

Messy Redemption

RH 5782

This spring we emerged from our homes- with shots in our arms we could finally be in the same space, the same home as our dearest friends and family- we could sit across the table and share a drink or dinner with someone in real life. It was bliss. Fear began to dissipate and for the first time in 18 months many of us felt more connected than we had in a year and a half. Not only that, but the simple pleasures of life became sacred. Hugging, the scent of a loved one, sharing a meal together, sitting next to someone as you laughed out loud- it felt like redemption had come. And then the summer came- Delta rose- fear returned- masks returned- restrictions returned. Anger rose. Blame rose. Redemption was here and now it's gone. Too soon. The story does not always go the way we want it to. And when it doesn't we fight like crazy.

The world is messy. People are messy. Disease is messy.

Redemption is messy. We are constantly trying to fit everything into tidy boxes. We have this vision that our lives should go a certain way.

Our American culture would have us believe that the story goes like this: we are born, we are raised with wonderful parents who know everything about how to raise us, we go to school, we do well, we achieve success in career and we age well with a loved one by our side. This is the story we are trained to believe is true and the picture of what life should look like and when it does not- we are functioning outside of the norm.

I know so many people. I see the intricacies of your lives and I know my own life. I do not know one single person- honestly --that I actually want to spend time with- whose life looks like the picture I described.

Many of us have parents who had chaotic upbringings and brought that chaos into our lives- maybe we found our way in school and careers but then our kids have struggled in ways we don't quite understand. Or there is illness. Illness that hit out of the blue or over

a long period of time. There is unexpected loss, death, loss of jobs, of marriage. This is actually life.

We are messy because we are human. In the Torah, God begins creation with a very structured start. The light goes with the day. The darkness at night. The stars in the sky. The water separated from the dry ground. All was good. But the moment humans arrive- things go astray. We just cannot be ordered, but we have a very hard time accepting that. We imagine our lives and we want so much to predict what will happen and when life goes off the tracks- we resist. I hear these words a lot: "It is not fair. It should not happen this way." We spend a lot of time resisting what is -- and most times we miss the cycle of light that comes out of the chaos. The messy reality of creation that emerges from being off the path. If we are open to the experience that we are actually living and not the life we think we should be living. Redemption does not come without loss, pain, hardship- but loss, pain and hardship are not all there is. Redemption also does not stay- we move in and out of redemptive moments but

nothing stays forever. The world we live in is constantly moving and changing and we do not ultimately have the controls.

I want to describe redemption. Redemption is clarity, a moment of connection, of love, of seeing something that we just could not see before, connecting with another or the natural world in a way that lifts the borders and boundaries that we are usually walking around boxed in. Redemption can deliver us to better shores physically, spiritually, intellectually, societally, communally or holistically. Redemption can be a big moment like the splitting of the sea for the children of Israel.

They decide to leave Egypt and God meets them at the sea to make a path to freedom. But for most of us, most of the time, redemption occurs in a small everyday kind of way. A moment of clarity, a re-unification of a relationship that has been broken for a long time, finally being seen- in a job, in a relationship, within ourselves.

Redemption is ongoing and forever. It does not come like a messianic moment and shift everything forever. Redemption can be a small light in the midst of darkness. Not a light that breaks the difficulty of everything, that takes us out of Egypt, but a moment that fuels our

souls, gives us strength to keep going and reminds us that there is indeed a loving energy in the universe.

My dear friend Jennie Litvack, zichrona livracha taught me this idea of finding redemptive moments even in the dark. Jennie had been diagnosed with cancer and for 5 years she went through any type of treatment she could find to cure the cancer. Though the treatments would at times wreak havoc on her body, she was so committed to being on this earth that she just kept going. At a certain point in her treatments she began to flow into a cycle of 3-6 weeks between scans. Scans that would reveal whether another tumor had emerged or grown which would lead to treatment which would slow her down OR whether she would gain more time for life with a clean scan. When the cycle became apparent Jennie saw the 3-6 weeks in between treatments as redemption and she would pack more life into those days than most people do in a lifetime. She planned international travel, trips to NY to see shows and go out to dinner with her beloved, she meditated with gurus, she took her kids out of school for a day of skiing, she went to Aspen to hike the mountains or flew to

Israel to find the perfect shofar, she walked the beach in Puerto Rico and flew to Israel in search for the perfect shofar. She made it to two high school and one college graduation. Those were the moments of redemption in between the dark, hard days of treatment and setbacks. They fueled quicker recoveries and I feel that the determination to live even through the darkness gave her light. She would always say to me that she wanted to be present for what is- to be treated for the illness, to cry for the sadness and to live in the now- all of it- it all made her feel very alive. The colors of the sky were richer, the love was boundless and she was just present in the full catastrophe living that is here if we let it in.

To find redemption in the darkness, we have to be awake. The Rav-Joseph Soloveitchik taught:

“In moments of agony and despair, when living becomes ugly and absurd- in those VERY moments - God addresses us. “Not from infinity but from infinitesimal. Not from the vast stretches of the universe but from a single spot in the darkness which surrounds suffering man, from within the despair itself. Eleven years ago my

wife lay on her deathbed and I watched her dying- day by day, hour by hour. Medically I could do very little for her; all I could do was pray. However, I could not pray in the hospital; somehow I could not find God in the whitewashed long corridors....The moment I returned home I would rush to my room, fall on my knees and pray fervently. God appeared in those moments not as the exalted, Majestic King, but rather as a humble, close friend, father, brother; in such moments of despair, He was not far from me, He was right there in the room. I felt his warm hand, on my shoulder, I hugged His knees, He was with me in the narrow confines of a small room, taking up no space at all.”

What the Rav is describing here is not only his pain and loss, but also the intimate, loving arms of God wrapped around him as he lost his wife. Whether or not you believe in God, there is a presence, a knowing, an intimate touch of the universe that we won't be able to see if we are fighting too hard against what is happening and missing these awakened moments. So we need to go into the storms when they come and to anchor ourselves with relationships, community, God, and tradition. That is what we have.

These redemptive moments came from a practice of being awake to what was happening, not running, or hiding or pretending that life was not what it was in the moment. It was also through a faithfulness that even in this profound darkness there is a loving light that holds us together. For me this light is God, but if you don't believe in God then perhaps it is the grounding energy of community or the force of life itself.

There is this amazing story about this cycle of darkness and light of the holiness found even in the dark which is told in a midrash in Shemot Rabbah. It is a story that comes from the time period when b'nei Yisrael were slaves in Egypt. Pharaoh decreed that all of the baby boys should be thrown into the Nile. At this time, when an Israelite woman felt that she was about to give birth, she would go out to the fields and have her child there. After she had given birth, she would leave the infant there saying to God, "Lord of the World! I have done my part now you do Yours!"

Rabbi Yohanan said "God God's self would immediately come down to cut the umbilical cord and to wash and anoint the infant. God would place two stones in the child's hand- from one the child would suckle oil and from the other honey. The children would grow up in the fields and when they were asked "who took care of you?" they replied, a certain young man came down and took care of all of our needs. When Israel reached the sea, those same children were among them. They saw God at the sea and said to their parents "This is the one who did those things for us when we were in Egypt! Thus Scripture says "THIS is my God and I will glorify God!" (Exodus 15:2)

This midrash is teaching that God was present when slavery was happening. Not far away unaware of what was going on but present enough that the women would call God out and say- "do your part!" God would come down in the midst of a terribly dark time and nurture these babies. These babies grew up in slavery. In the pains of Egypt- but that nurturing presence- that miracle of being taken care of was not lost to them. It was embedded even when things got tough. Then redemption rose again- crossing the sea they looked out and noticed

God who had nurtured them. Why did God not bring these children to freedom right away? We will never know. But they held on and through the dark- light came again.

This midrash says that God was there. God knew. Terrible things happen in the world and they are not about the absence of God. There is a holy chaotic mess of energy that is at work all of the time. Sometimes those forces bring us the most stunning moments and then we all cycle into darkness too. Suffering is part of the human experience- sometimes because of cruelty we inflict upon each other, sometimes because of occurrences in the natural world and sometimes because of our own unawareness or unwillingness to change patterns in our lives. Whatever it is- the darkness is not the absence of God and it is also not the end of the story. It is a part of the story and if we embrace the darkness, we can find unimaginable wisdom and sometimes the path to lead us to redemption.

Today the shofar blows. It is a call for us to wake up. But it is not just the tekiah- the smooth single sound. We are also supposed to listen for the teruah and the shevarim- the broken sounds and when we take all of that in- we eventually reach a tekiah gedolah- the greatest sound there is.

The medieval great Maimonides quoting the Mishnah said:

This Teruah that the Torah discusses, due to the many years of exile, we are unsure what it is. It may be the wail that women wail amongst themselves while crying. It may be the sigh that one does, one after the other, whilst they are worried about a great stress. It may also be both together, the sigh followed by the cry, as it usually comes afterwards. This may be called teruah, as this is the way of a worrier, to first sigh, and then cry. (Mishneh Torah, Shofar, Sukkah and Lulav 3:2)

He goes on to say that: “Even though the blowing of the shofar on Rosh HaShanah is a Biblical decree, it hints at something..to “Wake

up, sleepers, from your sleep! And slumberers, arise from your slumber!”

To be awake is to bear witness to this unimaginable gift we have been given to live. To open our hands and our hearts to what is. The pain, the rapture, the love, the grief, the conflict. This is life. When we can see it, when we can be in it without running from it- we have the chance to stand on the brinks of the sea and say “zeh Eli vaanveihu”- this- this is my God and I will glorify this. This- this is the life you have given me and I am in it. From this place- the hope is that we take this material and make space for the energy of redemption to meet us- not in a dream- not in a story- but in the real light and dark- dancing together as they will. May it be so, quickly and in our day. Amen.

