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Standing at the *Petach* on the Threshold of a New Year

Queen Esther threw her crown across the room. It landed with an awkward thump as it hit the table. She was so frustrated at her uncle, Mordecai. He had convinced her to enter that beauty contest. He had pushed her to marry the King. He was always wheedling his way into her life.

Life in the palace actually wasn't so bad, she conceded. She had cozied up to the most powerful man in the land, and she had sort of gotten used to it. But that was before Uncle Mordecai had sent the message to her, that she had to tell the King what Haman had been plotting.

It was true that the political situation was getting dangerous. Haman had been gaining power throughout the kingdom. He was planning to destroy the Jews.

But she could not approach the King if he hadn't first summoned her. It was a royal law, and it was punishable by death if the King did not show her mercy.

Who was she to do such a thing? She was not a courageous person. What did she know about politics? What would she say to the King? He didn't even know that she was Jewish.

Uncle Mordecai's words disturbed her. "Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king's palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father's house will perish. Who knows, perhaps you have attained your royal position for just such a crisis."

Three days later she stood at *petach ha-bayit*, the entrance of the palace where the King awaited her.

It was blistering hot in the sun. Abraham kept sweating as he sat by the side of the road. He could barely see it was so dusty. Through the haze he noticed three strangers walking down the road. Abraham observed that they moved slowly, weary from the heat. He assumed they were low on food and water and needed a place to stay. He was known for his hospitality, but today he was irritable, and it was especially hard to be generous.

Abraham could still feel the searing pain from the circumcision. God had commanded him to take a stone and cut off his foreskin. He didn't really understand why he had to do such a thing, but it was clear this was one of God's non-negotiable commandments. The pain had been blinding. His bandages were still bloody, and he couldn't stop thinking about it. But he also

knew that these strangers needed him. He knew the desperate feeling of needing to rely on others.

He pondered this as he sat at *petach ha-ohel*, the entrance of his tent.

Tamar had never felt so trapped. She resented her father-in-law, Judah. She had married both of his sons, and both had died. He seemed to blame her, but it wasn't her fault. The laws governing inheritance and marriage were tricky, and she was in a perilous position. Judah could have set her free, but he didn't. He had promised her that she could marry his third son. But she waited and she waited in her father's house, forbidden from having sexual relations with another man. She was always waiting.

Ten years passed. She was growing old. She'd been thinking for awhile now, maybe she needed to stop waiting and do something drastic. Unless she took matters into her own hands she would be trapped forever. No one was going to protect her. No one was going to save her.

She decided to trick her father-in-law into having sex with her.

It was true, she was framing him. But she was desperate, and he was an obstinate, callous man.

She covered herself with a veil so that her father-in-law wouldn't recognize her. She knew he had been at the sheep-shearing festival, and she sat ready for him to pass by her at *petach Eynayim*, the entrance to Eynayim.

We come together on Rosh Hashanah, standing at the precipice of the new year. Esther, Abraham, and Tamar all stood at a *petach*, an entrance, an opening. As we stand at the threshold of a new year, we too stand at a *petach*. Rosh Hashanah beckons us with the promise of change. It is a time of possibility. The gates are open.

Rosh Hashanah calls on us to be like Esther, to be brave. It calls on us to be like Abraham, to notice opportunities to reach out to others. It calls on us to be like Tamar, to create real change in our lives. This is the time when we open our hearts, when we commit to becoming the people we aspire to be.

A *petach*, an entrance, marks liminal space, when we are neither inside nor outside. It is a time of expectation, a time of growth, a time of opportunity. We stand at a *petach* at the most important moments of our lives, at those precious moments when we will change others and when we ourselves will be changed.

I was 23 years old and had been accepted into rabbinical school for the coming fall. Before I moved to Philadelphia, I decided to spend three months hiking 1,000 miles of the Appalachian Trail. I was alone, my backpack weighed too much, and I didn't know how to use my stove.

That first day was exhausting. I hadn't considered doing a few practice hikes before I left, and I had never hiked alone before. My feet hurt. It rained.

After the first night I learned how to use my stove, I became obsessive about trimming weight from my backpack, and I met other hikers. But I never got over the boredom.

A few weeks into the journey I met four women who were hiking together. They called themselves the Blister Sisters. I suspected they were lesbians, but you never can be sure. We talked all the time. They made me feel a little less lonely. By chance two of the Blister Sisters and I hiked into the town of Gatlinburg and planned to stay for the night. Over lunch I glanced at a newspaper. On the front page I saw that Ellen, as in Ellen DeGeneres, was coming out on prime time that night.

We made a plan to get together to watch the show. We laughed and laughed. Twenty years later I realize that I was standing at a *petach*.

It's so uncomfortable to stand at a *petach*, because you don't really know how strong or brave you are until you pass through it. No wonder Queen Esther didn't want to go to the entrance of the palace. How could she possibly stand up to the King?

On Rosh Hashanah we ask ourselves if we have Esther's courage to speak up, and to act for justice when we find ourselves at a *petach*. Will we align our actions with our values? Are we willing to tarnish our reputation, or endanger a friendship, or jeopardize our job? What risks will we take?

Abraham must have been annoyed when he saw the strangers approaching. He was already caring for his own family and was preoccupied with his wounds. It's hard to blame him for not being in the mood to care for strangers.

How difficult it is to be open-hearted, especially when we are in pain. We aspire to be generous, but life is so busy, and we are torn between parents and work and kids and a thousand other things. How can we possibly reach out to others when we are focused on our own needs? But then, how can we not reach out to others?

Standing at a *petach* is risky. Just think of Tamar's crazy plan to frame her father-in-law – so much could have gone wrong. Sometimes like Tamar we need to create a *petach* and change the trajectory of our lives, but the consequences of our actions are always unclear. The outcomes are unknown. We just can't know what will transpire.

Tamar sat at *petach Eynayim*, which means "opening of the eyes." An ironic name, given that she had veiled herself. Maybe it was her eyes that were opened as she took control of her future, seeing new possibilities that had been hidden before.

What would it take for us to open our eyes, to hope a little less and to act a little more? What would it take to really make change in our lives, to muster the strength to write a different story, to create a different future?

Queen Esther stood at *petach ha-bayit*, the entrance to the palace. Deciding to risk everything and speak up was the hardest thing she had ever done.

The King had mercy on her. She prepared a royal feast, and she told the King that she and her people were to be destroyed, massacred, and exterminated. "Who would do such a thing to you?!" asked the King. "This evil Haman!" she replied.

V'Haman niv'at milifney hamelech v'hamalkah. And Haman cringed in terror before the King and Queen.

And Queen Esther saved herself and her people. They hanged Haman upon a gallows 50 cubits high.

As Abraham sat at *petach ha-ohel*, he gathered up his strength and ran out to greet the strangers. Well, it was more like hobbling. He bowed low to the ground, and he invited the strangers in. "Drink some water, bathe your feet, recline under the tree. We have some bread for you," he offered.

They agreed.

As he began to interact with them it became easier to tend to their needs. He told his wife, Sarah, to make cakes for them, and he chose a tender calf for his servant to prepare.

These strangers were a little odd, even a little mysterious. They wanted to know where Sarah was. "Inside the tent," he responded.

The strangers nodded at each other. Then one of them spoke.

"I will return here next year, and when I do, your wife, Sarah, will give birth to a son."

Nonsense, Abraham thought. He had been waiting decades for his wife to give birth. She was 90 years old. Both of them were withered with age. They had given up so long ago.

"Vatahar vatayled Sarah l'Avraham ben lizkunav – And Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age."

Tamar sat at *petach Eynayim* covered with a veil, and her father-in-law Judah passed by as expected. She motioned to him and offered herself to him. Judah took her up on her offer and

agreed to send a goat in return for her services. She requested as collateral his signet ring and staff. They had a deal.

Later, Judah tried to send the goat for her as promised, but Tamar had disappeared. Three months passed. Tamar could hide her pregnancy no more. Rumors began to stir that she had violated her obligation to her father-in-law to remain celibate.

When Judah learned that Tamar was pregnant he commanded that she be burnt to death. As Tamar was being brought out to meet her death she sent a message to Judah, along with his ring and staff. "These belong to the man who made me pregnant. Examine them. To whom do they belong?"

Judah realizes what has transpired. "*Tzadakah mimmeni*," he whispered. "She is more in the right than I."

Tamar secures her place in the family and gives birth to twins.

That night in Gatlinburg I watched Ellen DeGeneres come out on television as a lesbian, broadcasting her announcement over the airport's loudspeaker. And that night in Gatlinburg I came out as well. With hours to think, new friends, and Ellen coming out before all of America, I too found my voice. For months I had struggled over whether I should walk through that *petach*, whether I was ready to tell another person my secret. Twenty years ago the landscape was different, and rabbinical school loomed large. I didn't really know what the cost of coming out would be. I just knew that I needed to walk through to the other side.

These are all happy endings to complicated stories. Sometimes, though, when we stand at a *petach* we encounter heartbreak and disappointment. We don't always make the right choices. Our thinking is blurred by anger. We worry that we acted too quickly. Or that it was the wrong *petach*. We are consumed by regret.

Jewish tradition seems to recognize the precarious nature of the *petach*, these liminal in-between places, because it declares them to be holy. It's why we place a mezuzah on a doorpost, why the rabbis say it's best to pray at dawn and at dusk, why we use the waters of a mikvah to mark moments of change.

It's why Rosh Hashanah presents us with such an important opening. At the holiest time of the year, we consider who we are and who we wish to be. The *petach* beckons us to be brave, to notice opportunity, and to create change.

L'shanah tovah – May it be a good, sweet, and meaningful year.