

Weaving Wounds into Wisdom

By Rabbi Elana Rosen-Brown

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Shanah Tovah.

There's a community in North America that claims to be the first to greet the New Year each year. That community is the Jewish community of St. John's Newfoundland. Each year they conduct Shacharit morning prayers at Cape Spear, the most easterly point of land on the continent, and greet Rosh Hashanah while overlooking the Atlantic Ocean.

I stood at Cape Spear this summer and gazed out at the Atlantic Ocean. I had been there once before, almost thirty years ago, but one visit wasn't enough to help me understand my family heritage. For the last five years I've asked my mom to help plan a family vacation back to the place she grew up until she was twelve. The drive for me to visit and record family stories, both the joyful and painful parts, while my parents are still healthy has been intense. I have a feeling, false and fanciful as it may be, that if I can deeply understand their narrative histories I will feel whole and stay whole after they and the generation that precedes me are gone.

As I stood at Cape Spear and gazed upon the Atlantic Ocean this summer I thought about the almost sixty years my family had lived in Newfoundland—one of only a handful of Jewish families. My great-grandfather arrived in Newfoundland from Russia in 1904. Eventually bringing my Grandma Fanny for whom I am named and five more brothers and their wives over. My grandmother was born in St. John's in 1916 and my grandfather met her in St. John's, a boy from Brooklyn, when he was stationed there during WWII.

Newfoundland was the site of so much that is beautiful about my family history and also some difficult stories. Some specific to my family, some the difficult stories that exist in all families. The pain of being new immigrants and feeling as outsiders. The pain of leaving one's family behind. The pain of family rifts and some tragedy. And also the beauty of a Jewish heritage mixed with Newfoundland culture and history. And the beauty of a lot of love and laughter and humor. As we wandered through St. John's Mom pointed out where Grandma used to pick up

cod at the wharf. We discovered where on Water street the family stores had been located. We drove out to Topsail pond, the site of so many happy family memories and the picking of blueberries. I had heard many of these stories before but now, to link it with place, to walk the stories, I felt a deep and inexplicable sense of home.

Of course, for me, this feeling of home was less complicated. I could connect with the depth of heritage and history without the nostalgia. I felt less viscerally some of what my mother was naturally feeling upon returning to a childhood home after many years. And yet, hearing all the stories makes it imperative that I attempt for myself and future generations to metabolize all threads of my history—the dark and light—into a path forward. To weave it all into wisdom as my mother has before me.

Two of the Torah portions we read on Rosh Hashanah are family stories. One, the Akeidah, which Rabbi Lara and Rebecca Prather both described extensively and beautifully over the last two days, tells a story of faith but also a story of trauma. When Sarah dies immediately in the Torah portion following the Akeidah some of our rabbis tell us this is the direct result of the trauma she experienced upon hearing her husband had come close to sacrificing her beloved son Isaac. Many scholars also focus attention on Isaac's passivity throughout his life and link it to the trauma of the Akeidah.

The Torah portion read in a majority of the Jewish world on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, Genesis 21, includes the banishment of Hagar, Abraham's maidservant who conceived his first-born son Ishmael.

It reads:

And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, making merry. And Sarah said to Abraham, "Drive out this handmaid and her son, for the son of this handmaid shall not inherit with my son, with Isaac."

And Abraham arose early in the morning, and he took bread and a leather pouch of water, and he gave [them] to Hagar, he placed [them] on her shoulder, and the child, and he sent her away; and she went and wandered in the desert of Beer sheba.

And the water was depleted from the leather pouch, and she cast the child Ishmael under one of the bushes.

And she went and sat down from afar, at about the distance of two bowshots, for she said, "Let me not see the child's death." And she sat from afar, and she raised her voice and wept.

In this instance God saves Hagar and Ishmael much like God saves Isaac in the following chapter. Interestingly, Ishmael ends up marrying an Egyptian woman.

There is much about this story that is unsettling. How do we understand Sarah's actions of rage and jealousy after she had been the one to tell Abraham to conceive a child with Hagar? Then there is the fact we often forget when we read the Akeidah—that in fact Abraham already has practice in sacrificing sons. He sacrificed his relationship with his son Ishmael and nearly Ishmael's own life in the desert when he banished Hagar and this first-born son. This story clearly had an impact on the intergenerational trauma in Sarah and Hagar's individual families but of course the trauma of banishment was also extended to the collective. To this day many interpret the promise to both Isaac and Ishmael that they will each become leaders of great nations as an initial rupture between Judaism and Islam.

Why do we read these stories on Rosh Hashanah? So many reasons. But one that I'm thinking about this morning is that in reading them they teach our community how to look both at the beauty in our Jewish heritage and at the intergenerational trauma extant in the passing down of a tradition. Reading these Torah portions on Rosh Hashanah teach us the importance of noticing that we are marked by relationship ruptures and choices made by previous generations at the same time that we experience these matriarchs and patriarchs of our tradition with reverence. These flawed ancestors are the same people who have taught us how to come face-to-face with God, they miraculously were the first to choose and sustain Judaism and monotheism, they are our ancestors--the same ancestors--who taught us how to argue with God and protest against injustice. Our task here again as we read and interpret these Torah portions seems to be how we interweave the strands of heritage and trauma into wisdom.

As a student of history I've always been drawn to memory—its uses and its complications. Rosh Hashanah—the head of the year, has another name—Yom HaZikaron. The day of memory. It

raises questions. Our tradition commands us to remember. To remember it all. The good, the bad, and the oh so ugly of our history. To remember that we were slaves in Egypt and to remember that we were delivered from Egypt. To remember the moment of revelation at Sinai. We are not only commanded to remember these stories but we are commanded to remember them as if we ourselves have lived through them. If, like me, you take this commandment to heart, you can feel viscerally in your body memory some of the experiences of these stories. And of course, the 20th century German-Jewish philosopher Emil Fackenheim added to our tradition's commandments of memory. The 614th commandment is to Never Forget the Holocaust—continuing Jewish life is to deny Hitler a posthumous victory.

As a Jewish community we have taken this 614th commandment deeply to heart. We have internalized it such that it has become a rallying cry—whenever there is an attack on the Jewish community we respond: Never forget. We shall not allow Hitler a posthumous victory. It has also been a commandment that has inspired us to rise in solidarity with other communities when they are under attack—when we see genocide or mistreatment throughout the world—we respond motivated by our own history, legacy, and attempt to turn horror, senselessness, and indescribable loss into meaning. The exception to this of course is our complicated relationship with the Palestinians—a relationship that is also profoundly impacted by our response to trauma. But that is a larger sermon I'll save for another time.

I have deep and enormous respect for the healing that has already taken place in the Jewish community. The generation that lived through and survived the Holocaust, some of you in our own community—have taught us resilience, courage, the triumph of love over vengeance and so much more. We owe an enormous debt to the ways you have not only survived but thrived in the aftermath of the unfathomable. In many ways too, Fackenheim's 614th commandment has served us well as we continue to heal from the trauma of the Holocaust. We have learned the power of our collective voice and we have linked that force to social justice in many profound and efficacious ways. But, as the fourth and fifth generations post-Holocaust are born into Judaism and raised I wonder at both the expediencies and the limits of this philosophy. What deeper level of healing for our community remains possible? Does the way we teach and pass down Judaism today, Jewish history and Jewish heritage have the right balance between

celebrating its richness and tales of oppression? Does our rallying cry of Never Forget always yield good outcomes in the public square or are their limitations to its usefulness?

After witnessing the last few years of the Jewish community's response to our current political climate I would argue that there remains room for us to continue to examine our legacy of trauma and how it impacts our actions and reactions. I've observed that as an American Jewish community we have internalized so well the rallying cries of "Never Again" and "Tikkun Olam," and in so many ways for good, but we often neglect to see the corresponding need for cheshbon haNefesh—reflecting on our triggers, our reactions, and our words before or in sequence with jumping to action. I am drawn to the ways that our community both at Rodef Sholom and the broader American Jewish community might more deeply engage in continued and conscious awareness of when we are re-activated by trauma and the work that remains to be done for ourselves and our community in this arena.

In her recently published book *Wounds into Wisdom* Rabbi and Psychologist Tirzah Firestone shares her insights after years of working with survivors of trauma—primarily Holocaust survivors and survivors of terror attacks in Israel and Palestine—as well as hundreds of interviews with second and third generation post-Holocaust. Rabbi Firestone confirms what I have also experienced anecdotally—that in the last few years—with the attacks in synagogues and the marches in Charlottesville the Jewish community has shown signs of re-traumatization—these reactions show up in the body memory so forcefully and so quickly that they are clear signs we can continue working on our own healing even as we stay wise to keeping our communities safe.

When our Jewish community naturally experiences the question: "Is It Happening Again"? Firestone notes both the pitfalls we can get into with this question and the wisdom that can arise if we learn how to use our trauma response as knowledge. The key is managing our reactivity and reality-checking. Reminding ourselves that we have agency and collective power. But utilizing that agency and collective power wisely. There may and there will be times that action is required. But it is not always required. Here Rabbi Firestone draws on Victor Frankl's

teaching. Frankl taught that agency heals us from trauma. It is not reactive. It comes from self-awareness. Because even when overt action is impossible or unwise, we can still have agency. As Rabbi Firestone says: “Seeking power after victimization might naturally lead to taking action to defend ourselves and our communities from further harm. This power may at times become forceful, even violent, in the quest for justice. But an important distinction is that while agency is always powerful, not all forms of power are synonymous with agency”. In an age where voices are amplified by retweets and shares we cannot afford to act before pausing to check our own fear and reactivity, take some time to research, notice our words and language, and remember that our own liberation is bound up with the liberation of others.

I think often about the ways that we tell the Jewish story and its vital importance to the continued vibrancy and character of our Jewish community. I believe that the Reform movement and Reform synagogues across the country are striving to focus on the joy of our heritage and helping to meet people where they are with a sense of belonging and meaning. And, of course, we continue to teach about anti-Semitism because we believe deeply in the importance of understanding that aspect of our history through the lens of how it has shaped us and contributed to our collective wisdom. I myself am a trained Holocaust educator and guiding young Jews through Auschwitz, the Warsaw Ghetto, and other sites in Europe have been among the most profound experiences of my life. As synagogues I believe we still have more to learn about how to teach the painful parts of Jewish experience, and how and when to stand up and speak out, without re-traumatizing or alienating the next generation. And the responsibility is not only on the synagogues. In this age of social media and soundbites Jewish institutions and organizations have a huge role to play in whether or not younger generations of Jews will be inspired by the beauty of Jewish heritage or alienated by the undigested ways our reactivity can turn into infighting and narrow-mindedness. I hear it all the time from my generation of Jews and younger. Many long to find home in the Jewish community and yet the narratives of Judaism with which they were raised and the reactivity they see playing out in the media whenever a comment is deemed to be anti-Semitic is alienating to them. Again, I believe we have more to learn, I believe we can do better, and I do believe that deeper efforts at community healing of our own collective trauma will have a profound impact on the solidarity work we do in social justice

spaces and the future of a vibrant Jewish community here in America. In 5780 in fact, I am committed to seeing this work continue to develop into deeper consciousness.

When I reflect on my own family history and the intergenerational patterns I've inherited, I am grateful for my parents' openness in telling me as much of their stories as they have been able to recall and interpret for themselves. I know that they have woven wounds into wisdom and I feel grateful. Now I have the continued task, as each individual and each generation has, of turning as much of my family history—both the dark and the light—into wisdom as I am able. I am grateful too that my parents passed on a love for Judaism that was deep and strong and true. They taught me that Judaism transcends. Its beauty, its wisdom, its values are bigger than history, bigger than human psychology, bigger than institutions. It is Torah, It is God, It is Divine. That same day following our trip to Cape Spear I stood outside the synagogue that my grandfather Maxwell Rosen helped to build and took a picture next to a Star of David bigger than me. I felt joy in being Jewish with all of its complexities and I felt at home and embraced by all the threads of my history.

In this New Year 5780 I bless us all that we continue to find a home in Judaism and Jewish community and find new ways to healing and wholeness. May we be blessed on this sacred path that is weaving our Jewish narrative into wisdom for today and tomorrow.

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