

Rosh Hashanah 5779

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Last month, when Unite the Right threatened to bring their hate to DC, we held a press conference with the mayor's office here at Adas. The conference brought the mayor, officials, the chief of police and the chief of the parks department as well as our fellow clergymen and women from around the city. We united under the banner of preparation, safety and filling the city with messages of love.

As Aaron and I sat in the Beit Am- in front of cameras and the mayor and the entire press- the chief of police, the chief of the parks department, and the mayor made their way to the microphone which was right next to me. Their guns- so neatly placed on their belts were literally right next to my ear. As they discussed the issues of the city from the microphone- my mind and eyes kept wandering to the guns attached to their waists. I had this urge to touch them- No, I was not going to do anything but I was curious about these dangerous weapons. Right next to my face. Somehow I could not get myself to focus on anything else. I kept looking at Aaron so I could remind myself of who I am- that I was not actually going to act on this impulse, but I also did not trust myself. I put one hand over the other as if to hold it down, just in case. A stranger inside of me had emerged and I wanted to make sure I remained in control of her.

After the press conference had ended and the crowds had left, I sat with Aaron and David and relayed this story as if to relieve myself of the burden of holding this strange, foreign impulse. I needed them to remind me that I was in fact still my good self. I found my way back to myself by the act of Vidui- a confession to reveal what had been going on for me. This internal strange thing that had just happened, which I felt some shame about- voiced out loud. Now I no longer had to carry the burden alone.

I joke about this- but the truth is, I have been thinking a lot about the stranger- the stranger that dwells within each one of us. Those times in life when the story of our lives on the outside does not match what is happening on the inside. Nobody escapes feeling lost or as the stranger at some point in our lives.

Like those moments when-----you get a new job and you feel like an imposter. You have a baby and you don't know who you are anymore- you lost your loved one 3 years ago- it looks like you have everything back in order, but you still can't find yourself. You come out of the mikvah after 12 months of intense study for conversion and you just don't feel like you belong. You have become a citizen of the United States, but you still feel like you are an outsider. Or when your country no longer feels like your own.

All those quiet places of feeling out of place- where you cannot find home inside- a nagging pushing at the heart and the mind. Forever on the run. Nobody escapes feeling homeless inside at some point in their life. It's part of the human condition-

The rabbis had an antidote for this feeling--it's called Vidui----- saying the words out loud and giving voice to what is going astray internally. Saying- I am lost, I am on the run, I just experienced a part of myself that does not feel familiar, or normal, or ok. Saying these words to a friend, to yourself, to God out loud- and not suffering alone. It is the first step to returning to ourselves after alienation. It is one of the first steps in the act of teshuvah and it helps us to return home.

36 times the Torah repeats the command to love the stranger. The Torah reminds us that we were strangers in a strange land. We got out of that land, but God never wanted us to forget that feeling of being on the run---it has become part of who we are-- it's also part of being human. Our work in this season is to turn toward the stranger- to see her, to seek to understand where she is coming from and where she has the potential to go.

Over the past couple of years we have been fed hateful rhetoric from the current administration about the stranger- the refugee, the immigrant that seeks a new home. This administration wants us to believe that **all** outsiders are dangerous, illegal, want to do us harm and should be kept out at all costs. I certainly believe there are people out there who are dangerous ---and--- appropriate, measured policies should be put into place, but when **every single outsider**, particularly of color, is deemed the enemy- something else is going on.

In an article in the Times this summer, poet and professor Elizabeth Alexander wrote about her late husband, a refugee from Eritrea- who even after achieving citizenship, marrying a Yale professor, birthing 2 kids, becoming an artist, never felt truly home. He came to the United States in 1981 from Eritrea after many decades of war. He fled death squads, saw classmates disappear, hid from soldiers. At the ripe age of 16, he was sent away by his mother- to save his life. He traveled on foot to Sudan, Italy, Germany and eventually the United States.

He worked hard, became a citizen, built a life, became part of his community and brought life to that community. After the Sept. 11 attacks, when brown people and people with “unusual” last names were being rounded up, he would break into an anxious sweat most days, worried that he was no longer secure in what was now his country. That he might be separated from Elizabeth, and his beloved boys.

Elizabeth wrote, “Ficre died unexpectedly, a few days after his 50th birthday, from cardiac arrest. Several doctors separately said to me they were not surprised to hear he was a refugee. More than one cardiologist told me, the heart is a metaphor and the heart is real. Sustained strain can break the heart. People who walk to freedom often carry that strain for the rest of their lives, invisible, but ever-present.”

This story stuck with me for weeks after reading it. Both the incredible resilience of Ficre and so many refugees I have come to know and also that gnawing, internal feeling, that even upon gaining citizenship, making a home, building a family, adapting into a

society--- he never felt that he was home. Externally he was known as one of the happiest people that anyone had ever met, but internally he worried that his children would be taken from him- so strong was that worry that it put strain on the heart. ---It was the refugee within, that never found a resting place. Forever homeless.

This invisible feeling-- the unsettling in the self is what I recognized as part of the human condition. Whether refugee or native born, whether fleeing a country or growing up with ease. In no way do I mean to say that we all have the experience of a refugee fleeing a country that is worn torn- but feeling alienated from the self, from your surroundings, from the life that is going on internally is real and has real life implications- it can affect our relationships, our work, and our lives. And when we don't give that feeling voice- relieving ourselves of feeling it alone, we suffer silently. Homesick and never settled in our own skin.

In a mystical commentary called the Peri HaAretz- shown to me by my friend and colleague Rabbi Elianna Yolkut- he teaches that words have actual energy. When we make an oral confession- saying, "I have sinned" or "I am lost" we transform the energy of the words and remove the power of shame or sin- the words transform and we take the vitality out of the feeling internally. Something shifts.

God reminds us of how to find home again once we lose it-- Let's go all the way back to the Garden of Eden. The place of perfection--that place where we once felt completely at home.

Adam and Eve were living nicely in the Gan- and there was that tree - the eitz hadaat- in the middle of the Garden they were not supposed to eat from- --- well, you know *that* story. After Adam and Eve eat from the tree, the reader sees into the first window of shame and hiding in the Torah. Adam and Eve's eyes are opened and they perceive that they are naked. They hear God in the garden and they hide. It's at this moment that we get the first question in the Torah. God asks them Ayeka. Where are you? Now.....God the all powerful, the all seeing certainly knows where they are...God is asking something different-- why are you hiding? What has happened internally? What did you do? Where do you find yourself now? What are you running from?

Adam says- I heard You and I was naked so I hid! Like a parent, God gets them to admit what they did- to bear their shame in the open. They confess. After the confession, they are no longer naked alone. Hiding. Though the Torah text pretty explicitly states that God punished Adam and Eve for their sin- the rabbinic tradition wants us to experience something else. A God who takes care of them because of their nakedness. Loving them and giving them a way to heal from their shame.

In Tractate Sotah, the rabbis ask, "How do we walk after God? How do we follow the Divine Presence?" The rabbis answer that we should imitate the attributes of God- Just

as God clothes the naked, as it is written: “And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skin, and clothed them” (Genesis 3:21), so too, should you clothe the naked.

When God hears the confession of Adam and Eve- he finds the clothing to help take away their shame and restore their humanity. It's the rabbi's way of emphasizing compassion, comfort and restoration when shame arises.

10 years ago- I gave birth to my beautiful daughter- Before giving birth I read every book on parenting, took classes, talked to friends- and when we came home from the hospital with our perfect baby girl- 10 fingers, 10 toes, radical amazement---- but all I could feel inside was lost. Tears followed me for weeks- that turned into months. Here I was in the life I had imagined and I could not feel what was right in front of me. I could see with my eyes this perfect child, the expansion of my family, but my heart couldn't feel what my eyes could see. I felt internal shame. As people flowed into our apartment and told me how happy I must feel, how amazing it must feel to be a new mom, I smiled and agreed but internally I was lost, sad, and confused.

I had struggled with depression and anxiety for parts of my life and I had returned to that dark place. I could not get out. I was trying hard to hide it. When I finally uttered the words to my mom, to my husband, to my sisters- My vidui---my confession-- Shame

could not stay. I did not recover overnight...it took a long time with the help of family, a great doctor, but confession was the first step towards finding myself again.

Our tradition wants to create a transportable home for us- whenever we are lost. When the world feels unfamiliar, when the language around us has become foreign and scary or when the stranger internally becomes too loud and unsettled. Home can be found again. But it doesn't come without admission. Without looking at that stranger within and voicing our shame out loud. This awareness should inform the way that we think about the actual refugee. Refugees are the embodiment of homelessness. This is why God reminds us 36 times in the Torah to love the stranger- it is hard to lose the ground beneath your feet.

The Zohar teaches that teshuvah - as a method of returning home- was an essential element of creation. Prior to creating this physical world God conceived of and created teshuvah and said to it, "Soon, I am going to create mortal human beings, but I do so on one condition: when they, because of their iniquities, because of their internal shame turn to you (teshuvah), you must be prepared to erase their faults." I would re-translate this to read- "teshuvah- when they turn to you- when they confess and bear their shame- running from all of the stuff inside of them that makes them feel foreign, pained, distant from who they want to be- when they feel alone and there is no rest- return them to Me. Help them feel held and that there is some place for their weary souls to rest and rebuild. So that I can open their eyes so they can see the well that resides within."

If we are feeling like refugees here internally, imagine what actual refugees who are fleeing must be feel like. We are experiencing one of the largest refugee crises in history and we have not figured out how to see refugees as humans. Humans that are homeless, and in fear, and suffering, and running and wanting just to find home. Our own internal work makes us more present, more awake, more ready to respond.

Teshuvah is the vehicle for returning each of us home. Returning us to the essence of who we are meant to be- without punishment or retribution- but rather with honesty, vulnerability and hearts cracked wide open.

Teshuvah is the vehicle for welcoming the stranger --reminding her that she is resilient even when living in a world where she feels lost-- it will remind her that she will land somewhere safely and find home.

Teshuvah is waiting for you. Waiting to greet your shame, waiting to bring us back from the far lands we traverse internally and waiting to clothe us and take away the naked sting of being lost.

May we all find our way back home. Shanah tovah.

