

Finding God In the Struggles of Our Lives

One of my favorite scenes in Fiddler on the Roof is when the Rabbi says that there is a blessing for everything. The crowd asks, "even for the Tzar?" The Rabbi replies "Yes even for the Tzar". "What is blessing for the Tzar," asks someone in the crowd? You all know the Rabbi's reply: "May God bless and keep the Tzar far away from us." Today we are assembled as a large crowd. There is actually a blessing for seeing a large assemblage. What is it? Baruch Chacham Harazim "Blessed is God, the wise knower of secrets." The purpose of this blessing is to remind us that each person has his or her own struggles and difficulties, often known only to God. We all have struggles and difficulties; myself included. As your Rabbi, I am privileged to share in your struggles and to try to help you find God's comfort, guidance and peace in the midst of them. As we come together as a congregation, some of us wrestle with the limitations of aging or illness. Some of us come in grief, struggling with the sorrow of mourning the loss of a loved one. Others here today are wrestling with anxiety over financial or work related matters. Still others struggle with disappointment or worry over children and conflict with family members. Some here today wrestle with anger and frustration in marriage, or guilt about not doing enough for aging parents. And some of us struggle with frayed friendships, with feelings of being let down or hurt by friends.

So each of us faces God, the Chacham Harazim, the knower of secrets, on this Day of Judgement. We come to make an accounting of all we have done and all we haven't done. In the words of the u'netana tokef prayer, "We each pass before You (God) one by one like a flock of sheep." But we also long to feel God's presence in our struggles, God's comfort in our pain and loss, God's support and guidance in our challenges and conflicts. But how do we

find this connection to God that touches our souls and gives us resilience?

Today we read two stories of people who are alone and in pain: Channah and Hagar. In the Haftorah, we read of Channah, despairing of her infertility. She pours out her sorrow to God in prayer. Her lips move silently and Eli the Priest thinks she is perhaps drunk. But Eli moves closer to her and really listens. He discovers her prayer is pure and that she is an intensely spiritual woman. He then blesses Channah that her prayers for a child will be fulfilled. They are fulfilled and she bears a son who grows up to be the Prophet Samuel. The Haftorah tells us that the love and support of others, like that of Eli for Channah, can bring us through our pain and struggles. The listening presence, the understanding, and the support of others can be the conduit of God's energies of healing, strength, support and guidance. Sometimes we tough it out alone. We don't want to be a bother to others. We are too proud for others to help us in our struggles. But when we turn to others, there flows the love God designed to be integral to our souls.

This is the experience many have had right here at Temple Beth El. Not long ago, I received a note from a family where a man who was a beloved father, grandfather, and husband had died. The family was so touched by the beautiful meal of consolation provided by the caring committee. They said the comfort they received was like a miracle at that moment. God's comforting presence was there for them in the support of the caring committee. A widow in the congregation wrote recently about her friends here in the Temple. In a time when she missed the presence of her husband to converse with, her friends engaged her in conversation, providing some of the experience of conversation with someone who really cares for you. God's presence was in the soothing dialogue with friends. This last year some one was having trouble with her child. The loving support of the Temple Community helped her through the crises. Even the child's peers reached out to help to support the child until she made a turn in a better direction. God's presence found in the care, the support and guidance of friends, family, and

community was there.

The sense of God's caring presence in the deep caring by others is beautifully described in our prayer book, in the Ahavah Rabbah prayer about God's unending love, by Rabbi Rami Shapiro. "We are loved by an unending love. We are embraced by arms that find us even when we are hidden from ourselves. We are touched by fingers that soothe us, even when we are too proud for soothing. We are counseled by voices that guide us even when we are too embittered to hear. We are loved by an unending love. We are supported by hands that uplift us; even in the midst of a fall. We are urged on by eyes that meet us; even when we are too weak for meeting. We are loved by an unending love. Embraced, touched, soothed, and counseled...ours are the arms, the fingers, the voices; ours are the hands, the eyes, the smiles; We are loved by an unending love." When we resist assistance, we are resisting God's intricate creation of the flow of Divine energy from one soul to another. God has made us messengers of caring. As Channah found comfort and hope in Eli's listening to her and blessing her, so we can find a flow of God's comfort, fortitude and hope when we open ourselves up to the deep caring of others in the midst of our struggles. We can experience God's unending love.

Sometimes it is not in turning to others, but making a turn in the way we orient ourselves that helps us to access God's energies of strength, guidance, and peace in our struggles. Here we turn to the lessons of today's Torah reading. Hagar is in pain. She is alone in the desert with her child Ishmael. She has been cast out by Abraham and Sarah. Hagar has nothing left but the clothes on her back. Her water pouch of a canteen has run out and she cannot bear to see her son die of thirst. Hagar places him under a scrub and moves a distance away. She cries out to God and she hears a response. "Lamah Iach Hagar, Ia tiri. What's wrong Hagar, don't be afraid. Because I have heard the voice of your son where he is. Arise, lift up your son, and

find your strength in holding him; for I will make him a great nation." And then she sees a well of water that was actually there all along.

In the story of Ishmael and Hagar, there are three ways that they turn towards life and with that turn access Divine energies of courage, guidance and hope. (Based on a teaching by Rabbi Ilana Grinblat) The first is that Hagar is told that God hears Ishmael's voice from where he is. He starts with his being cast out as a given. His prayer is simple. Please God help me find some water in my life threatening thirst. The first thing that we learn about the voice of Ishmael that reached God was that he didn't waste time on complaining. He didn't complain about being cast out, about his brother being favored. So too, in our struggles, we have to turn from complaining and try to find what can be salvaged in a given situation.

I am thinking of a story of a dog that is well trained by his master. The man wanted to show off his dog to his guests. He says the dog is going to bring in the paper from the front lawn. The man gives the dog the command. Instead of going for the paper, the dog opens his mouth and says, "I'm hungry and I have a bad case of fleas." Immediately the master apologizes. Slightly embarrassed he says, "My dog is hard of hearing. Seems like he thought I said, "kevetch."

Kevetching is a long standing tradition in the Jewish community and my Grandmother Rose was known to be quite the master. But there is a midrash Rabbi Larry Kushner tells, to illustrate the negative consequences of complaining. According to the midrash, Reuben and Shimon were going across at the Miracle of the Parting of the Red Sea. Reuben says, "What is this muck?" Shimon adds, "There is muck everywhere." Reuben says, "This is just like the mud pits back in Egypt. The mud here and there is the same." Reuben and Shimon miss the great miracle because they are just looking at the mud.

This is a meaningful midrash because it is a portrait of ourselves as

well. In our lives we have so much that is miraculous and all we focus on is the mud. I don't want to down play the reality that there is mud in everything we do. Sometime we can be really slogging through. The rule is the bigger the miracle, usually the more mud. The raising of children involves a lot of mud. Work involves a lot of mud. In our everyday lives, we weigh ourselves down by complaining. We miss the miracles in the everyday. I know we could complain that it is so cumbersome to have the deal with so many people on the High Holidays, parking far away, getting a seat. It's mud. Yet we can see beyond the mud when we enjoy the energy of such a large group of Jews making up a strong community, all worshiping together. I challenge each of you to spend the next Ten Days without uttering a complaint. Try instead to see, if not miraculous, at least something good instead at the time. Even better try to see how you can make the situation better. Like Hagar, who discovered a well of water she had not noticed, you may find when you stop complaining, and focus on the positive, some blessings that you had totally overlooked suddenly appear.

The second thing we read about the story of Hagar and Ishmael is that Ishmael received a blessing that he would be a great nation. True, he would not get the birthright of Isaac. But he would be blessed and do well as a great nation. All his happiness depended on was not making comparisons with his brother Isaac. Like shifting away from complaining, avoiding comparisons with others is very hard to do. In fact our consumer society is founded on trying to get us to pay attention to and keep up with others.

Our material standard of living is so much higher than most of the rest of the world. But the economy of the United States grows on the continuous consumerism of comparing ourselves with those who have more we have. As a society we tend to compare ourselves with others we think we see doing better than us: Better houses, or better jobs, or better incomes, or better family life, or better marriages and significant other relationships. This happens particularly around the areas of our lives where we have

struggles or disappointments. We think, "Why can't my life be like theirs?" This blocks God's energies of healing, or support that would allow us to find peace of mind. But we can open the channels of God's comfort by disputing these thoughts. We can affirm that each of us is made in the Divine image, our own life of equal worth to that of another no matter what our socio-economic circumstances or accomplishments. Also, we must remember we never see the whole picture. We compare our inner struggles with the outer appearance of others. No one's life is ever as good as it looks from the outside. I once had a woman seek out my counsel due to unhappiness in her marriage. She mentioned to me a family whom she envied because they seemed to cut a figure in the community as such a together family with the parents having a wonderful marriage. While confidentiality kept me from saying anything, I knew the family was having trouble with their children and were going to be getting a divorce. I could only think to myself, all families have their own struggles in life. When we compare ourselves with others, we don't know their heartaches. Ishmael was felt blessed by God because he didn't compare himself with Isaac. He was happy that he would be a great nation.

Let's think about the crossing of the seas again. To the person looking upon the miracle of crossing the red sea from a distance, all they saw was the Israelites passing through. They weren't at the level of the Israelites trudging through the mud. They didn't see how much mud there was. When it comes to envying others, we don't know what price they've paid, what work they've done, or hardships they've faced. The Tenth Commandment is a helpful one. It says do not covet. But we need strategies to help us with that. My second suggestion to finding God's comfort, strength and peace, is to let go of comparisons with others. Think that we never know the whole story of the lives of others. Knowing that everyone faces failures and disappointments and struggles, can help us turn away from jealousy in our times of failure, disappointment and struggle.

The third thing that we learn from Ishmael and Hagar is to let go of the past. Hagar is told by G-d, arise embrace the boy and strengthen yourself. Sure it's not going to be the family they once had in Abraham's tents. But they can have a different family, the two of them, and it will grow to a multitude. There's disappointment over what was lost, but a new situation will bring them a different happiness. It was a different dream, but one worth pursuing and one that would be fulfilling. I once had a Temple member come to see me when he unexpectedly lost his job. We talked about his sadness and anger but also tried to focus on what he could do instead. He could have gotten defeated in this setback, thinking about the job he no longer had. But we brainstormed and he came up with a different profession. He pursued that new profession and today is very successful. In part his success was due to his ability to let go of the past and embrace life and its different possibilities.

In ten days it will be Kol Nidre. The Torah calls upon us to fulfill our vows. Yet Kol Nidre comes with a special spiritual message. As the circumstances of our lives change, we must change our goals, our vows. We must have new plans and commitments for the future, based on new realities. Only if we let go of the past and embrace the new circumstances of our lives can we experience God's comfort, God's strength, and God's peace of mind. The third thing we must do in the next ten days is to let go of the past. Whatever you are holding onto let it go. The slight or hurt that you experience; let it go. The disappointment that still weighs you down; let it go. The failure or missed opportunity that haunts you; let it go.

Blessed is G-d who is wise in knowing secrets. All of us come with our own secrets, our own struggles and problems. We hope to find in G-d, resources for strength, healing guidance and peace. The story of Hannah reminds us that we can find them in the love and caring of family, and friends, rabbis and members of our Temple community. Let us be the conduits of God's love and caring, and let us turn to each other for help and support without embarrassment, whatever our struggles in the coming year, knowing that

we all face them.

The story of Hagar and Ishmael in today's Torah portion reminds us that we must turn not only to each other, but in our orientation to life when struggles are upon us. We must do three important things. The first: turn from complaining to looking for blessings and opportunity. Let's try to refrain from complaining for just ten days, during this holy time, until Yom Kippur. Let's try, when we are tempted to complain, to look for something good instead and what we can do in a situation to make it better. The second: avoid invidious comparisons of ourselves and others. Remember, like the stories of the Bible that are filled with struggle and conflict, that everyone has their own heartbreaks and difficulties, their own mud and mishagas. Each life has its own enjoyments and successes. And third: let go of the past, formulating new dreams and new goals for our lives, when loss, disappointment or difficulty lays us low. So let go of something that has you tethered to the past, driving through life looking in the rear view mirror. Between now and Yom Kippur, set some new goals based upon your life as it is now. Find some new pleasures and new aspects of relationships that will make life fulfilling in the year to come. The Torah and Haftorah speak to us of how we can find God's energies of strength, healing, and peace in this New Year. May you find them and find that it is a good New Year.