

Kol Nidrei 5776 - Grave or Cistern? Introducing Wise Aging Together

Beginning, middle and end, that has been the recurring theme this year and will continue this evening. The idea for that theme and the central text came from my friend and teacher, Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld (some of you will remember she officiated at the Simchat Bat naming ceremonies for Noa and Rose). Tonight is the last in the series of the beginning middle and end theme: endings.

In 25 hours we will, God willing, go “through the gates” into a new year marking renewal, new possibilities and beginnings. However, as I explained on Erev *Rosh haShanah*, that new beginning is linked to the idea of our lives hanging the balance of judgment. There is a new beginning because we are judged and exonerated. The whole apparatus of the season, of the last forty days, is to confront us with the possibility of a different, less positive, outcome.

B’Rosh haShanah Yikatayvun u’vYom Tzom Kippur yikhataymoon. “On *Rosh haShanah* it is written, on *Yom Kippur* it is sealed: Who will live and who will die...” and then a detailed list of ways one might die. Each year we go through this ritual to ask “is this the year for me?” and consider our lives and our deaths which is so hard to look at with courage and maturity. The wisdom of our tradition is saying to us: “endings are hard, for some nearly impossible, but ready or not, here they come.”

The central text I’ve used for the theme of beginnings middles and endings is from the Book of Ecclesiastes [12:1]: “Remember your Creator, *Zakhor et BorEHcha*, in the days of your youth before the evil days come.” A midrash on this phrase, *Zakhor et BorEHcha*, “remember your Creator” offers two puns that allow this one statement to offer answers to the challenges to “Know where you come from” and “Know where you are going.”

The first pun I discussed on the first day of Rosh Hashanah: *Zakhor et Be’ERkha* – “remember your well” which is about our *beginnings*, where we come from literally, in terms of birth, and also how we *choose* to begin our stories. My main point in that sermon is that we have a lot of choice, more than we usually feel, in how we think about our lives and in the stories we tell ourselves and others to explain who we are.

Tonight, talking about endings, we will get to the second pun and the choices we make about endings.

But first, to introduce some of the key ideas, I want to look at two contrasting models from the Torah of the deaths of righteous people: Moses' brother and sister, *Aaron* and *Miriam*. Both occur in chapter twenty of the book of numbers, *Miriam* first [Nu 20:1-4]. I will read both biblical passages. Pay attention to the differences and similarities. Numbers chapter 20:

Then came the people of Israel, the whole community, into the desert of Zin in the first month; and the people abode in Kadesh; and *Miriam* died there, and was buried there. 2. And there was no water for the community; and they gathered themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. 3. And the people quarreled with Moses, and spoke, saying, "Would God that we had died when our brothers died before the Lord! 4. And why did you bring the Lord's assembly to this wilderness to die here?"

That's *Miriam*, here's *Aaron* [Nu. 20:23-24]:

And the Lord spoke to Moses and *Aaron* in Mount Hor, by the border of the land of Edom, saying, 24. *Aaron* shall be gathered to his people; for he shall not enter into the land which I have given to the people of Israel, because you rebelled against my word at the water of *Meribah*. 25. Take *Aaron* and *Elazar* his son, and bring them up to Mount Hor; 26. And strip *Aaron* of his garments, and put them upon *Elazar* his son; and *Aaron* shall be gathered to his people, and shall die there. 27. And Moses did as the Lord commanded; and they went up to Mount Hor in the sight of all the congregation. 28. And Moses stripped *Aaron* of his garments, and put them upon *Elazar* his son; and *Aaron* died there in the top of the mount; and Moses and *Elazar* came down from the mount. 29. And when all the congregation saw that *Aaron* was dead, they mourned for *Aaron* thirty days, all the house of Israel.

What are the similarities between these two passages? They both died. That's it. The obvious contrast is that with *Miriam* it is sudden and rushed – her name is mentioned only once - and the narrative moves immediately to conflict. With *Aaron* there is an orderly deliberate process of communication and ritual.

I want to call out some of the key elements in the story of *Aaron's* death.

First, *Aaron* knows what's happening and has time to prepare. Also, the deep disappointment that he will never enter the Land is front-and-center. Although painful, there is an honest accounting of his life including his mistakes and disappointments. Next, *Aaron* is accompanied each step of the way by those who care about him and the

community is paying attention. Then, there is a specific ritual of *Aaron* dressing in the garments of the high priest and Moses taking them off and putting them on his son, *Elazar*, who will continue as High Priest. There is a specific passing on of his legacy. According to the *Ramban*, the text indicates that after placing the clothes on *Elazar*, Moses dressed *Aaron* in a kittle, the burial shroud. Finally, the community has a chance to mourn his loss for thirty days.

Contrast this with Miriam's death. Here is the passage again:

Then came the people of Israel, the whole community, into the desert of Zin in the first month; and the people abode in Kadesh; and Miriam died there, and was buried there. 2. And there was no water for the community; and they gathered themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. 3. And the people quarreled with Moses, and spoke, saying, *Would God that we had died when our brothers died before the Lord!* 4. And why did you bring the Lord's assembly to this wilderness to die here...?

What is going on? The medieval commentator Rashi [on Nu 20:2] refers to a midrash to explain why we jump from Miriam's burial to "And there was no water for the congregation" – the midrash reads: From here [we learn that] all forty years they had the well to provide water on account of Miriam's merit. [Talmud Bavli Ta'anith 9a]

This refers to Miriam's well, also found in midrash, which is a miraculous stone with holes from which water flows. This miraculous well was specially created on twilight of the sixth day of creation to roll alongside the Israelite caravans and provide water at their encampments because of the merit of Miriam. Miriam's well can be read as fantastic supernatural or, as I am reading it here, as a metaphor for the way some people can provide vitality and sustenance to a community.

In contrast to *Aaron*, *Miriam's* death is unanticipated. Sadly, the response of the community is *not* mourning her loss and reflecting on her life, legacy, and contribution. Rather, the mourning is displaced by the crisis of deprivation *caused* by her loss.

In my work as a rabbi and training as a hospital chaplain, I have seen both of these models. I've seen it go the way of *Aaron* and the way of *Miriam*. Remember these are beloved righteous people. The differences are the ways in which they, their families and community are prepared and choose to respond.

Of course this is a very personal experience, but generally, in the moment of grief and confusion in the shadow of a death, people are shaken. Our tradition, which normally demands an exacting schedule of obligations, suspends all of them for a person preparing to bury a loved one. This leniency recognizes that this is not a time when a person can be expected to have the ability to focus on prayer or anything else.

This is an overwhelming moment.

There is the intensity of grief and loss and then the need make myriad decisions about funeral, *shiva*, documents, logistics and on and on and on. These decisions, most often, do not fall on *one* individual but are negotiated by the family. Therefore, on top of intense grief we can insert family dynamics into the decision making process. That can be a very positive aspect of the experience, or extremely difficult.

One of the most interesting calls I got this year was from a woman in the Southwest who had no connection to our synagogue. She found our number online, called, got my cell phone and called me in the evening at home. There was an emergency. She explained to me that a relative had died in Gloucester that evening and the body was still in the home. She wanted to know if the Jewish community in Gloucester had a *hevrei kedisha*, a Jewish burial society that would come pick up the body and prepare it for burial. I explained that this was done by the Jewish funeral homes and helped her contact them. In the course of our conversation I discovered that neither the woman who had died, nor the person I was speaking to, was Jewish. Why, I asked, was she calling a rabbi to inquire about arranging the very specifically Jewish way of preparing a body for burial? She said to me, "I know that her soul is gone and that it is just a body, but it's a precious body. I know that in your tradition the body is treated with great respect and not allowed to be alone. I don't want to bring her to some funeral home where they will fill the body with chemicals and I don't know how they will treat the body."

Here was someone who was not Jewish who had an understanding and respect for our practices around death and burial. It made me think of the times I've been with families who are preparing a funeral and trying to figure out what their relative would want. Children of grandchildren who have no Jewish practice and no knowledge of even the questions to ask, are trying to figure out what their relative would have wanted them to do at this moment, and of course, among the family members, there are different opinions.

One of the echoes for me in the story of the death of *Miriam*, which immediately becomes a story of deprivation and complaint, is the way sometimes people use conflict as a kind of

perverse break from their pain. For some, it is much easier to be aggrieved than to grieve; much more comfortable to be angry than to be painfully sad.

People behave in unexpected ways when they are shaken, sometimes opening their hearts and experiencing the world with great intensity and sensitivity and devoting themselves to their highest ideals, and sometimes people go looking for a fight, and sometimes it's even the same person.

I would like to avoid the surprise and lack of preparedness and grief mixed with conflict for as many of us as I can. I want to help to make the experience of loss is like that of *Aaron* and not of *Miriam*. Of course, this is a shared project, one that will require your engagement and courage in order to succeed.

Here's the critical point: I don't want to talk about death either. Remember the central verse is: "Remember your Creator *in the days of your youth, before the evil days come.*" I want us to explore how we *live* with integrity and joy. How we can be present; meaning responsive to what is happening right now, and still connected to our beginnings and endings. How can we be mindful of endings without the present being diminished by fear?

The greatest two-word slogan in the Torah is "Choose Life!" [Deut 30:19]: God says "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life that you and your offspring may live!"

Anything that can fit on a bumper sticker seems like it should be easy. "Choose life" is not easy. "Choose life" is sometimes really, really hard.

And now at last, to the final pun on *Zakhor et Bore~~h~~cha* "remember you Creator..." The first pun to respond to the imperative to *know where you come from* was *zakhor et be'ercha* "remember your well."

To respond to the imperative to *know where you are going* the verse is vocalized *zakhor et borcha* "remember your pit." One of the meanings of **Bor** is "grave" – a hole dug in the ground where a body is buried- but it is also a word for "cistern" –a hole dug in the ground where water is stored; a well we make ourselves.

Miriam brought with her a well of vitality and energy and sustenance for her community. She provided the water, but when she was gone, she left no cistern, no way to pass it on and so her loss, and mourning for her was overwhelmed by deprivation and thirst.

The midrash is pointing toward a choice. Either:

- Remember the finality of the grave, or
- Remember you can leave a legacy of vitality and sustenance.

Zachor et Borch'a is the *midrash's* way of offering this choice.

Erik Erikson is a 19th century Jewish psychoanalyst is best known for his theory of life-stages. Perhaps he knew this midrash. His seventh of eighth life stages is exactly corollary to this question of how we read *Zachor et Borch'a*. Do we read it as: Remember the grave, and therefore, be afraid, or do read it as: Remember to leave behind a cistern! and therefore, start digging.

Each of Erickson's life stages offers two possible paths. The seventh stage is: "Generativity vs. Stagnation." Generativity is doing things for the next generation ("digging a cistern" in the language of the midrash) and finding meaning and fulfillment in life based on what can be done to improve, nourish and support others. Stagnation on the other hand, is being disconnected from others and not finding fulfillment in making a contribution to family and community. Generativity, "digging a cistern" is an answer to the challenge of how to we live with integrity and resilience and joy at each stage of life, and particularly as we face endings.

How do we continue to "choose life"? This was the question that was raised in an important Congregant's Corner article of the newsletter written by Fern Miller. It was that column and conversations with Fern and Dale Rosen that lead to these reflections tonight and a new project we are starting this year: *Aging Well Together*. The newsletter piece Fern wrote described her own questioning about the challenges of aging and the very positive experience of leading the caregiver support group here at Temple Ahavat Achim. This was a confidential group – meaning nothing discussed in the group was shared outside the group – to talk about the difficult and very personal journey of people acting as caregivers.

Aging Well Together will have two parts. First, another confidential group, and perhaps more than one group if there is interest, to talk about these issues. We will use a new book as a guide: Wise Aging: Living with Joy, Resilience and Spirit. Fern will lead the first group. I will be participating, but not facilitating. Marjie Sokol of Jewish Children and Family Services, who helped us form the Chesed Committee, has been the key organizer in getting several local synagogues to form groups to discuss these issues using this book as a guide. Marjie will be joining us for our kick-off event for this project Sunday, November 1st. In addition to the reading and discussion group, we will also have teaching and learning opportunities about some of the important practical issues likely to arise regarding ritual,

financial, and medical issues based on the interest of the group. So we are starting a new project!

I look forward to entering into the new year with you and embarking on this new and important initiative.

May we learn together, and support and strengthen one another so that we may choose life!

Gmar Hatimah Tovah! May you be sealed in the book of life for a good and sweet year!