

ROSH HASHANAH 5776/2015

Sounds of Shofar = Sarah's last three wails

I don't know about you, but I get caught up in the High Holy Day season. I find the liturgies we visit and the reflective process in which we engage simultaneously satisfying and unnerving.

The New Year feels redolent with opportunity. And yet, at the same time, the pain of past hurts and the remorse over unfinished business emerges.

I like renewing promises to myself and considering new strategies for managing the happiness quotient in my life. But the truth of the matter is that an essential part of the High Holy Day season of *teshuvah*, repentance, is also feeling the pain and dissatisfaction in our lives.

The Chasidic Master, Nachman of Bratslav, taught his disciples to regularly go out into the forest and find a place of refuge and quiet. Once there, they should think about the pain and suffering in their own lives. If that pain and suffering was not enough to make a man cry, they should contemplate the pain and suffering throughout the world. Dwell in it, and cry...sob, shriek...physically and vocally wail the negativity out of them.

The Torah portion we read each Rosh Hashanah, the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, the story in which our patriarch, our ancestral father brings his own son into the wilderness to slaughter him, evokes memories of our own family dysfunction.

Abraham appears to be a total narcissist, on a professional journey that will found a distinct religious community but will without doubt destroy his family.

The rabbis tell us that Isaac is not a young boy, but a 30 something year old man. Why can't he challenge his father? Is he so naïve? So desperate for dad's attention, approval?

And, where is Sarah? Why doesn't she know what's going on, or does she hide her knowledge in order to survive her marriage? Which, by the way, spoiler alert, she won't.

For centuries rabbis have taught that this story, the Akedah, is the moment of truth for Abraham, the moment in which all the nations witness the lengths to which Abraham goes to prove his faith in God.

I have always felt this lesson to the story to be simplistic and primitive. Our sacred literature is too rich for such superficial demonstrations of faith.

The details around and right in this story force us to face the most profound roots of our own pain and suffering. Not what others do to us, not how nature and health histories hurt, but how we participate in creating our own pain and suffering and how we choose to retain it rather than purge it.

In the midrash, the rabbis teach that when Abraham came down from Mount Moriah, the angel, Samael, saw Isaac trailing behind. Samael was angry at Abraham's failure to realize

the sacrifice. Apparently he didn't hear the other angel of God clearly stop Abraham. What did he do?

He went off and told Sarah.

OK. Been there. Done that. It's better to hear bad news from a friend, right. Sometimes we feel the need to meddle. Better she should hear it from me than a stranger or a hater, right?

So the angel, Samael, speaks with Sarah:
Have you not heard what's happening in the world today, Sarah?

A friendly, compassionate starter? Or, mal-intended? You decide.

(ready, Jo?)

Sarah replies, No.
Samael, continues: Your old husband has taken the boy Isaac and sacrificed him as a burnt offering. I heard the boy cry and wail in his helplessness.

Immediately, Sarah began to cry and wail. The midrash tells us she cried three sobs, corresponding to the teru'ah staccato notes of the shofar, (JO on shofar)

Babababa babababa babababa.

Then her soul flew away and she died.

So what do we make of Samael's meddling? Sarah's fatal response to a false report? Abraham's lack of disclosure and conversation prior to such a drastic mission? Isaac's victimization and silence?

The aftermath of the Akedah is so graphic, so vulgar, and so true to life...

Why is it we start conversations with statements like,
It's none of my business, but...
I shouldn't say this, but...
And then we continue with whatever information we feel we need to share?

It's like we don't want to inflict the pain of our information on the person, but we kinda do.

We all carry pain. We've all felt disappointment, regret, grief, loneliness, so on and so forth. Maybe it draws us to the pain and suffering of others.
I say so, because the truth is that sometimes we reach out in a healthy, loving gesture, while other times we unwittingly harvest the low hanging fruit on our neighbor's tree in order to avoid our own issues.

I think Samael's meddling stirs a pot in an unnecessarily cruel manner. I'm not sure why the bloodthirsty angel feels such resentment about the ram being slaughtered instead of Isaac. But he clearly does and wreaks havoc in response.

Sarah married a rock star. Abraham was not an easy husband. He dragged Sarah from their hometown onto to the road to create a new nation. He partied hard, and on at least two occasions essentially pimps her out to local kings. All she wants is a family. She is willing to follow him, entertain his guests, and even give him a concubine on account of her infertility. Finally Sarah gives birth, weans a child, and rears him.

Abraham proves his loyalty as husband. He collects fans and groupies and wealth. He gets rid of the competing mother and son (Hagar and Ishmael) once Isaac is a young boy. And then, one morning she sleeps in only to wake up to the angel, Samael's false report.

The news is too much to bear.
She doesn't just drop dead.

She wails three final sobs, the staccato notes of the shofar.
And then, she dies.

Have you ever heard such a sound come from a woman's soul? A man's soul? It's profound.
It's terrifying.

The midrash continues:

Abraham came and found her dead, as it says in the next verses of Torah following this story, Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to bewail her. Pirkei dRabbi Eliezer 32

That's it!

Where is the angel, Samael? Did he really drop that bomb and then exit stage right?

Where are the servants? Where is Isaac?

Doesn't Sarah have any friends? Didn't the neighbors hear those three blood-curdling cries?

Is that it? Life hurts, and then you die? Alone.

For Sarah, yes.

Isaac never speaks to his mother, Sarah, or his father, Abraham, again. Eventually he marries Rebekah and raises Esau and Jacob. His marriage and family life is filled with rivalry, conspiracy, and deception.

Abraham lives on. His son is estranged. His wife is dead. He remarries, has more children, and settles in to a quiet second family life. Abraham has no relationship with his son, grandchildren, or great-grandchildren. Remember, that was his mission, to grow a nation through his now estranged son, Isaac. It happens, but Abraham doesn't have a relationship with any of those children or grandchildren. Not even Facebook.

The Torah continues with the ongoing drama of passing lousy family traits from one generation to the next... Rivalry and the avoidance of pain and suffering at all costs plague our families with the same dysfunction today.

Every year I want to scream at Abraham: Wake up, what's the matter with you? Pay attention to your family. Pay attention to your wife. What's your game plan? What's going on in your head? Share. Communicate. Ask for help.

Every year I want to commiserate with Sarah: Sure, it would be so much easier to not notice the clues all around us. Ignorance is bliss. But honey, step up. Why are you holding all the pain in this story? It's clearly too much for one woman to bear.

Three wails, three staccato notes of the shofar, and she's gone. Poof.

And then, every year, I remember Abraham is a character from our mythology. I'm not angry with Abraham. I'm angry with my dad for the fact that work was always more important than family. I am angry at my husband who always forgets what time it is when he's out fishing.

Sarah is a character from our mythology. I'm not mad at her. I'm mad at myself for all the times I act like a sponge and absorb anger and pain until I'm saturated and stuck in a funky state of mind. I'm mad at my mother for not being a better mother. Drama queens annoy me, too. There's enough pain and suffering in life, do we really need to stir up more?

I don't even have a beef with Isaac. I do however find it extremely frustrating when my kids fail to take the initiative required to get what they want in life.

I'm not rebellious against God. I do find mind games repugnant. Don't test me so that I can fail. Tell me what you want and I'll decide if I can get on board.

The characters of the Akedah are us, our mothers and fathers, our sons and daughters, our spouses, our friends, our bosses and colleagues, our neighbors and strangers on the far side of town. Their mistakes are ours. Their angst is ours. Their deepest, most internal pains are ours.

The story ends, but not really. Loose strings are not tied into neat bows. Just like in life. Where does the pain go, when it's intense but not so great that it kills us on the spot?

We know. We hold it. A phone call from an aging parent triggers it. An obnoxious comment from a teen ager triggers it. A lonely evening. A provocative film. Certain pieces of music. Witnessing a precious moment we wish was ours rather than somebody else's.

How do we release it? With a good cry every so often? A primitive scream in the privacy of wilderness? A drink? A meaningless flirt or dangerous rendezvous? Smoking or overeating? Lashing out at a loved one who will be forgiving later? Humiliating a stranger or a service person?

Do we release it?

A choreographer friend of mine produced a dance piece several years ago called Fight, Flight, or Freeze. Her research for the piece took place mostly amidst the work of animal behaviorists. She learned that animals have three responses to threat. They fight it. They flee from it. Or they freeze until it passes by and then they shake it off.

The problem with us, human beings, is that while in our animal-ness we fight, flee, and freeze too –

Our human-ness seems to get in the way of shaking it off. We deny and avoid. We absorb without processing. We may be in touch with our feelings, but not really know what to do with them. We get stuck. And most of the time, being stuck, doesn't get in the way of life. It sort of works, until...

...until something triggers our caches of pain and grief, anger and resentment.

How do we shake it off? How do we feel it, let it course through us a while, but not let it define us? Not let it damage the relationships we've built in family and social networks that sustain us and give us companionship and joy?

Israel's first chief rabbi, Rav Kook, was unique in his ability to bring religious Jews into the mostly secular and socialist Zionist endeavor of building a new Jewish state. For him, the study of Torah and observance of mitzvot were vehicles for what we would call today, everyday mindfulness.

He taught that:

When we forget the essence of our own soul, when we distract our minds from attending to the substantive content of our own inner lives, everything becomes confused and uncertain.

In his own way, Rav Kook is saying that our religious practices are not mere rituals that please a god-head, but they should connect us to ourselves.

He continues:

The primary role of teshuvah, which sheds light on the darkened zone, is for the person to return to him herself, to the root of his or her soul...Rav Kook

The task of the High Holy Days is to return to ourselves. To notice what's hidden in the crevices among our thoughts and routine behaviors. We don't have to linger. Just get off the tour bus and take an honest look.

The idea that Sarah's pain can be articulated through the sound of the shofar might call us to a different way of experiencing the central ritual of Rosh Hashanah.

While I did reference how frightening it is to witness a soul wrenching wail, the staccato notes of the shofar are finite and contained. Not at all frightening. They sound and then they end. And we remain.

What if we allow the sound of the shofar this year to resonate with the chords of stored pain, disappointment, and fear inside each of us? If we allow the primal sounds of the ram's horn to echo inner screams and silences that are too profound for words.

The ceremony of the experience creates the boundaries. One might feel tears well up. Another only sacred silence. Yet another, cluelessness. Give it a try: All our attention turns to the sound and consequent sensations in the body. Ear, mind, chest, heart, stomach, throat, spine, arms and legs.

Where do we feel the vibrations? Try breathing into that part of the body.

Is it in the throat? What truths are we not speaking?

Neck and shoulders? What eats away at our confidence, keeping us from holding our heads high and relaxing our shoulders?

Between the shoulder blades? What inevitable life sadness and grief lingers year after year?

Lower back? Why does everyday living sometimes feel so burdensome?

Listen and breathe. Be open to the effort. Listen and breathe. When we reach tekiah g'dolah, let out a sigh.

We begin quietly.

Please turn to the Shofar service sheet.