

THE EMPTY CHAIR

I have always been wary of using the opportunity of a sermon to share with you the various events of my own life. I have tried not to build my sermons on my children's first steps, their recitals, or clever retorts. I know the temptation to do so is there, but it presumes that a congregation is really interested, and that my personal experiences are somehow more enlightening than yours. Instead, I have always felt that I would be doing quite well if I could learn from my experiences. You didn't have to.

But most of you know that a little over 30 days ago, I lost my father--His death was not unexpected, but still, it was a great loss to me and my family. You have been a wonderfully supportive, caring and loving community. Your words and thoughts have comforted me.

And Yet...A profound event has occurred in my life. It has transformed me and changed me. Richard Adams, the author of Watership Down wrote that, "the death of a parent propels one into the next generation." I feel it. I am suddenly much much older. I have experienced a significant loss.

So much of my thoughts these past few months have been concerned with absorbing, understanding this one event in my life. It is difficult tonight to speak of a year just passed, to explain the ways of the world, the actions of God without these thoughts in my mind.

Certainly this evening, as my family sat around our dining room table, welcoming the New Year with ritual and food, it was also a time to recall the Rosh Hashanah meals of my childhood, the Passover Seders, Thanksgivings, the other many times when the seats around the table were all taken. I recalled the presence of my father, my grandparents, the others who used to share those festival meals together. After a loss, the holidays are often a time to realize that there is a place at the family table that is empty.

There is a poignant Biblical story in the Book of Samuel. Saul, King of Judah, invites the young David to a banquet in celebration of the New Moon. David is cautious, for he fears that Saul means to set a trap for him. David decides not to attend. Jonathan, Saul's son, the beloved friend of David, conspires with David to protect him. In doing so, Jonathan knows that they may never see each other again. Jonathan says: "Your chair will be empty. You will be missed."

Sitting at our dining tables, with the candles, china, silver, challah, wine, good food, we can feel the spiritual presence of those who have sat with us in the past--those who have shared those meals, those who used to prepare the meals which we now prepare ourselves. The chair is empty, but we often feel as if they are sitting with us. Sitting in a sanctuary on Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur we might well recall parents, grandparents, children, teachers, family members who are no longer alive, yet their presence is felt. It is as if there were an empty chair or place next to us where they should be. The Empty Chair is a metaphor for loss, a symbol of grief.

The empty chair is a recurring image in Jewish thought. Last Sunday's NY Times Magazine contained an article about the Rosh Hashanah pilgrims to the grave of Rabbi Nahman of

Bratslav. Jews from all over the world travel to the little town of Uman in the Ukraine to be with their rebbe on Rosh Hashanah. There, where he is buried, the Bratslavers imagine their dead rebbe praying with them and on their behalf.

Nahman was the great grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, the 17th Century founder of Hassidism. He was beloved and revered by his followers, his Hassidim. But unlike the other rebbes of the Hassidic movements, Nahman left no spiritual heir. He was never replaced. After he died the Bratslavers sought no successor. They wanted only the memory of Nahman. The other Hassidic sects ridiculed them. They were called the “Dead Hassidim”, for they had no living rebbe.

But they had a chair--an empty chair. A few years before Nahman died an admirer of the Rebbe had made a magnificent carved wooden chair for him. After his death in 1810, the chair was placed at the head of the synagogue, and it was as if Nahman was still there. I've seen the chair. In the 1920's, during the Cossak attacks in the Ukraine, the chair was taken apart and pieces of it were given to various families who were escaping to the Promised Land. Later, after the War, the families came together in Jerusalem and reassembled the chair. It now sits in Jerusalem. Rebbe Nahman's chair. A book of his sayings has recently been published. Its title is The Empty Chair.

This is not a sermon about furniture, however. Nahman created much of his spiritual teaching around the concept, the metaphor of the empty chair. His philosophy was called, Hitbodedut--aleness. Alone with God. He would go into seclusion and speak intimately with God. He sought to unite with God. Through meditation, silence, ecstatic trances, Nahman sought union with the Divine. He imagined God in the emptiness that was before him. God inhabited the empty chair.

In our own day the metaphor of the empty chair has been used in psychology, particularly Gestalt therapy. When a therapist is dealing with patients who are having a difficult time letting their emotions out, the patients are told to imagine an important, influential, key person from their past sitting in the empty chair in front of them. They are then told to say all the things to the empty chair that they were never able to say face to face. The repressed anger, the hidden disappointments, the unspoken words of love all come out. The empty chair isn't really empty at all. It contains the memories and feelings that existed between two people. More importantly, the empty chair allows the patient to resolve conflicts and emotions whose resolution is impossible due to the death of the other party.

Outside of the formal settings of psychotherapy, the empty chair exercise still makes sense to me. There are times when we may have things to say, questions to ask, advice to seek from a parent, grandparent, teacher, or friend who is no longer alive. My father used to tell me that whenever he faced a tough decision or a crisis in his life, he saw his late father appearing in front of him. I don't know what the advice was, but my father always felt calmer, more serene after the encounter. My father sought to imagine my grandfather's physical presence in his midst.

My father talked to my grandfather long before Hillary Clinton talked to Eleanor Roosevelt.

The truth is, I see nothing wrong in Hillary Clinton talking to Eleanor Roosevelt. I wish she did it more often. I wish all of us spoke to those who have influenced our philosophy and values. One of the most valid criticisms of American culture is our lack of historical perspective. We should wonder what Lincoln, Jefferson, Roosevelt, Martin Luther King or others would have done if confronted by the issues of our day. It is a healthy exercise. Eleanor Roosevelt may well be one of the best conversation partners imaginable. I would like to imagine Eleanor in the empty chair.

I, too, have been known to talk to those who have lived before me. I come to this practice honestly. It is part of Jewish tradition. Jewish thought and theology are very much history based. Jews seek to know and understand Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph. We study the words and actions of Miriam, Moses, David, and Solomon. If anything, Jews are obsessed with history, from Spain to Eastern Europe. From Ellis Island to Maxwell Street. From the Holocaust to the State of Israel. History is defining for Jewish thought.

But there are times when history is more than just an academic exercise. One actually tries to live through and experience the past. A few years ago, I studied Talmud in Jerusalem at the Shalom Hartman Institute. The method of learning there is a classic Talmudic yeshivah model. Two, three, or four students sit at one small table with a single volume of Talmud open before them. A page of Talmud has a small section in the middle that is the text itself, and then all around that central text are the commentaries and opinions of other rabbis of later times. Two thousand years of thought are arranged on a single page.

As the three or four of us would sit and study the Talmud together we were essentially in a dialogue with all the other writers and commentators who had studied the same text. To study Talmud is to be engaged in a conversation across the centuries. Arrayed about our little desk, we felt the presence of Akiba and Hillel, Yochanan ben Zakai, Rabbi Tarfon, Rashi, Maimonides, and so many others. They too had a seat at the table.

Some of those names that I just mentioned, Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Joshua, Rabbi Elazar, Rabbi Akiba, Rabbi Tarfon, might sound familiar to you. They appear in the Haggadah. Their story is told at Passover. The Seder meal is also intended to invoke the memories of other Seders in other places and other times. Teachers, parents, family are not forgotten if they are still present at our sacred meals.

And there is always one additional guest at Passover. No matter how crowded the dining room might be, there is always an open door and a bit of wine for Elijah. Elijah has a special role. He is the one who will announce the messianic era of peace and well being, an end to exile and mourning. He enters our homes and drinks from the cup of Elijah.

We all know about the cup of Elijah, but Elijah also has a chair. It is the Kiseh Elijahu, the Chair of Elijah. It is a central religious symbol in many synagogues. It is usually a bench, often finely carved and ornate. It sits on the Bimah and has a special role in Jewish ritual and observance. In many synagogues throughout the world the Chair of Elijah is the most precious object other than the Torah.

In the synagogue, Elijah's chair is usually empty. No one sits in it except during the Torah service. One of the elders of the community is given the honor of holding the Torah following its reading. The Torah is dressed with its mantle and silver, and the person holding the Torah sits in the chair of Elijah. The Torah is of course the Tree of Life. It fills the Empty Chair and brings it life. The Empty Chair of Elijah now contains the torah, the source of wisdom, teaching, tradition.

The Kiseh Elijahu has an additional role to play. Whether the ornate community Chair of Elijah of the synagogue or the chair designated as Kiseh Elijahu in a home, this is the chair that a newborn child is placed in before a bris or a naming ceremony. The empty chair is filled with a young child. New life comes to replace the old.

Last Sunday, I spent a number of hours in various cemeteries around Chicago. I had been asked to officiate at dedications of the tombstones of people who had died during this past year. The Sunday before Rosh Hashanah is the day of Kever Avot, the day of visiting the graves that is traditionally done before the New Year. The cemeteries were crowded with families gathered about the graves of their loved ones. People go there to commune with their dead relatives. Sometimes they bring them up to date on the events that have occurred during the past year. Often they ask forgiveness for past slights. More often I think, people just go to say I still love you or I miss you. It used to seem like a primitive, superstitious custom to me. But I have gained new respect for it in these last thirty days. In fact, it was quite touching to see so many people visit with the dead.

Right now, I feel more keenly the pain of loss. The year that has passed has been one of sadness. I mourned the death of Yitzhak Rabin. My uncle, who was also my teacher and mentor, died in December at the age of 99. And finally my father died just last month. I know that I have also shared some of your losses this past year as well. So it is that this Rosh Hashannah is bitter sweet. There is the promise of the future but also the sadness for what has passed.

There is some consolation and comfort to be found in the awareness that we continue to feel the presence of those who have influenced and touched our lives. Their teachings, advice, wisdom did not die with them. We can still refer to it when we need to. They are still present to us and alive through us.

This is the New Year. For some of us, this has been a year of loss. For others, it has been a year for growth. But on Rosh Hashanah it is fitting and appropriate to look back and recall those who have most profoundly shaped us. They sit at our side. Their spirit is felt in our homes. They will always merit a place at our tables, for they have earned a place in our hearts. May we continue to be blessed with the gift of memory, and may we strive to live our lives in this next year, as well as in future years, in fulfillment of the noblest values and most sacred visions of those who have loved us and those whom we have loved.

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Rosh Hahanah 5757/1996