

Sermon | Rosh Hashanah 5782
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For Memorial Day Weekend, journalist and author T.M. Shine went to Las Vegas to see what post-pandemic life would be like. Restrictions had been eased, and the Strip was bustling with tourists, people reveling in the newfound freedom of lifted pandemic restrictions. But Shine could not help but look at things differently. Standing at the craps table, he watched the person across from him lift up the dice, and yes, he blew on them! Two years ago, only a few of us would have cringed at such a sight. (Remember: we often encouraged children to blow out birthday candles at their parties!) But things are different now, or perhaps, we are different now. The experience of the pandemic changed us. Our perspective on the world has changed. Our posture towards what is right and what is wrong, what is courteous and what is rude, all of that has changed because of the experience that we endured, separately but together.

We have been through some ups and downs since Memorial Day. There was a time when I anticipated that this was really coming to an end. We made more plans, we went on vacations, we stopped wearing masks in certain places at certain times with certain people. And now all of that seems to have come to an abrupt halt. We are not quite where we were last year, but most of us are now awaiting a third dose. This cycle of isolating and emerging, quarantining and coming back out again, can be exhausting. In a recent article in *The Atlantic*, "Parents Are Not Okay," Dan Sinker writes, "Parents aren't even at a breaking point anymore. We're broken. And yet we'll go on because that's what we do: We sweep up all our pieces and

put them back together as best we can.”¹ And that is precisely what Judaism teaches us to do as well: fix the brokenness, and try to build it all over again. When we emerge from harrowing, challenging, and difficult experiences, we are compelled to emerge with an eye towards rebuilding, repairing, and recreating. As we look forward to emerging into the world once again, I ask: Are you ready? What will you do when you reenter the world?

The Talmud² recounts a tale of two rabbis, father and son, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and Rabbi Elazar, who seek refuge from the Roman authorities who wish to execute them both for speaking out against the imperial Roman government. They spend twelve years hiding in the bowels of a cave in ancient Israel. They are sustained by two miraculous life sources: a well of water and a carob tree. They protect their clothing from deteriorating by only dressing when it was time to pray. Otherwise, they bury their bodies in the earth, practicing modesty while engaged in the study of Torah. And that was all they had: water, carobs, each other, and Torah. For twelve years they lived this way, until Elijah the Prophet stood by the cave’s entrance and announced that the Roman emperor had died, and the decree against them was abrogated. Thus they emerged from the cave.

The first scene upon which they gaze was a field full of workers, tilling and tending the land. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai is appalled and cries out: מַנִּיחִין חַיֵּי עוֹלָם וְעוֹסְקִין בְּחַיֵּי שָׁעָה, “These people have set aside the reward of eternal life which comes through Torah study, only to occupy themselves with the needs of the moment!” Filled with resentment, their gaze is destructive. Wherever they direct their eyes is consumed by flames. The Divine Voice calls out,

¹ Dan Sinker, “Parents Are Not Okay,” *The Atlantic*, August 22, 2021
<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/08/parents-are-not-okay/619859/>.

² Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 33b-34a.

“הִצַּרְתֶּם לְמַעַרְתְּכֶם!?! חִזְרוּ לְמַעַרְתְּכֶם!?! You emerged only to destroy My world?! Go back to your cave!” And so, without question or protestation, they did.

For an additional twelve *months* they lived in their cave until the Divine Voice called them forward to emerge. When they came out this time, Rabbi Elazar was still inclined to look upon the mundane aspects of the world with disdain, and so the gaze of his eyes was still a force of destruction. But Rabbi Shimon’s perspective changed; wherever he directed his gaze was healed, corrected, fixed. One destroyed and the other healed.

Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Elazar are of the same household. They both study Torah in the rabbinic academy of 2nd century Israel. And they both spend twelve years in a cave, drinking spring water, eating carobs, davening, and studying Torah. When they first emerge, they look at the world in similar ways: they disdain the mundane, and look askance at anything that is not an explicitly spiritual pursuit. But after just one more year, this changes dramatically. Rabbi Shimon, the father, no longer sees the daily grind of chores as a symbol of one’s lack of piety and faith. Rather, he emerges from the cave prepared to fix that which is broken and heal that which is damaged. But Rabbi Elazar has not changed. Both had the same experiences, and yet each one reacted differently. Each one responded to the same set of circumstances with a very different posture. One brings destruction, and the other healing.

Rabbi Shimon had a change of heart; that final year of Torah study in the cave was more transformative for him than the prior twelve years. Whereas his son, was hardened by the experience. Torah did not make him a better person. Torah did not change him for good. Torah made him fixate on the loftiest and most spiritual pursuits, forgetting that reality is lived, and that Torah is not meant to exist in the highest spiritual realms, but it was given over to us, to

human beings, to be brought into the world of the lived experience, the messy reality of our daily lives. God intentionally did not deliver the Torah to the angelic divine beings of the most spiritual realms, but to us, human beings of flesh and blood. Multiple times in the Talmud we read, לא נתנה תורה למלאכי השׁרית, “the Torah was not given to the ministering angels!”³ Rabbi Elazar must have forgotten that particular teaching. Two individuals, placed in similar although not identical circumstances, each emerge from their cave totally unlike one another.

How familiar this must sound to all of us. We have lived apart, separated, isolated, alone. And yet the experience of that isolation and separation was shared by so many. All of us missed out on major events. All of us had to pivot. All of us experienced nearly a year of living mostly within the confines of the four walls of our homes. Blessed to be protected by those walls; cursed to be confined within them. For many, blessed to be able to work remotely on a computer rather than facing the dangers faced by frontline workers, from grocery store clerks to those who work in the medical field. Cursed to be forced into these difficult positions, forced to risk their own wellbeing and the safety of their family members. And despite the similarities of our experiences, each of us has emerged with a different posture towards the world. Some are like Rabbi Shimon, forgiving and kind, giving people the benefit of the doubt and seeking to rebuild the world. And others are more like Rabbi Elazar, critical and cynical, skeptics of the highest degree, and convinced of their own righteousness above all others.

But we are not the first to enter into strange circumstances and emerge in different ways. The Talmud also tells the story of four great sages who entered into the *pardes*,⁴ the

³ Talmud Bavli Berakhot 25b, and elsewhere.

⁴ Talmud Bavli Hagigah 14b.

garden of paradise—understood by some as a metaphor for the experience of the Torah’s greatest secrets, understood by others as a literal place with divine and heavenly qualities, a visit to the Garden of Eden. Those who entered were Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Elisha ben Abuya, and Rabbi Akiva. All four merited entrance to this holy abode, but only Rabbi Akiva emerged unscathed. Ben Azzai saw the Divine Presence of God, and died. Ben Zoma was stricken with a mental illness. Elisha ben Abuya returned, but became a heretic known thereafter as *Aher*, the Other One. Rabbi Akiva safely emerged. Each one was a great sage in their own right—learned in all matters of Torah and dedicated to the promulgation of Torah and Judaism. But each one responded differently to the same set of circumstances. Three of these sages could not translate this intense experience into an opportunity to emerge back into the world and shape it for the better. Only Rabbi Akiva returned from the *pardes* prepared to make the world a better place, just like Rabbi Shimon when he emerged from the cave.

Next week, we will read the Book of Jonah as the *haftarah* at Mincha on Yom Kippur. The connections between that book and the themes of the day are obvious: Just as God forgives the people of Nineveh once they do *teshuvah*, so too God forgives those who return to ways of righteousness. But there are more subtle messages in this book, too. Jonah is a troubled figure, distressed by God’s call for him to serve as a prophet, unwilling to face the inevitable. As a result, he winds up thrown overboard from a ship, and is miraculously saved by a great fish, swallowed whole but protected from harm. When Jonah is on the ship, he is despondent: "Heave me overboard, and the sea will calm down for you; for I know that this terrible storm came upon you on my account."⁵ But when he emerges from the fish he

⁵ Jonah 1:12.

enthusiastically follows God’s instructions, despite running from God at every chance he could earlier in his story. Jonah’s time in the belly of the fish is transformative. He could have emerged from the fish even more frustrated than he was before. Instead, he sees his emergence as a second chance, as an opportunity to be better and to do better. Recognizing his situation in the belly of the fish, Jonah cries out, “When my life was ebbing away, I called Adonai to mind; and my prayer came before You, into Your holy Temple.”⁶ The belly of the fish is Jonah’s sanctuary and place of refuge; it is a space where he is able to step away from the world as it was, and emerge again to build a world as *it should be*. He entered the fish’s belly like Rabbi Elazar—angry, closed-minded—but emerged like Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Akiva—enlightened and prepared to repair the world. Jonah aspired to fix that which was broken.

What is the key to unlocking this ability to emerge into the world with a new posture towards its inhabitants? The key, I believe, lies in broadening our perspective. A *midrash* from Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer⁷ teaches that when Jonah was swallowed up the giant fish, he was taken on an underwater tour of the world. The eyes of the fish became as glass windows, bringing light into the belly of the fish and giving Jonah an opportunity to see not only that which is outside, but to illuminate that which is hidden within. He was shown the path of the exodus through the Sea of Reeds where the Israelites walked upon dry land; he was shown the pillars of the world, upon which land is built; he was shown the depths of Sheol, the darkest and most depressing recesses of the world beneath; he saw that which was beneath the Temple, a holiness radiating out in all directions. Jonah’s view of the world was changed because Jonah

⁶ Jonah 2:8.

⁷ Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer 10.

saw more of the world, and seeing more of the world, he saw that which was within himself. Together, those circumstances made it such that when Jonah was ready to emerge, he did so with an eye towards repairing, healing, and rebuilding.

When Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Elazar first emerged from their cave, they destroyed everything in their sight because all they did for twelve years was study Torah in isolation from the world. But one additional year was sufficient to teach Rabbi Shimon that Torah was meaningful if we allow ourselves to see the world through Torah, and to see Torah in the world. We must hold Torah as a lens through which to see the world, then we unlock the key to shift our mindset and broaden our perspective. We then reenter the world prepared to fashion it as it ought to be, rather than accept it as we find it.

The students of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov ascribe to him the following teaching:

אם אתה מאמין שאפשר לקלקל, תאמין שאפר לתקן.

“If you believe that is possible to destroy, then you must also believe that it is possible to repair.” It is abundantly clear that there is brokenness in our world. All of us have witnessed or experienced personally some version of this brokenness. But our tradition reminds us not to despair, because that which has been broken can also be mended. There is great potential in a fractured world. If something has been destroyed, let us be the ones who merit to put it back together. When we reenter the world, whenever that may be for each of us, this is our mission: to fix that which is broken.

In his book, *More Beautiful Than Before*, Rabbi Steven Leder asserts, “Pain is an invitation to fix what is broken in us and in the world.”⁸ Pain is an invitation—we choose how to

⁸ Steve Leder, *More Beautiful Than Before*, p. 181.

respond. It is from the depths of our experiences, both the joyful and the painful, that we draw our inspiration to step out into the world, emerge from our metaphorical caves, and do what we can to repair the brokenness. This is the challenge set before us as we enter 5782.

In this new year, I pray that we may emerge into the world as Jonah emerged from the belly of the fish, with a reinvigorated sense of purpose and mission to face a fractured world; that we emerge as Rabbi Akiva emerged from the *pardes*, with knowledge to elevate and uplift through the power of Torah and the values of the Jewish tradition; that we emerge as Rabbi Shimon emerged from the cave, with eyes directed towards healing and repairing this imperfect world. I believe that it is possible to repair, and I believe that each of you, individually and as a sacred community, are ready to do it.

L'shanah tovah tikateivu v'teichateimu!