Rosh Hashanah Second Day 5781 Rabbi Daniel H. Liben

  The Cry of Sisera's Mother

L'Shannah Tova, dear friends.  Yesterday, I spoke with you about the Sound of the Shofar.  I shared with you my sense that listening to the shofar, even if only through its echo on a computer screen, reconnects us to each other and to our tradition, and inspires us to hope.

There is another aspect of the shofar’s call, however, that Maimonides so eloquently and dramatically evokes. It hints, he says, at a deeper meaning, as if saying, “Awake O sleeper, from your sleep; O slumberer, arouse yourselves from your slumbers; examine your deeds, return in Teshuvah, and remember your Creator….”

For Maimonides, the Shofar is primarily a wake-up call, to remind us of our true purpose, and of the priorities and commitments that we have neglected.

Even more, he suggests that there are things that we know, but that we willfully forget, and that, when we do, it's as if we are sleepwalking through our days.  I want to ask you today if you have ever felt that this is true for you- that you have been at times sleepwalking through your life?   And, if that resonates with you, why do you think that is true, and what is it that wakes you up?

During the last six months of living through a pandemic, we have experienced a national “waking up” of sorts, an unwelcome, sometimes violent shaking us out of our routines and our complacencies.  So many certainties and commonplaces, once taken for granted, have come into question.  Will our children go to school this year, or will we be juggling and supervising zoom schedules, again?  Will our college kids, and our elderly relatives, stay healthy?  Is this mask really enough to protect me, and others...how safe am I when I go into a store?

None of us asked for this; none of us signed up for this.  And yet…once our  sense of routine complacency is cracked, it allows in a certain amount of light.  We are able to see all kinds of things differently, to question other unquestioned assumptions, and to wake up to something buried, unnoticed, or even willfully ignored.

Let me share with you a small example of my own sleepwalking, my own willful forgetting.  Recently, I googled the Wikipedia entry on the words, “I can’t breathe,” George Floyd’s last words, as we all know, while a police officer held his knee to his neck for eight long minutes.

I was actually surprised to read that these were also the dying words uttered by Eric Garner while being held in a policeman’s chokehold, in 2014, six years ago.  And then I was a little shocked at my own surprise.  I should have known that.  I’m sure that once, I did...  and I should have remembered.  It’s as if I had put out of my mind the painful cry of a racial protest movement that has been building in this country for more than six years.  That kind of willful non-engagement is a kind of sleepwalking.  And we all do it.

 There are good reasons why we choose to forget difficult, painful things.  First of all, because they *are* painful.  We do not want to hold them, and so we do a kind of mental triage, letting go of the thoughts and images that our minds determine that we do not need to keep, because they have little or nothing to do with us.

But, they do.  When George Floyd died uttering those words, he was, according to the New York Times, the 70th American Black man to die in an altercation with the police, uttering those words. So what made this time, this moment, different?  Why was Floyd’s death the instance that sparked a national “waking up” in this country to the specific issue of over-policing of Blacks, and the broader issue of systemic racism?

Perhaps it took a worldwide pandemic to allow us to wake up to just how interconnected- and vulnerable-  we all are; how a microscopic germ in China could affect the way we live and die in every part of the globe.  And, how social systems in which we live our lives affect us and implicate us in ways that we don’t usually choose to notice.  We don’t notice (why should we) how different our lives are, day to day, from the lives of Americans whose skin color is black.   Yet, we are now all awake to the fact that Black Americans are likely to die of Covid 19 at twice the rate of the rest of us.

 It’s important to point out that “waking up,” is not the same as what many people in today’s political discourse refer to as “being woke.”  Actually, I dislike that phrase immensely.  When people claim to be “woke,” they betray a sense of superiority over the rest of us; as if they have discovered the truth, and are  now permanently enlightened. Woke.

Yet, our experience -and Jewish wisdom- teaches us that this is not the case.  It is possible for our hearts to be acutely attuned to a particular reality, and nevertheless, for our concern and empathy, our very awareness, to wane over time.  We get distracted...we become inured to the problems that once seemed so pressing.  Our hearts crust. The Hassidic tradition recognizes this ebbing and flowing of attention, noting that a person’s spiritual state perpetually rises and falls.  It's why, as Maimonides says, we have to hear the shofar wake us up, again, every year, because there are always things that we have chosen to forget.  What is referred to as, “The “Unknown-Known.”

What is it about the sound of the Shofar that helps us to wake us up?  The Torah instructs that Rosh Hashanah is to be a “Yom Teruah,” a day of blasting for the New Year.  But it doesn't explain exactly what the “Teruah” should sound like, in contrast to the long unbroken sound of the “Tekiah.”  So the Talmud explains that a “Teruah” must be a broken sound, like a sigh or a cry, a “*Yevavah*.”

Actually, the Rabbis disagreed over what kind of a sigh: the three-fold broken sob that came to be called Shevarim, or a staccato series of cries, which we call Teruah.   So, in their typical way, the Rabbis included them both. But, on this they agreed: however it sounds, the word “Teruah” should be translated as *Yevavah*- a sigh, or a sob.   And in the Bible, there is only one person whose tears are described with a form of that word.

If you remember the story of Deborah, in the book of Judges, you may recall that Deborah was a judge and prophetess, who led the Israelites in victorious battle against a Canaanite general, named Sisera.  As the battle wanes and Sisera retreats, another woman named Yael lures him into her tent, and kills him, thus ending the war, and assuring a period of peace and tranquility for the Israelites.  However, there is yet a third woman in the story, which circles back to our lesson about the Shofar: the unnamed mother of Sisera, the Canaanite General.  Deborah’s victory song imagines Sisera’s mother waiting by the window for her son to return. “*Va’teyabev*- *she sighed*- Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why so late the clatter of its wheels?” *Va’teyabev*:  she sobbed a mournful sigh, already fearing the worst.

Based on this one word, this single thread of connection, the Talmud teaches us that we blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah 100 times, corresponding to the 100 *Yevavot*-  the one hundred cries- of Sisera’s mother.  The mother of a Canaanite General in whose defeat, we rightfully rejoice.  The mother of our enemy.

There are other mothers’ cries that we hear in the Biblical texts yesterday and today: the cry of Hagar in exile with her child Ishmael; Rachel, weeping for her exiled children, Sarah, who according to one Rabbinic telling, died in tears, when she heard what Abraham nearly did to Isaac on Mt Moriah.  These women, even Hagar, are all part of our Biblical family.  It is easy to empathize with them, to identify with and feel their pain as our own.

But the mother of Sisera?  Not so much.  Deborah’s song, which describes this woman waiting by the window for her son who is not returning, goes on to imagine her thinking, “oh, maybe he’s just delayed, occupied by plundering and ravaging Israelite maidens... “It’s really not a very sympathetic portrait.  And yet...

It's never easy to hear the cry of the mother of your enemy, in any time or place, because we feel that we need to save our compassion for those who deserve it.  And, we are afraid.  We are afraid that God might have to choose between hearing our pain, or someone else's, as if compassion is a limited resource that has to be carefully rationed.  But that isn’t really so.  Compassion and Lovingkindness are boundless Divine qualities.

The Talmud teaches that on Rosh Hashanah, God stands up from the throne of Din (the throne of Strict Justice), and moves over to His throne of Rahamim (the throne of Mercy).  All of our prayers today are in the service of that Divine move. Which means, of course, that we, ourselves, are directed to make that shift from judgement to compassion in our own hearts. Compassion for ourselves and for others.  God challenges us to stretch open our hearts, even when it is difficult.  My friends, if we can do that today, then we are truly ready to begin together a New, different kind of Year.

Let me tell you a story.  This goes back almost 20 twenty years, to those terrible days of the Second Intifada, when our Israeli brothers and sisters were reeling under the constant barrage of bus bombings, restaurant bombings, and all kinds of indescriminate acts of terror.   I remember a friend, a dear member of our congregation saying, you know what, let's not wait.  Let’s get a group of people from Temple Israel to go to Israel as soon as possible, on our own TI solidarity mission. And we did.  We flew to Tel Aviv and headed straight for Jerusalem.  Its streets were deserted, like a ghost town.  Leaving the safety of our heavily guarded hotel just to walk a few blocks towards the tourist shops felt like an act of courage.  Shopkeepers wept when we walked into their stores and asked us, “why are you even here?”  “Because we care about you,” we cried.  “We had to come and tell you we care.”   It was very emotional, and we knew that we were offering precious comfort in the midst of a perilous time.  That week, we spent many hours in Sderot, commiserating with families who lived under constant rocket attacks.  We sat in the homes of victims of terror, some of whom our congregation subsequently adopted and helped, quietly taking in their stories, holding their pain.

One morning, our scheduled speaker was a Palestinian doctor who worked in the West Bank.  He came to present research on the Intifada’s PTSD effects among children in the West Bank. He was neither angry, nor accusing; simply conveying and interpreting his data, which told a very different story, a parallel story, to the ones we had been hearing, the ones that spoke to the reason for our journey.

I could sense a tightening in my body, and could see the discomfort in the posture of the others in our group.  “Why was he telling us this?” some of us were thinking.  This wasn’t the story we came to Israel to hear.

 There was something inside of us that feared that our hearts couldn't hold this narrative of pain that competed with our own, that there was just no room for both.  But that’s exactly the stretch that our tradition, particularly on Rosh Hashanah, invites us to make.  We just have to allow our hearts to break open, a little wider.

The Rabbis teach that, though an animal with an imperfection is unfit to offer as a sacrifice, in a person, a broken heart is precisely what God is looking for, as it is written, “Adonai is close to the broken hearted.”   Hearing the pain of the other makes us more human, which brings us closer to God.

Before I close, I want to bring this back to what is happening right here, in America.  Following the death of George Floyd, grief filled the streets of our cities; grief, and rage, shared by Americans of every color.  Some of what we witnessed on those streets was poignantly sad and inspiring: I’m recalling images of protesters and policemen, in rare moments, reaching out to each other, and choosing to walk or kneel together.    It is also true that rage often spilled over into lawlessness, destruction and blood, and we rightfully judge that violence to be dangerously unacceptable.  But, we cannot let the harshness of our judgement, or our fear, blind us to the real story here, which is the story of the human heart breaking open, and awakening to the pain of the other.  Americans are paying attention to the realities of racial injustice, and entering into a serious conversation about it, to an extent that we haven’t seen.

 You have probably heard that across the country this summer, black and brown-skinned professionals were invited to share with their white co-workers their stories; shameful, degrading stories that they never before would have permitted themselves to bring into the workplace.  Stories of violence, of racial profiling, and of indignities large and small that those of us who are white, even if we are Jewish, do not experience.   And people listened. We learned that every black family in this country, rich or poor, has to have a conversation, “the” conversation, as their teens approach the right of passage of getting a driver’s license:  A lesson on how to behave, lest a police officer consider you a threat, and arrest you.  Or, God forbid, harm you.

I know that there are many people in the Jewish community who correctly point to an anti-Israel, and anti-Semitic strain within a stratum of the Black Lives Matter Movement.  We need to call it out, clearly and emphatically.   But, like many mass movements, Black Lives Matter is an umbrella that embraces far more than what may rear up in its extremes.  It is the racial justice movement of our era, and *we* have a choice.  We can walk away, because of the odious expression of a few voices, and relegate Judaism to the sidelines and to a position of moral irrelevancy.  Or, we can dig into the pain of our own Jewish experience, and bear witness to what oppression means, bringing the full weight of our moral tradition to the needs of this hour.  We can renew the historic bonds between Black people and Jews in this country, in the tradition of Abraham Joshua Heschel, and be a moral voice for change.  I hope and pray that this is where we go.

My friends, it took a pandemic to wake us up this year. We are more awake to the fragility of our health,                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              and of the health of our planet.  We are more awake to the infinite web of connections that bind us one to another.  Let us also awaken to the call of the shofar, the “*Yevavah*”- the sobbing cry that comes from many places.  Sometimes it is the cry of our neighbor.  Sometimes it is our own cry.  Or even the cry of Sisera’s mother.  But it is not a competition of tears.   There is no “their pain” or “our pain;” it is the same pain.  And, if there is no shortage of it in this world, then at least let there be no shortage of compassion.  We just need to expand our hearts a little bit more.  And though they may break open, they will surely beat more strongly.   God wants the broken heart.

Shanah Tovah.