

Possibility-Trumps-Inevitability_Vayeira_RH_Sept8-2010_raw

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So first and foremost, before I even begin, I have to say a big yashakor, a big thank you, to our partners, our friends, our colleagues, and those who prayed with us just this last year, one year from today. The very Reverend Alistair Drummond is here, and I wanted to call him out and thank him. Please stand, Alistair, if you would.

Thank you. Thank you so much, Alistair. Alistair is the minister of this wonderful church, as we call it, but the space in which we have found a home, really.

And this is our third year here, and so we're so happy to have you with us this Rosh Hashanah. And are you planning to be with us and bring your community like you did last year and dance with us and sing with us? And we'll see. OK, we'll see.

So it was just a year ago, those of you who remember, those of you who were with us, that I spoke about birth. It was up for me at the time, and certainly my wife, Ariel, can say that it was up for her. I spoke about the factors that lead to birth.

The pain must be severe enough, the necessity clear enough, and the path one way for birth to take place. And from that moment on, I'd been troubled by a different question about the path of fatherhood, parenthood. People come to me all the time and say, well, David, how is it? You know, being a dad.

How's that going? Just like that, they say, how's that going? That dad thing. And inevitably, I say your usual pattern of responses. I have the list.

Oh, it's great. Oh, it's challenging. No sleep.

It's hard. It's rewarding. It's great.

It's interesting. It's illuminating. It's inspirational.

It's edifying. Any that you have? Exhilarating and confusing. Exhilarating and confusing.

And I always leave wondering why I feel like I just lied. And by that, I want to pose and frame a question that we'll come back to, which is, why is it that I can't quite describe truthfully in a way that feels full for me what it means to be a father? Motivations for human behavior being complex and varied, mysterious, determining the why for our what's can be a mysterious activity. This kind of mental archeology can take years and cost thousands of dollars, often yielding only a faint wisp of a memory, if that at all.

For many of us, our earliest childhood memories are sealed, locked behind a vault, forever lost and irretrievable. Even if we do remember or are told some experience, it isn't always easy to

discern how a particular experience affected us and gave birth to a particular habit pattern in our lives. Well, I'd like to share with you one that is quite old and pretty clear.

On March 28, 1969, at 3 in the morning exactly, I left the warm, cozy environment of my mother's womb. This was a full two minutes, or some say 15 minutes, after my brother had made his escape. From that moment on, it takes me forever to leave any house that I've aimed.

No matter how well I've thought out things, and we all know what that looks like, no matter how many alarms I've set, no matter how early I begin my preparations, I always seem to need just five more minutes. In fact, just a minute are the three words most often heard by my wife, well, my friends, everyone that knows me. Just a minute.

It would seem that Rosh Hashanah, our new year, suffers from a similar malady. As Jackie Mason, the noted Talmudic scholar, has went to say, only the Jews could put the new year in the seventh month. Rosh Hashanah falls, the Chodesh HaShavi'i, in the seventh month.

And so, I'd like to explore together a little bit of this phenomena called being late. Lest you think it only appears there, the entire theme of the first day and second day of Rosh Hashanah, one of the strongest themes is the theme of birth. We're familiar with the first day's reading where Sarah, V'Adonai pakad et sarah, kashera amar, God remembers Sarah.

Sarah is forgotten. Sarah is told that she will have a child. The Haftorah is about Hannah, who's also late in giving birth.

And what's interesting to note is that often the prism to which we look at both of these stories, and indeed, even the story of Isaac on the second day, is one of finally God remembered. That's the trope, right? Finally God remembered Sarah. Finally God remembered Hannah.

Perhaps finally God remembers Isaac. But if we were to look at it through the prism of time and in the nick of time, and the infinitesimal, that sliver of time called almost, we see that in a way the theme of anticipation and of it almost passed. Sarah almost missed her opportunity to give birth.

She was so old. Isaac, one more moment in Isaac's life might have been taken. Hannah, almost.

The theme of lateness or of having missed the moment, the moment almost passed us by, I would humbly submit is a fundamental theme of Rosh Hashanah. We almost missed it. Had it not been.

You might think that this theme is relegated only to human beings. Advisedly another person, i.e. the divine being, in a wonderful midrash, an astonishing midrash, a midrash that blows your socks out of the water, a rabbinic legend, says that when God creates the universe because Rosh Hashanah is not only birth of children but the birth of the world, that when God creates the universe, the rabbinic legend says that God did not create the universe in one fell swoop. Reshit

Rabbah, Genesis Rabbah says that God was busy.

That in God's creative process, God, like an artist crumpling up manuscript after manuscript, went through one copy, said, no, this one doesn't work for me. Then another one, no, that one doesn't work for me. And a third and a fourth, and who knows how many others before finally, Hadayn HaNayanli, this one piques my interest, this one is what I want.

The divine, in a sense, putting off, putting off, putting off the creation of the world until finally creating the world, finally. This theme, this trope, finds its way in another context with Hagar. Hagar, the maidservant of Abraham, right? She's at her wit's end.

Her child might die. There's a moment. And Hagar says, God, please help me.

And she lifts up her voice and she cries. Just one more moment and this child might be taken from me. Just one more moment.

When I think about lateness, I sometimes wonder, and this is not lateness by the clock, but putting off, or a sense of not yetness, not yet. I often wonder if that impulse is because we're afraid of the enormity of what we might find if we show up. Rosh Hashanah says to us that even if you think you've missed the moment, even if you think that there's no hope for Ishmael, even if you think that Isaac is done for, even if you've shown up in the middle of the year, even if you're not ready, you're never ready.

Rosh Hashanah says in the famous words of Alan Lew, this is real and you are completely unprepared. You try your hardest to get out of the house. You try your hardest to get your career going.

You try your hardest to make it work. You try, you try, your efforts and efforts accruing over time. And in the back of your head, you think, oh, I missed it.

I missed my window. Or even worse, there's no point in even trying anymore. I missed the first month.

I missed the second month, the third month, the fourth month. God says Rosh Hashanah is in the seventh month. It's in the middle of the year.

You missed the first chance. You missed the second chance, the third, fourth. Come pilgrim, come pilgrim, even if you've broken your vows a thousand times, come.

This quality of trying so hard to be on time and to catch the moment but missing it, in the language of our rabbis, is called a broken heart. Alan Lew again. And this is what we call heartbreak.

Heartbreak is precisely this, the feeling that we have done our best, we have given it our all, but it

hasn't been enough, not nearly enough. And this is what we mean when we say God is close to the broken hearted. This is what we mean when we say in banu ma'asim, we have no deeds.

When we say in the avinu malkeinu, chanenu va'anenu, our father, our imminent presence of the divine lover, be gracious to us, be gratuitously loving, and answer us even though we don't deserve it, but not because we're guilty and bad children, but we can't do it. We can't get it. We can't make a perfect world.

God keeps trying to make a perfect world. He tries once, he tries twice, she tries a third time and the fourth time, and they all come together and they say, we're not going to build the perfect world, we're going to build this world. It will get away from us.

It'll break our heart. It'll be real, so real that at moments we'll wonder how can we even hold ourselves together. I had someone call me early this morning to tell me that just as she was preparing finally to have her mother come to visit her here in New York, her father having passed away last year, so that her Rosh Hashanah last year was answered, who will live and who will die was her father last year.

And just this morning as she prepared to welcome, just this weekend as she prepared to welcome her mother, whom she had had a very difficult childhood with and whom she'd begun a rapprochement with, suddenly, unexpectedly, out of nowhere, without any warning whatsoever, her mother passed. And instead of spending Rosh Hashanah this year with her mother in community and in love, she is now traveling away with her family to a funeral and to a shiva. The world will break our hearts.

That's a guarantee. We didn't need the Buddha to tell us, but he said it so beautifully, life is suffering. And so we gather together on the Yamim No Ra'im to celebrate the birth of the world, af al pichem, even though.

Even though it will disappoint us. Even though it will leave us bruised and scarred. The rabbis say, it is good that we were created.

And so now I'd like to answer for you the question that I've been pondering for the last year. I had no idea I could love so much. I had no idea that my heart could grow to be that big.

When I look at my son, I am immediately overwhelmed by a sense of the real. I worked so hard on myself in my 20s, working in restaurants, good therapists, they know who they are. I did my work.

I thought, you know, I'm going to, when I have a kid, I'm going to get it right, you know. I'm going to pass my stuff back, not forward. I'm going to be clean.

When I finally, when I finally look at this person, and for every moment this year that I look at him, somewhere the enormity of what it is hits me. How absolutely and completely unprepared I was,

am, and will be, and how important it is that even so, that even with, even with this thing called the human condition, even with this inevitability, Rosh Hashanah says, inevitability is trumped by possibility. Inevitability loses the fight against the impulse to build and to rebuild and to build and rebuild.

And so we enter Rosh Hashanah together. Ein banu ma'asim. The most righteous amongst us, the most holy amongst us, the most ethical, the most moral, the most spiritually evolved, the most holy, the most learned, the most educated, all of us together in one boat.

We have no one but each other and our broken hearts. And that will be enough. That will be enough.

Please rise for the Aleinu.

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