

The Cries of a Child: Rosh Hashanah Day I 5778

Once a Hasidic master was walking along a cobbled street in Eastern Europe some 200 years ago when he heard the sound of a baby coming from his student's home – a wrenching cry that pierced the night. The rabbi rushed into the house and saw his pupil enraptured in prayer, swaying rhythmically back and forth in pious devotion. He walked over to the infant, took her in his arms, and gently rocked her to sleep.

When the student emerged from his worship, he was much surprised to find his teacher in his home holding his daughter. "Master, what are you doing here?" the young man asked. The rabbi answered, "I was walking down the street when I heard the sound of a baby crying. So I followed it here and found your child alone and in distress."

"Master," the student replied. "I was so engrossed in my prayers that I did not even hear her. So very strong was my *kavannah* – my sacred intention – that it blocked out all the rest of the world!" "My dear student," began the rabbi, "If praying makes one deaf to the cries of a child, there is something deeply flawed in that prayer. Perhaps, it is not even really prayer at all."

Gathering here for Rosh Hashanah, one of the holiest days of the Jewish calendar, I would imagine that there may be some of us this year who wonder if we're not just a little too much like the distracted student. It's not necessarily that our prayers this morning *prevent* us from hearing the cries of children, the brokenness of modern society; it's rather the sense that when the world is falling apart around us it seems indulgent at best, irresponsible at worst, to sit staidly in our seats, mollified by mere words.

And it really does feel like the world is falling apart around us.

As people of conscience and especially as Jews, the atmosphere of hatred and intolerance - best exemplified by the demonstrations of alt-right, neo-Nazi, and white supremacist groups in Charlottesville, VA, last month but all too present in other places and spaces as well – both chills our heart and devastates our spirit. Over the last year we have witnessed bomb threats at JCCs, vandalism of Jewish cemeteries and houses of worship including Chicago’s own Loop Synagogue, and the ousting of a group from our city’s Dyke March in June for the mere act of carrying a rainbow flag emblazoned with a Jewish star. Anti-Jewish sentiments come both from the left and from the right with liberal groups, under the guise of minority rights, singling out Israel alone for condemnation and censure, often allowing anti-Zionism to become anti-Semitism, while conservative groups, under the guise of nationalist pride, continue to foment prejudice and bigotry. “Jews will not replace us,” are not words we ever would have expected to hear in this day in this country. And we remember all too well how quickly noxious speech turns into noxious acts, particularly when it is given license by highest leadership.

To our great dismay, it is not only Jews suffering from this pernicious atmosphere of hate. Gay, lesbian and trans-gendered individuals, Muslims, Mexicans, people of color. Immigrants, women, those with disabilities. The elderly, the sick, and the poor. Over the past year the most vulnerable members of our communities have been repeatedly neglected and maligned, made subject to harsh words and harsh treatment and, in some cases, overt acts of violence. “Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed,” it says in Psalms 82:3, just one of many Biblical verses which emphasize fair and generous treatment of those most at risk within society. As Jews we are not only concerned with our own safety and welfare. We are also dedicated to the just treatment of those around us.

The Hasidic master was so very wise when he indicated that there is deep flaw in prayer that makes one deaf to the cries of a child, prayer that blocks out all the rest of the world. Indeed, at its best, worship should rather heighten our sense of the brokenness that exists around us, call us towards its repair, and provide us with strength to do this holy work, particularly when our energies are failing. The world may be falling apart around us, but I believe that this makes our gathering here for Rosh Hashanah today more necessary than ever and not less. Gathering together in prayer can help to usher in, rather than to block out, all the rest of the world.

“L’lovesh tzedakot b’yom din – [God]clothes the Divine in righteousness on the Day of Judgment.”

“Mi camocha av harachamim zocher y’tzurav l’chayim b’rachamim – Who is like You, compassionate Parent, who remembers Divine creatures in compassion for life?”

“Oseh shalom bimromav, hu y’aaseh shalom – May the One who makes peace in the heavens make peace [below].”

These words are not only well-known passages from the *machzor*, our High Holiday prayer-book, but they are also an articulation of values, holding up righteousness, compassion, and peace as amongst some of the highest ideals which God embodies and for which human beings should continually strive. Living in a time characterized by stunning absence of moral leadership and authority, we crave a voice to call out right for right and wrong for wrong, and we find that voice within the wellsprings of tradition.

“Guard my tongue from evil, my lips from lies.” – We value honesty and civil discourse.

“For the sin we have sinned against you by baseless hatred.” – We value tolerance.

“*Avinu, Malkenu* – nullify the plans of those who spurn us.” - We value peoples’ right to live free from harassment and fear.

At its best, prayer should heighten our sense of the brokenness that exists around us, and one of the ways in which it does this is through moral clarity, by reminding us unequivocally of the ways in which we are to behave and the values that we are to champion. There is much within Judaism that favors non-binary thinking; we are the people whose law code includes both majority and minority opinions listed side-by-side, who see opponents Hillel and Shammai both as conveying the words of the living God, who can designate a legal position and its exact opposite both as accepted practices of our movement. And yet, there are times when the issue is simply black and white with no nuance in between, as when hate-filled bigots take the life of an innocent young woman.

As we sit in services this Rosh Hashanah day, we are reminded once again of the values for which Judaism stands and the distance that is too often manifest between these ideals and the reality of our world. Our senses are heightened to the brokenness that exists around us.

When the great rabbi and philosopher, Abraham Joshua Heschel, returned from walking in the Civil Rights March from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama in 1965, he was asked by a member of his community, “Rabbi, did you find much time to pray during your visit to the South?” In what has become one of Heschel’s most iconic lines, he answered simply “Yes, I prayed with my feet.” And with this he

taught us that action, protest, working for justice are themselves a form of worship, at least as important – and sometimes more so – as the traditional recitation of a fixed liturgy.

You probably will not be surprised to hear that I am one who values prayer and finds it meaningful – for the quiet recess it carves out to better connect to ourselves and to God, for the way it links us to other Jews throughout time and space, for the sacred sense of community which it seamlessly fosters. But prayer that spurs introspection without also spurring action, prayer that calms and comforts without also agitating and discomfiting, prayer that blocks out all the rest of the world without also ushering it in has, in the wise words of the rabbi, a very deep flaw. It is not reaching its highest potential for both personal and societal transformation.

At its best, prayer is meant to heighten our sense of the brokenness that exists around us so that we will recommit ourselves to the world's repair, something that most often takes place outside the confines of worship but, ideally, is at least partially inspired from within it. It is so easy these days to become overwhelmed by the sheer scope and magnitude of the issues facing our country that it's hard to know where to begin or feels like any effort we make will be but a drop in the bucket. And yet, as we read in the *haftarah* for Yom Kippur from the Book of Isaiah, our obligation as people of faith is not only to engage in ritual observance but also to engage in acts of kindness and social responsibility. In the words of the prophet, "Is this the fast I desire? A day for people to starve their bodies? Is it bowing the head like a bulrush and lying in sackcloth and ashes?...No, this is the fast I desire: to unlock fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of the yoke to let the oppressed go free... It is to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked, to clothe them..." (Isaiah 58:5-7). God wants not just our words and our devotion; God rather wishes for us to honor the Divine by helping to take care of the precious world that God has created.

As we sit in services this Rosh Hashanah day, our senses are heightened to the brokenness that exists around us. Our sense of moral conscience is newly activated to work for the world's repair.

Tekiah. Shevarim. Teruah. Tekiah Gedolah.

These four notes not only represent the various calls of the shofar but they also illuminate a pattern, taking us from wholeness to brokenness and back to wholeness again. Some of us will know that the middle notes of the shofar are meant to mimic the wailing of the human spirit – the three truncated calls of *shevarim* bringing to mind a moan or a sigh and the nine, pinched blasts of *teruah* intimating an anguished sob. These mournful tones are surrounded by the more hopeful and full blasts of the clarion *tekiah* – we move from wholeness to brokenness and back to wholeness again.

The past year has been an extremely difficult one for our world, not to mention the personal setbacks and losses with which some of us have had to contend, and many have arrived at the High Holiday season exhausted, depleted, and lacking in hope. Prayer can help to renew our energy, allowing us to approach the year ahead with increased spirit and vigor. We draw strength from tradition, from community, from a shared sense of how beautiful and yet how difficult it is to be a human being.

The High Holiday liturgy is replete with images of despairing individuals at the very end of their spiritual and emotional capacity who nevertheless find a way to carry on, often with God's help. There is Hannah so desperate for a child that she appears drunk and heart-broken Hagar, cast away from home and

forced to watch her child near starve to death in the wilderness. There is Abraham, commanded to do the unthinkable in sacrificing his very own son, and Rachel weeping for her children in Ramah unable to be comforted. We, Jews, know what it is to feel as if all hope is gone, only to witness – at the very last moment – a miraculous reprieve. While we should not sit around hoping and expecting that God will come and make it all right, we can perhaps take from our sacred readings this holiday the lessons of perseverance and faith. We must not give up the fight, even when it feels unwinnable.

My colleague, Rabbi Jill Jacobs, indicates that not only does the sequence of the shofar blasts each High Holiday season take us from wholeness to brokenness and back to wholeness again, but that completing this cycle actually leaves us in a stronger place than we were prior due to the healing and repair that this progression ushers in. As we patch up our cracks, tend to our wounds, and bind up the relationships in our lives that have been damaged, we emerge in a different and better state. She writes: “*Tekiah* – we are whole. *Shevarim* – we are broken. *Teruah* – we are shattered. *Tekiah Gedolah* – we are more whole than before.”¹

As we sit in services this Rosh Hashanah day, our senses are heightened to the brokenness that exists around us and our sense of moral conscience newly activated to work for the world’s repair. Amidst failing energy, we find strength and renewal for the difficult tasks ahead.

In closing this morning, I turn to another story of a crying child and her rabbi, this time living in Klausenberg, Romania during World War II. When the Nazis invaded the small village, they gathered the Jewish community in a circle in the center of town with their rebbe, Rabbi Yekusiel Yehudah Halberstam,

¹ <http://forward.com/shma-now/shevirah/341788/broken-notes/>

in the middle. Amidst the terrified wailing of children and the raucous laughter of German troops, they pulled on the rabbi's beard and taunted him saying, "Tell us, do you really believe that you are the chosen people?" In a strong and serene voice the rabbi answered, "Most certainly."

The head officer became enraged, lifting his rifle and sending it crashing down on the rabbi's head. "You still think that you are the chosen people," he sneered? Once again Rabbi Halberstam nodded his head, "Yes, we are."

The soldier was now furious, kicking the rabbi in the chin and spitting at him. "You stupid Jew, you lie here on the ground, broken and humiliated, sitting in a pool of your own blood. What could possibly make you think that you are the chosen people?"

Battered and bruised as he was, the rabbi spoke with quiet dignity. "As long as we are not the ones kicking, beating, and taking innocent lives, we are still the chosen people," he replied with conviction.

Our responsibility as Jews is to be forces for good and justice even, and perhaps especially, when the world is falling apart around us. Our job is to usher in, rather than block out, all the rest of the world.

May our prayers this Rosh Hashanah day heighten our sense of the brokenness that exists around us, call us toward its repair, and provide us with the strength to do this holy work, particularly when our energies are failing.

Wishing us each individually and also our global community collectively, a good new year filled with blessings of healing, tolerance, and peace. Shana Tova!

