



Rosh Hashanah Day 1 5782 Sermon  
By: Rabbi Joshua Ben-Gideon

It is good to be together! I am grateful for the 100 plus people who are with me right now in our beautiful, renewed Bernard and Nancy Gutterman sanctuary. And I am deeply thankful for all of the people joining us on the stream. Our very special community is gathered together on this sacred day, and for this we are thankful.

No matter what is happening, Rosh Hashanah and the holiday season comes every year. And every year, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur help us prepare ourselves to face the vast unknown of the year to come. Perhaps this is especially true of this year.

The first step in our High Holiday journey is to grapple with where we have been and where we are now. The Torah teaches that when we cry out, God does not merely hear us, God encounters us “in the place where we are.” This morning we read in the Torah that Yishmael cried out from thirst and God heard his cries “b’asher hu sham” -- from the place where he was. The rabbis picked this reading in part because we can’t move forward until we know where we are. How can we look at the year to come, how can we think about what it means to be inscribed in the book of life for the coming year, if we don’t examine “Ba’asher Anachnu Sham” if we don’t look at where we are?



So where are we? Let me begin with where I am. Last year at this time I was just happy to pull off online services. I was proud that our congregation came together to deliver Mahzorim to one another and to be present with each other online. We took what solace we could seeing family and friends in zoom boxes. We had no idea how long this would last. We were together in our aloneness. The unknown was scary, and yet each day it seemed that we were figuring out how to survive this pandemic a little bit better—and yet the promise of a vaccine was out there.

We hoped that this year would be different. After vaccinations we had hope. And yet here we are. In June I had hoped that these holidays would be almost normal. And now here we are. So I am disappointed and I am frustrated. At the same time I feel quite fortunate. Our community continues to do good things and to give us ways to support one another, to learn together and to celebrate life through our Judaism.

And yet this is not how it was supposed to be. In that sense, we are all feeling at least a little broken and suffering. In the past year, so many have had to change or put off plans or had career goals ripped away from us. Our children have been socially disconnected, isolated from peers, teachers and the formative experiences of youth. And our young adults and young professionals--the people who are meant to be building their futures. Our hearts go out to them. When our



children, young adults and young professionals try to imagine their future, what can they be thinking?

And yet, this is not last year. We are vaccinated. We know more. While there are breakthrough infections, and no one wants that, the odds of serious illness are better than they were. Those over twelve are nearly universally vaccinated in our community. And God willing, and the data proves it to be safe, our younger children will begin to be vaccinated before the winter begins. So we are not in the same place where we were last year. We are crying out from here--where we are now.

On this Rosh Hashanah, I find myself wondering...we got through the last year with grit and one another. What do we need here, in this place in time? What do we need to deal with the “stuff” we are going through? And just as importantly, what don't we need? What will help and what will get in the way?

There is a Talmudic story that sheds light on this question of how to face our spiritual needs at the moment and how to deal with suffering where we are right now. This isn't a story about some sainted rabbi who knew just what to do and whose example we should follow. In fact, the story might help us know what NOT to do in the face of illness and suffering. The rabbis knew from misery and suffering. In their time, just the difference in infant mortality and the dangers of childbirth to mothers alone made life so much more precarious. I will tease out

three rules that provide us guidance for how to face the suffering in our time. The rabbis' wisdom helps us by giving us a way forward.

רבי אלעזר חלש.

Rabbi Elazar, one of Rabbi Yoḥanan's students, fell ill.

על לגביה רבי יוחנן. חזא דהנה קא גני בבית אפל

Rabbi Yoḥanan entered to visit him, and saw that he was lying in a dark room.

גלייה לדרעיה ונפל נהורא

Rabbi Yoḥanan exposed his arm, and light radiated from his flesh, filling the house. (That last part is tricky--don't worry, we'll get there).

אמר ליה: אמאי קא בכית?

Rabbi Yochanan asked him: "Why are you crying? And then without waiting for a response he continued:

אי משום תורה דלא אפשתי — שנינו: אחד המרבה ואחד הממעיט, ובלבד שיכנין לבו לשמים. ואי משום מזוני — לא כל אדם זוכה לשתי שלחנות. ואי משום בני — דין גרמא דעשירא ביר.

“If it is because you did not learn as much Torah as you would have liked to in your lifetime - don't worry! Remember we have learned: It makes no difference whether you do much or little, as long as your intention is to serve God. Or, maybe you're crying because you haven't made enough money in your lifetime--not every man is fortunate enough to acquire both wealth and learning. You're learned, so be



happy with that! Or if you're crying because you never had children--well, I've lost ten children!"

Can you imagine someone coming to visit you and trying to convince you that your suffering isn't justified? Let's stop there in the story for a moment to learn two rules for loving each other through suffering:

### RULE #1

When someone we know is suffering in any manner, rule number one is **show up**. This, R. Yochanan did right. One of the ways that the Talmud illustrates this point is through the personalities involved. Rabbi Yochanan is Rabbi Elazar's teacher, his rabbi. If the story had the roles reversed and it was the student visiting the rabbi, we might have thought, of course, you take care of your teacher, it's a matter of respect. But here, the teacher shows up for his student--visiting isn't about honor--it's about being present for a fellow being who is suffering.

The story also places Rabbi Yochanan as the protagonist for another reason. He is not only Rabbi Elazar's teacher, he is quite an important person. It would have been easy for him to send one of Rabbi Elazar's friends to check on him. He might have rationalized that Rabbi Elazar would prefer to hear from a friend. And this way He could continue with his studies and his important work while someone else checks on Rabbi Elazar. Again, the Talmud teaches us about the universality



of suffering. This time, the obligation to take action, to visit, falls upon everyone regardless of role or station.

In this pandemic--all we can do is to love each other through this hard time. Rule #1: when confronted with suffering, show up. Yet as the story continues, we learn that showing up can be very very hard and visitors can be very very awkward, even with the best intentions. So let's turn what NOT to do:

**RULE #2:**

Rabbi Yochanan asks Rabbi Elazar "Why are you crying?" And instead of waiting for a response, he pontificates. He offers three possible explanations, in each case without letting R. Eleazar a word in edgewise. Three times Rabbi Yochanan offers a theological rationalization why that imagined concern should not upset R. Eleazar in any event.

Why? Why does he bungle this part of the visit so badly? We see a friend in a bad situation and it causes us distress. We want to help. We want to help them feel better. But when we seek to comfort them, without realizing it, we sometimes end up speaking to comfort ourselves. This example is so bad, we could have used it in rabbinic school as an example of what not to do when visiting the sick.

Our teacher, Rabbi Neil Gilman, Tz"l, was very concerned with the practical theology of rabbinic students who would then become rabbis and use that theology



to comfort and teach the Jews of America. He taught me that moments of crises are not moments for theology—they are moments for action. When I am with someone in pain, I am not to talk to them about why God would create a world where there is pain and suffering, I am to do something to bring them comfort, perhaps something as simple as holding their hand, and to show them God’s love. Words and ideas, even if brilliant, won’t help them. Food, a listening ear, a warm hand, these are the things that bring them comfort. The job of my theology, of my belief system, is to inspire me to do what is good and what is right. It is not to explain away someone’s pain.

Unfortunately, R. Yochanan falls into this trap--let’s learn from him. This story helps us understand the pitfalls of theologizing in moments of crises. Rule number two is don’t do it. And a similar yet more expansive rule applies when it comes to consoling our friends and Beth David family members about anything having to do with COVID. Don’t theologize, don’t rationalize and perhaps most challenging and most importantly—don’t politicize. When someone we know gets sick with Covid-19, or suffers in any way from the pandemic, the only response from us that will be helpful are expressions of love and support.

If they have missed out on something, tell them how disappointed you are for them. If they have lost something or someone dear to them, tell them how angry you are on their behalf. Hold their hand. Sit with them quietly. Ask how you

can help. Be patient. Bring them God's love and comfort, the knowledge that they are not alone.

Physical presence is good. Not theologizing/rationalizing/intellectualizing is important. The first two rules get us in the room and provide for us a guideline of what not to say so that we bring comfort and support, not judgement and distress. This third part of the story gets to the heart of the matter--and the reason why I am speaking about this on Rosh Hashanah.

Rabbi Yochanan has finished spouting off his three explanations for why Rabbi Elazar should not be crying. And now Rabbi Elazar responds. These are the first words he utters to his teacher and friend who has come to visit him. He speaks directly to the first question, why are you crying, and not to any of the other suggestions that Rabbi Yochanan has made.

אָמַר לֵיהּ: לְהָאִי שׁוֹפְרָא דְרַבִּי בְּעַפְרָא קָא בְּכִינָא.

He says "I am crying because this beautiful person I see in front of me will one day rot in the ground as well."

This is a gut punch. Rabbi Elazar is saying "I am not upset because any part of my life has not gone as planned, or perhaps I have not achieved, accomplished as much as you. I am crying because of the fleeting and precarious nature of life. I'm crying because you-- this beautiful and wise person who has come to visit me--will also one day die and be buried in the earth."

אָמַר לִיה: עַל דָּא וַדַּאי קָא בְּכִית, וּבְכוּ תַרְנִייהוּ.

Rabbi Yochanan replies “this is something worth crying over.” And they sit and cry together.

אַדְהֶכִי וְהֶכִי אָמַר לִיה: תְּבִיבִין עָלֶיךָ יְסוּרִין? אָמַר לִיה: לֹא הֵן וְלֹא שְׂכָרוֹן. אָמַר לִיה: הֵב לִי יָדְךָ, יְהֵב לִיה יְדֵיה, וְאַוּקְמִיה

After they cry, Rabbi Yochanan takes Rabbi Elazar’s hand, and through his touch, helps to restore Rabbi Elazar to health.

Though it may look like this on the surface, when we visit the sick we are not a healthy person coming to bring something good to a sick and suffering person. No. We are a fellow human being, who will also die one day, coming to be present with a fellow human being who is ill or suffering. And who knows, the person in the bed could or will likely recover, and the person who is visiting could die sooner. There are no guarantees about the outcomes of our lives. In the midst of so much unknown, in that moment, we know that we can be with another person. We know that we can empathize and comfort them by being present in our own vulnerability, the precariousness of all human life.

True presence is when we recognize that no matter what our external circumstances seem to suggest, we are all in the same, human condition. It is this emotional and spiritual presence that heals and helps to lift people up from suffering. And there is a reason that the second paragraph of the Amidah, the



prayer we are meant to say three times a day, identifies three different ways in which we can do this— you might recognize the Hebrew—*Zokef Kefufim, Helps the bent (physically challenged) stand up, Somech Noflif, Helps up the fallen, Um'kayem Emunato Li'sheinei Afar, Keeps faith with those who sleep in the dust.*

RULE NUMBER THREE: Take the hand of your fellow human, know you're the same. You're both human. This last piece is so powerful that the story makes literal what we know to be true - human connection can heal.

On Rosh Hashanah and in the next 10 days, here - where we are in this pandemic and in life--these three rules can help us to live with intention. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are here to remind us of all three of the truths R. Yochanan learns in the story. 1) We need to be there for each other 2) Don't try to rationalize your way out of vulnerability or anyone else's suffering and perhaps most of all 3) We are all mortal. We are all human. We are all connected. We have the power to help one another when we embrace our own vulnerability.

Rosh Hashanah and the Yamim Noraim help us get there. The liturgy helps us strip away illusions of control. It confronts us with our own impermanence. When I recognize the fragility of all life, and of my life too, I am motivated to be more humble and to recognize the few things in life that truly matter. And then to make the conviction to let go of anything that distracts us from the pursuit of those important things.



Let's use these days together to sit together like R. Yochanan and R. Elazar at the end of the story. Together--connecting as humans--we can access the healing power of these days.

Let us roll up our sleeves like Rabbi Yochanan and bring light into our dark moments. Let us connect in our shared vulnerability, in the truth that we are all in this together and are responsible for each other. Let us reach out our hands to one another, bringing love and healing in a moment when we all need it most.

Shanah Tova U'Metukah U'Briyah - Happy and Healthy New Year.