

A New Normal

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“Bontsha was a human being; he lived unknown, in silence, and in silence he died. He passed through our world like a shadow. When Bontsha was born no one took a drink of wine; there was no sound of glasses clinking. At his Bar Mitzvah, he made no speech of celebration. He existed like a grain of sand at the rim of a vast ocean, amid millions of other grains of sand exactly similar, and when the wind at last lifted him up and carried him across to the other shore of that ocean, no one no one at all.

*During his lifetime his feet left no mark upon the dust of the streets; after his death the wind blew away the board that marked his grave. The wife of the gravedigger came upon that bit of wood, lying far off from the grave, and she picked it up and used it to make a fire under the potatoes she was cooking; *

With this, we are introduced to *Bontsche Schweig*, or “Bontsche the Silent,” the tragic protagonist of the classic Yiddish short story by I.L. Peretz. Peretz

describes a man beset by virtually every possible misfortune; no one cared when he was alive, and no one mourned when he died, but when he did pass, he was greeted in heaven with great fanfare. Bontsche's stoic suffering earned him a premium share in the world to come; the angels surrounded him in love, Avraham Avinu embraced him as if he were an old friend and the Messiah himself heralded his arrival. After hearing both sides of the celestial trial- a mere formality for a man as righteous as he- the ministering judge offered him anything he wanted as reward. Bontche was incredulous; this had to be a mistake, further proof that the cruel joke that was his life would continue to torment him in the next world. So turned to the angel and asked-

"Really?" he asks, doubtful, and a little embarrassed.

"Really!" the judge answers. "Really! I tell you, everything is yours. Everything in paradise is yours. Choose! Take! Whatever you want! You will only take what is yours!"

"Really?" Bontsha asks again, and now his voice is stronger, more assured.

And the judge and all the heavenly host answer, "Really! Really! Really!"

"Well then"—and Bontsha smiles for the first time—"well then, what I would like, Your Excellency, is to have, every morning for breakfast, a hot roll with fresh butter." A silence falls upon the great hall, and it is more terrible than Bontsha's has ever been, and slowly the judge and the angels bend their heads in shame at this unending meekness they have created on earth.

Then the silence is shattered. The prosecutor laughs aloud, a bitter laugh.

Peretz, of course, is critiquing those who long for mediocrity, who pine for nothing, whose life circumstances have rendered them hopelessly meek, the kind of person who hears good news and can think of nothing more meaningful than screaming the word “Kiddush!” Our great heroes, our giants of faith, surely they hope for so much more than just a roll with butter. Or do they?

Throughout Rosh Hashanah, we invoke the memories of righteous women whose prayers, our sages tell us, were answered on this very day. On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, we read the story of Chana as our Haftarah, and in the Haftarah of the second day, we conjure the rich imagery of Rachel crying over her children. Each of these women struggled through the nightmare of infertility, compounded by relentless exposure to a co-wife who was blessed with an abundance of children; Peninah in the case of Channah, and in the case of Rachel, it was Leah, her own sister and co-wife. But aside from their challenges, there is another common trait shared by Chana and Rachel- the way they express their anguish and longing.

Chana is depicted as a brokenhearted woman, whose lips were moving though no sounds came out. She was deep in prayer, and the text lets us into her internal world, her deepest yearnings:

והיא מרת נפש ותתפלל עליה ובכה תבכה

In her wretchedness, she prayed to the LORD, weeping all the while.

ותדר נדר ותאמר ה צבאות אם-ראה תראה בעני אמתך וזכרתני ולא-תשכח את-אמתך ונתתה לאמתך

זרע אנשים ונתתיו לה כלימי חייו ומורה לא-יעלה על-ראשו

And she made this vow: “O LORD of Hosts, if You will look upon the suffering of Your maidservant and will remember me and not forget Your maidservant, and if You will grant Your maidservant a male child, I will dedicate him to the LORD for all the days of his life; and no razor shall ever touch his head.”

Chazal were naturally intrigued by the ambiguous phrase זרע אנשים. After all, this prayer forms the basis of the structure of the Rosh Hashanah mussaf, and contains principles relevant to all Jewish prayer. If there is anyone whose prayers we ought to understand at greater depth, it is Chana. So exactly what was Chana praying for? The Talmud records several opinions:

מאי זרע אנשים אמר רב גברא בגוברין

Rav says Chana was praying for an extraordinary child, a leader among men.

Others give a more specific interpretation- that Chana wanted a child who was the spiritual equivalent of two men.

ורבי יוחנן אמר זרע ששקול כשני אנשים ומאן אינון משה ואהרן

According to Rav Yochanan, she wanted her child to be the equivalent of Moshe *and* Aharon. This makes sense; if you could choose your child's spiritual heritage, wouldn't you aim for the stars? Go big or go home! Which is why the statement of the Rabbis is all the more perplexing.

ורבנן אמרי זרע אנשים זרע שמובלע בין אנשים

In this interpretation, all Chana wanted was an average, ordinary child. Literally, someone who is lost in the crowd- unremarkable, unrecognizable and unmemorable in every possible way. And yet, according to the Rabbis, *this* is what we ought to be thinking about, and striving for, on Rosh Hashanah: Let me just be a pareve, average person, let me pass through this year unnoticed, let me simply be forgettable. Who wants this for themselves? What kind of aspiring Jewish parent wants this for their children? Have you ever seen a bumper sticker that says, "My child is a B-student"?

But the aspirations for mediocrity don't begin and end with Chana. On the second day of Rosh Hashanah, we read of Rachel, who cries over her

beloved and missing children רחל מבכה על בניה. Who better than Rachel? ***For Rachel Imeinu, motherhood was an obsession.*** She told her husband Yaakov, “Give me a child or I will die!” - הבה לי בן ואם אין מתה אנכי - She was even willing to introduce a concubine in the relationship, in the hopes that her act of sacrifice and the ensuing children that would be born would tip the scales in her favor. She gives up her very life for the sake of motherhood, as Binyamin enters the world. Rachel is known as Rachel Imeinu, as *Mamme Rochel*. Yet when her deepest wish is answered and a long awaited son Yosef is born, she says,

וַתְּהַר וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתֹּאמֶר אֲסַף אֱלֹקִים אֶת־חַרְפְּתִי:

She conceived and bore a son, and said, “God has brought an end to my disgrace.” No longer would she be embarrassed to walk in public alongside her sister, while her arms were empty and Leah was pushing a triple stroller. No longer would she walk into a room full of mothers and hear a conversation about parenting come to an awkward halt, replaced by uncomfortable silence. Listen, though, to the explanation of the Medrash Rabbah about this name:

בראשית רבה (וילנא) פרשת ויצא פרשה עג סימן ה

א"ר לוי בר זכריה עד שלא תלד האשה הסרחון נתלה בה, לאחר שתלד תלוי בבנה, מאן אכל

הדא מקמתא? ברך, מאן תבר הדא מקמתא? אלא ברך, אסף אלהים את חרפתי

So long as a woman has no child she has no-one to blame for her faults; when, however, she has a child, she puts it on him.

“Who broke this vessel?”

“Your son!”

“Who ate those figs?”

“Your son!”

This explanation of Rachel’s expression of gratitude is bizarre; Is this really what she hoped for during those long nights as she cried herself to sleep? Is this what she yearned for while the incessant giggles and laughter seeped through the walls of her tent from next door, and filled her heart with agony? She wanted a child so that she may blame him for that which goes wrong? This is deeply troubling; dare I say, the definition of a terrible person and terrible parent is one who would use their own child into a scapegoat for their own indiscretions! *This* is the Tefillah for Rosh Hashanah? And so, at the end of two days of Rosh Hashana, the attentive reader should be wondering why we would choose Chana and Rachel as our matriarchal lodestars and as paradigms for prayer on Rosh Hashanah!?

I’d like to offer a powerful, explanation for the underwhelming requests of our matriarchs. In her recent book, “Look Alive Out There”, humorous essayist Sloane Crosley speaks about her battle with with Meniere’s Disease, a disorder of the inner ear that causes extreme vertiginous episodes. For most of us who do not know what it's like, it is impossible to imagine how

debilitating repeated episodes of vertigo can prove. Crosley opens up about the mental anguish she experienced with her condition, and the punishing tests she underwent during her diagnostic process. She described her sensation of the room viciously spinning, likening it to riding the teacups at Disney World, if that ride were built upon a fault line that shifted every fifteen minutes.

She then adds:

*“I wanted to start the process of being thankful for my health so that I could get back to taking it for granted **like a normal person**. When we are sick or in pain, even if it’s just a case of “something in the eye,” we swear up and down that we will be grateful for every moment from this day forward when there is not something in our eye.”*

To appreciate the enormity of Rachel and Chana’s plea, we have to understand what they were really asking for: normalcy. What *is* normalcy? It is hard to define unless you have first experienced its absence. How many people in the world really have an “ordinary” life? 12.9% of the world right now is living in conditions of famine. A study published in 2012 showed that 43.5% of American households are “Liquid Asset Poor,” meaning that they may earn a decent income but lack sufficient savings and insurance, and are therefore one illness, one catastrophe, away from poverty and financial ruin¹. And on this day, when we pray especially for the well being

¹ https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/01/31/working-poor-liquid-asset-poverty_n_1243152.html

of Israel, when we say שמחה לארץ - joy to your land- how many dunams of that land, of Israeli farmland and nature preserves, have been incinerated by burning kites, the very perversion of an innocent childhood pastime? Today is the day we pray for honor for our people, כבוד לעמך - and British Jewry is poised on the precipice of an election in which a rabid anti-Semite may be elected to the highest office in the land. All these people- the Israeli farmer, the war torn refugee, the economically precarious American, the British Jew- they yearn for a normal life. If you or a family member have experienced a period of illness, shuttling back and forth to experts for a second or third opinion, trying various treatments in the hopes of a cure, if you know the joy of a medication becoming generic, because it can finally be afforded - you begin to understand what a blessing a normal life would be. If your child struggles with anxiety, self doubt, eating disorders or other mental illnesses, you know what it's like to desperately want a normal day. How many singles yearn for **someone** to come home to and simply have dinner with? This is not asking for too much- it is asking for an ordinary life. It is not a מובלע בן האנשים sort of fantasy; it is, rather,

On Rosh Hashanah, we fear that which is most evocatively terrifying, what psychologists call the “vividness fallacy”- we worry about fires, floods, Neo Nazis, mass shootings, terror attacks and the like. But for most of us, our deepest, most profound wish for this year, in fact our only wish for 5779, is to be inscribed **for an ordinary life**. This is the message of emotional

highlight of the *tefilot* recited on Rosh Hashanah, *U'netaneh Tokef*, which focuses on the anxieties and fears we face as we enter a new year. That prayer refers to vivid, shocking and rare occurrences. Who by water, who by fire, who by plague, who by wild beasts, who by strangulation- *Hashem yeracheim!* Yes, people do experience all of these and they may be on our minds because they make the nightly news, but how often do they really happen? And there isn't any reference to the *positive* things that can happen in a year! And then the last two lines, there is a change in tone.

מי ינוח ומי ינוע

מי ישקט ומי יטרף

מי ישלו ומי יתסר

Who will rest and who will wander

Who will live in harmony and who will be harried

Who will enjoy tranquility and who will suffer

These requests are not extraordinary. They are just for harmony, rest, tranquility- just a little peace and quiet, a minute to play with the kids, the noise of a cookie jar crashing down that breaks the silence. What Chana and Rachel wouldn't give for that kind of normalcy! We stand before HKB"ה, and we know there is a certain level of chaos in our homes and our lives that could, with just a few major or minor changes, be eliminated and restore our lives to "normal." And for those who are blessed to experience

equilibrium in their lives, we know how precarious that is. I don't have to tell you about the blessing of normalcy, because we all desire it deeply.

But there is one final kind of normalcy we ought to think about as we prepare to listen to the shofar. We've been pretending that the children Chana and Rachel wanted were normal, but let's be honest: Was Shmuel normal? Was Yosef normal? Was Binyamin normal, the person our sages say never sinned even once? Ephraim and Menashe? They were not average, run of the mill kids. Perhaps we need to redefine the term normal. Chana sent her child immediately to the Mishkan in Shilo, where he would be raised in an environment suffused with the love of God and the observance of His commandments. Rachel metaphorically protects her children, inoculating them against the challenges of exile. Their "normal" was a life of holiness, of *kedushah*. Today, as we ask for a life that is מובילע בין אנשים, as we ask מי ינוח, who will have an uneventful life, what we are truly asking is to restore our Judaism back to a holy normal. What are the norms of a Jewish community? What are the values we hold and the practices we engage in that should be standard? This is the question we are challenged to ask, as our beautiful new building provides us with a reset button, an opportunity to redefine our vision and aspirations as a community. It can be normal to hear the beautiful buzz of Torah study taking place in the Beit Midrash and in classrooms, for men and women, children and adults. It can

be normal to have robust minyan attendance even beyond the wonderful Massive Morning Minyan. Our community is great at *chessed* and we are unparalleled in *hachnasat orchim*. It should therefore continue to be normal for people to come to shul and be welcomed, to be shown a seat when they walk in, and not be kicked out of one. It can be normal for us that blessings are recited regularly, that *zemiros* are sung and words of Torah are shared at the Shabbos table, that mikvah use is a sine qua non of Jewish family life and that someone who is struggling in any number of ways is helped out by his or her community. When a Modern Orthodox family makes aliyah, it should be celebrated and recognized as mainstream, not lamented as Israel claiming our best families and our finest young people, and it should be normal that a simcha looks more like a simcha and less like a nightclub; and making these things normal again means that doing all the above does not render a person a religious fanatic, but just as a *frummeh yid*, which, once upon a time, was not a pejorative. If our normal looks and feels like this, we will have more Shmuels, more Ephraims and Menashes, more Binyamins in our classrooms, in our shuls and in our youth movements.

This morning, we recognize that asking for normal is a valid and ambitious request, but we must not stop there. As Torah Jews, we cannot just ask for average; we have to remember what that is, and rededicate ourselves to that

ideal. Let us do so, and may God send us a year in which excellence and abundant blessing is the new normal.

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