

Together, and Apart
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5781
September 19, 2020

We are brought together this morning, even though we may be physically far apart, through the miracle of Zoom. In general Zoom and similar platforms have been a great gift

But like all things new and different, as we unwrap and use this gift, it comes with quirks. Maybe they could have named the act of departure from a session something other than “End for All?” Kind of ominous! [Reminds me of being told by Microsoft that I had just performed an illegal function, or that my machine had a fatal flaw.] And there is a new squint, narrowed eyes as we look at the tag, not the lanyard hanging badge of conventions, but the tiny white letters at the bottom of our Hollywood square. Funny how many parents named their offspring “iPhone” or “iPad.”

Which has me thinking about names, and words. Of all the names which appear in classical Jewish literature, my favorite is that of a rabbi in the Talmud, who was called “ben Bag Bag,” the son of Bag Bag. I don’t know that much about him, except for his best known teaching. He is the one who says, about the Torah: “*hafoch bah, v’hafoch bah, d’kula bah*. Turn it, turn it, for everything is in it.”

Turn, and return. The special prayerbook we use for the High Holy Days is called a *machzor*. From the root “*chazar*,” meaning, “return.” We come *back*, to our place, to ourselves, to our God.

And the word for “year” is *shannah*, as in Rosh HaShanah, head of the year. It comes from *sheni*, “second,” or “*shnayim*,” “two.” The same word is used for “repeat,” and “teach.” And “change.”

Come back. Look again. Dive deep. We uncover, and discover and recover. Return and renew. And opening our eyes... enables change.

So I return to the Torah portion for Rosh HaShanah. I come face to face with all the old familiar phrases. But I see something as if for the first time.

This morning there was a single sentence, uttered twice, first as Abraham and Isaac isolate themselves to go into the mountains... and, again, after the terror of Moriah, when they return. “*Vayeilchu sh’neihem yachdav*. And the two of them walked forth... together.”

How much we want to be together. And how much we feel apart.

Where, now, is the unity, in community? Quarantine, isolation, closure, distance. It may be that we pay more attention now to these experiences of “together and apart” than ever before in our lives.

Even this vessel of innovation, this technological tool which enables us to congregate, at the same time reflect a reality that is separate. As human beings, we evolved to respond to signals, body language, depth perception... all of which are either distorted or altogether absent on a screen. This is an amazing, a creative and new way of connecting with each other. But the social cues we depend on... are just missing.

Do you remember Dr. Doolittle? He could talk to the animals! There was one beast, in particular, I never forgot. It was a horse, with, um, two front halves. Two heads. Remember its name? It was a PushMePullYou!

So, this year, push, and pull. We have an instinct, a yearning, we are pulled towards each other. But we are pushed apart by circumstance. And we also push back at too strong a sense of collective power. At any sense that someone else is going to tell us... what to do.

We don't want to be alone. But being together, moving forward will take science, and sanity, knowledge, and facts. Commitment, concentration, communication, coordination. For God's sake, it requires cooperation!

Vayeilchu sh'neihem yachdav. And two went forward, together.

We don't want to be alone. But we also resist anyone... anyone... there they are, the defiant, the deniers, the reckless, the maskless, proudly proclaiming: "no one is going to tell *me* what to do!" (BTW not limited....)

Here's the thing. We are social creatures. And we worship ourselves. So in the clash of opposing instincts, we are a hot mess.

Today I want to share three thoughts, stories which walk the boundary, the borderline, between pull and push, intimacy and isolation, coming together and being apart.

The first comes from the Midrash, from Leviticus Rabbah:

תָּנִי רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּר יוֹחָאִי, מִשָּׁל לְבָנֵי אָדָם שֶׁהָיוּ יוֹשְׁבֵי בַסִּפִּינָה נָטַל
אֶחָד מֵהֶן מִקֵּדַח וְהִתְחִיל קוֹדֵחַ תַּחְתָּיו, אָמְרוּ לוֹ חֲבֵרָיו מַה אַתָּה
יוֹשֵׁב וְעוֹשֶׂה, אָמַר לָהֶם מָה אֲכַפֵּת לָכֶם לֹא תַחְתִּי אֲנִי קוֹדֵחַ, אָמְרוּ
לוֹ שֶׁהַמַּיִם עוֹלִין וּמְצִיפִין עָלֵינוּ אֶת הַסִּפִּינָה.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai taught a parable: There were travelers on a ship. One of them took a drill and started drilling underneath their seat. The others said: What are you doing? The first one replied: What do you care? This is my seat! I can do what I want with it! The others said: it may be your seat, but the waters will rise, and all of us will drown.

To put the same message another way: “Your right to swing your arms ends where someone else’s nose begins.” Liberty coexists with responsibility. Morality, the basic behavior we expect of one another, judgement on us and of us rests not only on the subjective internal intent of an individual. It is also based on the objective impact we have on others and on the world.

The story of the ship... maybe you had heard that one before... although maybe you did not know if was a Midrash, from a classic Jewish text.

This next lesson is less well known. We first find it in the Middle Ages, in commentaries called the Tosafot. This teaching comes with a bit of a false back story. The medieval writers *thought* it was ancient; they attribute it to a Midrash called *Pirkei deRebbe Eliezer*. I am not sure how many Pinocchios to assign, but a quick fact check on fake news finds... no such story. At least, it is absent from any editions which survive into the modern era.

When you hear this, though, you can see why someone might have... cut it out. This is a bit... gruesome. The conclusion is important; the way of getting there is a bit... extreme.

Here is this tale of unknown origin is this:

Once, during the days of King Solomon, the king of the demons, Ashmodai, created a two-headed demon. The creature married a human woman, one with the usual and customary number of heads. The couple had children, and their offspring were of both the single- and double-headed varieties. After the father passed away, or left the scene, or whatever it is that no-longer-present demons do, the double-headed children tried to claim a double portion of the inheritance. The case was brought before Solomon, who placed a blindfolded on one of the heads and... [look, I said this was gruesome...] he poured hot water on the head of the other. When the blindfolded head screamed in pain, Solomon declared that they were one person, and were only entitled to a single share of the inheritance.

There are all kinds of reasons this story makes me squirm. One ick-factor here is the casual ascription of a demonic nature to what we now call conjoined twins.

But fables which offend sometimes are a graphic way to grapple with with important issues. That is clearly the case here.

I know this story because of its brilliant use by one of the most important figures in the North American Orthodox world in the past century, Joseph Soloveitchik, widely known simply as The Rav. In *Kol Dofi Dofek* (The Voice of My Beloved Knocks) Soloveitchik likens the conjoined twins to the entire Jewish community.

Soloveitchik is modern enough to see the twins as separate beings. They are individuals. There are two people here. Solomon was wrong.

But how can we tell if we are one body? If we feel each others' pain. If we hurt when they hurt, if they stub their toe and we cry out, if they are in danger and we are afraid.

What an image for Jewish unity! If there is substance to our much touted slogan that "we are one," that sense of separate zip codes coexisting with a shared nervous system has to be real.

But in this era of pandemic and this moment of racial reckoning we know: this is not just a tale for Jews. If some live in fear we are all afraid. If some are targeted every back should itch. If one age group is exposed we should all worry. If one profession takes risks we should all hold our breath. If one race is pushed to the ground we should all taste dust. We are all exposed, we are all vulnerable, a common present, an intertwined destiny. We share morality and mortality alike.

That is, if... If there is any connection there at all. And if there is yet any power, any purpose, any meaning or life left at in the "United" part, of the name of the country under whose flag we live.

We are in hot water. The earth shakes, the storm surges, the baton beats us back. Our forests and our souls are aflame. If there is a shred of connection left between us we should all scream in pain.

Finally, today, a story whose origin I do not know, which even Rabbi Google was unable to properly source for me. For a society which worships the individual, and is willfully blind to even obvious threads of connection, a parable which tells a great truth:

In a small town, a woman who worked as a telephone operator used to receive a very regular and, eventually, mildly annoying phone call at work. The call came every day, at about 4:00 PM. It was a man with a deep voice, who would, politely, ask her what time it was.

The operator would give the man the time, and that was it. He said thank you, and good-bye, and hung up.

One day, the woman decided to just ask. "You call," she said to the man, "every single day, with the same question. Why do you do that?"

The man explained. "Well, I work at the factory at the edge of town. One of my jobs is to blow the whistle at the end of the day, at 5:00 PM. People are depending on me, and they have worked a long day, and I want to get this exactly right."

There was a dead silence on the phone for a few moments. Finally, the woman spoke up again. Very slowly, she said the following. "I really don't mind your call," she said. "And I am happy to be helpful." Pause. "But I do think there is something you ought to know." She took a breath, and then said: "We set our clock... by your whistle."

We set our clocks. We call the shots in our lives. We do what we want. But what I do affects you. What you do affects me. Get one thing right, and something else falls into place. Do one thing wrong, and others are led astray.

Alone, so much time alone. But we are not alone. Save one life, and we save a world.

We think we are self-sufficient. We revel in the rugged, we exalt the individual. Loud and proud, firm and strong, defending our freedom to do whatever we want.

We face a moment now when everyone just doing whatever they want will actually be the end of us all. Unchecked freedom contains within it its own fatal flaw.

Too often we forget – or we ignore – what goes on next door. And too often we just don't get how much of what we accomplish, and so much of what we are able to do... depends on others.

And so we come back, we return to the heart of the matter. Turn it, and turn it, for everything depends on it. Repeat. Recite. Learn. And change.

For me, for you, for us... in this moment, while being apart... what does it mean, today, to say: "*vayeilchu sh'neihem yachdav*. And the two of them went forth, together?"

L'shana Tova.