

Did you stop the war (a Rosh Hashanah sermon)

So usually at this point when I was a kid, we would say, if you're waiting for the rabbi's sermon to leave, now's the good time. We began what seems like an eternity ago, two nights ago, with a framing of this holiday season. We discussed the imperative and the vital and essential core teaching of our tradition, that each and every one of us become a seeker, and that seeking is at the heart of the Jewish agenda.

To begin where we leave, leich lecha lechilach, go to a place that is uncharted, and that in order for us to get there, the vessel that we take is a vessel known as a question. And ma nishtana, what is different, how am I different, how can I change things? And we enumerated a number of Talmudic questions, from a beautiful gemara where Rava, the great sage, the Amorav, the Talmudic period, asked us, kavata itim l'torah, did you establish times for learning? Did you make wisdom an important priority in your year? Yesterday we explored nasata v'natata b'muna, did you give and receive in faith? And we spoke of three questions that we are to carry with us at every moment of our lives, did I love well, did I live fully, and did I learn to let go? And amazingly, we arrive once again this morning, and after having heard arguments from both sides, the lawyers debating back and forth in the court of law, okay, I've heard a lot of interesting questions. And as we take the witness stand again this morning, the prosecutor sneers and says, quoting our gemara, tzipita l'yishua, did you yearn, did you anticipate yishua, redemption, salvation?

That word tzipita has so much in it, l'tzapot is to anticipate, to yearn for, tzipiot. But it also comes from the root word tzofeh, tzofim are those who have a vision. Did you vision peace, did you vision salvation, did you yearn for it? Both of those, the vision and the yearning in that one prosecutorial sneer. And in yesterday's reading, Hagar, the stranger is sent forth, and after that very difficult reading, the Torah then reminds us that vision is all important as she sees a well that she didn't see before.

And in today's reading, Abraham, as Larry so beautifully read for us, sees hagar with something in hindsight and redeems the moment, delivers the moment. And balanced between yesterday's reading and today's, there's a passage of the Torah that almost always has me jump over it. Between those readings of visioning and redemption, yesterday's and today's, there's a point that my father-in-law brought to my attention so beautifully.

After all of the intense and troubling story, the almost death of Yishmael, Abraham reaches a peace accord with Abimelech. A powerful moment, no doubt, but right here, yesterday's reading, right after that, mitn drinnen, the Torah throws us an interesting but seemingly irrelevant story about peace. Might the Torah be teaching us a valuable lesson about visioning and redemption? What tzipita and yeshua really mean? Do we live in peace? And can we make a connection between deliverance and seeing clearly? Perhaps if we reframed the Talmudic words, tzipita and yeshua, into a different vernacular, maybe it might be more powerful. Perhaps instead of saying, did you vision peace? Maybe we could say, did you stop the war? Did you stop the war? When we step out of battles, whatever they are, we see anew. As the Tao Te Ching says, with eyes unclouded by longing. To follow a path that has a heart, we must understand the whole process of making war. Within ourselves and without. How it begins and how it ends. War's roots are in ignorance.

Without understanding, we can easily become frightened by life's fleeting moments. The inevitable losses and disappointments. The insecurity of our own aging and death. Misunderstanding leads us to fight against life. Running from our pain. Grasping at security and pleasures that by their nature can never be truly satisfying.

Our war against life is expressed in every dimension of our experience, inner and outer. Our children see on average 18,000 murders and violent acts on TV before they finish high school. 18,000. The leading cause of injury for American women is beatings by the men they live with. We carry on wars within ourselves, with our families, our communities, among races and nations worldwide. The wars between peoples, between nations, are a reflection of our own inner conflict and fear. Perhaps that is an insight the Torah emphasizes by placing that peace treaty between these violent readings. In the middle of this intra-family dynamic. Our own contemporary society fosters within us a mental tendency to deny or suppress our awareness of reality.

Ours is a society of denial that conditions us to protect ourselves from any direct difficulty and discomfort. We expend enormous energy denying our insecurity, fighting pain, death and loss. And hiding from the basic truths of the natural world and our own nature. To insulate ourselves from the natural world, we have air conditioners, heated cars and clothes that protect us from every season. To insulate ourselves from the specter of aging and infirmity, we put smiling young people in our advertisements. And while we relegate our older people to nursing homes and old age establishments, the advertising agency continues to bombard us with images that say, facelift, Botox, young, young. We hide our mental patients in hospitals and relegate our poor to ghettos, constructing freeways around these ghettos so that those fortunate enough not to live in them will not have to see the suffering that they house. We deny death to the extent that even a 96-year-old woman newly admitted to a hospice complained to the doctor, why me? We almost pretend that our dead aren't even dead. We dress them up in fancy clothes and makeup to attend their own funerals as if they were going to parties. Of course, not in the Jewish tradition. We have changed the name of the War Department to the Defense Department and call a whole class of nuclear missiles peacekeepers. The war in Iraq was called Operation Enduring Freedom.

So how is it that we manage to consistently close ourselves off from the truths of our existence? Ours has been called by one author, the addicted society. Over 20 million addicts. Alcoholics, 10 million drug addicts, millions addicted to gambling, to food, to sexuality, unhealthy relationships, and in the DSM that's coming out in a couple of weeks, texting now is a disease. And lest you think that it's a joke, they've done actual studies that show that the addicted mind bears striking resemblance to the mind addicted to texting and other related media. Our addictions are the compulsively repetitive attachments we use to avoid feeling and to deny the difficulties of our lives. Advertising urges us to keep pace, to keep consuming, smoking, drinking, and craving money, food. These addictions serve to numb us.

Anne Wilson Shafe, who was the author of *When Society Becomes an Addict*, described it this way. The best adjusted person in our society is the person who is not dead and not alive. Just numb, a zombie. When you're dead, you're not able to do the work of the society,

but when you're fully alive, you are constantly saying no to many of the processes of society. The racism, the polluted environment, the nuclear threats, the arms race, drinking unsafe water and eating carcinogenic foods. Thus, it is in the interest of our society to promote those things that take the edge off. Keep us busy with our lives, keep us busy with our fixes, and keep us slightly numbed out and zombie-like. In this way, our modern consumer society, she writes, itself acts and functions as an addict. Society is an addict.

In a society that demands life at double time, speed and addictions numb us to our own experience. In that society, it is almost impossible to settle into our bodies, to stay connected with our hearts, let alone connect with one another and with our mother, the earth. Lest you think this is only our problem, this is the problem of nations. This is the problem on a global scale. There are, as we speak, 115 wars. There have been, since World War II, 115 wars. And there are only 165 countries in the world. Friends, it's not a good track record. To stop this war, to stop all of these wars, might not be possible today, tomorrow, next week. Lest you think that that is something to throw our hands up and say, well, we can't stop it. What can we do?

Mahatma Gandhi said something very beautiful. He said, I have only three enemies in my life. My favorite enemy, the one most easily influenced for the better, he said, is the British Empire. My second enemy is the Indian people. They're far more difficult. But my most formidable opponent is a man named Mahatma, Mohandas K. Gandhi. With him, I seem to have very little influence.

Like Gandhi, we cannot easily change ourselves for the better through an act of will. That's kind of like wanting the mind to get rid of itself, or pulling ourselves up from our own bootstraps. Ravi Saral Salanter, one of the greats of the Musar Movement, said that it is easier to learn the entire Talmud. The entire Talmud is easier to learn, he said, than it is to change one unskillful character trait. I was thinking about that as everybody gathered last month to celebrate the finishing of the Talmud. I thought, what if we had such a gathering every time somebody successfully overcame jealousy, or envy, or any of the myriad of things, the diseases and toxins of the mind that we carry around all day and all night. Easier to learn the entire Shas, the entire Talmud, than it is to fix one negative character trait.

So what do we do? So our tradition has a beautiful way of approaching this. The tradition says two things, and these two things take with us for the entire year. The first thing the tradition says that we are to do is in the words of Sylvia Borstein, don't just do something, sit there. We Jews have known this little secret for thousands of years, and we call it Shabbat. And Shabbat is a day in the week, but it's also a way of living. Shabbat means to stop. To go on strike in modern Israel is to go on Shabbat, shvita. To stop means that every now and then in the midst of our craziness and our busyness is to stop and give ourselves a pause, a moment, and say, you know, maybe if I stop for a moment I will feel life more deeply, more richly. To sit and to be present is one of the ways that we stop the war. Shabbat is a stopping of the war.

And the second more radical teaching, this tradition that we are so blessed to be a part of, gives us this High Holidays, and everyone, is that when we recited the 13 middot arachamim, the 13 attributes of love, we begin with a strange repetition. Adonai, Adonai,

God says to Moses, say these 13 words, these 13 moments of reflection. Adonai, Adonai. And the Talmud says, Adonai, Adonai, one Adonai would have been enough. Adonai, Adonai. Why the repetition of God's name of love? Why the repetition and the redundancy in God's name of compassion? Why say love twice? And for the Gemara, the Talmud answers strikingly. That at that moment, when all of the craziness and the addictions of the golden calf and all of that which had taken place in the desert, the Jews needed to hear one message. Adonai, Adonai, I was the same loving God before you sinned, and I am the same loving God after you sinned. That love doesn't change. Compassion is to be with. It's to meet the other where they are. Compassion, *kompati*, means to suffer with. God says, I suffered with you before, I suffer with you after.

It didn't change. Can you hold that, he says to Moshe. Give that to the Jewish people. If they use their willpower between now and Yom Kippur to try to change everything, they'll be doing more aggression. They'll make a list of all of these things, all of the questions that all of you have today and next week, and you'll say, let me cross this one out, and I'll take that with me. I don't want this and I don't want that. Maybe the Hasidic masters say that the way to change a character trait is by not trying to change it. Maybe radically the first movement we make towards ourselves tomorrow, the next day, is not where must I excise, but where must I love. What in me deserves compassion even in its unskillful and unwholesomeness. After I've made a mistake, Adonai. Before I've made the mistake, Adonai. Can compassion be just as present for us when we fall as when we run. This practice, these practices, are in our hands.

There's a story that I wanted to share with you, but I seem to have misplaced the book, but I know it by heart, I think. A certain student was in a town when a Rebbe came, and this student wanted to trip up the Rebbe. He was jealous that this great master had come to town. He wanted to show that he himself was also a great teacher, and in his envy and in his jealousy, he thought, okay, I'm really going to find a way to make this master look silly. And so he came to the master and he said, master, give me a riddle and I promise you, being the great student that I am, I will figure it out. And the master said to him, okay, here's your riddle. The master could see that this student was trying to trip him up. And he said, go find me a bird, he said. A bird, and bring that bird to me that is alive. Bring me a live bird. And if you're able to find this rare bird, I'll know that you really are wise.

Wow, the student said, great. If I bring back the bird alive, right, I'll bring back the bird alive, and I'll be able to show the master that I am great. But if I don't find the bird, or if I bring it back, and in some way I change what the master wanted, I'll make the master look like a fool if I kill the bird. Say, look, you sent me to find a dead bird. Whatever he told me to do, I'm going to do something different. So he goes and he catches the bird and he comes back.

And he's holding it in his hand and he's come to the master, and all the students have gathered around. And he's thinking, whatever the master tells him, he's going to do the opposite. He's going to go behind and he's going to do something different. And the master knows this. And he says to him, here's my riddle, great master. Is the bird in my hand alive or dead? The master thinks, you know, if I tell him that it's alive and it's that rare bird that he caught, then he'll be successful. If I tell him that it's dead, then he'll also be successful. I really have no way out. So the master thought for a moment, and he thought, okay.

He turns to the student and he says, you ask me if the bird is alive or dead, I'll tell you. It's up to you. It's up to you.

My friends, we don't know what will be Yom Kippur in a week from now. We don't even know what will be in an hour from now. We don't know when we'll fall. We don't know when we'll stand. But it's really up to you. If you can bring comfort, compassion to bear on any given moment. We can't stop all the wars, but we can stop ours. So let's do that.

And rise together for Mikadosh.