

## **Rosh Hashanah — Waiting Isn't Easy**

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**September 19, 2020**

It tells you a lot about my state of mind during this shelter-in-place that the inspiration for my sermon this morning comes from a picture book I read to my grandson Oren when we visited Washington, DC, back in February: *Waiting Is Not Easy*, by Mo Willems.

If you don't have a preschool child or a grandchild, you might not be familiar with the pigeon who mustn't be allowed to drive the bus, or good friends Gerald (the elephant) and Piggie, who deal with childhood challenges with humor, compassion, and insight. Gerald is anxious by nature, and Piggie more optimistic, but the problem of waiting is real, even when the payoff is great.

Abraham and Sarah also confronted the problem of waiting. Abraham was 75 when God instructed him to leave everything he had known and promised him that he would become a great nation. It doesn't go smoothly. After a forced detour to Egypt because of famine, God assures Abraham that his offspring would be infinite like the dust of the earth. Then, again, after his nephew Lot is taken captive in a local war, God promises Abraham that his progeny would be like the stars in the heavens that can't be counted. At age 99, almost a quarter of a century after Abraham first left home, God was still insisting that Abraham's descendants through Sarah would be exceedingly numerous. But it is only in the following year, when Abraham is 100 years old, that Isaac is born. It is the

fulfillment of all that waiting that caused this Torah portion to be chosen for Rosh Hashanah many centuries ago.

Waiting isn't easy. Abraham protests and complains along the way. "What use God are all your promises? I am going to give my inheritance to my servant." But having let off some steam, Abraham stays with the program. In contrast, after years go by, Sarah loses hope and takes matters into her own hands, presenting Abraham with her young servant Hagar to produce a child. This was the custom at that time as we have learned from neighboring cultures. Abraham was 86 when his son Ishmael was born, but Ishmael wasn't the promise, and with him came complications.

Waiting in Jewish culture is associated with unfulfilled promises. We wait principally for the coming of the Messiah. As the old Yiddish joke goes, "Watching for the Messiah doesn't pay well, but its steady work." Or as we sing on Yom Hashoah: *"Ve'af al pi sheyitmameah, im kol zeh ani maamin.* And even though the coming of the Messiah is delayed, still I believe." The origin of these words comes from the prophet Habakkuk (2:3), who talks about waiting for God's salvation. Habakkuk lived in difficult times. He writes that the imperial powers "slay nations without pity." They are led by a treacherous arrogant man, who is puffed up and not upright. How can Habakkuk reconcile what he sees around him with what he believes are the attributes of a just and merciful God?

Habakkuk knew that his people, the people of Israel, were impatient. Like us today, they wanted to be in the future faster than reality would take them. That

had been part of the challenge, even way back in the desert, during the 40 years of wandering.

There was the issue with Moses, being delayed coming down Mt. Sinai and their constant complaining. Today we hope that our children develop the ability to wait and pass the “marshmallow test,” but the Children of Israel wanted immediate gratification and thus the Golden Calf.

The medieval commentator known as Sforno, Rabbi Ovadia ben Yaakov Yosef (1475–1550), understood that living with God’s time was difficult. He noted that human waiting is done not only impatiently, but also grudgingly.

Waiting is what we have been enduring for these past six months. I am waiting to go to Washington. You too may be waiting to travel, to go to school, to see old friends, to hug and feel safe.

It’s okay if, like Abraham, we have to complain a bit to let off steam. It may not work out as well if we try to avoid the waiting and circumvent the process, like Sarah. There have been consequences to rushing to open, jumping to conclusions on treatments and medications, and we hope not on the vaccine that will ultimately liberate us. Like Habakkuk we are aggrieved: Our great country could not get it together to prevent how many deaths—more than we suffered in so many wars. It doesn’t seem right or just.

What did we learn from all this waiting? Perhaps we learned not to be so quick to say to others that they need to be patient about longstanding injustice. Perhaps

we have learned to be a little less goal-oriented, and more able to ask ourselves, How am I doing today?

How am I doing at this moment? And if I am well and safe and maybe even happy at this moment—not to move on so quickly to worrying about the next moment and the one after that and where we will be six months from now—because we now know that we don't know.

Waiting isn't easy. But sometimes waiting leads to deliverance. That is the theme of Psalm 126, which we sing at the beginning of the *Bircat Hamazon* (Grace after Meals) on Shabbat, about how when our exile came to an end, it felt like a dream. And indeed it ushered in a new chapter in Jewish history, giving us the Torah as we know it, the core of Jewish life. The psalm continues: Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy, and the one who goes out weeping with the bag of seed can sometimes return carrying sheaves with songs of joy.

Our Torah portion this morning began, *V'Adonai Pakad et Sarah*. The Hebrew is translated, God singled out Sarah or took account of her, took note of her or remembered her and fulfilled the promise. According to tradition, that happened on Rosh Hashanah. And so we pray that our waiting too will come to a good end, a restoration like that which ended the Babylonian Exile, which did not just return us to where we had been, but also started a new chapter with new blessings. And so we pray that in this new year, all of the wishes of our hearts for good will be fulfilled. Shanah Tovah.