

There is Me

Over the summer, I took my daughter Adina out for a walk in the stroller. She was just a few months old, and still at an age where she would usually fall asleep instantly upon being placed into anything in motion. As we rounded a corner, I noticed that today, she hadn't fallen asleep, but was silently staring out at the sky. Around the corner was an old woman sitting alone on the low brick wall along the edge of her small front garden along the sidewalk. Her red walker was off to the side. As I came towards her with the stroller, she sat up straighter, preparing to look at the baby. I greeted her and stopped the stroller just past her so that she could see Adina under the canopy. She stood up, and held right on to the handle bar and beamed. "It's a girl," she said.

"Yes," I replied, "Her name is Adina."

"Adina," she repeated, "She has such blue eyes."

"Yes, I said," as she began to search my face to see if they came from me.

"My husband has blue eyes," I clarified.

"And look at all of her hair," she said, "and her cheeks," she smiled wide at Adina who gave her a toothless little baby smile back. The woman smiled at me and said, "It's wonderful. She is just on her way in, while I am on my way out."

A rabbi-friend asked me what I would be speaking about this Yom Kippur. So I told him this story. "She did *not* say that," he said.

"She really did," I replied, "I couldn't believe it either."

"That sounds like the kind of story a rabbi makes up for a sermon," he said, "Wow."

It is so easy to be cynical and hopeless. Strolling around the corner that day, just days after the horrific shooting at Robb Elementary in Uvalde, TX, more than 2 years into living with the COVID-19 pandemic, with constant worry about climate change, the retraction of reproductive rights, the decline of democracy, antisemitism, inflation and so on, I was speechless hearing this statement of hope. “It’s wonderful. She is just on her way in, while I am on my way out.” I was so struck by this woman’s hope. She didn’t know us and we didn’t know her, yet she was hopeful at our mere existence. Just seeing that new babies are still coming into the world brought her hope. And isn’t that really all we need to be hopeful?

We all worry about the next generation. Our people have been worrying about the next generation for millennia. Every week Rabbi Z and I tell our b’nai mitzvah students, “Your great-grandparents, grandparents and parents have been *dreaming* of this moment since before you were even born.” And while that is certainly true, it is possible that “dreaming” isn’t quite the right word--“*worrying*” might be more accurate. And while worrying about the next generation is not uniquely Jewish, in Torah, worry goes all the way back to the very beginning.

In the Garden of Eden, after God creates humanity and that one tempting tree at its center, immediately after they eat from that tree, the first two human beings in existence begin to worry about what will happen to them next.¹ And worrying, especially about who will come after us, is passed from our ancestors from generation to generation.

¹ Sforno on Genesis 3:10:1

ואירא, this feeling of fear is similar to that experienced by the Jewish people in Exodus 34,30 when, because of the sin of the golden calf, the people were afraid to face him...

Upon finding out that she will have a baby at age 90, Sarah worries.² Lot worries about the well-being of his daughters.³ Hagar worries about her son Ishmael.⁴ Jacob worries about his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren and takes all of them to Egypt.⁵ The midwives, Shifra and Puah, worry about the very existence of the next generation and defy Pharaoh.⁶ And so on throughout the Torah, we see our ancestors worrying.

Rabbi Z shared the following joke about Jewish worry: During some dark days in Russia, the Jews of a small town gathered enough money to send Yankel to their nearest city to send a telegram telling the Jews in America what was happening. When he got to the telegram office, he was told he only had enough money to send a telegram with 5 words. He thinks for a minute and then says, "OK, send this: Start worrying. Letter to follow."

At times in our history, our worries grew into despair. And rightfully so. Our worry grew to despair with the Yom Kippur War, the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto, The Spanish Inquisition, the First Crusade. This list goes on and on, all the way back to the destruction of our first and second Temples. These are all tragedies we mark on Tisha b'Av, the 9th day of the Hebrew month of Av, which begins our journey to these Days of Awe. On Tisha b'Av we read the book of Lamentations, in Hebrew, *Eicha*, which means "How?" In our moments of deepest worry and despair, when we wonder, who will come after me? Will there be a "next generation"? When we feel hopeless, we ask "*Eicha?--how* can this be?"

² Genesis 18:5

³ Genesis 19:8

⁴ Genesis 20:17

⁵ Genesis 46:3-7

⁶ Genesis 50:19

On Kol Nidrei, we look at the empty ark and recall these moments of profound emptiness, perhaps of pain, yearning, worry or despair. We ask ourselves, “*Eicha? How* am I standing here? Who am I remembering? Will I be here next year? What’s next? And how do I get there? *Eicha?*”

“*Eicha? How?*” is an existential question at the center of this day, of Yom Kippur. As Rabbi Alan Lew writes, “The Holy of Holies was the space no one could enter except the high priest, and even he could only enter for a few moments on Yom Kippur. If anyone else entered this place, or if the high priest entered on any other day, the charged emptiness at the Sacred Center, the powerful nothingness there, would break out on him and overwhelm him, and he would die. So Yom Kippur is, among other things, the day we enter the vacated space, even if only by proxy, the day we experience the charged emptiness at the Sacred Center.” And what is that emptiness but the place where we face our deepest worries and the depths of our despair? *Eicha? How?* How can this be? Who am I? What is it all for?

Rabbi Lew explains that even when the Temple was destroyed, some of this charged emptiness remained. A bit of worry, of fear, of despair, passed down from generation, to generation, to us, from the very beginning.

When we cry out “*Eicha? How?*” from that empty place, we think back to the very first worry in Torah, when God turned the question back to Adam and Eve, “*Ayekah--Where* are you?” You see, the question we ask ourselves when we feel hopeless, *Eicha*, is made up of exactly the same Hebrew letters as the first question God asks Adam and Eve, the most essential question of all, that echoes in our hearts every Yom Kippur. “*Ayekah?--Where* are you?” And it is in answering this question that we can find hope.

There is a record in the Talmud of a conversation that the rabbis had of the most outstanding characteristics of the sages who came before them: “When Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai died, wisdom ceased...when ben Azzai died, the diligent ceased; ...When Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi died...humility and fear of sin ceased.”⁷ [And so on.] Growing increasingly hopeless, listening to this litany, suddenly, Rav Yosef interrupted:

לֹא תִּיתְּנֵי עֲנוּהָ,

“*Lo tit’nei anavah*--Do not teach that humility ceased,

דְּאִיכָא אָנָא

d’ika ana--for there is me.”⁸

And Rav Naḥman similarly added:

לֹא תִּיתְּנֵי יִרְאַת חַטָּא,

“*Lo tit’nei yirat cheit*--Do not teach that fear of sin ceased,

דְּאִיכָא אָנָא

d’ika ana--for there is me.”⁹

From a place of hopelessness we ask, “*Eicha? How?*” And these holy days remind us of God’s call to us, “*Ayekah, where are you?*” And the rabbis of the Talmud offer us an answer: “*D’ika ana.*” There may be a whole lot to feel hopeless about, but *there is me*. We can find hope in the simple fact that we are here. We are here, and that is enough.

Jewish tradition teaches that Elijah the prophet is the ultimate symbol of hope. We are likely familiar, on Passover, with Elijah’s chair, cup or opening the

⁷ BT Sotah 49b

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ *ibid*

door for him. Throughout Jewish tradition, Elijah represents a mystery figure who shows up in various guises to help Jews in need. Let share one of my favorite stories about him:

Once, a man came to the Baal Shem Tov, [the founder of Chassidism].

“Rebbe,” He said, “I want to see Elijah the Prophet.”

“It’s simple,” said the Baal Shem Tov, “Get 2 boxes and fill them with food and clothes. Then, before Rosh Hashanah, travel to the outskirts of town. There you’ll find a dilapidated house. Go to the house in the evening, but don’t knock on the door immediately; stand there and listen. Then, before sunset, knock on the door and ask for hospitality.”

So the man went and did as the Baal Shem Tov told him. And when he found the broken-down house at the edge of town, he stood in front of the door, listening. Inside, he heard children crying, “Mommy, we’re hungry. And it’s Rosh Hashanah and we don’t have decent clothes to wear!”

He heard the mother answer, “Children, don’t worry, God will send Elijah the Prophet to bring you everything you need!”

The man was very excited, he knew he was in the right place to get to see Elijah the Prophet! So, the man knocked on the door. When the woman opened it, he asked if he could stay with them for the holiday. “How can I welcome you when I don’t have any food in the house?” she said.

“Don’t worry,” he said, “I have enough food for all of us.” He came in, opened the boxes, and offered the family the food and clothing. They all ate, and the children took clothes for themselves. The man was there for two days, waiting

to see Elijah the Prophet. He did not even sleep--how could he?! How often do you get a chance to see Elijah the Prophet?! But he saw no one.

So after Rosh Hashanah, he returned to the Baal Shem Tov and said,
“Rebbe, I did not see Elijah the Prophet!”

“Did you do everything I told you?” asked the Baal Shem Tov.

“I did!” he said. “And you didn’t see him?”

“No, Rebbe.” “Are you sure?”

“Yes, Rebbe! I didn’t see him!”

“Then you’ll have to return for Yom Kippur,” said the Baal Shem Tov.

So the man went back again with the same provisions, this time before Kol Nidrei, and stood in front of the door again. Listening, he heard the children crying, “Mommy, we’re hungry! We haven’t eaten the whole day! How can we fast for Yom Kippur?”

“Children!” said the mother. “Do you remember you were crying before Rosh Hashanah? And I told you, ‘Don’t worry! God will send Elijah the Prophet! Wasn’t I right? Didn’t Elijah come and bring you a delicious meal? He stayed with us for two days! I promise you that Elijah will come now, too!’”

Then the man understood. And he knocked on the door.

D’ika ana--There is me. Any of us can be Elijah the Prophet. Any of us can walk around the corner. Any of us can wait at the door. Any of us can bring hope.

Every day I take Adina on the same route in the stroller, and everyday I pass that brick wall, hopeful to see the gleam of a red walker, my Elijah the prophet, around the corner. “It’s wonderful. She’s just on her way in, while I’m on my way out.” That simple encounter reminds me that though there is so much to worry

about, and it is so easy to feel hopeless; that though there is emptiness and pain, there is hope. “*D’ika ana*--there is me.” There is you. We are here. And we can have hope, because we can *be* hope.