

Listen to Silence Vulnerability is Strength

We're coming to the heart of the service, the reading that we just engaged in, the reading of the story of Ishmael and Hagar, of children abandoned and mothers crying. And in a moment we'll be blowing the shofar. So I want to tie together the Torah reading from this morning with the blowing of the shofar.

Some of you might know this story, but I hope that just as Rosh Hashanah, as Machzor is the same liturgy as last year, that you'll appreciate this a second time, if you have. I was a second year rabbinical student in an Orthodox seminary here in New York. I was conflicted, a little bit confused.

I had spent many years studying Eastern religion, things like yoga, meditation, martial arts, and, of course, Zen, referring to Zen. So there I was on a retreat, on a one weekend, and that retreat led me to one of my dearest and oldest friends. Her name is Bonnie Niyotai Tracy.

She was the vice abbess of the Zen Mountain Monastery. And after that retreat, we became close friends. I taught her Talmud, Kabbalah, matzah balls, kinishes, that kind of thing, all kinds of things Jewish.

And she deepened my relationship with the Zen tradition, with Dogen, with Koans, and even American Zen. So there we were one Sunday spring morning, and I had invited her to my apartment to do some meditating. And I was hoping secretly that I would get my first koan.

My first koan. For those of you who don't know what a koan is, it's a riddle or a phrase, a statement that defies logic or conventional logic, let's say. You might be familiar with a few of them.

Here's one. What is the sound of one hand clapping? Or what was the face that you had before you were born? It is riddles like that that jar the mind. It kind of pulls the rug out from underneath your mind and you try to figure it out, and instead your mind drops into a different place.

Maybe a non-mind place. So I was yearning for one of those. That's what I wanted.

I wanted a koan. So we began to sit in my living room, and I was especially clued in to hear if Miyota would bless me with my very first koan. Oh, boy.

After about 15 minutes of stillness and silence, the place was really quiet. I heard inaudibly. I kind of whispered.

I heard my teacher say, Do you want... I could barely make it out, but it sounded to me, in my half-meditative state, like she was saying, Do you want chicken? I didn't understand. But heck, what do you know? I don't know. What do I know? I'm not an encyclopedic knowledge of koans.

Chicken? Okay. You know, strange, but not stranger than the usual first koan which is given to students, which is what? Mu. Right.

What is Mu? So chicken is better than Mu. So I went to work. Chicken.

Do I want chicken? I... I want chicken. I want chicken. Do I want chicken? I thought to myself, in true Buddhist form, when there is desire, there is want.

When there is no desire, there is no want. If I want, there is I and there is chicken. When there is no desire, there is no I, there is no chicken.

So after about sitting with that koan for like 20 minutes, I'm thinking to myself, I got it. I'm the first Zen student to ever figure out his first koan in 15 minutes. So Miyota finishes.

She finishes sitting. She gets up. She walks out onto our porch.

And about 20 minutes later, I joined her quietly, triumphantly, self-congratulating myself all the way to the porch. And she looked at me and she smiled. And so I smiled back.

And my face had this face which was like, I know. I got it. She looked at me and she said, How was your sit? How was your meditation? I said, Great.

Nothing. Complete silence. And then I told her, I figured it out.

So she was coy. What did you figure out? I'm thinking to myself, Come on. I got it.

There is no chicken and there is no I. Nothing. Nada. Zilch.

No self. I just spilled it to her. I just told her the whole thing.

She looked at me with the most honest, sincere face of absolute perplexity and said, David, what in heaven's name are you talking about? I was shocked. I said, You gave me a koan. My first koan.

You asked me, Do you want chicken? She burst into laughter. She was side-splitting for like 10 minutes. She could not stop laughing.

And she looked at me and she said, David, I asked you if you wanted to check in. She calls me chicken to this day. Chicken.

I wanted to teach you about a koan because there is a koan that happened in this morning's Kriyat HaTorah that when I read it for the first time, it blew my mind. I thought, Wow. There you go.

There is a koan. So first a little background. We focused this morning on Sarah.

It's all about Sarah and that's why it's connected with the shofar. The shofar is coming to remind us, remind God, just as God remembered Sarah. It's a very Sarah-centric reading this morning.

You'll agree. She's delivered after years of pain and suffering. The rabbis want us to believe and to identify with Sarah the matriarch.

If you read a little bit more carefully, you'll see something. Yishmael is alluded to in the reading this morning. Yishmael, the son of Abraham and Hagar is alluded to repeatedly in the reading of chapter 21, but he's never mentioned as Yishmael.

It's that nameless one. Yishmael is the boy, the na'ar. He's the yeled.

He's Ben Hagar, the son of Hagar. He is in relation but without nomination. He has no name.

He's the nameless one. And then as the story reaches a crescendo, you read in the text, and our sympathy for him is profound. It's reaching its height.

We're told that Hagar distances him from her, kim tachaveh keshet, from the distance of a bow, of an arrow. She was far away. An arrow is not five feet away.

He's by himself under a bush. And the text tells us, everybody, the text tells us, who cries in the text? Who cries in the text? Hagar cries. She raises her voice and she begins to cry.

And you're thinking, if you're reading the text, Vayishma Elohim, and God heard. That's the beginning of the sentence, Vayishma Elohim, and God heard. What does God hear? The immediate words that preceded that are, and she lifted her voice.

She is the subject. So who should be the one, help me with this, who should be the one that God hears? Hagar. And the verse tells us, Vayishma Elohim et kol hanar.

And that God heard the voice of the boy. So in a simple reading, we could say that the boy was crying, but the text didn't bother to tell us that. It just told us that Hagar was crying, right? Came along someone named the Mendelevorker, the Vorker Rebbe, who was known as the Silent Rebbe.

And says a profound thing. He says that, Yeish tza'aka balikol. Sometimes he says there's crying that doesn't have a voice.

Yeish tza'aka balikol. There's a cry that God hears. And Yishmael was crying so deeply that only God could hear him.

Vayishma Elohim et kol hanar. And God heard the voice of the nar, even though it isn't articulated in the text to teach us, to teach you, to teach me, everyone here, that it isn't always the crying that we see outside. It isn't always a crying that is visible.

It isn't always crying that catches our attention or that we feel sympathetic towards. But it is the inner crying that we miss. That's the teaching of this morning's reading, says the Vorker.

That there are people who are crying and we can't hear them. But God hears. It's a beautiful idea.

And if we were just to leave it there, I'd say, great. We have a beautiful teaching about the unheard cries. But I want to problematize that for a moment here.

I want to problematize the valoration of the silence of a cry that isn't articulated. Because if we know anything about Rosh Hashanah, Rosh Hashanah is a day when we scream. We cry out.

So I want to talk about a world. I want to talk about a society and a culture and a community and a family and a friendship where vulnerability is so dangerous that people have to cry alone. That they have to cry at night.

That they can't lift up their voices from the depths of where they are and cry. I can't believe that I go to shuls and I go to a lot of shuls and there aren't tissues everywhere. How can it be that the core element of a healing space won't have a place where people can come and cry? How is it that vulnerability, which is the core of what Rosh Hashanah is about, and I'm sorry, I'm sorry to disappoint you if you came today hoping that I was going to talk about Israel or to talk about politics.

There are plenty of shuls around New York and in the rest of the world where there will be those discourses. But I want to talk to you about a much more insidious issue. I want to talk about how it is that we have transformed the core piece of what it is to be a human being, which is to carry a wound.

We are downwardly mobile, everybody. From the moment that we are born, and that is what Rosh Hashanah is about, it's about birth. Hayom harat olam.

Hayom yamid ba'mishbat. From the moment that we are born, we are moving inexorably towards Yom Kippur. And vulnerability is perceived as cowardly.

Vulnerability is shamed. Vulnerability is for the weak. Vulnerability isn't what I do.

Vulnerability in you is beautiful, but not in me. Vulnerability that I witness is inspiring, but not in my own. Who am I? I'm impenetrable.

Me, I have it together. There's a woman named Brene Brown. Some of you might know her.

She's amazing. She's a social worker in Houston. She's a researcher.

She collects data. And she was invited to give a TED Talk. People have heard of what TED Talks are? About 18 minutes, 12 minutes, anything under 18 minutes, right? 18-minute talks.

So she was invited to give a talk about her research. She did research on what? She reaches shame and vulnerability. Those are her two areas of expertise.

Anecdotal, but very deep, phenomenological. And she goes to give a TED Talk, and she's thinking, like, you know, maybe 500 people are in the room, like, here tonight, today. 11 million people have watched the TED Talk.

Go online after Yontif. 11 million people have watched Brene Brown. They've catapulted her into success, into stardom, to fame.

She speaks to Fortune 500 companies. Fortune 500 companies need to hear about vulnerability. She writes, Vulnerability isn't good or bad.

It's not what we call a dark emotion. Vulnerability is the core of all emotions and feelings. To feel is to be vulnerable.

To believe that vulnerability is a weakness is to believe that feeling is weakness. To foreclose our emotional life out of a fear that the cost would be too high is to walk away from the very thing that gives purpose and meaning to living. Our rejection of vulnerability often stems from our associating it with dark emotions or with children.

Children are vulnerable. Adults, not. I remember as a kid, I was a very sensitive kid.

And I felt completely misunderstood because I was also a good jock. And so in order to be a really good jock, I had to be really competitive. And I remember how deeply, when I began, when I was 14 years old, to become a bodybuilder.

I wanted to lift weights. And I remember that as I armored myself, I began to feel a little bit less sensitive. I built myself up in order that I wouldn't feel the world so deeply, that I wouldn't feel so misunderstood and so sad.

I pushed away my sense of being vulnerable so that I could feel more in control. So I could appear to be strong. What keeps me up at night, I have to admit, I don't sit up late at night thinking about all of the things that have gone right.

I wish I did. What keeps me up late at night is I think about the things that no matter how strong I become, I can't protect. The places in life that life will never allow us to completely, completely armor.

Sometimes my wife calls me a helicopter parent. But more than anything, I want to feel. I want to feel my heart.

I want to feel the heart of the people who wrote those letters to me on Saturday night and said, Rabbi, this Rosh Hashanah and this Yom Kippur, I'm praying for healing for my sister. This Rosh Hashanah and this Yom Kippur, I'm praying for healing for my mother. This Rosh Hashanah and this Yom Kippur, I'm praying for the children in Syria, for the poverty here in New York, where one mile from Park Avenue up to Park Avenue into the Bronx, the disparity is so large that we as a society have no idea what it is that we have to do to eradicate hunger and poverty.

And that the only confluence between Republicans and Democrats it seems these days is in order to agree on whether or not we should bomb Syria. We can't get together to feed our own people. Hayom haras olam, we are vulnerable, each and every one of us.

And along comes the shofar, which we're going to blow any moment. And the shofar says, call out from your silence, call out from your apathy, call out the silence that you speak only to yourself because you don't think anybody wants to hear it. Call it out, scream it out, tkia, tkia, tkia.

Call it out, let it loose. Speak that silence. Give it voice.

And let there be a world that can hear the voice of tkia, of strength, followed by shvarim, brokenness, shruaa, papapapapapa, tearing, tearing, tearing. We are born into perfection and we are inexorably pulled into brokenness. And that is our human condition and to run from it, to run from the vulnerability of the wound that we naturally carry is to be inhuman, not superhuman.

So we call out from this crooked horn, this crooked horn, this not straight horn, this crooked horn, which is the song of the crooked life, the song of the wound, the song of shruaa, of tearing. Asher ha'am yod eichua. Wealthy, wealthy, wealthy is the nation ha'am yod eichua that knows the pain of brokenness and can articulate it.

So as we rise for shofar and then the deepest prayer of our tradition, the Nesanetokef, I leave you with these words from my favorite poem. More than consciousness itself, what makes the human spirit truly heroic is the irrepressible instinct to face all of life's ties with an open heart. The heroic fact that we can be worn by these mighty, overwhelming currents and still pucker open and find a way to sing.

We can still pucker open and find a way to sing. This is the majesty of being human. Please rise for qiyat shofar.