

Rosh HaShanah Morning Drash 5779  
10 September 2018  
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Shir Tikvah

They all gathered 'round Sarah and Abraham's table.

Abraham sits at the head. He is old, the patriarch, father to Ishmael and Isaac, with a wanderlust for God.

Sarah, first among the Jewish people, is seated, aging, withered according to the text, surprise mother to Isaac.

Hagar is present; she is Sarah's handmaiden, given to Abraham when Sarah believed herself to be barren, so he could have a son. God heard, Abraham coupled with Hagar, who then bore Ishmael.

Ishmael, too, is at the table, finding it hard to sit still; he's young, energetic, always ready to play.

Isaac, two, is at the table- bouncing on his mother, Sarah's knee. He's the child of their old age- a miraculous creation.

The family held a great feast [Gen. 21:8] on the day that Isaac was weaned at two years old [B. Talmud Gittin 75b]. You can imagine the foods that were served; the smells of fig and goat, pita bread and saffron and savory stews that filled their tent; their bittersweet joy and celebration of the weaned child, able to move more independently, but needing his parents slightly less than the day before. What joy should have filled that tent, that table, was clouded by the pain and jealousy of parents and children and old rivalries.

Sarah, now a mother in her own right to Isaac, felt their tent has grown too small. Hagar, she tells Abraham, must live up to her name- and be estranged from the family. Take Ishmael with her.

So one day after the great feast, Sarah turns to Abraham and demands:

"Cast out that slave-woman and her son! The son of that slave will not share the inheritance with my son Isaac." [Gen. 21:10]

There is room, in the heat of the desert and the narrowness of Sarah's emotional imagination, only for her husband and her son, Isaac. Hagar and Ishmael are banished.

Abraham, however, is greatly distressed by Sarah's demand because, Torah says, וַיִּבְרַח אַבְרָהָם מִפְּנֵי שָׂרָה אִשְׁתּוֹ, for it concerned a son of his.

God reassures Abraham that of Ishmael, a great nation will be made.

Abraham fails to protest and the next day, sends Hagar and Ishmael his son off into the desert heat with some bread and a skin of water [Gen 21:14].

There are so many *drashot*- so many sermons- in this story: Sarah's cruelty to Hagar; Abraham's complicity in this cruelty; how we treat strangers; how we treat people who work with us or serve us. They're all sermons yearning to be given.

But this New Year, these are not the sermons I am called to give.

That final dinner- what should have been a joyous feast of celebration- was full of dread and mourning. It would be their last meal together as a family- as convoluted and tangled and unorthodox a family as it was.

What haunts me about this story is this family's final time together around the dinner table:

What rage fills Sarah's heart?

What terror invades Hagar's soul?

What emotional paralysis allows Abraham to permit his son to be cast out?

What horror must have pervaded Ishmael's tender life to know he would never again see his father alive?

That final night together- starkly passed over without mention between two verses- distresses my heart.

This tormented family will rupture and break as we chant their story today. Their world- their mythic lives- cannot be repaired. It is a brokenness that can never be made whole.

It seems the rabbis picked an odd story for the start of the New Year. For years I've wondered: With all the powerful stories in Torah, why this one on Rosh HaShanah? Shouldn't we read something mystical and cosmic about creation? Or perhaps Lech Lecha, when Abraham and Sarah, the first Jews, are called forth to discover a new land. Or maybe Moshe at Mount Sinai- a great spiritual epic.

But this year, I don't wonder anymore. I get it. The rabbis in their sagely wisdom chose a story of wretched pain and brokenness and they said, "Nu? These people can never repair the brokenness in their hearts and in their lives. It's over for them. But you- you're still here. You're still alive. I know you're hurting, I know people have hurt you and you've caused other's pain. But you see, this project of *t'shuvah*- this new year of redemption- this is the chance to reclaim our time and our lives- to forgive those who have hurt us, to go to those we have hurt and ask their forgiveness, to take the time to repair what is busted; and, with a lot of tenderness and attentiveness, perhaps we create something more whole, more beautiful than it was before."

A family at dinner one night- dispersed and exiled the morning after.

We read this text on Rosh HaShanah as the new year dawns **not** because it's particularly pleasant or Minnesota nice; we read this story as a mirror-

Life does not have to be this way!

*Their* lives are shattered; we are called to *t'shuvah*- to look and to move in a new direction. We don't have to be like them. We can choose a different way.

How do we hold their pain- and hold our own- in this sanctuary? How do we move beyond the pain and grief- the hurts we know in our bones- into the promise of life renewed?

The rabbis imagined that the place to pray was the place that could hold our pain. And you knew it as soon as you arrived. The Midrash teaches that everyone entered the sanctuary from the left and moved clockwise, in one direction, as they made their way to the *Cohen Gadole*- the High Priest- and gave their offering.

Everyone.

Everyone- except the people with great loss, people who carried grief, who had survived tragedy, people who were mourning the death of their loved ones.

These people- self identified- entered the sanctuary from the right walked in the opposite direction around the holy gathering.

And the people who were fortunate enough *that year* not to be in mourning, greeted the mourners, "*Mah Lakh, Mah l'kha*- How are you? What's with you? Tell me your story."

Rabbi Anne Brenner explains, "When the Temple stood, the commonality of the various experiences of loss was publicly acknowledged. Others joined the mourners on the path. For it was understood that economic reversals, personal illness, relocation, and the illness of someone close required attention similar to that given to mourners.

The existence of the Mourner's Path confirmed that it is acceptable for those facing significant loss to be out of step with others [while it simultaneously] affirmed their status as a normal part of community life." <https://ritualwell.org/ritual/reclaiming-mourners-path>

The Targum [Rosh HaShanah 33b] calls Rosh HaShanah "Yom Yevava"- a day of sobbing- a day in which the shofar's call wakes our hearts and calls forth tears of grief that we might see one another in our brokenness.

The sanctuary itself was constructed in a way that the reverence it centered was not formality for its own sake; they weren't competing for the cover of "Ancient Architectural Digest." The rabbis conceived a sacred space that demanded we face the reality of death and grief and pain so that people would face one another, would acknowledge each other's suffering, would see each other's tears, would experience the giving and receiving of compassion to one another on the most sacred days, in the holiest of places.

But the rabbis didn't stop there.

In ancient times, not only did we move differently in the sanctuary, the rabbis imagined an “**Even Ha’toen**”- a Stone of Claiming- where a person would go to announce that they had lost something. Or a person would announce that they had found something.

A public place where people would hear stories of loss.”

Rabbi Aaron Brusso, my beloved friend and colleague teaches, “What a powerful place this must have been.

People describing what an item meant to them. Moments of reunification. Knowing there were others who lost things too.

The stone was not meant to be enshadowed by the person with the greatest story of loss. The point was not to win. The point was to allow the stories to transform you into a person of care, to turn you into a finder.

It’s not easy to listen to other people’s losses...

But the presence of the Stone of Claiming in public teaches us to listen.

Loss is measured by whether or not we still have a place to announce all lost things. A place that makes us most open to the vulnerabilities of others and to our own.

The Talmud seems to be telling us that as long as we use our experience of loss to be open to listening to other people’s losses we are not yet lost.

... [W]here is the Stone of Claiming? Where do we go to announce that we lost it? To talk about what it meant to us.

Once there was a place where I could go to hear you. And tell you how sorry I am for your loss.

But now it’s gone.

I lost the place where I could find myself through seeing you.” [Rabbi Aaron Brusso, Facebook, July 1, 2018].

I saw Rabbi Brusso last week. And I told him how deeply his Torah inspired me- but- as rabbis are wont to do- I imagined a different ending.

For each of us today in the face of this painful story of Ishmael and Hagar, Sarah and Isaac and Abraham; in the space of that final table where a family was to feast together one last time and then, like matza, crumble and break apart; for each of us who brings in our burdens and our brokenness into this sanctuary, we ask of each other, “*Mah Lach? Mah L’kha? Mah L’khem?*”

For these days together, in the cry of the shofar and the work of *t’shuvah*; in the meditation of prayer and the conversations between us, we make a decision- we must

choose not to be like our ancestors at the table at Isaac's weaning feast precisely because we face one another, because we know each of us moves through the sanctuary in our own way, that all of us are called to treat one another with compassion, tenderness, and dignity.

Together, we create this sanctuary facing one another as our "**Even Ha'Toen**"- our place to claim our story and to share it: the shards that are sharp and broken; the memories that are brilliant and beautiful; the pulse of our hopeful hearts that beat with promise and possibility; the tears of sobbing that fall from the brokenhearted.

Together, here, now, as inheritors of this ancient spiritual feast, we reunite the broken pieces of this story and the grief of our human failings. This moment, this sanctuary, this is our **Even Ha'Toen**. Face to face, those who ask "*Mah Lakh?*" and those sobbing on this Yom Yevava- this New Year- searching to express an answer.

Mary Oliver writes in her poem, *The Summer Day*:

Who made the world?  
 Who made the swan, and the black bear?  
 Who made the grasshopper?  
 This grasshopper, I mean-  
 the one who has flung herself out of the grass,  
 the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,  
 who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-  
 who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.  
 Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.  
 Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.  
 I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
 I do know how to pay attention,  
 how to fall down into the grass,  
 how to kneel down in the grass,  
 how to be idle and blessed,  
 how to stroll through the fields,  
 which is what I have been doing all day.  
 Tell me, what else should I have done?  
 Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
 Tell me,  
**What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?**

Shanah Tovah.