

THE SNUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL
YOM KIPPUR EVE
OCTOBER 8, 2019 ✨ 10 Tishri 5780
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"Two are better than one ... and the triple cord will not easily snap." Lately, I have been thinking a great deal about these words from Ecclesiastes, a message so contrary to what we are accustomed to hear: "Leave me alone;" "I can do it myself;" "It is my way or the highway."

Our fractious political environment increasingly tends toward polarization and fragmentation. Compromise is a dirty word. Cooperation is non-existent. We yell at each other rather than converse. Or worse, we do not converse at all with those with whom we disagree.

As I worried about what all of this will mean for our children and grandchildren, I came across an article that gave me hope. The essay focused on the natural world and its propensity for cooperation. We have not been all that kind to nature, but maybe nature could teach us humans something.

The essay explained that evolutionary theory has been interpreted to mean that "survival of the fittest" means "survival of the ruthless". But new studies show that evolutionary progress is attained not only by competitive struggle but by the relaxation of selective forces. Mathematical biologist Martin Nowack calls this process, not "the STRUGGLE for survival"... but "the SNUGGLE for survival."

In cold environments, instead of struggling alone to survive, mice snuggle together. Since they are not warm blooded animals that can succeed independently in frigid conditions, they huddle for warmth. By huddling together, mice create a super organism without having to grow a larger body, and they pass that adaptation on to their offspring.

It is not only mice that benefit from cooperation. Corals, for example, do the same thing by building reefs that not only protect them, but create a habitat for countless other species and enable them to prosper.

Penguins also excel at cuddling in order to endure the frigid blizzards of Antarctica. They bring the baby penguins to huddle together for hours. As the snowstorms intensify, the penguin colonies come closer and closer together to shelter each other. The huddle circle is strategically organized so that every penguin from the center to the periphery of the circle has a chance to warm up in the middle.

Monarch butterflies also cluster together in colonies on trees for protection as they travel from cold to warmer climes. Tens of thousands can gather on a single tree. Although they each weigh less than a gram, tens of thousands add to the weight and generate heat.

The same intuitive mechanism of mutual protection and cooperation applies to birds. They fly in formation, avoiding predators, accelerating with dazzling esthetics and clever maneuvers. Schools of fish do as much.

And so it has often been with humans. As we collected into ever larger groups, the development of complex technology accelerated; artisans and innovators specialized in their crafts; exchange of ideas and the need to live side by side fostered our ability to coexist. Aggressive, uncooperative individuals had a harder time in subsisting and surviving. Humans became a gentler, more cooperative species in the course of time. We call it "civilization."

Reading all of this research I was reminded of a trip to California where Sandy and I visited the stately and beautiful California Redwoods. The Sequoias are regularly threatened by summer fires, yet somehow they endure. Surprisingly, despite their towering presence that testifies to longevity and permanence, Sequoias do not have the deep roots that typically keep tall trees strong and alive. So, what allows them to grow to over 300 feet and live for 2500 years, making them the largest, longest living and among the most elegant organisms on earth? Sequoias survive because they grow in groves. In shallow soil, their root system interconnects and spreads, often for 300 feet. Their survival is predicated not upon isolation, independence, but upon interdependence, cooperation, and outreach. Through storms, winds, flashes and fires, the redwoods endure.

There are lessons to be learned from the huddling mice and penguins, the intricate coral reefs, the clustering butterflies, and the intertwining Sequoias. As individuals and families, as communities and nations, we can best survive **with** one another and **not against** each other. Would that we might heed the example of the penguins, the sequoias and the butterflies, the birds and the fish. Competition and exclusion are not the way forward. It is **not the fittest** who survive, **but the friendliest**.

Alfred North Whitehead, a British mathematician, philosopher and theologian, once suggested that "religion is what a man does with his own solitariness". He was reflecting the spiritual individualism that defines so much of the western religious tradition. But Mordecai Kaplan and other Jewish thinkers teach, to the contrary, that religion is what we do as a collective. While every person is a seeker, there is no minyan of one person. A minyan is a quorum, nine people searching for one; one person searching for nine. Rabbi Kaplan observed that a sense of "belonging" is the most defining characteristic of Jewish identity. Everything else, "Believing," and "Behaving" flow from it. It is a community of belonging that affords us the nest and the cradle, the history and the context to develop significant expressions of belief and behaviors. Absent a sense of belonging, we are atomized entities without a sense of enduring purpose and meaning.

Judaism is the evolving "religious civilization of the Jewish people". We are like the penguins in the Antarctic circles, the corals in the reefs, and yes, even the mice in their huddles, yearning for interdependence with the collective as we evolve and discover meaning and purpose.

The prophet Isaiah imagined a time when this cooperation, the **“survival of the friendly”** as opposed to **the “survival of the fittest,”** would be reflected in all of nature, a time when

The wolf shall dwell with the sheep, and the leopard shall lie next to the kid, and the calf and the young lion and the fatling shall be together...

and they shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, for the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of God, as the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 11: 6-9).

Far from an idyllic pastoral, this is a vision of a world so evolved that the huddling, the cuddling, and nurturing care allow for a safe and protective environment where the most vulnerable can dwell in safety. Can we approximate this time? Can we turn poetry and metaphor into practical reality?

We have much work to do. Polarization has become the norm; attack and insult, the way. In the immigration detention centers, staff have been cautioned not to cuddle the babies and toddlers. Less cuddling and huddling and more isolation and denigration have become the norm.

Governments work against one another rather than together to solve world problems: immigration, climate change, the arms race, weapons control, and the drug epidemic. We substitute tribalism for statehood; racial identity for nationhood; survival of a few for survival of the whole. We define humanity in our image and are blind to the divine image in our neighbor.

Contrary to the organisms and animal species that snuggle and huddle for survival, we reject; we disperse; we disengage. We have developed an ethos which is adverse to and subversive of human survival. We believe in rugged individualism, going at it alone, outdoing one another.

Competition is good, if it helps to lift society up. Debate and argument are good, if through them we engage for a higher purpose, what our tradition calls for *L'shem Shamayim*, "the sake of heaven". But competition and diatribe are dangerous when they ignore the periphery and leave others out in the cold.

Indiana author, Scott Russell Sanders, observes how nature serves as our inspiration and ally:

We can make peace with the rest of creation, perhaps more easily than we can make peace with our own kind.

Unlike humans, who seethe with resentment over past wrongs, the whales and wolves and rivers and woods hold no grudges. They answer our love with healing.

What more joyful and promising work could there be than to help nurture and restore wildness? For that good work we have a powerful ally in wildness itself.

So, here we are gathered on this Yom Kippur. We have come together because, like many other creatures in nature, we require, at least from time to time, one another's company, support, encouragement, warmth, assurance, guidance, care.

We come to this sacred place, "not to unburden ourselves, but to share our burden" (heard from Indianapolis City Council President, Vop Osili, 10/5/2019). On this Yom Kippur we come together because we need to share the burden, and want to share the joys, to increase the hope and to care. To care.

Rabbi Yohanan Ben Zakkai, (the sage who saved Judaism following the destruction of the Temple in the 1st century), concluded that above learning, piety and any other consideration, the most important quality a person can have is a *Lev Tov*, a caring heart. As a rabbi, I too have come to that conclusion. For, as President Teddy Roosevelt once observed: "People don't care how much you know until they know, how much you care." Like so many of God's creatures in the world of nature, let us show our best nature and dare to care.

For humans, caring, coming together for common purposes is not always easy. I imagine, if you are a porcupine, snuggling together for warmth and protection can get "sticky." Yet that is what family, community and nation are all about. Working out the sticky points and staying together for a common cause.

This Yom Kippur, let us ask ourselves who are we leaving out in the cold?

What of the poor, the immigrant, the ill?

Are we as prudent as the sequoia who are strengthened by interconnection?

Are we half as shrewd as the mice who survive a harsh environment because they come close to one another?

Are we as wise as the penguins in bringing the periphery into the center?

Do we, like the corals, create habitats that benefit and protect not only our own, but others as well?

Do we cluster like the soaring Monarch butterflies or do we confine others, and then abandon and disperse?

Are we the UNITED STATES or the UNTIED STATES, divided against ourselves and dismissive of our closest friends? Where you place your "I," makes all the difference.

Emma Lazarus, a beloved American Jewish poet, said it in plain Jewish-American language: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free ... send these, the tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

Will we lift our lamp, or will we turn off the lights?

Will we stand for and by ourselves, or will we huddle and be there for one another?

Will we heed the prudence of the natural world and recognize that we are interconnected, that what happens to one, impacts all? That what happens here, impacts there?

Tomorrow's Haftarah from the Prophet Isaiah is a clarion warning:

...You fast in strife and contention....
You pursue your business and oppress the laborers
...
Do you call this a fast?
A day favorable to God?
...
No, this is the fast that is required
To unlock the fetters of wickedness,
And untie the cords of the yoke;
To let the oppressed go free;
...to share your bread with the hungry,
And to welcome the poor into your home;
When you see the naked, to clothe them...,
And not be indifferent to [the pain of] human flesh.

Then shall your light burst though like the dawn
And your healing shall speedily spring forth.
Your righteousness shall march before you
And the presence of God will enfold you.

(Selections from Isaiah 58)

A lot to ask, but can we at least begin?

I wish you a New Year of huddling and cuddling, companionship and joy, justice and peace.

L'shanah tovah tikatevu v'tehatemu.

May our names be entered and sealed in the Book of Life.