Rosh Hashanah Sermon Day II 5784/2023, Rabbi Ed Elkin

"Grievance"

As I mentioned yesterday, Israel is much on my mind, and I am going to share my reflections on all the turmoil in Israel and what it means for us here – on Yom Kippur morning.

It's not my focus today -- but I did want to begin there, because the topic that I do want to focus on today is one that I came to because of my strong feelings about what's been going on in Israel. My topic today is grievance. Having a grievance means that you have a justifiable claim, you have a reason to feel that you have been wronged, and usually you feel there's nothing you can do about it because the party you have a grievance against has more power than you do. Now I know that some of you are davening with the Narayever this year for the first time, and if that's you, then a very warm welcome, I'm so glad you're here. If you're a *vatik*, meaning you've been here before and have heard me speak in previous years, you probably have a general sense of my politics. And you probably won't be surprised to hear that I've got pretty major grievances about what's been going on in Israel over the last few months of turmoil under a coalition government that I personally find repugnant in almost every way.

But actually, whether you share my politics or not, I'm guessing you have grievances too. It is part of our makeup that we as human beings carry grievances. And today more than ever, our society is filled with people of all political persuasions who carry grievances. About the Israeli government, about Trump, about wokeness and cancel culture, about vaccine mandates or the lack thereof, or about mask mandates or the lack thereof, about gender, about race, about class, about the climate crisis, about the housing crisis. And many of us harbor grievances in our personal relationships as well for ways in which we feel we've been hard done by – grievances against coworkers, against bosses, against neighbours, against exes, against our parents for what they did or didn't do to us, against our children for what they do or don't do.

And one interesting fact that I've learned this year is that the human brain on grievance is, neurologically speaking, similar to the human brain on drugs. James Kimmel, who is a Yale University psychiatrist, a lawyer, and a novelist, writes that "Brain imaging studies show that harboring a grievance (a perceived wrong or injustice, real or imagined) activates the same neural reward circuitry as narcotics. This isn't a metaphor; it's brain biology…"[1] Grievance, Kimmel teaches us, is an addiction.

And like substance addiction, grievance addiction can spread from person to person. We see the effects all around us.

Now I happen to know (and I'm guessing you do too) that all the people who have grievances against me, either personally or against a group that I belong to, are completely unjustified in their grievances. Their grievances are the product of some twisted, irrational conspiracy theory. Or they're motivated by fear or greed or ignorance or paranoia or malice. Whatever the explanation, their grievances are completely unjustified.

[1] https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/12/12/trump-grievance-addiction-444570

And I also know that I, on the other hand, am perfectly justified in the grievances that I hold. I know that mine represent a reasonable, objective analysis of history and society and the circumstances that occasioned my grievance.

But the interesting thing about the Kimmel study is that neurologically speaking it doesn't actually matter if the grievance is real or imagined. The surge we get in the reward center of the brain is the same. Now don't mistake me -- I'm not saying that it doesn't matter who is right and what the true facts are. We are citizens of a democracy and members of the Jewish people and it's our obligation to advocate on behalf of what we know to be the best policies for achieving a more just, healthy, and compassionate society – and against the policies which we believe will undermine that goal – here, in Israel, wherever. We are members of families or workplaces in which sometimes one party objectively hurts the other, and the one who is hurt is legitimately aggrieved.

But today is Rosh Hashanah, and this isn't a political campaign or a political science course or a family therapy session. We're in shul, and we're thinking about our spirit, and we're thinking about Hashem who is with us but who ultimately stands outside of our political divisions and our righteous anger, and our binary categories of good and evil, heroes and villains, us and them, which feed all our grievances. And on a day when we are supposed to be cultivating the attribute of humility, we acknowledge our fallibility, and our subjectivity, and that we don't have all the answers and we actually don't know how things are going to turn out, if things go "our way" or if they go another way.

I'm thinking today about the 23rd psalm. It's one of the most familiar pieces of biblical literature, it begins מזמור לדוד ה' רועי לא אחסר – "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." This psalm is recited at funerals and other occasions of mourning because of the reference in it to גיא צלמוות "the valley of the shadow of death." But there's one phrase in that psalm that I've never really understood, however many times I've recited it in my life as a rabbi, a phrase which doesn't seem to fit in with the rest. תערוך לפני שלחן נגד צוררי דישנת בשמן ראשי כוסי רוויה "Thou hast set a table before in the presence of my enemies, Thou hast anointed my head with oil, my cup runneth over" is the familiar King James translation. I've long asked myself, why are we suddenly introducing enemies into this meditation on trust and serenity in the face of our mortality? It has always felt a bit jarring, especially when I chant it at a funeral for someone whose life story didn't include obvious enemies. The traditional rendering of that phrase conveys an image of a royal banquet at which the host sits flaunting their wealth and their self-confidence in the face of their defeated adversaries. But I recently encountered a translation of the verse which gives it an entirely different sense: In Rabbi Richard Levy's translation of the Book of Psalms, the phrase is "You set a table before me along with my enemies…" This is a very different image of what's going on in that verse. The table is one of hospitality. God sets a full table so that we might invite our enemies, those against whom we have grievances, to sit down and break bread with us. What would it mean for us if, rather than holding on to the fantasy of triumphing over those we envy or fear or even detest, we were to say "Come, join me at my

table, let us get to know each other. Let us try to find out where the image is in us of the God who created us all."[2]

Our society is marked by extraordinary diversity and multiplicity – in our politics, in our religion, in our race, our gender, our age, our body shape, our socioeconomic status, our mental and physical health, etc. All this diversity, and yet earlier in the service today, we recited the Shema. Our Jewish tradition famously proclaims that God is one. We, who are so very diverse, put great stock in the fact that we believe in one, rather than in many gods. But on this holy day we need to ask -- why? What is the payoff of the great monotheistic revolution that our ancestors brought about? What's so great about the number one?

Rabbi Art Green teaches that "the only value of monotheism is to make you realize that all beings, every creature – and that means the rock and the blade of grass as well as your pet lizard and your annoying neighbour next door – are all one in origin. You come from the same place. You were created in the same great act of love, God bestowing God's own grace on every creature that would ever come to be. Therefore, and this is the key line, the only one that really counts – *treat them that way!* They are all God's creatures, just as you are. They exist only because of the divine presence, the same divine presence that makes you exist. Get to know them! Get to love them! Discover the unique divine gift within each of them as well as the common bond of existence that draws you all together. Live in amazement at the divine light strewn throughout the world. That's what it means to be a religious human being."[3]

What a beautiful teaching by Rabbi Green about the implications of God's oneness for us – but boy it is *so* hard. Get to know and love my annoying neighbour? That's hard enough. But get to know and love Ben Gvir and Smotrich, the racists and bigots who are using their newly acquired power to trample Israel's democracy, encourage vigilantes, ultimately demolish the rights of Arabs, women, non-Orthodox Jews, and LGBT people? Get to know and love Putin? Trump? Get to know and love the climate change deniers and the Sacklers from Purdue Pharma who marketed opioids as being non-addictive, and the gun lobby and the trucker convoy people and the guy who shot up the Tree of Life Synagogue? How about the bullies who made my life so miserable when I was a kid? That's some of my list, you surely have yours.

I want to say to Art Green, sounds nice, but you're asking too much. If loving all those people, if accepting my commonality with all those people, is what it means to be a religious human being, well, I'm a rabbi but I don't know if I can do that. Ask me to daven three times a day, not easy but -- I can do that. Ask me to walk from my house to the Leo Baeck Day school every Shabbat for a couple of years during the Narayever renovation project during all the weathers, also -- I can do that. But now you're telling me that my religion requires me to believe that all these people who I have such deep-seated grievances against, these people who I define myself against, and I, are all one? That's too much of a stretch. And for sure, Rabbi Green, even if I would entertain the idea of our commonality, of our oneness, for a minute -- I know that they would never entertain that idea about me, and that's not fair, so I'm not even going to go there.

[2] Rabbi Richard Levy, Songs Ascending, vol.1, p.85.
[3] Art Green, Judaism's Ten Best Ideas, p. 86.

These “enemies” wouldn’t even want to come to my Shulchan, my table, they wouldn’t be interested in my “hospitality.”

This hard spiritual work is what I’m challenging myself to do this Rosh Hashanah, and I invite you to join me. Which doesn’t mean for one second that we should give up our beliefs and our causes and our activism and our sense of justice. That’s not what Art Green is saying, and that’s certainly not what I’m saying. I’ve been out there protesting what the Israeli government is doing both there and here, and will continue to do so – because according to my values that’s what it is to be pro-Israel and Zionist in 2023. I’ve donated money to causes and organizations that are on the ground in Israel advocating for the kind of values I believe in. I try to do what I can, and of course it’s never enough, to fight climate change, and to make our society a more compassionate place for the disadvantaged and the vulnerable. So many important issues. Of course, we have to continue to advocate and act as energetically as we can on behalf of what we think is right, and do what we can to counter what we think is wrong, in politics -- and in our personal lives.

But this is Rosh Hashanah, and this is not a day which is intended for activism. It’s a day of prayer and reflection, of *heshbon hanefesh*. The metaphor that our tradition bequeaths us about this day is that this is a courtroom, and we are the defendants, praying for mercy. The Judge is asking us to reflect and gain perspective and awareness, as much as we are able, about why we’ve done what we’ve done, about what makes us tick. And to the extent that it’s grievance that makes us tick, to the extent that we are in some strange way exhilarated by it because of our brain biology, to the extent that we are defining ourselves by our political stances, to the extent that we are denying our common humanity with those whose political opinions we oppose, or those with whom we are in tension in our personal lives, I think that’s something for us to surface and consider, with courage. Maybe we can become more aware of our grievances, more aware of what effect holding on to those grievances has on us, more aware of what science has taught us about the brain biology that might be motivating or supercharging some of our grievances, more aware of our fundamental commonality, our essential oneness, with all creatures whether we like them or not, and – perhaps – more able to allow our awareness to help us let go of those grievances that no longer serve us.

There’s another grievance that many of us hold that I’d like to mention on this day. Many of us have come here today holding grievances against God. We blame God for various misfortunes we may have experienced or may be experiencing. We blame God for illnesses physical or mental afflicting us or our loved ones. We blame God for financial setbacks or other disappointments or failures professional or personal. We’re nice people, we think, surely the all-powerful and benevolent God should have taken care of us a bit better. Our minds know it doesn’t work that way. As Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote, asking the universe to treat you better because you are moral is like asking the bull not to charge because you are a vegetarian.[4] But our hearts still grieve, and blame, and sometimes there isn’t anyone to blame but God. Today I challenge us to think about that grievance and find ways to let it go and allow it to be replaced

[4] Quoted in Bradley Shavit Artson, God of Becoming and Relationship: The Dynamic Nature of Process Theology, p.131

with an awareness of God's loving presence and compassion for us in our suffering. עמו אנכי בצרה another Psalm[5] says. I God am with you in your sorrow, in your tzures. To find the place where we can wake up in the morning, say our Modeh Ani or our Modah Ani and then say "Hashem, there is nothing that can happen today that You and I can't handle together." That's not easy and it doesn't solve the theological problem of God and evil. But just as today isn't a political advocacy training day, it's also actually not a theology seminar. It is a day of faith, and love, and community, and oneness, and feeling God's presence.

Rabbinic tradition uses the vocabulary of Shechina to express God's presence among the people of Israel. The Shechina is said to have *knafayim*, wings. Taking refuge under the wings of Shechina is an image that is used in our liturgy to signify a place of protection and safety. The Jewish mystical tradition builds on this image of the winged Shechina by emphasizing that she can't fly without both her wings[6] – and these two wings can be taken as a metaphor for many different binaries in our lives: fear and courage, love and hate, masculine and feminine, particular and universal, security and morality, yahadut and demokratiyah, religious and secular, health and illness, humility and pride, right wing and left wing, light and dark, good and evil – name your binary and I'll tell you that they're all necessary for the Shechina to fly and at the end of the day – they are all one. That is the pretty scary message that our tradition is asking us to consider on these holy days. Scary, because the blurring of these boundaries undermines the way in which many of us have set up our lives. It's inviting our enemies to the table, it's entertaining the possibility of letting go of some of those grievances that our brains crave.

Our resentments and grievances can, in ways that we are barely conscious of, be exhilarating. And also debilitating. Might we be prepared to let go of some of our self-righteousness in the areas where we feel aggrieved? Can we face who we are without them? Can we imagine finding, without our grievances, the energy and the passion that are so necessary if we are to make ourselves and our families and our world healthier and stronger?

These are some of the questions I'm considering this day. Listening to the sound of the shofar today, I ask myself what I am being called to do in the coming year, in what ways I am meant to wake up. Grievance fills our world, and we know how much the algorithms of the online world where we spend so much time are programmed to amplify our grievances. I want in 5784 to challenge myself to see where I can let go of at least some of them.

And even as I set for myself that goal, I know that sometimes it's impossible. Sometimes the only proper human response is grievance, is anger, or even rage. The powerful Holocaust memoir by Zalmen Gradowski recently published in English under the title *The Last Consolation Vanished: The Testimony of a Sonderkommando in Auschwitz* evokes such rage[7]. At Auschwitz, where his entire family was murdered on arrival at the camp in 1942, Gradowski was forced into the Sonderkommando unit tasked with escorting other Jewish prisoners into the gas chambers

[5] Psalm 91

[6] Melila Hellner Eshed lecture, Hartman RTS, summer 2023.

[7] U of Chicago Press, 2022. Reviewed by Dara Horn, Jewish Review of Books Summer 2023, pp.15ff.

and then removing their bodies for incineration, work he did daily for two years. The Sonderkommandos were accused by many of being collaborators with the Nazis, and have themselves therefore long been the subject of much bitter grievance. But on Oct.7, 1944 Gradowski organized a revolt that lasted one day, blowing up Crematorium 4, killing three guards, facilitating the escape of several hundred prisoners almost all of whom were recaptured within hours and killed, including Gradowski himself. Gradowski in his memoir, which he wrote in Yiddish and buried in an aluminum water bottle with a metal cork in the ashes near Crematorium 3 in Birkenau, asks us not for sorrow, not for sadness, not for tikkun olam -- but for revenge. "Come here to me, you fortunate citizen of the world who lives in a land where happiness, joy and pleasure still exist," he writes, "and I will tell you of the abject criminals of today who took an entire people and turned their happiness into sadness, their joy into eternal sorrow – their pleasure forever destroyed…Come here to me, you free citizen of the world, who had the good fortune not to know the rule of the cruel…two-legged beasts, and I will tell you with what refined sadistic methods they murdered millions of the people of Israel, helpless, alone, protected by no one. Come and see how a highly cultured people was transformed by a savage, diabolical law born in the mind of the greatest bandit and the lowest criminal that the sadistic world has yet spawned."[8] To put it mildly, Gradowski has a grievance and we can all understand why, given the suffering and losses that he endured. Never having gone through such horrors myself, and living now almost 80 years later, I don't know how to respond to his plea for vengeance. But I do know that this account, and the Shoah in general, poses a stark challenge to the "we are all one" message. It poses a stark challenge to the idea of inviting one's enemies to one's table. This is not an annoying neighbour; this is a campaign of mass extermination targeting our people. And if I don't because of my own life experience feel called to revenge, I certainly share Gradowski's sense of grievance, and I don't know that I aspire to let this particular one go. That's a bridge too far, and my campaign against grievances has its limits.

But other grievances, perhaps yes. Perhaps on Rosh Hashanah I can stretch myself. I can let go of some of my self-righteousness and some of my certainty. I can consider and examine the glasses through which I look at the world, and think about how I got these particular glasses and not others. At a time when the world is on fire, both literally and metaphorically, perhaps there are areas where I can contribute to turning down the flames. Maybe some of the people who voted for the current coalition government in Israel that I so oppose had legitimate concerns that I can try to understand better. Same with people who take different stands than I do in my Canadian politics or my American politics. Maybe in some sense the system has been "rigged" in favour of the college-educated for example[9]. Maybe the Mizrahim in Israel did get shafted in lots of ways by the Ashkenazi elite, especially in Israel's first decades. And as I think about some of the people in my own life who have hurt me – maybe it is more complex than right and wrong, good and evil. Perhaps in this new year I can deepen my sense of humility, my recognition that neither I nor my "side" has all the answers to the often-overwhelming problems that face us as a society, as a people, and as individuals -- even as I continue to advocate boldly, for and hopefully act on, what I believe in, to the best of my ability. Even if, and

[8] Gradowski, p.6.

[9] David Brooks, "What if We're the Bad Guys Here?" NYT August 3, 2023.

this is so very hard, even if I don't perceive a corresponding humility and openness on the part of those who I am trying to understand better.

We read this morning the Torah passage of Akedat Yitzhak. Abraham does not appear to have had a grievance against God for putting him through that trial. Isaac is not said to have had a grievance against his father for his readiness to slaughter him on the top of that mountain in the name of his faith, although we do know that the Torah does not record any more dialogue between Abraham and Isaac after the Akedah. But many of us come away from that text with a grievance against it. At least one way of reading Gen.22 is that what Jewish faith demands of us is submission, unquestioning obedience, and that the Jewish God is cold and cruel. Rabbis and commentators throughout the ages have sought to counter this interpretation, and I take comfort from their efforts in this regard, but looking at the original text it's not a farfetched reading. And those of us who are invested in our faith in a God who is loving and compassionate and life-affirming and who weeps with us in our sorrow and who wants us to stand for what we believe in and speak truth to power, have an understandable grievance against a text which seems to point the other way. I get it; the Akedah is a very hard piece of Torah. The ancient rabbis selected it to be read on Rosh Hashanah of all days, so we can't even really skip over it or pretend it's not there. It's spotlighted. So let's work with it. Let's see what we can learn from it, what it offers us. Let's think about what we're prepared to sacrifice, in the name of what. Sacrifice, obligation, faith, trust – these Torah values comprise one of the wings of the Shechinah. Another wing is love and compassion and the permission to challenge authority when something seems wrong. These are also key Torah values. The Shechinah needs both her wings in order to fly. We ourselves need all these aspects of humanity in order to fly, to lift off from the ground and gain some perspective on who we are, where we've been, where we're going.

Let's check in with ourselves and with trusted loved ones about our grievances at this turn of the new year, and let's see whether we can perhaps lighten our load a bit by letting at least some of them go, so we can soar ever higher in the new year.

Shanah Tovah.