

## We Will Not Be Lost - Rosh Hashanah 5778

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“What a pity the book was lost.” That is the conclusion to a short story by the 20<sup>th</sup> century Hebrew writer and Nobel laureate, Shmuel Yosef Agnon.

It’s about Rabbi Shmaria, a rabbinical judge who spent years poring over one of the great commentaries of the Shulkhan Arukh. He composed an erudite commentary of his own, and he called upon a prominent bookbinder to help him publish it. When the bookbinder met him, he happened to bring along papers from another project; and Rabbi Shmaria picked up the papers and saw that they contained another commentary on the same work of Jewish law, written by a more prominent scholar. Rabbi Shmaria leafed through the pages and determined, “I have been preceded by another; there is no need for my work.”

Four or five generations later, a young scholar found the unpublished pages in a synagogue attic. He dusted them off, read them, showed them to others, and determined that Rabbi Shmaria had been too quick to dismiss his work. The book had to be published. And it happened that the central library in Jerusalem was looking for new books and manuscripts to add to its collection. The young student saved from his lunch money every day until he had enough to send the book to Jerusalem.

Years later, the man moved to Jerusalem and visited the famous library. The librarian showed him many books, and the man told him about the book he had once sent from Rabbi Shmaria. The librarian “went from room to room, from cupboard to cupboard,” but the book was nowhere to be found. He promised to keep looking, but even after many years, the book was never found. “What a pity,” the story concludes. “The book was lost.”

This is not going to be a sermon about the lost world of European Jewry that perished in the Holocaust, and not about traditional practices in danger of being lost to the modern world. I am not interested in sociologists or demographers or population studies. Today I want to focus on you – on your individuality, your contributions, your perspective that might shape and define the Jewish future. I want to talk about the tragedy of lost voices, what anthropologist Ruth Behar calls “the horror of self-erasure.” I want to talk about empowerment.

I once heard a story about a man who wanted to become a monk. He went to the monastery and was told that he could join the particular order, but he had to take a vow of silence. He would only be allowed to utter two words every ten years.

The man agreed, and he joined the order. Ten years passed without speech, and when given the opportunity he said simply, “Food cold.” The head monk raised funds to update the kitchen, and everyone seemed happy in their spaces of solitude. Ten more years passed, and the now-graying monk

was given a chance to speak again. He said simply, “Bed hard.” That afternoon, new mattresses were installed throughout the monastery as the monks went about their work in silence. After another 10 years had passed, and this time the two words were: “I quit.”

The head monk spoke up. “It figures,” he said. “You’ve now been here for 30 years, and all you’ve done is complain.”

Of course, nobody loves complaining. But silence isn’t great either. Judaism values dialogue, participation, contribution from every individual to a vital, ongoing conversation. Every individual can make a difference.

These first months of my new rabbinate have been animated by a text from the Mishnah, where the Rabbis ask why it was that the first human was created as an individual. Why wasn’t humanity created the same way as the fish, birds, and other animals, as an entire population? The answer speaks to the power of each individual: If any individual causes a single person to perish, Scripture considers it as though an entire world has been destroyed; and if anyone saves a single person, Scripture considers it as though a whole world has been saved.

And the Rabbis continue: Only a single human being was created to demonstrate that we are all equal. No one can say to another, “My parents are greater than yours.” And we are all uniquely created in the image of God. For when a human being stamps many coins using one die, they are all alike; but when God stamps every individual with the die of the first human being, each one of them is nevertheless unique. Therefore, the text concludes, everyone must say, “For my sake was the world created.”

We are all equal. We are all unique. And each of us plays a critical role in creating and maintaining and enhancing our community – within these walls and beyond.

Jewish leaders of today stand on the shoulders of giants. Our community is well-established, and organized in a way that gives Jews an outsized role in the political and social arenas. This building is a monument beyond anything our immigrant forebears could possibly have imagined. Our rabbis and cantors and educators and other professionals are trained in high-quality, post-graduate programs in the United States. It is a far cry from my grandfather’s favorite movie, the Frisco Kid.

But there is a corollary to the institutionalization and professionalization of Jewish life. Rabbis and cantors lead our services. Paid educators teach our children; we delegate visiting the sick to chaplains. And, too often, your voices are silent.

I speak into a microphone and you listen. It’s like I am at the top of the pyramid and you are waiting at the bottom. And that’s how the experience of the synagogue works for a lot of people. You receive emails or flyers inviting you to an event. Our religion is made up of rules, procedures, a fixed liturgy; and it doesn’t always work. You don’t always leave feeling inspired. A particular program doesn’t

interest you, or the timing doesn't work. And so we wait for someone to create something different; we hope for change. But we can't just wait. We have so much power to self-direct our experiences.

We don't wait for the morning paper to arrive before we check the internet to find out what's in it. We don't wait for a rerun to air when we miss a show. We don't wait until the next day if we need to shop after hours. We have gotten so used to being in full control of our experiences in so many areas. Jewish life should not be any different.

I was a fourteen-year-old camper at Ramah when I first came to understand the power each individual to chart his own course. One of my bunkmate's sisters was visiting and she volunteered to go out of camp and pick up Roy Rogers for anyone who wanted it. And everyone got excited. And then someone piped in: "This is great! Why don't you pick up milkshakes for us as well?" Except that then he checked himself: "No. I can't have a milkshake because I'm going to be *fleischig* from the roast beef."

And that's when I spoke up. "That's silly!" I said. "Why would you care about waiting three hours between meat and milk if you are going to be eating an *unkosher* roast beef sandwich?"

And my friend, to his credit, shot back. "You can't judge me like that," he said. "How dare you! Everybody has their own ladder of observance; and if my kashrut standard is that I separate between meat and milk but don't eat kosher meat, you can't judge me." And I was only 14 at the time, but I looked at him and I said: "You are right."

One size does not fit all. Even with the standards of *halakhah*, individuals have to make choices.

It reminds me of the story of the *Hasid* who asked his teacher: "Show me one way that all of us might serve God." The teacher raised his voice. "One way?!? What makes you think there is one way? It is impossible to tell people one way to serve. For one, the way is the way of study; for another, it is the way of prayer; for another it is fasting or feasting; for another it is service to one's neighbor. Tell them only this: Carefully observe the way of your own heart, see what stirs your passion for God and godliness, and then do that with all your heart and all your strength."

We often use the metaphor of a ladder of observance, but it is imperfect because the rungs are ordered differently for different people. The rabbis of old determined the law; they proclaimed what was right and wrong; they judged. But that has changed. Today, rabbis want to be guides. We want to teach. We want to empower, because your voice matters and you can do this.

When I was in college, I used to teach Hebrew School. And I would assign homework. It was a simple assignment. I asked the students to go home, open a siddur to any page, and spend ten minutes just reading. "But what if we make a mistake?" The complaints poured in. "How can you assign Hebrew reading if some of the parents don't know how to read themselves? How will they be able to help?" I defended my assignment, though. "So what?" I told the well-intentioned parents. "So what if they make mistakes? Imperfect practice is better than no practice; and, in any case, it is perfectly okay to make mistakes."

I could say the same thing about celebrating Shabbat in the home, building a *sukkah*, conducting a Passover *seder*, even leading a service or Torah discussion. We are capable people who could stand to worry less about making mistakes, while worrying more about getting involved and trying new things.

A handful of people this year are experimenting with a new *mahzor*, which is built on the premise that there is more to an authentic spiritual experience than what can be delivered from here to there. This new book invites worshippers to let their eyes wander, to learn more about a particular prayer, to read an inspiring poem, to self-direct the prayer experience. Ours is an educated generation. This isn't the *shtetel*, where the rabbi was the most educated member of the community. I am speaking to a room full of lawyers, doctors, professors, business leaders, artists, journalists – experts in so many fields. Everyone in this room should feel empowered to learn, to try, to lend our own voices to a conversation that has carried on for thousands of years. We can do this.

And we have to do this and more.

A midrash comments on the first of the Ten Commandments. “*Anokhi Adonai Elohekha*, I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” Why does the text say “*elohekha*, I am the Lord your God,” in the singular, and not “*eloheikhem*, your God” in the plural? After all, God is speaking to the people as a group. The answer is that the Holy One appears as a mirror. Thousands look, and it looks back. Each individual can say, “The Lord is speaking with *me*.” God and Torah are not closed books; their content is defined by the people whose thoughts and ideas and identities are reflected back into the Foundational Mirror.

Another ancient rabbi likened Revelation to the Manna. Just as the Manna came down and each person had to go out to collect it, and then each person would experience the taste in his or her own unique way, so was God's voice experienced uniquely by each person who made the effort to understand.

The Revelation at Sinai was not a one-way communication. God could not give the Torah until the people said “*נעשה ונשמע*, *We will do and we will hear*.” Every individual has to actively accept Torah. Each of us continues the process of revelation by interpreting and adding our own unique voices. That's empowerment.

To be empowered means to inject ourselves. We cannot be silent or to wait for someone else.

- Take prayer. The 17<sup>th</sup> century Italian scholar Leon of Modena offers the analogy of a man on a boat on a lake, pulling himself, by means of a rope, back to shore. The person standing far off and at a certain angle might be fooled into thinking the man is pulling the shore closer. Says Rabbi David Wolpe, “We are the boats, and God is the shore.” We tell ourselves that we are pulling God closer to us, but in reality we are pulling ourselves closer to God. We cannot sit passively and expect to be moved. We have to take a first step, inject our unique selves into a prayer dialogue.
- In relationships. I was sitting recently with a friend who told me about something hurtful that another had done many years earlier. And I asked one question: Have you ever told him how you felt? She had not. She didn't want to get into it; she didn't want to make the person feel

bad. And I get that. But here she was, clearly hurt, and the other person probably didn't even know. She was waiting for an apology that probably will never come. There are some relationships, tragically, that are beyond repair. But in most cases we have the power – and responsibility – to try to reach out ... and to try again.

- Even with God. “I cannot believe in a God who could allow Auschwitz or Harvey or Irma or childhood cancer.” I go back to the title of Rabbi Harold Kushner’s best-selling book. It isn’t “*Why* bad things happen to good people,” because that is an unanswerable question. The title is “*When* bad things happen to good people.” There are moments when we will be mystified, disappointed, even angry. We need not be victims of the “why?”. We can lend a compassionate hand or offer comfort. We can reflect. We can try to forge a different relationship with God, changed but not destroyed by tragedy or disappointment.
- Or current events. We were horrified by Charlottesville. And then we waited to see what would happen next. Would our leaders condemn racism and bigotry? We debated: who said what, and was it enough? But what about us? It isn’t just our leaders. We can also speak up. We can also act. I am excited about two new committees that are just beginning their work in our congregation: The Faith Community Outreach Committee is making connections with other faith communities; and the Refugee and Immigrant Aid Committee is finding ways to help displaced families in our area. We can make a difference.

You may know the story of the old man on the beach throwing the starfish back into the ocean. A passerby went up to the man and asked him what he was doing, and the old man explained that he was saving the starfish lives by throwing them back into the ocean instead of leaving them to die on the sand. The passerby surveyed the beach for a moment before asking another question: “Do you really think you can make a difference, old man? There are thousands – maybe millions – of starfish washed up upon the beach and you are only a single person; what difference can you possibly make?” The old man listened and then picked up another starfish and tossed it back into the ocean. “Maybe so,” he said; “but it sure made a difference for that one!” We matter. We can do this. We have to do this.

The ancient rabbis debated: What is the most important principle of the Torah. Rabbi Akiva said, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” But Ben Azai disagreed. More important than that, he said, is the verse from Genesis: “These are the generations of humanity.” The most important principle of Torah is that we are unique beings, created in the image of God, empowered to choose our own destinies and change the world. And on Rosh Hashanah, the birthday of the world, we celebrate that power.

The sound of the shofar, a prayer without words, calls upon each of us differently to lend our unique voices to worship, the synagogue, and the ongoing conversation of Torah. Let us feel empowered to celebrate Shabbat and holidays. Let us feel empowered to climb the ladder of Jewish observance in our own ways. Let us lend a hand, take the first step to repair a relationship, to save a life, to change the world. Let us proclaim that our voices, our ideas, our contributions to the Jewish future will not be lost. Shanah Tovah.