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Congregation Beth Am
Yizkor – 7th Day Pesach

It seems that each year in the lead up to Pesach, a particular text, theme, or idea emerges from my preparations for my *Seder*, or for a Torah study or *D'var Torah*, that kind of carries me through: A text that stays in my mind, that reframes, or reawakens for me, a particular theme of the holiday, an idea that guides my practice during Pesach and the period that follows.

Over time, in addition to collecting crumbs of matzah and stains of wine, my Haggadah has become a collection of these thoughts and texts. One of the pleasures for me of the Seder is to re-encounter some of these guiding ideas in the in-between, quieter moments at the Seder table: to re-discover quotes and texts held by the binding of my Haggadah.

Last Saturday night I came across these:

from the Seder in 2016, a quote of Tah-nahesi Coates, from *Between the World and Me*:
The fact of history is that black people have not—*no people have ever*—liberated themselves strictly through their own efforts.

From a more recent seder, I found this quote of Audre Lorde's:
"The true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us."

This year, the text that has anchored my mind on an aspect of Passover, one I keep turning over and returning to during this week, is the 3rd chapter of Malachi, and particularly its conclusion: a verse that involves an act of turning towards loved ones, and of engaging in reconciliation. Malachi 3 is the haftarah for *Shabbat Hagadol*, the Great Shabbat that precedes Pesach; this chapter is also the final text, in the final book of prophecy contained in the prophetic section of the Tanach. Many of us studied this haftarah, together, a week ago.

The third chapter of Malachi describes יוֹם יְהוָה הַגָּדוֹל וְהַנּוֹרָא the coming of an awesome, fearful day of Adonai's, a future day of redemption that Elijah, the prophet, will herald. Many things will occur on that day, events that strike us, contemporary readers of this ancient text, as downright biblical. As we read,

And on the day that I am preparing, said Adonai of Hosts.... you shall come to see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between him who has served God and him who has not served God...for you who revere My name a sun of victory shall rise to bring healing...and you shall trample the wicked to a pulp, for they shall be dust beneath your feet on the day that I am preparing—said Adonai of Hosts (Mal. 3:17-21).

But this coming period, that the haftarah depicts, will also be one of great blessings, when Judah will be the most desirous of lands; there will be a bounty of crops and all of the nations, as Malachi prophesies, will call Israel “happy.” This haftarah from last shabbat, dating from perhaps the 5th or 4th century BCE, serves as a foundation for conceptions of what our tradition evolves into descriptions of the Messianic Age: a time of ingathering and of peace and joy.

Our rituals at our seder tables focus us towards this messianic future. The seder interweaves two redemptions: one in the past, the Exodus from Egypt, but also a future redemption, a time of liberation for all. And what we are to learn from the Exodus is to serve us in our working our way to a future redemption, one that will be announced by Elijah.

The Haftarah concludes with these words, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the coming of the awesome, fearful day of the LORD. And here is the verse that has stayed with me during the past week:

וְהָשִׁיב לֵב-אֲבוֹת עַל-בָּנִים וְלֵב בָּנִים עַל-אֲבוֹתָם

Elijah shall turn the hearts of parents towards children, and the hearts of children towards their parents.

What struck me when I encounter this Haftarah, this year, is how the notion of reconciliation between parents and children is key to the onset of the Messianic Age, that of all of the preconditions that Elijah might engender with his arrival, it is this particular detail, this single action that is emphasized at the conclusion of the Haftarah: reconciliation between parents and children. In what is, essentially, the final prophetic words in the Hebrew Bible—remember Malachi is the last book in the prophetic section of *TaNACH*—in a chapter that describes in cinematic, Cecil B. DeMille terms the great and awesome day of the Lord, the book ends by focusing the reader on familial relationships; the conclusion sounds a domestic note.

I gained a deeper understanding of this verse on the Friday before Passover, when I met with a family to plan a funeral. These meetings, with which many of you are, sadly, familiar, involve a conversation about a service and the logistics of burial, but most of the meeting concerns the person who has died; it is an opportunity for my colleagues and I to learn about the deceased. For a family to reminisce, to grapple aloud with the death of a loved one and to discover meanings, some new, some remembered, excavated from the character of the person and the manner in which they lived their lives. These conversations are often therapeutic and may provide an hour of catharsis in the midst of grief. For me, and for my colleagues, these meetings are a privilege of our work: It is not a privilege that we seek, but it is a privilege nonetheless because we get to learn from you and from your beloved family members, who are often individuals we have never met. Yet we have the opportunity to learn from their lives and from your memories of them. And most often, in the process of speaking with you, and of writing a eulogy, and of gathering with you for a burial, I have moments of insight about my own parenting; about the ways in which I live my life; or how I may improve in my practice of

Judaism. I don't seek to learn from your loss, but I am humbled, and privileged that I may, and over the years I have acquired many small lessons and important insights about lives well led.

These meetings also provide an opening for reconciliation between generations of a family. For parents to turn their hearts towards their children and for children to turn their hearts towards their parents. This is particularly true with the death of a grandparent, which often brings together two generations of a family who, in my presence, engage in a collaborative process of making meaning from the life of the parent and grandparent who has died.

Martin Buber taught that in each person God has placed a unique way back to God, a unique route to the redemption of the world. The person that this family was mourning, imparted to her children and to her grandchildren, a turn, a next step, in the directions that may lead us along the route towards redemption. It was a grandchild, a woman in her twenties, who I will call Eliza who voiced this instruction. Eliza's grandmother had often told her: "You never want anyone to guess what you love about them. Tell them!" Her sharing of her grandmother's teaching, shifted the ways in which these parents and their children, who had come together to mourn their loss were speaking to one another; it provided, in that moment, an opening for them to speak their appreciation for one another; for these parents and their children to turn their hearts towards one another.

When we say together, *Zecher tzaddekot livrachah*, may the memory of the righteous bring blessing, we commit ourselves to transmuting the memory of loved ones into actions that will bring blessing; and in that moment, when I saw these parents and children speaking new words of love to one another, I witnessed one of the first moments of transmutation, of memory bringing blessing, in the long process of mourning that this family had only just begun.

The scholar Arthur Green writes, "The actual work of redeeming the world is turned to us in history, and is done by all of us, day by day...rather than messiah redeeming us, we redeem messiah."¹ Perhaps it is this notion, that we bring the messianic age, that was a motivation guiding the writer of Malachi to end this book of prophecy with a verse about families, and not about God. The messianic age will not arrive until parents and children reconcile with one another, and these acts of reconciliation, of love, are ones that are in our power. We prepare the way for Elijah's return.

In these next moments of Yizkor, let us remember our loved ones and consider how they imparted, perhaps unknowingly, a route, a next step in the directions that will lead us towards redemption. It is likely a small action, a domestic moment. A wise behavior, a way of speaking, of giving, that once recognized, and enacted in our daily lives, will enable us to turn our hearts once again, toward the members of our families, to provide them with a greater sense of connection, a deeper feeling of support and love. So that, perhaps, next year, when we are, once again, gathered around our Seder tables, when we open the door for Elijah, he will come in.

¹ Arthur Green, *Seek My Face: A Jewish Mystical Theology*, 179-180.