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Kol Rinah
Rosh Hashanah 5780/2019

Waiting

For those of us who do not work in construction, our experience of construction is often one of waiting. We wait for the designs, the contractor to come, the bid, the approvals and permitting, the materials to arrive, the subcontractors to come, the work to be finished, the inspection, the punch list. While we are the client, and are in control in the biggest sense--deciding whether or not to do the project, and what the parameters are, its actual execution is to a large, and sometimes frustrating, extent, out of our hands, and out of our control.

So I have good news, and bad news. The construction on our new building is going completely smoothly--everything is being built correctly and well. There have been no surprises. It's just gone a little more slowly than we would like. So we are here, waiting, at 829 North Hanley Road again this year, with much gratitude and appreciation to The Journey, who have been incredible partners in this process of building, and of waiting.

And so, while we are waiting, I'd like to share some thoughts, some Torah, about waiting, centered around three Jewish narratives of waiting. As we'll see, looking at some of the different dynamics of waiting can be a powerful way of thinking about the changes we want to make in our lives, and in the world. Waiting and teshuva, repentance, are intimately connected. How has waiting helped you this year? And how has waiting hurt you?

I know it's Rosh Hashanah, but let's start with the Passover story--the story of the Exodus, which is a story of waiting. We know that the enslavement came gradually, in stages. First, *they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor* (Ex. 1:11). And you can imagine what the Israelites thought--it's not so bad; we can wait it out. Waiting is usually the first strategy we try to address a problem--a sickness, a difficult person, a relationship--things will just improve with time. So many medical problems do just get better on their own, with time. But for the Israelites, and for us too often, things don't get better while they wait. The Israelites multiply even more, but the Egyptians work them even more ruthlessly (Ex. 1:13). That is to say, things get worse.

One way of defining waiting is as continuing to do the same thing to see if it will have the desired effect. This can be completely passive--waiting to see if it will stop raining so the baseball game can resume. Or it can be rather active--imagine you're hiking, not sure if you're on the right trail. You might hike for twenty more minutes to see if you come to the next trail marker and are on the right path, before turning around. In that case, waiting has direction and speed--it's active, not passive.

The Israelites' waiting while enslaved in Egypt isn't so passive as a rain delay. They do try having more children. The civilly disobedient midwives, Shifra and Puah, help birth children, against Pharaoh's decree. But when that fails to create the desired outcome, it might seem that the Israelites have given up, and weren't waiting for anything or anyone anymore.

It's only when their suffering becomes so unbearable that the Israelites cry out. God hears them, remembers the Israelites, calls to Moses at the burning bush, and the rest, as we say, is history.

But the Torah gives us a detail that indicates that maybe the Israelites were waiting for something. It says, *After a long time, the king of Egypt died, and then the Israelites were groaning and cried out* (Ex. 2:23). The Israelites are waiting for this cruel pharaoh to die, hoping that a different pharaoh will end their enslavement, suggest the medieval commentators on the Torah (see Bekhor Shor on Ex. 2:23). But when nothing changes, they become desperate and cry out, giving up on human help, and change strategies, calling out, for God to hear them.

Have you ever waited for something, only to find out you were waiting in vain? Not only are you stuck, but you also feel like a fool for having waited, and hoped. Is there something that you have waited for, fruitlessly, this year? Or is there something it's time to change strategies on, to try a different direction? This is the time of year when we look at our lives to consider what we should keep waiting for, and to think also about what we should stop waiting for, because it's time to do something different. Deciding whether to continue to wait or to stop waiting is one way of understanding what teshuvah, change, and turning are all about.

For the Israelites, and for us often, the clock we watch while waiting is internal--it's a question of how much we can endure, how long we're willing to wait. But sometimes, we really are running out of time as we wait.

Abraham and Sarah knew something about waiting, and about feeling like you are running out of time. In God's first communication with Abraham, God promises, *I will make of you a great nation* (Genesis 12:2). That means children. But Abraham is 75, and Sarah is 65, and they're childless. This promise strains credulity given their ages. But they then wait twenty-five years until Isaac is born. Twenty-five years is a long time to wait for someone to keep a promise. Especially when what's promised seems more and more farfetched with every year that passes. Given this long wait, it's obvious why God needs to reiterate that Abraham and Sarah will actually have children, and God offers this reassurance four times, for a total of five promises, all together, until God finally "remembers" Sarah, as we read in the Torah this morning.

Waiting doesn't have to be an action; it can also be a feeling, an awareness of the difficulty of the passage of time--whether time is passing too slowly or too quickly.

And I speak frequently with people who feel like they are running out of time--they are waiting to meet someone, waiting to become pregnant, waiting for a treatment to become available or work, before too much time passes.

You may have read or heard about the story of Erika Zak, a young mother from Portland, Oregon. I didn't know her, but we had a friend in common. Five years ago, Erika was diagnosed with cancer, and after much chemotherapy and several surgeries, she was declared cancer-free. But one of the surgeries was done incorrectly and she needed a new liver. Beginning a year and a half ago, Erika Zak waited, and fought with her health insurance company to cover a liver transplant. When finally they agreed, she began waiting for a liver. On August 23, five weeks ago, finally, a liver was available, and she went into surgery, but her body was just not strong enough to endure, and she died during the surgery.

Erika Zak was waiting, but through no fault of her own, ran out of time.

Can you remember a moment this year, or maybe something you're living with now, where you have felt or feel like you're running out of time, waiting? Where are you feeling a sense of urgency? Is there something you feel like you could be doing during this time to be

more active, to make use of the time remaining? Is there someone waiting for you, as their time runs out?

And that brings us to the last Jewish narrative of waiting--the wait that has been the longest, the greatest Jewish wait. As the twelfth of Maimonides' Thirteen Principles of Faith declares, "I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah, and even if the Messiah tarries, I wait each day for the Messiah's arrival."

Now, there are A LOT of Jewish ideas about what the coming of the Messiah means and will be like. Some hold that the laws of nature will be overturned, and others, like Maimonides, suggest that the messianic age will be a time of peace and tranquility, where Jews will be able to live fully Jewish lives and fulfill all the mitzvot, but that the laws of nature will still apply.

What would be your personal idea of what the messianic age would look like? For me, the messianic age is a time when we live sustainably and peacefully on our planet, where people are not perfect, but the culture of teshuva, of repentance, of apology and forgiveness permeates human lives.

An old Jewish story tells of a Russian Jew who was paid a ruble a month by the community council to stand at the outskirts of town so that he could be the first person to greet the Messiah upon the Messiah's arrival. When a friend said to him, "But the pay is so low," the man replied: "True, but the work is steady."

We've been waiting a long time for the messiah, and will probably be waiting a while longer.

We ask in Psalm 13, *עד-אָנָה יְהוָה תִּשְׁכַּחַנִּי בְּצַח עַד-אָנָה | תִּסְתִּיר אֶת-פְּנֵיךְ מִמֶּנִּי: How long, God? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? (Ps. 13:1)* We have this sense that God is hiding, that we're waiting for God to turn, or return to us. The last line of Psalm 27, the psalm for the season of repentance, exemplifies this: *קוּיָה אֶל-יְהוָה חֲזֵק וַיִּצְמַח לִבְךָ לְקוּיָה אֶל-יְהוָה: Wait on the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage; and wait on the Lord.*

But the prophet Isaiah, reversing the waiting game, has the sense that God is waiting to show us grace (Is. 30:18), until we deserve it. That is, it's not that we're waiting for God. Rather, God is waiting for us.

One day, the story is told (Sanhedrin 98a), Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi met the prophet Elijah, and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi asked him, "When will the Messiah come?" "Ask him yourself," replied the Elijah. "The Messiah is at the gates of Rome, sitting among the poor, the sick and wretched. Like them, he changes the bindings of his wounds, but does so one wound at the time, in order to be ready at a moment's notice."

Then Joshua went to Rome and met the Messiah and asked "When will you be coming?" and was told "Today!" Joshua went back to Elijah and said that the Messiah had not told him the truth, because he had promised to come today but had not. Elijah explained "This is what he said to you, *Today, if you will hear his voice* (Ps. 95:7).

Maybe God is waiting for us, rather than the other way around. Waiting for us to listen, to hear, to understand, to change, to return. And maybe there are people waiting for us too--waiting for us to be the people they need us to be, the best versions of ourselves. What is your partner waiting for you to do? How is your parent waiting for you to show up differently? What is your child waiting for you to understand? What are your friends waiting for you to see? What are you waiting for yourself to have the courage, or the strength, to do?

Who is God waiting for you to be, to become, this New Year?
What is our world waiting for you to do in it?
And what are you waiting for?
Shana Tova Umetukah. May it be a good and sweet year.