

5782 Rosh Hashanah Day I

The First Step to Getting Unstuck is to Recognize our Stuckness

I found writing my Rosh Hashanah sermons to be particularly difficult this year. I just kept thinking, I am so overwhelmed by the idea of doing Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in covid-world for the second time. I am as stuck in this pandemic as everyone else is. I am struggling with my *own* sense of optimism and hope. I am struggling with my *own* frustration-- and even with anxiety, and depression. I *also* have family members I don't see enough; I *also* had a summer of running around seeing family while it felt safer to do so-- somewhat at the expense of actually relaxing and unwinding; I, too, am faced with decisions about how to protect my unvaccinated children while also enabling them to participate in school and life and social relationships.

What am I supposed to say?

How am I to bring comfort or wisdom? The challenge of speaking to this moment felt paralyzing. A friend and colleague, Rabbi Jenni Greenspan, described the pandemic as a family road trip-- we are the kids in the back seat, who know it is a ten hour drive, but don't know what ten hours actually feels like. So, every 2 and half minutes, we ask "are we there yet?"

And what is so hard about the moment right now is that this summer, it felt like we were there, at our destination, but it turns out that it was

just a lunch break at a rest area on the side of the highway, and we're getting back into the car. We don't know how long it will be, but we know that we're tired, and hot, and frustrated, and we've played all the games our parents packed us 30 times already. Rabbi Greenspan said to me, at the beginning, it seemed like maybe rabbis and community leaders were like the parents driving the car-- but it is absolutely clear at this point that we're all in the back of the car together. And this road trip is far from over. I resonated very strongly with this-- it connects to my feeling of stuckness, of thinking that I'm supposed to provide wisdom, but feeling that I have no special insights or understanding. We are all in the back of the car together, friends, and sometimes I just want to howl, to roar, to scream, to cry out in frustration. AHHHHH! The good news is that there is plenty of Biblical and Rabbinic precedent for crying in frustration. The Haftara which Art Friedson just chanted, describes Hannah's stuckness, and her great howl of frustration. Though Hannah's crying out is related to her experience of infertility, we, like the rabbis of the Talmud, can relate to her emotional expression. And to her loneliness.

A man named Elkanah had two wives, Hannah and Peninah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah was childless. Every year Elkanah would bring his whole family to Shiloh to worship God and offer sacrifices. One such day, Elkanah offered a sacrifice. He used to give portions to his wife

Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; but to Hannah he would give one portion only—though Hannah was his favorite—for the LORD had closed her womb. Peninah taunted Hannah, and Hannah wept, and refused to eat. Her husband Elkanah said to her, “Hannah, why are you crying and why aren’t you eating? Why are you so sad? Am I not more devoted to you than ten sons?”

Rabbi Sari Laufer teaches, “At the beginning of our lives, as we enter adulthood—life is about building: careers, relationships, families. But sometimes we are forced to confront that the lives we are living are not the lives that we imagined. Rosh Hashanah asks us to look behind, and look ahead. But what happens when, a year later, you still don’t have a job, still don’t have a child, still don’t talk to your brother? *What happens when you stop imagining you ever will?*”

That is a bit where I am this Rosh Hashanah. I fear that I’ve stopped imagining a different way. Honestly, I was saying to Rachael the other day that I can barely remember what it was like in the before times, when I didn’t carry a mask around everywhere. When it didn’t seem scary to go to a ball game, or a wedding.

The Haftarah for Rosh HaShanah imagines this very situation. As Rabbi Sari Laufer explains, Hannah, the beloved wife of Elkanah is **stuck**, unable to conceive a child. A nice religious family, they would—year after year—go to shul to offer their sacrifices. And year after year,

Elkanah would divide the sacrifices between his two wives. And, year after year, this small act only serves as salt in Hannah's wounds, a constant reminder that she is still childless. Year after year, those offerings came to represent not their love, but the endless negative tests, the months and months of tears and anger and frustration. Until one year, everything changed. One year, her husband's pity, his clueless questions, his attempts to mollify her—were not enough. And on that day-- and tradition teaches that that day was Rosh HaShanah-- on that day: After they had eaten and drunk...Hannah rose...in her wretchedness, she prayed to Adonai, weeping all the while.

What changed? Why, this year, after years of routine, does Hannah get up from her meal and turn to God in despair? What was different on that day?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks answers this question by doing a close reading of the verse **וַיְהִי הַיּוֹם וַיִּזְבַּח אֶלְקָנָה** On that day, Elkana made an offering. Sacks taught: You have to understand the intention of the verse when it says "on that day." What happened *on that day*? The whole time Hannah was barren Elkana did the same thing that Isaac did when his wife Rebecca was barren-- he prayed next to her; they both prayed for a child, for an opening of the womb. Each year, Elkana and Hannah would *both* pray, until "וַיְהִי הַיּוֹם" "on that day" Elkana gave up hope. It was Elkana's lack of hope that led to his self-centered and uncompassionate

question: “Why are you so sad? Am I not more devoted to you than ten sons?” When Hannah heard Elkana ask her that, on that day, she understood that Elkana no longer believed that prayer would accomplish anything. She realized that he would no longer pray along with her for her womb to open. Hannah was left completely alone. And she prayed bitterly to God, without expectation that any person would be able to help her, not her husband, not her rabbi, not the high priest, not anyone. At this point, Hannah was relying on God alone. An act of deep faith and hope, born of desperation, but without giving up. Hannah, after *years* of trying to control her destiny, in the face of her husband’s failure of hope, admits finally that she is powerless over her life; that a power greater than herself might provide answers; and she makes a choice to turn her will and her life into the care of God. Wracked in sobs and individual whispered prayer, she is accused by the high priest Eli of drunkenness, and she responds “Oh no, my lord! I am a very unhappy woman. I have drunk no wine or other strong drink, but I have been pouring out my heart to the LORD.” I have been pouring out my heart to the lord. וְאֶשְׂפַךְ אֶת-נַפְשִׁי לַפְּנֵי ה'. That explanation becomes the Talmudic basis for so much of our Jewish prayer practice.

Here’s the question that I want us to consider together: How can we, each of us, when we feel hopeless like Elkana, manage to tap into the

depths of hope and faith that Hannah shows when she, in desperation, pours out her heart to God? Where is that faith for us? Can we find it? *Where can we, each of us, find renewed hope at this moment in our lives? How can we each be Hannah instead of Elkana?*

I began by confessing to a sense of stuckness. And I feel that acutely. I'm not "totally ok." No one is. Covid's social and emotional impact did not discriminate. It did not pass clergy by. And perhaps, by trying to maintain a facade of "ok-ness" I have actually made it more difficult to connect. By shielding my own vulnerabilities, perhaps I numbed my own feelings, and impacted my ability to be fully present. Perhaps I've been less able to focus on what really matters. The following story illustrates the metaphor.

Nate Howe, a musician, posted last week on Twitter a story about how, when a small basement window was broken, he boarded it up, thinking to get to it someday. Each year that went by, the problem seemed bigger, and more expensive, and meanwhile, the boarded window let in bugs but not light. Nate explains that the thought of that window ate at him for years. Every time he went down to the basement, every time he went to the hardware store, it nagged at him. He knew he needed to address it, but he had built up the process (and the price) so much in his mind that he was paralyzed. In the end, when he and his family were moving out of the house, he sprayed WD-40 around the rusted frame

and pulled it out with no trouble-- a \$12 fix that could have been done on the day the window broke.

We have to learn to recognize our own boarded up windows, to help each other see the stuckness in each others' lives, to be there for each other with a can of metaphorical WD-40. *The first step to get unstuck is to admit that we are stuck.*

For me, stuckness is connected to overthinking things, to a tendency toward hyper-rationalization, to prioritizing "i think" over "i feel." I used to be deeply stuck in my relationship with God. I described myself as an agnostic, because I did not want to commit to a belief that I could not rationally explain.

But then, though I didn't expect to, I had an experience of Presence, of Mystery, of Eternity in the room with me. And what opened up that experience for me, what got me unstuck, was admitting honestly, in prayer, that I was stuck. Somehow, admitting, or confessing, my own blocked-ness, to myself, and to God, out loud, was liberating, and made space for Presence to respond to my call. It was a Hannah moment-- with no one else to turn to, I turned to God.

With my emphasis on reason and rational thinking, I had boarded up the window to my heart, and I was not letting the light in. But when I deeply acknowledged that boarded-up window in my heart, that felt like spraying WD-40 on it-- and all of a sudden, the light was shining

through. This is what I think Moses meant when he said, וּמַלְה' אֶלֶּהֶיךָ, "YHVH your God will circumcise your heart... that you may live." The image of removing the blockages from our hearts is of an action which leads to life, to love, and to relationship.

How can we be more like Hannah and less like Elkana? First, by admitting the ways in which we *are* like Elkana. By being present with our own vulnerabilities. By recognizing our own stuckness.

Then, like Hannah, we may be able to reach deep inside with faith and refill our inner wells, though they may feel like they've dried up. We may be able to howl in pain and love and frustration to God, knowing that God is the One who Holds Our Pain. We may find hope, as David writes at the end of Psalm 27, which we read so many times during this season of Teshuva: קִוּיָּה אֱלֹהֵי ה' חֲזַק וְיִאֲמָץ לְבָבְךָ וְקִוּיָּה אֱלֹהֵי ה' Put your hope in Adonai! You give your heart courage and strength when you hope in Adonai.

Where can we each find renewed hope at this moment in our lives? How can we each be hopeful, faithful, self-affirming, outward-focused like Hannah instead of hopeless, faithless, self-centered, and negating like Elkana?

Jewish tradition has a blessing for seeing a friend or family member the first time after an absence of more than a year. It is a surprising blessing, and I've used it more often this year than I ever have before.

The Talmud teaches (Berakhot 58b): One who sees his friend after twelve months recites: בא"י אמ"ה מחיה מתים Barukh Ata Adonai, our God, Sovereign of the Universe, who restores life to the dead.

Yes-- our tradition teaches that seeing a person after a 12 month absence is as if they have been resurrected. Or, perhaps, we might say, that our relationship with them has been given new life.

The passage from the Talmud continues with the sage Rav connecting this tradition to a verse from Psalm 31:

As Rav said: A dead person is only forgotten from the heart after twelve months have elapsed, as it is stated: וְנִשְׁכַּחְתִּי כִּימַת מֵלֵב הָיִיתִי כְּכֵלִי אֲבֵד "I am put out of mind like the dead; I am like an object given up for lost." (Psalms 31:13).

The commentary explains that the connection between this verse and the 12 months absence is that with regard to the laws of lost objects, it is human nature to despair of recovering a lost object after twelve months (see Bava Metzia 28a). In other words, seeing someone again after an absence of 12 months is like finding an object that you had completely given up hope would ever be found. And, finding hope where there was none, we bless God as the restorer of life, because hope is life. How can we find renewed hope like Hannah, and avoid giving up like Elkana? By returning to relationship, as with a person one

hasn't seen in a year. By finding ways to recognize life-giving moments in our day-to-day experience. By recovering what was lost.

Rav's explanation is beautiful, but it turns out that is not the only way to understand the poetic phrase from the psalm that he quoted-- הָיִיתִי כְּכֵלִי אֶבֶד. I am like an object given up for lost. Oveid *can* mean lost, but it can also mean broken-- and that is, in fact, how the Aramaic Targum translates the verse: נִשְׁכַּחְתִּי כְּמֵת מְלֵב הָיִיתִי כְּכֵלִי אֶבֶד "I was forgotten like the dead; **I was like a broken vessel.**"

How does it change our understanding of the verse to read it that way? What does it mean to be like a broken vessel? The image of broken vessels recurs in our tradition. For example, in Leviticus we learn that if something tamei, impure, falls into an earthen vessel, everything inside it will also be tamei, and "the vessel itself you shall break."

Vayikra/Leviticus *seems* to be viewing brokenness as a negative quality, but the rabbinic midrash Vayikra Rabbah takes that idea and completely turns it upside down:

R' Abba bar Yudan said: Everything that the Holy Blessed One invalidated for an animal offering, was validated for people. That is: The Torah does not accept as an animal offering one that is blind or **broken** or with a split eyelid or a wart — but God accepts with love a person one who has a broken heart. Rabbi Alexandri said: If an ordinary person uses a broken vessel it is humiliating, but the Holy One remains in loving

relationship with us, who are broken vessels, as it says in Psalm 34 "Hashem is close to the brokenhearted" and in Isaiah 57 it says "I, God, am with the lowly and the broken-spirited." Psalm 51 even goes so far as to say that זְבַחַי אֱלֹהִים רוּחַ נְשֻׁבָרָה "True sacrifice to God is a broken spirit."

This reminds me of the story of a Jew living in a Shtetl who had the job of being a water carrier. She had two large earthen jugs, each hung on the ends of a pole which she carried across his neck. One of the jugs had a crack in it, while the other jug was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water. At the end of the long walk from the stream to the house, the cracked jug arrived only half full. For two years this went on daily, with the bearer delivering only one and a half jug full of water to her house. Of course, the perfect jug was proud of its accomplishments, perfect for which it was made. But the poor cracked jug was ashamed of its own imperfection, and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of what it had been made to do. After two years of what it perceived to be a bitter failure, it spoke to the water bearer one day by the stream. "I'm ashamed of myself because this crack in my side causes water to leak all the way back to your house." The bearer said to the pot, "Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of the path, but not on the other pot's side? That's because I've always known about your flaw, and I planted flower seeds on your side of the bath,

and every day while we walk back, you've watered them. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate the table. Without you being just the way you are, there would not be this beauty to grace the house."

Another way to find hope is to accept ourselves the way we are, and to learn how to love the beauty of our own brokenness, the beauty of our frustration, the beauty even of our hopelessness. *We are all cracked jugs.* And right now, in this ongoing pandemic, perhaps we're even extra broken, more cracked than usual, or perhaps the pandemic has created new cracks. We're imperfect. But the cracks have potential to be beautiful. How we respond to our own shortcomings can make the difference between a dirty path and flower garden. If we are honest with ourselves about our own cracks, perhaps we can find the beauty in them. Perhaps we can even build beauty from them.

Where can we each find renewed hope at this moment in our lives? How can we each be Hannah instead of Elkana?

Our search to find new hope is, I think, one reason why we come to shul on Rosh Hashanah, why we participate virtually by live stream, why this holiday holds so much importance in our experience of Jewish life. Why the sound of the Shofar, which we are about to hear, is so powerful. As Rabbi Alana Suskin taught, "On Rosh Hashanah we come to shul to hear the sobbing voice of the shofar, crying out for us – crying like Hannah,

like Sarah, like Hagar, as we join with our community, so that we can raise up our voice in a roar of sorrow and pain for the things that were not right this year, that we hope will change in the future, a great sobbing cry that lifts the hairs on our necks and rises up to God, so that our one voice can rouse the *rachamim*, the mercy of God, that God's *rechem*, womb, will open for us, and will give birth to something new, a year of forgiveness, and hope and reconciliation."

It is completely understandable to feel stuck, to feel powerless, to feel frustrated. Like Elkana, it is understandable to give up, to think that our prayer will accomplish nothing. We are living in an overwhelming moment, in the back of a car on a family road trip with no sense of time, and we are all in it together.

As we rise for the Shofar service, let us let that cry of the shofar be our howl. Let us let it shatter the boards on the windows of our hearts. Let it inspire us to love the cracks that bring beauty to our lives, and let it inspire us to change and fix the faults that do not serve us well. Let the sound of the shofar remind us of the life-giving power of relationship with each other. Let the sound of the shofar challenge us to be honest with ourselves and with God about our own stuckness. Then may we turn to God as did Hannah, with faith and hope, and the promise of using our blessings to make the world a better place.

Shanah Tova.