

## **Zahor et Be'erecha: – Remember your Well R"H 1, 5776**

*Based on a teaching by my Teacher and friend R. Sharon Cohen Anisfeld*

My comments today will follow from what I said last night when I spoke about *Rosh haShanah* as the anniversary of the sixth day of creation and the *Rosh haShanah* themes of Birth-beginnings and Judgment-endings. Last night, I focused on the middle – because you can't have beginnings and ending without the middle - and that is where we spend most of our time.

I also introduced the following verse from the book of Ecclesiastes (12:1): *Zakhor et Borehka* "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come...."

This morning I will continue the theme of *beginning-middle and ending* and focus on beginnings based on a midrash on the phrase "Remember your Creator" *Zakhor et Borehka*.

Today we are moving from the Garden and sixth day of creation to the complex family history we just read in the Torah. Our reading begins with the Sarah becoming pregnant and giving birth to Yitzchak, when she is 90 years old, something she and Abraham have been striving for since we first heard of them. This is the successful culmination of a lifelong drama but is not the central drama of our reading. Rather, the climactic moment of our Torah reading is when Hagar, in a moment of intense desperation, is rescued by an angel. She has left her and Abraham's son, Yishmael, dying of thirst under a bush. Gd opens her eyes to reveal she is actually next to a well – a well of water in the desert - and so she and Ishmael can drink, be refreshed and live.

This is actually the *second* time Hagar has been saved by an angel in the wilderness next to a well. The first time was the result of tensions in the family when Hagar became pregnant with Yishmael. I want to return to look at that earlier story. One clarification of something that might be confusing: Between our story today and the earlier story, both Abraham and Sarah's names are changed. Before this, in this earlier story, they are Avram and Sarai.

A woman struggling to have a child is a common motif in Torah, beginning with Sarai, and is central to both the *Torah* and *Haftarah* readings today. This is the first thing we learn about Sarai and one of the only things we know about her and Avram when Gd first calls Avram. By chapter 16, Sarai is tired of waiting to get pregnant, and decides on surrogacy. She will give her servant, Hagar to become pregnant with Avram and so provide Sarai and Avram with a child. What could go wrong? Before I get to the story, remember the focus this morning is on beginnings. There is a tremendous amount to unpack in this story that I will *not* discuss. We will have that opportunity when it comes up in the annual Torah

reading cycle later in the fall.

The text reads: (Gen. 16:4) And he (Avram) came to bed with Hagar and she conceived and she saw that she had conceived, and her mistress [Sarai] seemed diminished in her eyes. And Sarai said to Avram, "This outrage against me is because of you! I myself put my maid in your embrace and when she saw she had conceived, I became diminished in her eyes. Let the Lord judge between you and me!" And Avram said to Sarai, "Look, your maid is in your hands. Do to her whatever you think right." And Sarai afflicted her and she [Hagar] fled from her. And the Lord's angel found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, [by the spring on the way to Shur]. And the angel said "Hagar, Sarai's maid: "Where have you come from? and where are you going?" *Ei mizeh vat, v'ana teyleychi?*" and she said, "From Sarai my mistress I am fleeing." And the Lord's messenger said to her, "Return to your mistress and submit to her harsh treatment." The text then continues with a description of the angel giving Hagar information and assurances about her son, and that his name will be, Yishmael, meaning "Gd has heard" because Gd has heard Hagar. And Hagar refers to Gd as "God who sees me" and the well is therefore called *Be'er l'Hai Roi*..."Well of the Living One Who Sees Me." We will return to the details of this story in a moment.

These questions: Where have you come from? and where are you going?" also appear in a rabbinic teaching very appropriate to the season (Avot 3;1):

Akavia the son of M'halal-El would say: Reflect upon three things and you will not come to the hands of transgression: Know from where you come, where you are going, and before whom you are destined to give a judgment and accounting.

- 1) Know from where you come – [beginnings]
- 2) Know where are you going – [endings]
- 3) Know before whom will you be judged [more endings]

Then there is an attempt to answer these questions. The answers of Akavia the son of M'halal-El I will not share this morning. A more relevant answer for us is provided by a very slick midrashic move whereby all three of these questions are answered by the three words of the verse from Ecclesiastes *Zachor et borEhcha* "remember your Creator." This word for "creator"- *Borey* may be familiar from the blessing over wine, *Borey peri haGefen*, Creator of the fruit of the vine. "Remember your Creator" is the plain meaning of the verse; and seems to answer the third item: "Know before whom you will be judged." But what about the other two? Where we come from, and where we are going?

A note on midrash: because rabbinic literature was originally oral, combined with the fact that the written Hebrew text has no vowels and so can be vocalized in many different

ways: midrash is full of puns – in this case, puns on the word *Borey*, Creator. To give a sense of this if you think of the *English* word “Creator” without vowels” C-R-T-R that could be vocalized “creator”, “curator”, “creature”, “crater”.

Similarly, *Zachor at borEhcha*, remember your Creator it can also be vocalize as: *zachor et b’Air’cha* and said this way it means “remember your well.” Recall the name for well we just heard: *Be’er l’Hay Roi*. This “well” is beginnings - from where you come.

I will leave the third pun for *Yom Kippur* when we will talk about endings.

This morning, where we’ve already heard about two wells I want to talk about this “well” from which we are coming. What is the *well of origin*? The first and most immediate answer I think is: the womb - our shared watery beginning. *Be’er* as womb fits the themes of *Rosh haShanah* I began with last night. First and most obviously, the theme of birth.

*Also*, it links to the theme of judgment and forgiveness since the Hebrew word for womb is “*Rechem*” which is the root of the word for compassion and mercy: *Rachamim*. This is the first of the thirteen aspects of Gd’s mercy we invoke throughout the liturgy: “*El Rachum v’Hanun*” Gd, merciful and gracious.

*Rachamim*, compassion therefore is womb-like in being natural, universal and literally where we all begin. On a literal level, this is the well from which we have all come and is a reminder of our personal beginnings *and* shared origin and connection to all humanity. But the womb experience is a one-time event.

The *Be’er*, the “well”, as we have seen from the story of *Be’er l’Hay Roi*, is a symbol of miraculous vitality and new life-saving possibility. It is also a place of loving connection. It is at a well in the desert where Jacob meets Rachel and Isaac meets Rebecca, and Moses meets Tziporah.

In our tradition the *Be’er l’Hay Roi*, the where the angel rescued Hagar, is the same place where Isaac goes to pray and is also [Miriam’s well\\*](#) that provides water to the Israelites in their forty-year desert journey. These are “beginnings” in the sense of being the places of connection and vitality in our lives, to which we return to are renewed.

All these wells are in the desert. The vulnerability and dependency of being in desert is important here. The desert is a place of deep thirst and fragility. Water is scarce and precious. In the desert, one doesn’t come upon a well and say “I’m not so interested today.” Finding a well is a matter of life and death.

This connection goes deeper when we consider one of the most dramatic names for Gd: *Makor Mayyim Hayyim*, the Source of Living Waters. Here from the book of Jeremiah (2:13).

“My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the Source of Living Water, and have dug their own **cisterns** (*borot*)\*, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.

The image from Jeremiah is that Gd is the ultimate Source, the Well of Living Waters. Human beings who want to be in control try to get by without the Source and dig their own cisterns. For Jeremiah this is a metaphor for idol worship. The human-made alternatives, literally and figuratively, just don't hold water. They are not a source of life and connection.

Our “wells,” our “places of connection and vitality” while deeply personal are not exclusive. They do not set the individual apart but connect us more deeply. Notice that all of the stories of wells in the desert involve bringing people together; mother and child, husband and wife, in the case of Miriam's well, it unites the entire community of Israel. These human relationships are sacred and are an essential part, I would say *the* essential part of connection to the Source of Living Waters.

This relates to the question: What is “spiritual”? That's one of those complicated words I try to treat very carefully. It is complicated because how I've come to use that word, often feels different than the way others use it. In connection with this image of the well in the desert I want to say a word about Jewish spirituality. Jewish Spirituality is practical and relational. If “spiritual” is describing an experience that happens when alone on a mountain or surf-board or on the beach at dawn, that's beautiful and wonderful and it should happen again and it may be “mystical” – it may make you feel closer to your Creator - but it's not “spiritual” as I understand it. Spelling helps me here, Spi-Ritual. There is no Jewish Spiritual without Ritual, and lots of Jewish ritual requires community – at least ten. Jewish Spirituality seeks deep connection to Gd *and* community and, following our tradition, does not see them as two separate projects.

You can't have a deep spiritual connection with the Creator and not strive for connection with the other createes, other people, and the rest of creation. Nothing makes this point more strongly than the Mishnah (Yoma 8,9) we read this morning: [Elazar ben Azaria] “Yom Kippur brings atonement for transgressions between people and God, but Yom Kippur can bring atonement for transgressions between one person and another only if the person offended has first been reconciled.” Powerfully, it is the human relationship that comes first!

The important question from all this is: What is *your* source? Where are you coming from and where are you going? What is your well in the desert? What does it mean for you to *Zachor et Be'ercha* remember your well? And how do you get back to those connections?

Our life-giving sources are fundamental and essential. We do not choose the place we had our watery beginning, the womb, or those places of deep connection in our lives, or our connection to what is beyond us and sustains us, the *Makor Mayyim Hayyim*. those beginnings we do not choose. But getting to the practical challenges of the season, the most important thing I want to say about beginnings is that most of them *we do choose*. We choose how we want to begin our stories.

*Ei mizeh va?* Where are you coming from? There are a hundred ways to answer that question. I might say: "I walked here from my house," or "I was born in Cleveland," perhaps I could say "My great grandfather's family came to Chelsea from Moscow in the 1880s," or moving back considerably I might say: "because of our sins we were exiled from our land", or "My ancestor was a wandering Aramean," Or all the way back to the first *Rosh haShanah*: "We were in this garden with two trees in the middle and a snake that could walk and talk..."

There are many beginnings, many ways to tell our stories but we tend to get stuck on one version that fits best with our current attitude. If someone feels triumphant, they tend to begin their story with obstacles they overcame rather than their painful mistakes that came first. If one feels wronged, they will tend to start with the moment of insult, rarely with *their* role in the deterioration of the relationship leading to the insult.

For one example, let's return to the messy story of our founding family. The angel ask Hagar: Where are you coming from and Where are you going? A general principle: When Gd, or an angel asks a question, it is not to learn something but to teach.

Hagar answers: "From Sarai my mistress I am fleeing." Notice that she doesn't answer the second question. She has no idea where she is going. She is fleeing without a destination. The angel is telling her that destinations are important. Also notice that Hagar is beginning the story at a particular place. She begins with the second half of v. 6: "And Sarai oppressed her." Imagine if we asked Sarai. I think she'd start the story two verses earlier when Hagar begins treating her disrespectfully. "Hagar saw that she conceived and Sarai became diminished in her eyes." And if we asked Avram? He might begin with the moment when Sarai came up with the idea in the first place.

We start the story where it works best to validate our present attitude and orientation. Where we are *now* creates our history. Where we are *now* determines what we choose-to-remember, and think about, and where we choose to begin. But “*teshuvah*, turning,” means making a change in attitude and orientation. It means changing where we are now. Therefore, it also means being open to new beginnings and a new way of telling our story.

If you are caught in a situation of difficulty and discord and misunderstanding, you might try, to tell the story of the conflict from another starting place. You might try listening to where *others* begin the story. This can be extremely challenging because it means giving up being “right.” It can mean giving up our identity. If we tell the story differently perhaps we are not the *hero* of the story, or the *victim* as we have come to so firmly believe. This can be deeply unsettling and scary and it takes courage and faith.

May this *Rosh haShanah* help you reaffirm and strengthen your bond to what sustains, connects and enlivens you.

In this season-of-judgment and repentance,  
as we remember and reconnect with ourselves and others,  
I encourage us to be generous and courageous with where we begin our stories.

*Shanah tovah u'Mitukah tikatayvu!*

May you sign up for a good and sweet year.

\* Included in Yom Kippur Sermon on endings.