

B'har-B'chukotai 5777
Rabbi Michael Adam Latz
Shir Tikvah Congregation
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I'm going to pose a question that I'm willing to bet 1,000,000 bucks you never expected me to ask:

What is Chaos Theory?

Chaos is the science of surprises, of the nonlinear and the unpredictable. It teaches us to expect the unexpected. While most traditional science deals with supposedly predictable phenomena like gravity, electricity, or chemical reactions, Chaos Theory deals with nonlinear things that are effectively impossible to predict or control, like turbulence, weather, the stock market, our brain states, and so on... Recognizing the chaotic, [fractal] nature of our world can give us new insight, power, and wisdom. For example, by understanding the complex, chaotic dynamics of the atmosphere, a balloon pilot can “steer” a balloon to a desired location. By understanding that our ecosystems, our social systems, and our economic systems are interconnected, we can hope to avoid actions which may end up being detrimental to our long-term well-being.”

Now, this impressive science is something the authors of nascent Torah text inherently understood even if they don't have all the complex theory of chaos fully articulated. We read in the earliest verses of Torah the phrase “*tohu vavohu*”—chaos reigned at the creation of the world—before God was present.

We are living through a time of rough and painful political chaos... In the past 10 days, we have been assaulted with a dizzying array of political events—the firing of the FBI director; the president sharing state secrets with the Russians; the testimony of the Acting Attorney General; the appointment of the Assistant Secretary of Homeland Security who openly embraces white supremacy and has overseen the

death of at least five people in his jurisdiction as Sheriff; the fired FBI Director revealing he kept details memos of the President asking him to impede an investigation; members of the White House administration and the President contradicting each other within minutes; and the Tweets—oh the Tweets! Each one of these events *alone* would shake the foundation of our democracy—but together, they have created an atmosphere—a vortex—of absolute and utter chaos: where each hour is dominated by disorder, turbulence, and unpredictability in the very institutions that are designed to provide structure, stability, and order.

I asked on Facebook recently for people who lived through Watergate with Nixon if this is what it was like.... Dozens and dozens of people commented... Almost all of them said this is worse... Such chaos—such direct attacks on treasured Americans institutions by the President and his administration are infuriating, destabilizing, terrifying, and demoralizing.... it can make us feel untethered and rudderless...

Which brings us to this week's parsha. It's a double Torah portion that concludes the book of *Vayikra*—Leviticus. The central book of Torah focuses mostly on the Cohen—the Priest—and the mitzvot, the commands of how to live a holy existence. Sacrifice, prayer, sacred time, and purity are the buzz words of this sefer—this book—of Torah. One can almost imagine the sacred rites and rituals at the Holy Temple—the burning incense, the majestic priestly robes, the glorious music, the people crying out to connect with the Divine in awe and agony and hope.

Ironically, Leviticus doesn't end with ceremonial majesty or holy rollers preaching how to cleave to God's presence.

We end Leviticus with the duty, explicit instructions, and organization plan of how to protect our society—morality, economics, politics, and justice are woven together in the ideas of Shmita and Yovel—the sabbatical and Jubilee years; Shmita every seven, Yovel every 50. They

are bold, radical visions of the society we are obligated to build: A society that honors water and the earth and the mountains—that when we sing about the amazement of creation on Shabbat, we are reaffirming our commitment to Divine Creation not as a political platitude but as a moral commitment.

Shmita and Yovel—they weren't simply nice ritual commands—they were ways to re-order societies towards fairness because they understood we could easily—and certainly overtime—get out of whack and unjust. The people's debts would be forgiven; that slaves would be free; that everyone—the haves and the have nots, the wildly successful and the weird schlemiel—everyone would start from the same place of communal equality and societal justice.

Shmita and Yovel imagine a society built upon the conscious respect for labor, where we treat people who shower after work with the same level of respect and opportunities as we do the people who shower before we go to work.

In a time when our faith in our public institutions are tested, when the president and his morally bankrupt administration seem to practically revel in creating chaos, what is up to us is not that we can control the chaos—because, often we can't—but we can decide how we engage it and how we respond to it. Chaos in the universe may be a natural phenomenon and in the current administration, it appears to be a daily—hourly—phenomenon.

As a spiritual, moral, ethical people, we have several responses to this unnecessary chaos, this intentional disorder and disruption to the values and systems we hold dear. And while I get the impulse to tune it out, to harden our hearts to it, to down play it or ignore it, that is simply not an acceptable moral response. We are a people who wake up to and are attuned to the pain and suffering around us; we have faced Pharaohs before—checking out, despite our natural desire to do

so—is not permissible when the people causing the chaos harm our neighbors, our community and our planet.

Given the power and the weight of this chaos and the rapid fire pace it comes at us, how do we respond?

First, we remember that we are a people rooted in Torah—in a 3,000 plus year old tradition. We have the scope of history. Yes, this has been 120 days of bitter chaos that has left an immoral stench throughout the land. Politicians come and go—some, we pray, sooner than others. Memory is an act of moral resistance.

Torah—engaging, studying, lifting, reading Torah is a theological response and act of resistance to chaos. One of the reasons we read Torah publicly is to anchor ourselves in our ancient moral commitments so that we can build the structures of a society and a community where everyone—the wealthy and the poor alike—each have the same opportunities to thrive.

Finally, our resistance to this absurd and manufactured chaos is to live our Jewish values—these Torah values—values that endure and inspire us to action; Values that implicate us in this great human project, that call us to justice and to compassion, to serve ideals greater than ourselves. These ideals provide moral clarity in a time of chaos; they give us hope, they compel us to act in the public square, to show up and protest, to write and speak and sing and pray, to engage in the great moral project of democracy. These values demand that when others instigate chaos and promulgate suffering, we offer a vision of decency, moral courage, and human dignity and we engage that work, daily. We host our Muslim neighbors for Iftar dinner and we provide temporary Sanctuary for undocumented people; we gather in prayer and bring meals to our sick loved ones and we teach our children a Torah of mutual affection and respect. We teach, we preach, we live over and over again that amidst the chaos and in direct

response to it, we Jews rise with a vocal, holy, ecstatic call of hope and love.

Shabbat Shalom!