

Whose Life is This Anyway?
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Rosh Hashanah, September 29, 2019

I often find myself at Safeway late at night. Sometimes it's just easier to shop without a three-year-old in tow. One night in particular, I was there late after a meeting because we needed milk in the house. I walked the aisles, appreciating the time to myself, picking up things for lunches, dinners, the needed milk, and even some M&Ms to fill the machine that I keep in my office for kids who come to visit.

When I was finished, I walked to the front of the store and got in the only line that was open. There were two people ahead of me in line. Directly in front of me was a man, alone, holding a bottle of alcohol. In front of him, a young woman finished putting all of her items on the conveyor belt, and then pulled out a coupon and handed it to the cashier. He walked away to a back office of the store, leaving all of us there with no other option except to wait. It took a while, but he finally returned carrying seven containers of baby formula. He scanned them all, and then scanned her coupon. The coupon didn't work. They tried again. It still didn't work. I began to worry: What would she feed her baby if she couldn't afford to take home this formula? I offered to help, but she didn't understand English. The cashier gave me a look to tell me that she was ok. She bought one container with cash and left the store.

When it was finally my turn at the register, I asked the cashier if the woman was really ok. He told me that the coupon that she was trying to use was from the government, and it would only be valid in another 3 days, so she bought the one tonight and would come back to use the coupon for the rest. I asked how much each container of formula cost. He said that it was very expensive.

Then the cashier told me that for the first ten years of life, he had lived only on sugar and water. I asked where he was from. "Honduras." He continued, "My life is much better here now, but I might not be able to stay here because of what is going on."

And with that, I left the store.

I had so many questions rushing through my mind as I drove home. What happened with the woman with the baby formula? Was that really enough food to make it three days until her coupon worked? Would the baby be ok? Should I have done something more in that moment? What did the cashier's future actually hold? Was he going to be able to continue living his better life here? Was the man with the bottle of alcohol going to be ok out there? Did he get in a car and drive?

There were no answers. I couldn't solve all of their problems, and I hate to admit that I actually forgot about the whole experience pretty quickly. Not because I didn't care. Not because I wasn't concerned. But because in truth, no one person can solve the problem of immigration, of poverty, of alcoholism, of child hunger. The experience was overwhelming, and I felt for those individuals in the moment. But I also knew that I could not continue to carry their individual burdens with me and make them my own.

What I didn't consider in that moment was that there was an opportunity to think more broadly about my own interactions with others, how I support, how I can feel and hold, and how I can work to figure out where my place is in their stories.

The more I think about it now, the more I realize that this encounter in the grocery store was not so dissimilar from something many of us do every day - reading someone's sad story on Facebook, feeling the pain of it for just a moment, and then scrolling past it to the next vacation photo or news story.

But in truth, those moments of pain are real for that person and they last longer than our attention span.

I was with someone recently who lost someone close. It was sudden and unexpected, and I could see the deep sadness she was experiencing as each day passed. She shared stories about him with me, about their life-long friendship, about their last interaction that was not as positive as she would have liked it to be had she known it would be there last.

A few days after he died, I saw her again and tears were streaming down her face. “What triggered it today?” I asked. She replied: “I just posted it on Facebook. Now it’s real.”

When she put it in writing, it was there for her to see, and there for others to bear witness, not only to his death, but to her pain and her sorrow. There for others to help hold her up as she navigated the journey of loss, and perhaps even to feel some of her sadness as well.

Social media feeds us information (hence “news feed”) - people in mourning, life celebrations and milestones, fun nights out with friends, a new outfit - whatever people feel like sharing. By opening these windows into our lives, we allow others to serve as a witness and to share in our joy and our pain, our highs and lows.

But mostly just for a brief moment. We read, we look, and then we scroll past and onto the next thing.

How often have you been in an Uber or a cab and get out of the car 20 minutes later knowing nothing about the person who drove you to your destination? In life we meet so many people who we encounter in so many different ways - the woman at the grocery store, the man we pass on a walk, the driver who gets us to where we need to go. We don’t know their stories, and we can easily pass them by and not turn our heads. We don’t know their highs and lows, and we rarely carry them with us. And we have become so accustomed to scrolling past stories that we allow people to come in and out of our lives without taking much notice.

Melody Wilding, a licensed clinical social worker and professor of human behavior at Hunter College in New York City, teaches, “Empathetic people have a way of making you feel like you’re the only one in the room. When they interact with someone, they give that person the gift of their full attention and respect, which is rare in today’s hyper-distracted world.” What a remarkable responsibility we have to be fully empathetic to people we encounter, to be fully present, to hear their stories, and to help and support them throughout their journey.

There is so much out there that maybe the scrolling is something of a self-defense mechanism as well. We couldn’t and shouldn’t possibly go through life carrying people’s burdens on their behalf. That doesn’t mean that we don’t care. But social media has made these encounters so

much more frequent that we are still just learning how to process and show empathy without being overwhelmed by it all.

Yet when the people who are in pain are our close friends and our family, people in whose lives we are engaged, our responsibility is even greater. We celebrate with them in good times, we cry with them when they are sad, and we walk their path of mourning by their side. And most of all, we don't scroll past their story and forget - unlike my experience in the grocery store. I'd like to suggest that we consider what the world would be like if we didn't just leave these people and their stories behind and walk away.

One of our central stories as a Jewish people that we revisit each year at the High Holy Days is the story of the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac, which we will read from the Torah tomorrow morning. The story begins:

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַהֲאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת-אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי:

Sometime afterward, God put Abraham to the test. He said to him, "Abraham," and he answered, "Hineni," "Here I am."

Abraham answers, "Hineni," three times in Genesis Chapter 22:

That first answer is a response to God calling out to him to take his son up the mountain. A simple answer, really, but one that showed to God that Abraham was present. Rashi teaches that this Hineni was an expression of meekness and readiness, ready to listen, ready to do what God asked of him out of respect and obedience.

The second answer is to Isaac inquiring about the sheep for the offering. This answer is not submissive like the one before. I imagine Abraham watching Isaac as a loving father might do, knowing what was to come. Perhaps this "Hineni" is quieter, more hesitant, maybe even more distracted. Abraham is weighted down by the task at hand, burdened by what God is asking him to do, risking his family relations, and leaving the future of what his life holds in question. This hineni is tentative but also loving.

And the third occurrence comes at the pinnacle of the story:

וַיִּשְׁלַח אֱבְרָהָם אֶת־יְדֻוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת־הַמַּאֲכָלֶת לְשַׁחֵט אֶת־בְּנוֹ:

And Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son. Then an angel of God called to him from heaven: “Abraham! Abraham!” And he answered, “Here I am.”

Picture it: Abraham and Isaac on the top of a mountain. Abraham binds up his son on an altar, and has a knife in the air ready to slay his son. And right before he slams it down, the angel of God comes down and says Abraham Abraham! Like a worried parent whose child is about to do something dangerous. Abraham Abraham! I can only imagine that “Hineni” - the sigh of relief that came with it through his unwavering faith that everything would be ok.

While they all receive the same answer, these three responses of Hineni illustrate that there are different ways of being present to those with whom we interact, with those for whom we care. Abraham teaches us this important lesson of being able to say “I am here for you,” in all different situations, to stop, to react, to care. He shows us that there are different ways to be present, depending on the person in need: A stranger, a close friend, my spouse, and even myself.

Rosh Hashanah reminds us that we are here and we are open to making change for this year to come. We must begin with the sanctity of human beings and human relationships, for only once we do that work can we begin the important work of tikkun olam, of healing our world beyond ourselves and our own personal relationships.

And yet there are times when we are fully in it, when we internalize the triumphs and struggles of those in our lives, sometimes even to the detriment of our own momentary happiness.

Every morning I pass a church on my drive to work. Each week, they post the title of the sermon in their display window out front, and each morning, I read that sermon topic to myself as I drive past. Some weeks, it stays with me for the duration of my drive. And one specific Monday morning, as I headed out on my daily drive to take Noah to preschool, the sermon title screamed out to me: “Whose life is this anyway?”

I couldn't stop thinking about it. It seemed to follow me throughout my day and kept sneaking into my thoughts.

Whose life is this anyway?

Where is the boundary between caring for others, that empathy that we talk about, and caring for ourselves and showing ourselves empathy as well?

In Pirkei Avot, Rabbi Hillel teaches a text that is familiar to many of us:

אם אין אני לי, מי לי. וכשאני לעצמי, מה אני.

“If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I?” We must be present for others, to show our empathy, to walk alongside those in mourning and celebrate in community. We must bear the burdens of others and carry some of their weight on our shoulders as well. That is what it means to truly care.

But we must also find the time and space for ourselves, for our needs, for our own burdens. If we walk around carrying the weight on our shoulders, we will drag our feet into a ditch of despair. How we balance that weight is what will keep us going, keep us caring, keep us enduring day after day.

Hillel's text ends with one more line:

ואם לא עכשיו, אימתי

“And if not now, when?” As we begin this new year of 5780, now is the time for us to stop and reflect on our relationships - on how we are present for others and how we take care of ourselves. Now is when we say “Here I am for you,” and “Here I am for me.” Both important, both part of this life we live, for you, for me, for our world, for our time on this earth together.

Shanah tovah.