

A Call for Unity

Rosh Hashanah 5784 (Day 1)
Anshe Sholom B'nai Israel Congregation
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Last February, when Julie and I came to visit Chicago, we were immediately impressed by many things about Anshe Sholom and Lakeview: the vibrant neighborhood, which reminded us of our early days as a couple when we met and started dating in Park Slope. Lake Michigan was *enormous* and the shul was just down the block from it — if we moved to Chicago we would be closer to a large body of water than we had been in L.A.! And of course, a number of you made sure to point out what truly makes this community so special: Windy City Sweets.

Throughout the weekend, however, there was something else that struck a deeper chord within us: it was amazing to see how the community was coming together. There was a palpable energy and excitement, paired with a minute-by-minute schedule befitting a presidential campaign. Every detail had been thought out, including who would walk us the long walk from Aldine to Melrose for minyan or who would drive us to Milt's for dinner.

We left the weekend inspired by this community and touched by the warm welcome that we had received from so many of you. It felt to us that the community was truly unified.

But this was not our first rodeo, and over the last decade, Julie and I have unfortunately witnessed the turmoil and discord that can accompany a rabbinic search. To some extent, this is to be expected and is not unique to synagogues. Any major decision in the life of an organization or a community can have a polarizing effect. The same can be true for families, when a pivotal moment or decision pulls people apart, setting parents and children or siblings at odds with each other.

Our Torah reading this morning depicts this exact situation, a family fraught with tension. Avraham and Sarah have experienced the miraculous birth of Yitzchak and for a moment, all is well. Then the Torah offers what appears to be an innocuous detail:

וַיֵּרָא שָׂרָה אֶת-בֶּן-הָעֶגְרִי הַמִּצְרִי אֲשֶׁר-יָלְדָה לְאַבְרָהָם מִצְחָק:

And Sarah saw the son who Hagar the Egyptian had born to Abraham playing.

The midrash (cited by Rashi) wonders: What kind of game was Yishmael playing? One explanation was that he was worshiping idols. Another suggests that he was engaging in inappropriate sexual conduct. Yet another says he was also committing acts of

murder; in other words, the three most objectionable actions for a Jewish person to commit. No matter the details, the midrash makes clear that this was not the kind of kid Sarah wanted hanging around little baby Ike...

וַתֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָהָם גֵּרֶשׁ הָאֵמָה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת־בְּנָהּ כִּי לֹא יִירָשׁ בְּן־הָאֵמָה הַזֹּאת עִם־בְּנִי עִם־יִצְחָק:

She said to Abraham, "Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac."

For Sarah, this little incident with Yishmael was the last straw in a long-standing rivalry that traced its roots to the question of who would be Avraham's heir. This is not even the first time that our matriarch Sarah has been harsh toward Hagar. Back in פרק טז [Chapter 16:6], Hagar's pregnancy is devastating to Sarah and "*Abram said to Sarai, 'Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right.'*" Then Sarai treated her harshly — וַתַּעֲנֶהָ שָׂרַי, and she ran away from her.

The biblical commentators read that passage with alarm and key in on the word "וַתַּעֲנֶהָ". It is the same root used to describe the Egyptians' harsh treatment of the Jewish people in Egypt (וַיַּעֲנוּ) and it is also the word used to describe the ways that we afflict ourselves on Yom Kippur. The Ramban explicitly critiques both Avraham and Sarah for their behavior:

חטאה אמנו בענוי הזה וגם אברהם בהניחו לעשות

Our mother sinned in this affliction of Hagar, and also Avraham sinned by permitting her to do so.

Yitzchak was destined to carry on the tradition of Avraham, continuing the covenantal relationship with God. And yet, Sarah and Avraham erred in their interactions with someone in their own family. It didn't have to be this way. According to Ramban, Avraham and Sarah should have done Teshuva to repent for how they treated Hagar!

Instead, we are left with a harsh scene: Hagar and Yishmael are exiled, sent off to die in the desert. They are on their own and alone.

It is a poignant image of loneliness for us to consider on Rosh Hashanah. Sometimes I wonder: have there been times in the last year when I might have acted like Avraham and Sarah did in this moment, overly harsh and lacking compassion? Have there been times when we've written someone off or exiled them, if not literally then maybe from our social circle?

Conversely, maybe we identify more with Hagar and Yishmael, cast out to the margins and left to go it alone in a harsh desert. Thinking back on the last year, perhaps we

weren't included in an important conversation at work, or left off a guest list for a *simcha*. Maybe we have become marginalized in our extended family for our beliefs, our family structure, or how we have chosen to live our lives.

Since arriving in July, I have had coffee with Hagar many times already. I have heard stories of heartbreak over not being included in Shabbat meals or certain shul events, people being cast out or pushed to the edges of the very place that should be a spiritual home for all.

We have an amazing community here, filled with warm, caring and thoughtful people. Still, there are too many times when too many of us have felt unheard, unseen or alone. And this is not a trivial problem.

Years ago, the then new U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy traveled across America. *"I embarked on a cross-country listening tour,"* he wrote in his recent annual report:

"I heard stories from my fellow Americans that surprised me.... People began to tell me they felt isolated, invisible, and insignificant. Even when they couldn't put their finger on the word "lonely," time and time again, people of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds, from every corner of the country, would tell me, "I have to shoulder all of life's burdens by myself," or "if I disappear tomorrow, no one will even notice."

The Surgeon General also connected loneliness to diminished health outcomes of course, linking loneliness with *"greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety, and premature death...And [there are also] the harmful consequences of a society that lacks social connection [which] can be felt in our schools, workplaces, and civic organizations..."*

We are living in a time of isolation. As a society, we feel more alone than ever. When we are together, we increasingly spend time with people that are similar to us in outlook, political belief, life-stage or background. Though many have decried how polarized our world has become, at its core polarization is another form of isolation, albeit in just one particular group. These twin trends harm our health and wellbeing, and yet our cultural moment reinforces these dynamics.

Even within our sheltered enclave of Lakeview, Anshe Sholom is not immune. Like the Surgeon General, I've been on my own listening tour and have met with, had coffee with, or taken a walk with, fifty of you or so over the last two months, with hopefully lots more to come. Many have shared stories from the last few years. Harsh words have

been said and stinging emails sent. There are people that have been hurt, and perhaps some of us are still hurting. There is still healing to be done in this community.

How do we heal, both as individuals and as a community?

The great Rav Soloveitchik offers us a solution, through a creative interpretation of one of the other names of this holiday. In the Torah, this day is not called Rosh Hashanah but *Yom Teruah*, the day of shofar blasts. Which of course begs the question: what is the purpose of Rosh Hashanah if we don't hear the shofar, which we won't today?

Rav Soloveitchik offered a beautiful explanation of the name "*Yom Teruah*." He points out that the root of *Teruah* — the key word in the Torah for Rosh Hashana — doesn't actually come from shofar blowing. Rather, it comes from another context altogether, the word רָעָה *re'ah*, meaning friendship, as in *v'ahavta l're'cha kamocho*, love your neighbor as yourself.

Yom Teruah, which we celebrate today, is not just a day of shofar blowing. It is a day of hearing a voice — not of the shofar, but of those around us. It is a day of fellowship and friendship, of connection and relationship.

On a spiritual level as well, Yom Teruah is about one relationship in particular: our relationship with God. Elsewhere, Rav Soloveitchik explains that this is why we eat the *simanim*, the special Rosh Hashanah holiday foods like beets and leeks, as we mutter odd puns and wordplay. Rav Soloveitchik says that this is nothing but inside jokes between us and God; we are like old friends reconnecting. And this work of connection, of coming together whether with God or those around us, is deeply fundamental to Rosh Hashanah.

There is a word for this in Hebrew, of the process and experience when people come together: *achdut*, which means oneness, solidarity, or wholeness.

Over the last few months, many people have asked me what my long-term vision is for ASBI. On some level, it is a bit soon for that — I still have my California driver's license! However it is not too soon for a vision for the coming year.

This year, let us have a year of *achdut*, a year where we come together as one shul and one community.

This will take some work and rewiring for all of us. We need to stop seeing ourselves as one thing and others as another, whether more liberal or more conservative, young

professionals, empty nesters, young families, or singles. Let us see beyond these labels which often reduce people to a particular identity and also misses the opportunity to genuinely connect with others who might, at first glance, seem too different.

As a community, we will be striving for and prioritizing moments and programs where the entire shul can come together. A week from tonight, we will have a special Shabbat Shuva of song and *motzei* Shabbat concert; let us all be together and sing as we prepare for Yom Kippur. Just last week, about twelve of us gathered to cook as part of the Engagement Task Force. There were many ages and backgrounds represented, united by our love of food and our desire to enhance the ASBI community.

By the same token, we must think about what *achdut* means on a personal level, day-to-day, and on Shabbat morning. How do we build that sense of solidarity and connection?

Each of us in the coming year must strive to see beyond their own little bubble, what halakha calls our *daled amot*, the four cubits which form our personal circles. We must reach out to others beyond a specific group. This is as simple as saying hello, on Shabbat, to people whose names we don't know (or have forgotten) and making a concerted effort to invite new people over for a meal.

I have met so many incredible people here in just these few months and it still surprises me that there are people who have been going to the same shul for many years who don't know each other. How can that be? We all experienced varying degrees of isolation during the pandemic; have we forgotten so quickly what a profound gift it is to be in community with others, to be a *re'ah*, to be someone's neighbor or be able to sit near them on Shabbat?

We learn the trait of *hachnasat orchim* [hospitality] from Avraham and Sarah, just a few chapters before the stories of Hagar. Their tent was famously open on all four sides, accessible to all. Is our shul? Is our Shabbos table? When was the last time we hosted someone new for a Shabbat or yuntif meal, or someone with whom we've never had a meal? It's such an obvious thing but it means so much and I believe these kinds of small gestures form the building blocks of a unified, intergenerational, and wholehearted community.

We must do what we can to ensure that no one here feels the way the Surgeon General described our epidemic of loneliness, that "*if I disappear tomorrow, no one will even notice.*" This year, let us truly notice each other.

When we come to shul, or a community event, the question should not only be who was there, but who wasn't. Who have we not seen for a long time? And what will we do about it?

Anshe Sholom is already a tremendously warm and welcoming place, but we need to do more. Let us break down the walls between us, for each person here matters.

Indeed, this is also the message of our Torah reading and the story of Hagar. Hagar and Yishmael are exiled, cast out, left to die in the desert. And they would have died had there not been “a קול”, an outcry, a voice:

וַתִּשָּׂא אֶת-קוֹלָהּ וַחֲבָדָּהּ: וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱ-לֹהִים אֶת-קוֹל הַנֶּעֱרָ וַיִּקְרָא מֵלֶאֱ-לֹהִים | אֶל-הַגֵּר מִן-הַשָּׂמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר
לָהּ מִה-לָּךְ הַגֵּר אֶל-תִּירָאִי כִּי-שָׁמַע אֱ-לֹהִים אֶת-קוֹל הַנֶּעֱרָ בְּאֶשֶׁר הוּא-שָׁם:

Hagar raised her voice, cried out and wept. And God heard the cry of the boy, and a messenger of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is.”

Three times in these *pesukim* [verses], the word *kol* comes up. It is not the *kol* of the shofar, but the *kol*, the voice, of someone alone and in need. God hears both Hagar and Yishmael crying out and answers them. A messenger of God, an angel, calls back to Hagar.

Let us do the same today and in the coming year. Let us listen closely to voices around us, and become like *malachim*, God's holy messengers on earth.

Rosh Hashanah is a day of universality and wholeness, it is meant to be a day of unity and *achdut*, for the whole world and each community. It is a time when we see old friends and welcome new ones, a reminder that we are part of something much greater than ourselves.

May today be a day of *re'ut* and *achdut*, of unity, fellowship and friendship in our shul and in our broader community.

May today be the first day in a year of *achdut*, a year where we come together as one.

Shana Tova.