For Goodness’ Sake

Kol Nidre, 10 Tishrei 5782 / September 15, 2021

Judea Reform Congregation

Rabbi Matthew V. Soffer

On Rosh Hashanah we read about the Akedah, the dreadful story of the binding of Isaac. The binding of Isaac is such a detailed narrative, you can almost hear the steps of Abraham and Isaac climbing the mountain…gathering the wood…preparing the alter. You can feel the relief when the angel intervenes and Abraham offers the ram instead of his son. So many details. And then, shockingly, a whole lot of silence.

We don’t hear a thing about the descent from the mountain—no conversations between parent and child. From Abraham, we get nothing. From Isaac we get nothing. And from Sarah—what about Sarah? We get nothing, she is speechless—literally, she never speaks another word. The next thing we know, she dies. No indication of anyone by her side, she just dies. What about Sarah’s story?

There an old saying: “the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, and the shortest distance between two people is a story.” We readers are left to imagine Sarah’s story.

The Midrashic work *Pirkei deRebbe Eliezer* helps us to hear her unspoken story. The midrash teaches that when Sarah got word about the Binding of Isaac, she broke down in tears. She wailed six times, forming only the sound of the Shofar, which we hear on Rosh Hashanah: the six visceral blasts of *tekiyah.* Only…Sarah’s lungs could not finish the sixth *tekiyah* before her soul left her body. On Rosh Hashanah this tradition urges us to hear her unvoiced “*tekiyah!”* in the voice of the Shofar. That is Rosh Hashanah, the day of her last breaths.

This is Yom Kippur. On Yom Kippur we do not blow the Shofar. It sits silent. We hear only the echo of its broken sound; and with it, the echo of her broken cries.

Yom Kippur is a day of death. We remind ourselves of this each year—that the High Holy Days are designed to be like a lifetime. Rosh Hashanah is a staging of the very beginning of life, we call it *yom harat olam*, “the day the world was conceived.” Yom Kippur is the end, a staging of death. Our Yom Kippur observances all dramatize this story. We refrain from all that is life-affirming. Water. Food. Bathing. Intercourse. In our service tonight we chanted *Kol Nidre*. We opened the *aron kodesh,* “the holy ark,” which is made *kodesh*, or “holy” by the Torah inside. But when we chanted *Kol Nidre* we took out the Torah, the *kodesh,* leaving just an *aron,* the stand-alone word for a casket. As we sing we stare into our open casket. We stare at death.

What does it mean to be staring at death, after a year of actually staring at so much death? What words could we possibly speak? What sermon could possibly suffice?

*The shortest distance between two people is a story.*

Most of you know my story. Personally, I arrive here on Yom Kippur a speechless rabbi stringing together words – because that’s what I do. As we close the gates of the year 5781, I hope you will forgive me for having little more to offer… than a eulogy. A eulogy for 5781, this year of mourning.

The Hebrew word for “eulogy” is *hesped*, from the Hebrew, *lispod,* meaning, “to lament.” We actually first discovery this word immediately after the death of Sarah. Abraham *lispod l’Sarah v’lovkotah*, “lamented and cried.”[[1]](#footnote-1) A *hesped* is not exactly a “eulogy.” Unlike the word “eulogy,” from Greek meaning “words of praise,” a *hesped* is not, at its core, a speech; it is a lament. Followed by tears.

There are all sorts of instructions regarding a proper *hesped*, Jewish eulogy. The *Shulchan Aruch*, the 16th c. law code by Yosef Karo, spells them out.[[2]](#footnote-2) Here are two key elements:

First, *mitzvah g’dolah l’haspid al ha-meit.* “It is a major mitzvah to lament the deceased….to speak of *midot tovot,* good traits, righteous deeds….[you can] embellish but not exaggerate.” Speak the truth.

Second, *lomar alav d’varim hamishbarim et ha-leiv, k’dei l’harbot b’chiya*. “When you speak, say things that will break [our] hearts [and make us weep]… to add more tears.”

This second aspect of a *hesped* might seem superfluous. Lamentation often elicits our tears. The *Shulchan Aruch* even expands on this part of the *hesped*, going on to say that it was common for communities to hire people - not just to eulogize but - to show up to a funeral *and wail*.

I know that sounds really strange, like “criers for hire.” It’s hard to imagine this actually playing out. Yet, if we think about it… we can imagine the comfort mourners may feel when surrounded by more than eloquent words, by *marbeh b’chiya,* a world of weeping.

*The shortest distance between two people is a story.*

When I eulogized my mother this year, so many of you were a part of my story—my world of weeping, even as I sat in a room alone, lamenting to a screen. Our eyes could not meet. You just had to hope that I felt you, and I had to try to receive your virtual embrace, through the screen.

By that point in the pandemic, I was used to the screen; we all were. As a rabbi I had helped so many who were in the position that I later found myself in. On too many occasions I had brought screens to the cemetery, and - through screens- too many cemeteries to you.

And then, ten months in, my mom breathed in the virus. And the very screens that I tried my best to sanctify for others, had to be sacred tools for us—for her locked in the hospital and us locked out. 40 days. Through a screen we saw her on Chanukah, and we heard her voice sing for the last time—*sha-asah nisim laavoteinu v’imoteinu,* thanking God for the miracles of our mothers and fathers*.*

Then there were days when we couldn’t even use screens. Long days when we couldn’t get through to her at all—when no one picked up, not even a receptionist. Or the three days that it took for the nurses to know or tell us that she got locked out of her iPad. Or the days that followed, when she had to share one with 100 other COVID patients.

Through a screen we saw her face, but only through an oxygen mask.

She tried to speak through it.

When she couldn’t, we saw her eyes, and she, ours.

Through a screen, she shared her last “word,” with all her energy forming her hands into a heart. “Love,” she sighed. “Love.”

Through a screen, we had seen too much suffering,

and she had seen too much of ours.

Through a screen, *Shema Yisrael*….

Through a screen, goodbye.

And then… “power off.”

I was not there when she died, none of us were. I couldn’t hold her hand, or put a washcloth to her lips…or wipe her tears from her cheek. I couldn’t relieve her, at last, of that bruising mask. I couldn’t hear her last breath—or see it leave her body, with her spirit.

I can only imagine.

Like a real-life midrash.

One mile away, and so far apart.

We are all so far apart.

*The shortest distance between two people is a story.*

You can understand why I turned to story of Sarah. And the story of Isaac, who was so distant from his mother. Isaac, who like Abraham, had no words. Isaac who actually had little to say for the rest of his life. The Rabbis say he mourned for three years. The Torah says only that *lasuach basadeh*, he just wandered the field in meditation. The only thing that eventually brings him comfort was love: Rebecca and the children they bring into the world. “Love.”

I share my story not to encroach upon our Yom Kippur….

I share it with you as a *hesped* for 5781, a year of unconscionable distance.

Being apart from each other, the single most powerful tool we have for drawing near is our stories.

The stories of our pains and sorrows.

The stories of our joys and adventures.

Stories like… Stan and Penny, who were able to stand by their daughter’s side on her wedding day.

Or Julia and Jordan who filled in the darkness of these days with a pregnancy and the birth of their beautiful Simon whom we blessed and named last month.

Or of Henry who injured his hip and had surgery a few months ago – he’s doing great.

Or of Doug who lost his father, who was also his best friend.

Stories of Becki, Daniel, and Susan who on Day-One of lockdown had their hearts broken by the sudden death of their father and husband, Mark, a mensch in our community. Or of Donna whose family lost 4 loved ones in a matter of months, two of whom to COVID-19.

Stories of children taking first steps, or learning to ride a bike.

Stories of parents struggling to make a constellation of a good world for their children

Or of children learning how to be good friends without high-fiving or hugging or holding hands.

Stories of heroic nurses, doctors, scientists, and everyday people caring in countless ways.

And stories of burn-out… of mental illness… of addiction….or recovery…

Stories of COVID survivors who still struggle to breathe.

Stories of refugees who yearn to breathe free.

And yes, stories of my mother…and the more than 5- some estimate as many of 15- million others who died from a virus that has been pushed from bodies to bodies, through what should be a life-source: *breath*.

In 5781 we have all lost so much… because we have all lost the blessing of closeness. Of being “proximate.” Of hearing each other, in person, crying or laughing. Of the connection that surges between us when we know and feel each other’s stories. 5781 was a year of *hesped*, of lamentation; a vessel of time filled with tears.

This here is my mother… crying. These are her tears. The tears she offered upon learning that she would be a grandmother;

that we would have children;

that from generation to generation, we would shower our young ones with tears of love. “Love.”

A few generations after Sarah, and after Isaac, we meet Jacob. In the Talmud[[3]](#footnote-3) we read that Rabbi Yochanan once said to his students that Jacob never died. This made no sense to his students. They challenged him saying, *how could that be?* *What about his eulogy? What about his burial?* Rabbi Yochanan replied to the students with the words of Jeremiah[[4]](#footnote-4):

*V’atah al tira, avdei Yaakov,*

O Jacob, my servant, do not fear, do not despair,

*Moshi’acha meirachok,*

I will redeem you, from being so far away,

and your children, from their captivity.

*V’shav Yaakov v’shaket, v’shaanan, v’ein macharid.*

Then Jacob will rest, quietly, in peace, and suffer no more.

“You see,” said Rabbi Yochanan, “Jacob and his children are the same. So long as they live, he too shall live.”

In 24 hours, we will emerge from Yom Kippur,

with *tekiyah g’dolah,* the sound of the *Shofar*.

Out of her broken cries, *may we return to life*,

With tears of joy overtaking those of sorrow, *may we return to life*.

With the unwavering faith that *we belong together, may we return to life*.

*G’mar Chatima Tova,*

May this year end and a new year begin, for goodness’ sake.

Amen.

1. Gen. 32:2 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Shulchan Aruch 344 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. BT, Taanit 5b [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Jeremiah 30:10 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)