

Letting 5780 Be a Year of Letting Go

I'm the family photographer in our home. This was a self-appointed position, and I've taken my responsibilities very seriously, particularly since Mia was born thirteen years ago. Vacation pictures, first days of school, Chanukah menorah lightings...I've considered myself personally responsible for capturing all of these meaningful and memorable moments so we have images to remind us of days gone by. Hard drive upon hard drive filled with photos. Hundreds...of...thousands of files which – collectively - create quite an interesting challenge when it comes time to create...the *bat mitzvah* video montage.

How on earth do I narrow these down and arrange them to tell the story of the first thirteen years of Mia's life in just a matter of minutes? So, I came up with an idea that would allow me to pack in way more pictures! Towards the end of the slideshow the photos started to appear faster and faster. First, a series of shots of her apple picking each year...Another set of thirteen years' worth of our family photos...Another series with every Halloween costume from birth forward...each set arranged in chronological order...each series of pictures appearing faster than the last. The result?

We got to watch her grow up sixteen times in a minute and a half. And while I initially set out to pictorially retell the story of Mia's life so we could reminisce with family and friends, what I actually did was to create a video which – at least in part – was a montage of my own inner emotional state. These years are flying by. She was born just a couple minutes ago, I'm sure of it. A beloved member of our Temple Beth Shalom family once taught me a lesson that has always stuck with me: "Todd," he said, "life is like a roll of toilet paper. When the roll is new and you pull on it, the roll spins slowly...but the longer you pull at it, the faster it spins."

"What the metaphor lacks in elegance," I responded, "it makes up for in profound truth."

With this window into my state of mind over these last few months, you'll understand why I recognized anew, this year, a commonality in all of the Biblical texts that are read on Rosh Hashanah. See if you can identify the pattern for yourselves.

Traditionally, the Torah reading for the First Day of Rosh Hashanah is the story of our patriarch, Abraham, who needs to cast his firstborn son, Ishmael, out into the wilderness with his mother. The traditional Haftarah reading for the first day is the story of Hannah who wants so badly to have a child that she promises to give him up to God's service rather than keep him for herself. Outside of our Reform Movement, the story of the Binding of Isaac is the second day's Torah reading, and we all know how that one plays itself out...it concludes with Abraham leaving his other son - nearly-sacrificed at his own hand - on top of a mountain, never to speak with him again. And finally, the traditional Haftarah reading for the second day of Rosh Hashanah finds our matriarch, Rachel, weeping for her children on the side of the road as her descendants are cast out into exile from their homeland. One after another is about a parent's struggle to let go of their child as they transition into a new phase of life - and of their

relationship with one another. Why on earth was I extra-sensitized to this recurring theme this year?

Before I go any further...I acknowledge that when it comes to this “letting go of our children as they grow” thing, I’m a relative novice. I haven’t handed over the exhilarating freedom that comes with the car keys yet, nor have I consumed an entire box of Kleenex after unpacking a freshman dorm room or new apartment hundreds of miles from home, and I haven’t walked anyone down the aisle except, on occasion, the other clergy with whom I’m officiating at the ceremony.

And I am humbly aware that some in the room right now are thinking to yourselves, “Hey! Bar Mitzvah Boy, Rabbi! Wait ‘til you do all of those things...with your grandkids!” May I be so blessed someday...

Wherever any of us may find ourselves along that continuum – as children, as parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents...whether one has experienced raising children themselves or not – the question remains: Why is it that on Rosh Hashanah, when we joyously ring in a brand new year on the Jewish calendar, all of the sacred scripture brought to lend meaning to these days has to do with the sensitivities, the trials, and the pains of letting go of that which is most precious to us?

One possible answer can be found in an alternative name for this day: *Yom Harat Olam* – the Birthday of the World – our Reform forebears, fittingly, selected the story of Creation to be read. But rather than share the well-known Torah tale of God’s week-long crafting of our universe, I believe that the story of Creation as imagined by Rabbi Isaac Luria – the founder of the Jewish mystical tradition – is more fitting for the question at hand.

You see, in the Torah’s narrative, Creation happens as if emanating from God. God exclaims proclamations like, “Let there be light,” and...voila...light! In Luria’s imagination, however, birthing our world required just the opposite. In his mythology, prior to God’s Creation, all of existence was nothing but God’s supernal light. This posed a challenge for the Creator...if everything is God, then there’s no room for anything – or anyone – else. “If I want for there to be room for that which isn’t me,” the Holy One reflected, “then there must be less...of Me.” And with that, God went (deep inhale)...and in doing so, created some empty space. Now Creation could begin. Luria describes this contraction of God as *tzimtzum*, a withdrawal of self that leaves space for others to be both created and, eventually, creators themselves.

All of the Biblical texts which are brought to confront us on Rosh Hashanah – each about parents who need to let go of growing children – were, perhaps, selected to correct an otherwise very intuitive notion as we enter a new year. While we might begin 5780 with hopes for having more, doing more, accomplishing more, controlling more in the year ahead...each one of these texts serves as a reminder that – even when it comes to those aspects of life most dear to us, there is often blessing to be found not in increasing our footprint or influence, but in reducing it, not in holding on tight to everything in our purview but in letting some things go. Or, as Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove writes, “[T]he holidays are here to teach us...that in order...for all of us to become our

fullest selves, we all need to contract a little and let go. Now there is a thought to consider over the next ten days: that our boldest acts of transformation will be found not in what we take on, but in what we let go.”¹

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen tells the following story: “For many years,” she writes, “I tried to persuade my father to buy a new living room couch. Year after year, the old green couch grew shabbier and shabbier. Finally it was no longer safe to sit on. Embarrassed, I told Dad that I had ordered a new couch from Macy’s by phone. I was sending a photograph of it for their approval. If they liked it, it would be delivered on Friday. They loved it. Saturday I called. How did it look? Shamefacedly, my father told me he had canceled the order. It turned out that he didn’t know what to do with the old couch. I suggested calling Macy’s and telling them to take it away. He told me that they did not do that in New York. ‘Then how about the Salvation Army?’ Apparently they only took things away they could still sell. Who would want our couch? With a sinking heart, I suggested looking in the yellow pages for someone who does hauling. But Dad didn’t want a stranger to know how to get into his house. Finally I was silenced. My father, unaccustomed to letting go of anything, could not find his way to accepting my gift. Several years later, in the night, the old couch collapsed in on itself. It stood in the living room that way until my father died and I brought my mother to live with me in California.”²

Many of us have elements of our lives – routines, sentimental longings, habits – which no longer serve us well and may – in fact – have become a drain on us while we weren’t looking...an easily overlooked fixture which no longer provides any actual support. As we enter 5780, how might each of us be holding on too tightly to the tried, true, and overly comfortable? How long must we feel compelled to do so before these presumed sources of comfort begin to crack and crumble beneath us because we’ve held on for too long?

Yet, please do not hear my retelling of this story as an invitation to go upgrade all of your furniture because – in fact – another element of our lives worthy of letting go in the year ahead is the all-too-common drive to amass more stuff. Yet, Rabban Gamliel, one of Jewish tradition’s earliest sages, was way ahead of his time when he taught, “מְרֻבָּה נְכֻסִים, מְרֻבָּה דְאָגָה” - The more possessions we have, the more worries we have as well.”³ He must have been the Marie Kondo of his day, pushing back against the notion that more is better. I have an image in my mind of him walking into people’s homes and asking, “Does this clay pot bring you joy?” and then tossing it out the window.

His great wisdom, however, lies in the reality that...if it is always better to have more, then – ironically, perhaps – it is impossible to ever have enough, and it is that very sense of “enoughness” – of contentment with what we already have - that is the true

¹ From Rabbi Cosgrove’s sermon entitled, “Coming Home”

² *Kitchen Table Wisdom* by Rachel Naomi Remen, Riverhead Books, New York, 1996, pp. 182-183

³ *Mishnah Avot 2:7*

source of our happiness. In this new year ahead, can we enhance our days by de-cluttering our lives, and can we let go of the misplaced notion that our contentment is just one online shopping click away?

I suspect that this formidable challenge is relatively straightforward when compared with the real work that these High Holy Days invite us to perform each year. Tonight begins the *Aseret Yamei Teshuvah* – the Ten Days of Repentance...of seeking forgiveness for the wrongs we have done and striving to repair the damage we've caused. Yet, of course, this is only half of the equation as we must not only be prepared to ask forgiveness but also to give it to others. To some this seems beyond reach. For how many of us begin this year holding onto longstanding hurt, pain, anger, grudges, or resentment that continue to eat away at us. And, as Rabbi Edwin Goldberg writes, "Nothing destroys a relationship or threatens our well-being faster than resentment. It is the cancer of our emotions. It is the poison of our spiritual life. The word *resentment* literally means 'feeling again,' and it therefore emphasizes a clinging to our past. Its meaning focuses on those who have hurt us and returning, over and over again to this vision of our being victims... [W]e don't want such baggage with us throughout our lives. But how do we let go of our resentment?"⁴

Goldberg suggests that we start by getting past a few potential roadblocks:

"The first obstacle to forgiveness is the perverse pleasure we find in not forgiving someone...Contemporary writer and philosopher Frederick Buechner compares such anger to gnawing on a bone. There's always a little more marrow...and you keep gnawing on it. The only problem, Buechner points out, is that the bone you're gnawing on is you. A crucial component to forgiveness is deciding if the anger is a delicacy you would like to forego."⁵

Another obstacle to forgiveness, Goldberg, writes, is that "We confuse forgiving and forgetting, but they are not the same thing. There are times when we will forgive those who hurt us, even though we cannot forget. Forgiveness is not saying, 'I don't feel the pain anymore.' Forgiveness is saying to the one who hurt us, 'I do not feel the need to hold on to your involvement in my pain anymore.'... Forgiveness doesn't mean condoning an action [either]. Forgiveness is not saying to the person who has hurt you, 'You're okay.'...You can forgive someone and still not approve of [their] behavior. You can forgive [that person] and still refuse to accept what he or she has done to you. At its core, forgiving is not [really] about the people who have hurt us. Forgiveness is about healing ourselves after we have been hurt."⁶ Wouldn't it be a true source of sweetness in the new year to let go of some of that anger and resentment?

As Michele and I were preparing our blessing for Mia on the day of her *bat mitzvah*, I was reminded that – in traditionally observant Jewish circles – the custom of parents blessing a child on this sacred occasion looks very different from our Temple Beth

⁴ Saying No and Letting Go by Rabbi Edwin Goldberg, Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, VT 2013

⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 18-19

⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 19-20

Shalom rituals. In those communities, parents typically recite a simple one-line proclamation as their child transitions into young-adulthood:

בְּרוּךְ שֶׁפָּטַרְנִי מֵעֲנֹשׁ הַלְזָה.

Roughly translated: “Blessed be God who has released me from being responsible for this child.” The parent is relieved of these duties because this child is now a young adult, responsible for his or her own actions...the good for which she ought take credit, and the mistakes and misdeeds for which she must take responsibility. It is time for us, as parents, to (deep inhale)...take a deep breath, withdraw a few steps, make some space, and let go just a little bit more.

My very favorite Jewish teaching on raising children instructs parents to live in a constant balance between pulling our children closer to us with our right hand while we simultaneously urge them out into the world with our left.⁷

And isn't that precisely what God – *Avinu Malkeinu* - is doing with us tonight? Our liturgy imagines God as a loving Parent who – as we embark upon a new year – draws us close to Holiness - and to one another - as we congregate for these days, while - at the same time (deep inhale) performing *tzimtzum* once again, making space for us and nudging us forward to boldly enter this new year with full autonomy to release ourselves from old habits and stale routines...or not. To declutter our lives, homes, and minds...or not. To forgive those who've wronged us and find a new path forward...or not.

5780 is sure to spin past us even faster than the year now gone by. This day is a welcome opportunity to pause, to take stock of our foremost values and priorities, and to let go of that which is holding us back from most fully embracing them. And when we gather together a year from now to review the retrospective series of images that encapsulate 5780, may there still be plenty that include us holding our loved-ones close...because letting go has its limits. May it be a sweet year for you...and for everyone in your family's montage. Amen.

⁷ *Bavli Sanhedrin 107b*