rabbi Jason Rubenstein
Howard M. Holtzmann Jewish Chaplain at Yale