

Being a Visionary

Parashat Devarim/Shabbat Chazon

July 17, 2021; 8 Av 5781

Twenty one years ago Sari and I were spending the summer in Dallas, with my in-laws. We had just returned from a year in Israel, and before moving back to New York City for my last two years of rabbinical school, I applied to a CPE program at Children's Medical Center of Dallas. CPE stands for clinical pastoral education, and it is an accredited, supervised program for seminarians and clergy of all faiths to learn ministry skills in a hospital setting. I spent 400 hours that summer, many days and even some nights, working with patients and families on three different hospital floors: one was general pediatrics, another was neurosurgery, and the third was one of the hospitals ICU's. Children's is a level 1 trauma center, the highest in all of north Texas, and severe cases were brought from all over the region, by ambulance, by helicopter to the hospital for its advanced level of care and expertise. I have so many wonderful, powerful memories of the people I met there; the patients, the families, the medical staff, my Presbyterian minister supervisor, and of course my fellow seminarians who shared this transformative summer with me. But there is one memory that still grips my heart with sadness and even shame. You see, I made a terrible mistake, an unfortunate misjudgment. I don't remember the specifics of the case, only that a child had been transported to our ICU in a very serious condition. As the child was wheeled in, a swarm of nurses and doctors converged around the bed, machines were powered up, a web of tubes and cords appeared, and as they were plugged in, their sounds of beeping and chiming began, only to be drown out by the ICU chief issuing orders to the staff. I had been called down because the parents had arrived and were hysterical in the waiting room. I remember their fear, their tears, their shrieks...as they worried about the condition of their child. I tried every technique I had been taught to be a comforting presence. They begged, pleaded to be able to see their child. I told them that I could not bring them into the ICU, it was the hospital's policy. Somehow though their anxiety and fear for their child triggered something in my heart. I would soon be a parent too. How would I feel if it was my child in the ICU whose life was on the line? I put my arms around them and I walked them to the outside of the double doors of the ICU so they could perhaps just peer through the windows and get a glimpse of their child. And that's frankly when all hell broke loose. The moment they

saw their child's precious face in the middle of all those doctors and nurses, they wiggled out of my arms and pushed themselves through the doors of the ICU. They wailed and wept as they tried to reach their child. The doctor in charge barked "Get those parents out of here!" I had lost control of the situation...and I knew it. I felt terrible...for the parents, for the caregivers, for the child...

The Midrash says that there are a number of ways that a prophecy, *nevuah*, is bestowed upon a prophet. Prophecy comes in various forms of dreams or speech, but the most difficult, *kasheh mi'kulan* says the midrash, is a vision. When a prophet is given a view, and image of a calamity that will befall the Jewish people that is the most arresting, the most haunting, the most severe form of prophecy. Recalling my experience in the hospital, had I been able to sit with those parents in the waiting room, and facilitated communication with the care team, the scenario would have played out much differently. I have no doubt they would have been afraid, they would have had a million questions, they would have wept...but the difference between hearing about what was happening and actually seeing it with their own eyes was incomparable.

When God spoke to Moses at the burning bush, God said: *Ra'o ra'iti et oni ami asher be'Mitzrayim: I have seen the suffering of my people in Egypt...ki yadati et machovav, and now I really understand their sufferings. Only after God sees the plight of the Jewish people, the depth of their suffering does God know that the time has come to free them from that awful bondage.*

This Shabbat is called Shabbat Hazon. The Sabbath of Vision. Of course it comes from the first words of that searing haftarah we just heard. *Chazon Yeshayahu ben Amotz asher chaza al Yehudah viYrushalayim...The vision of Isaiah son of Amotz, who prophesied concerning Judah and Jerusalem. What was the vision that Isaiah saw? He saw a "goy chotei," a sinful nation; an "am keved avon," a people weighed down by wrongdoing. He was shown a vision of a Jewish people punctilious about their offerings and their incense, but blind to the suffering of the orphan, and the widow. A Jewish leadership plagued by cronyism and greed, rather than heeding the call of justice that is the hallmark of our Torah. And of course, he is shown a severe vision of judgment and retribution that will befall the Jewish people as well. How terrible that must have been for Isaiah. Almost like a horror movie playing in his head, he had the unenviable*

responsibility of sharing this terrible vision with the Jewish people. Being a prophet was really not a fun job at all.

But the news, thank God, was not all bad. The end of the vision promises that God will forgive the Jewish people if they repent and re-dedicate themselves to caring for others and restoring goodness to society.

The Piaseczer Rebbe, Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira, who is also known as the Warsaw Ghetto Rabbi, devoted himself to supporting the Jewish people in the deteriorating conditions of the Warsaw Ghetto. The last sermon he gave was on July 18, 1942, which also happened to be this Shabbat, Shabbat Chazon, just a few days before the final deportations that liquidated the ghetto. The Rebbe said in that last drasha that just as God seeing the pain of the Israelites in Egypt led to their ultimate redemption, whenever suffering is truly seen and recognized there will always be a glimmer of hope as well. While Rabbi Shapira himself died in Trawniki on November 3, 1943, the glimmer of hope he believed in so strongly would be realized just a few years later as the Jewish State of Israel was proclaimed; and as displaced and downtrodden Jews finally knew they had a homeland, and a safe haven in this world. Shabbat Chazon always precedes Tisha B'Av, when we are shown a vivid description of a vanquished, demolished Jerusalem in the words of the Book of Lamentations. We are encouraged to think about the root causes of that tragedy, not the Romans or the Babylonians, but what responsibility our people had for the loss of our own sovereignty, our own most sacred place. But we are also instructed to look beyond the tragedy. Midway through the afternoon of Tisha B'Av we put on our tallit and tefillin, garments of honor and joy. We are taught that the mashiach is born on Tisha B'Av, and that redemption is indeed in our future.

Vision, chazon, may be painful and frightening, but it should also give us an opportunity to imagine a better future, for the Jewish people and for ourselves. As we observe Tisha B'Av this evening and tomorrow; as we remember the tragedies of the past, may we also gain a better vision of the kind of future we yearn for—as individuals, and as a Jewish people...and the strength to make it so.