

Could a Greater Miracle Take Place? Rosh Hashanah 5775

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The clip opens with a man being wheeled into a hospital. As he enters, words appear beside him on the screen: “Has been dreading this appointment. Fears he waited too long.”

As the video continues, and as other people make their way through the hospital – patients and family members, doctors and nurses, administrators and maintenance staff, similar phrases appear beside them, like a closed-captioning of the emotions. One man coming up the escalator has just found out his tumour is benign, and you can almost see the weight lifting off his shoulders; the man behind him has just found out that his tumour is malignant, and his fingers drum the handrail with fear. At one point, a doctor walks by an elevator, and we learn today is his 25th anniversary. Inside the elevator, an older man is there to visit his wife who has had a stroke, and he is worrying about how he will care for her; beside him is a hospital administrator who is recently divorced, and beside her, a young resident with a goofy smile on his face, who has just found out he is going to be a dad.

That moment got me. The woman is doing something a little strange with her hands, which I now recognize as feeling for the wedding ring which is no longer there. The look on the face of the prospective father: I remember that feeling too. The mother in the NICU who hopes that today is the day she will get to hold her baby – I know that ache. But the others passing by, the faces and the phrases, remind me of how much I have not experienced; they speak to me of what I do not know. Having a mammogram where a shadow was seen; signing a DNR; there is so much of the human experience passing through those doors.

It’s a four-minute video, put out by the Cleveland Clinic, a hospital in the United States.¹ But I know that much of that experience passes through our doors as well, as we gather for Rosh Hashanah. Each year, each of us adds to what we can relate to firsthand; and each year, we witness the lives of others, and realize just how much we do not know.

So often, we don’t know the story of the person sitting beside us. How can we hold forth on the story of the world? And yet our doorsteps and our inboxes and our social media feeds are cluttered with everyone opining on everything – and, in recent days, articles saying on which topics the rabbi should and should not opine. Peter Beinart says that rabbis speaking about Israel are “B-rate pundits” and should stick to what they know.² It is true that just as I stand before you not knowing the story of every soul here, I certainly don’t know every nuance of politics in the Middle East. But there is a quote at the beginning of that Cleveland Clinic video that stays with me. It shows the words of Henry David Thoreau, who said: “Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other’s eyes for an instant?” That, it seems to me, is an appropriate task, an essential task, an urgent task for these days – and that task requires me to speak about Israel, as well as what is inside our own souls.

1 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDDWvj_q-o8&list=PL95B29FDF6B7A3B17. My thanks to my colleague, Rabbi Michael Latz, for sharing it with me.

2 Peter Beinart, “American rabbis, these High Holidays, talk about Jewish texts, not the Jewish State,” *Haaretz*, Sept. 22, 2014 (<http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/1.617158>).

Let me tell you where I am coming from. Your rabbi is both a Zionist, and a dyed-in-the wool Diaspora Jew. Unlike many of my classmates and colleagues, I have never seriously contemplated moving to Israel, making aliyah. I have lived in Israel as part of my studies and led many Israel trips before, and I am looking forward to leading my first one with Temple this spring. I believe that the state of Israel is an astonishingly important achievement in the span of Jewish history, and that its story – with all its heights and depths – is closely bound up with our story as Diaspora Jews. I believe that no government in the history of the world is perfect, and Israel’s various governments cannot but be included in that belief. I believe that the lives of Israelis matter and that the lives of Palestinians matter; in fact, I believe that all of us are made in the image of God, and even my mortal enemies cannot but be included in that belief. I believe that Israel is in a tough neighbourhood, getting tougher every day, and that it has the absolute right and responsibility to defend its citizens from terror. I believe in a two-state solution, and in the liberal Zionist approach which has been both derided and defended this year.

It would be easier to be silent. But then I think of the congregant who spoke to me this summer, at the height of the conflict, and asked me to include her nephew’s name in our prayers, as he was serving in the IDF. “I speak to my sister every day,” she said, “and every day she is afraid.” And I also think of a young woman who was recently married here. Recently, she sent me an email that said:

I have a question about Israel and being a Jew. It may be a bit of a touchy subject... I've had a lot of arguments with my mom over this.

To be a good Jew... does that mean you need to fully support the state of Israel? Personally, I believe violence from both sides is wrong, no matter what. I find some people blindly support Israel, regardless of any facts... Personally, I would be one of those. I support Israel for no other reason than I am Jewish and that's what I'm supposed to do.³

And then I think of how we are trying to build this Temple community as the place where we can be our fullest, most honest selves. So no, I am no expert on the modern Middle East, and on some level, I feel like that patient entering the hospital: “She has been dreading this sermon. Fears she waited too long.” But often, what is most hard is also what is most important. And so today, I want to ask that we look through each other’s eyes. I want to ask that we look, and think, and feel, in the best Temple tradition of openness and the search for understanding.

And I want to do it through the lens of a difficult story, the one we revisit each year on Rosh Hashanah. Imagine, for a moment, Abraham as one of the characters in the Cleveland Clinic video: An old man with the words, “has just been told to sacrifice his son” floating beside him. It is not entirely clear what the expression on his face would be. For me, the most poignant moment in the story is when Abraham and Isaac are on their way up the mountain:

Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Isaac. He himself took the firestone and the knife; and the two walked together. Then Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he answered, "Yes, my son." And he said, "Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?" And Abraham

³ Personal communication, Sept. 18, 2014, shared with permission.

said, "God will see to the sheep for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them walked together. (Genesis 22: 6-18)

“And the two of them walked together” – *vayelchu shneihem yachdav*. How can they be walking together at the end of this exchange, just as they are doing at its beginning? Either Isaac knows what is really happening or Abraham is deceiving his son. It seems implausible, even impossible. Yet that is what the Torah says. I wonder, this year, whether we are too quick to deem something impossible. The two of them walked together. I wonder whether we are meant to consider that other implausible things might also come to be. In that spirit, let me draw out three principles for a Jewish approach to Israel: compassion, conversation, and consolation.

I want us to consider compassion.

Even before the akeda, there is a key moment in the story of Abraham and his family which is deeply relevant. Before God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham also sacrifices his older son, Ishmael. Not in the same way, but the parallels are too great to be ignored. Abraham sends Ishmael and his mother Hagar out to the wilderness, with little chance of survival, just as he takes Isaac up the mountain with the intention to come back down alone. And, just as God intervenes to keep Isaac alive, so too does God intervene for Ishmael:

God heard the cry of the boy, and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him." (Genesis 21:17-18)

Now, Ishmael grows up to be the father of the Arab people, who early on were enemies of the Israelites. But Rashi, looking at this passage, says:

“God heard the cry of the boy where he is... God judged Ishmael according to his present deeds and not according to what he will do in the future, for the angels were accusing Ishmael, saying, 'Master of the Universe, in the future, his descendents will kill your children by thirst! Will you now raise up a well for him?' God answered them, 'What is he now, righteous or wicked?' They said to God, 'Righteous.' God said to them, 'I will judge him according to his deeds at present.' This is the meaning of 'Where he is.'"
(Rashi on Genesis 21:17)

In other words: your enemy is only the person who is actually causing you harm. Not the person who has the potential to; not the person who might grow up to; not the person you might suspect. The whole story is crafted to evoke compassion for Ishmael, this boy who has done nothing wrong.

We are so quick to find enemies. Last month, when there was a demonstration against the war in Gaza planned outside the Israeli consulate in Westmount Square, I stayed to keep an eye on things. I was worried for our building: that we would be on the receiving end of the anti-Semitic fallout that has been so ugly and so frightening. But as I mingled with the crowds, the feeling I got was one that I recognized from rallies in which I have taken part: people gathering to support a cause they believed in, with excitement in the air. Did I object to some of the images and slogans I saw? Absolutely. Do I know that some of these gatherings have turned violent, even hurting one of our own congregants earlier this year? Yes, and I abhor it. The topic of rising anti-

Semitism is a serious one, and I'll speak to it on Kol Nidre. But that is not what I saw on that day.

I am not advocating for moral equivalency by any stretch. There is no justifying Hamas. There is no comparison between Israel using rockets to protect its citizens, and Hamas using citizens to protect rockets – particularly when those citizens are children. Where compassion comes in is being willing to look at the images from Gaza and know that the people who are mourning, who are suffering, who are dying, also are human beings, and also have their own dreams. The mother of Naftali Fraenkel, the Israeli teenager who was kidnapped and brutally murdered, gave her condolences to the family of Mohammad Abu Khdeir, the Palestinian teen who was burned alive. Palestinian visitors went to the Fraenkel home to give their condolences. We need to look through their eyes.

The two of them walked together. In the Torah, Isaac and Ishmael do reunite, at the funeral of Abraham their father. It should not take death to bring us together. I want us to consider compassion as a central principle in Jewish life.⁴

Next, I want us to consider conversation.

Abraham and Isaac talked, on their way up that mountain. Even when their conversations seemed to be on parallel tracks, they talked. After all, they were part of the same covenant, the same bigger conversation. One way or another, they knew they were in it together.

This war had many of us glued to our smartphones, downloading the app to see the red alerts, reading article after article to support our own points of view. We spoke with the people with whom we agreed, but when we felt we were not among friends, we kept silent. Some felt more closely connected to the organized Jewish community while others felt alienated and estranged. It was a time in which many banded together, and it was a time when many felt alone.

Last night I spoke about the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai, and how deeply they often disagreed. But their arguments were famous for being marked by mutual respect. They knew, as the Talmud teaches, that each of their arguments represented the words of the living God, and that each one needed to be heard. For those of you who will travel to Israel with me, I will be introducing you to people as much as to places. Some of the most significant moments will be shaped by the conversations that can only be had there. We need to look through their eyes.

The catch here is that, from what the Torah tells us, the akeda stopped a number of significant conversations. God never spoke directly to Abraham again. Abraham and Isaac could no longer talk to Sarah, because she died right after the event. Most strikingly, Abraham and Isaac have no more recorded conversations.

⁴ There is an extraordinary prayer I found in an old siddur. It includes the biblical passage of the akeda in the section for daily study, and then adds the following lines: *Master of the world, just as Abraham our father conquered his compassion to do Your will with a full heart, so may Your compassion conquer your anger...* This interpretation acknowledges Abraham's lack of compassion in his actions towards Isaac in the akeda, and then turns it on its head by using it to call upon God to be compassionate towards us. The siddur is according to the Sephardic rite, published in Vienna in 1935.

The two of them walked together. Abraham and Isaac do not speak again, but the conversation continues, under the big tent of the covenant with God. How much stronger their family would have been had they been able to find a way to speak going down the mountain, despite being separated by a chasm of experience and even belief. I want us to consider conversation as a central principle in Jewish life.

Finally, I want us to consider consolation.

It has not been a comfortable summer by any stretch. There is not much comfort in the story of the akeda either. A father willing to sacrifice his son, a God who would command such a thing... but here is where it is important to remember that the sacrifice does not happen, that the story has an end. Abraham opens his ears and lifts his eyes and is ready to do something new. The Jewish approach to history is linear: yes, we return to certain moments, certain themes, but there is something driving us forward. We go from an individual to a family, a family to twelve tribes, twelve tribes to a people. We go from slavery to freedom, from Egypt to the Promised Land. We are not doomed to repeat the past. Just because we have not found a solution before does not mean we cannot find one now. There may not be comfort, but there is the hope of consolation.

In the lead-up to the High Holy Days, we read Isaiah, proclaiming: “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people.” The weight of our tradition insists that ultimately, the covenant will prevail. Abraham goes up that mountain because he trusts in God’s promise that whatever happens, this will not be the story’s end. When I say consolation, I don’t mean a consolation prize; I mean the confidence that we will not be stuck in the cycle of violence forever, that there are better days ahead.

In the short term, I have every confidence that our trip to Israel will go forward in May, and I hope that you will join me. In the long term, I have confidence that this conflict is not intractable. The consolation is in knowing that we can play our part to move towards the promise of peace.

Back in the thirties, the story goes, the Labor party in Israel was struggling over the question of whether to agree to a partition of the land... Ben Gurion himself was divided on this question. And so he went to Yitzhak Tabenkin, who was one of the elder statesmen of the Labor Party, and who had always been his mentor, and he asked him how he should vote.

Tabenkin said: Give me twenty four hours, and I will tell you what I think you should do, because, before I give you my advice, I need to consult with two people.

Tabenkin came back the next day, and said: I think you should vote for partition.

Ben Gurion thanked him for his advice, and then he said: Would you mind telling me who the two people were whom you had to consult with before you made your decision?

Tabenkin said: I asked my grandfather, who is no longer alive, and I asked my grandchild who is not yet born. And only after I thought about what they would say, and about what would be best in their eyes, could I make my decision.⁵

⁵ Text shared by Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin.

Here's the interesting part. Some versions of this story have Tabenkin favouring partition; others have him opposing it. But all the accounts agree that he consulted with generations past and yet to come. We need to look through their eyes.

The two of them walked together. Past and future, we join the generations in search of peace. We are more likely to find a way out of this mess if we believe a way can be found, that the genius and creativity that built a Jewish homeland can help build a lasting peace. I want us to consider consolation as a central principle in Jewish life.

“Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant?” I believe that we can walk together – with compassion, with conversation, and with consolation. I pray that we can walk towards peace.