Dvar Torah

A Wakeful Heart: Thoughts on Rosh Hashanah

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WHY ARE THERE ALWAYS TWO SONS FOR EVERY BLESSING, TWO WIVES FOR EVERY HUSBAND, TWO MOTHERS FOR EVERY CHILD? SURPRISINGLY, AS WE TRY TO INVOKE THE HIGH HOLIDAY sentiment of forgiveness and compassion, the Rosh Hashanah readings seemingly affirm this harsh state of affairs. In the first day's Torah portion (GEN. 21), Sarah and Hagar vie for primacy in Abraham's household, while Isaac and Ishmael cannot both inherit their father's legacy. In the Haftorah (1 SAMUEL 1-2:20), one woman's fertility seems to come at the cost of the other's barrenness. Peninah, like Hagar, taunts her childless rival; when Hannah at last conceives, her paean of thanks to the Lord imagines herself as the mother of multitudes and Peninah as bereft.

That life may be a zero sum game inspires envy rather than empathy. If the world's bounty is scarce, should not as much of it as possible go to me, rather than to someone else? The readings intimate that it is in the nature of the world that one person's happiness is predicated on another's distress. Whether husbands, children, or love, there is simply not enough to go around. And so in the midst of holiday prayer emerges the disquieting suggestion that even our repentance, our desire for forgiveness—our inscription in the book of good life—may be a petition to a list with limited enrollment, a competition rather than a soul's accounting.

The High Holiday cycle opens on this sense of the scarcity of life's bounty. Undershadowing the Rosh Hashanah Torah and Haftorah readings is the predominant theme of the birth of a long-awaited, desperately desired child. Both Sarah and Hannah give birth to a son after the mother has given up hope. Correspondingly, the fathers, Abraham and Elkanah, who already have another child or children from other mothers, finally beget a son from their most loved wife.

Both Sarah and Hannah have banked everything on the child whose birth for so long eludes them. Sarah grows old and jealous of the more fertile woman she herself had given to her husband. Hannah weeps bitterly each year at the Holy Temple, despite the fact that her husband Elkanah loves her deeply, "better," he tells her, "than ten sons." For both of these women, the desire for a child eclipses everything else in their lives. In the first day's Torah and Haftorah readings, this intense, all-consuming life-desire is finally fulfilled—with Isaac in one case, Samuel in the other. Both births reflect extraordinary circumstances, clearly involving the intervention of the Supreme Being. On the beginning of the *Yamim Nora'im*, the High Holidays, then, comes this intimation that God may fulfill *mishalot libeinu le-tovah*—may fulfill the desires of our heart, for good (good things, goodness).

But there is also a countertheme to both of these readings. While the miraculous births represent the happy culmination of their parents' desire, each birth represents only one event in the ongoing narrative of the Tanakh. The Torah offers stories which are not static but dynamic, always in flux, always in change—much like our lives. Already in the Rosh Hashanah readings we see that the great joy of the much-desired child immediately becomes complicated by life circumstances. Sarah worries about the shady influence of her son's half-brother Ishmael and sends him away, a prelude to the more radical sending away of Isaac, read on the second day of Rosh Hashanah (GEN. 22). Hannah rejoices over the birth of Samuel, but he is already promised to serve the high priest at the Temple, already lost to his mother. And what of the other mothers in the readings—Hagar and Peninah? From her moment of triumph, conceiving and bearing a child for the childless Abraham, Hagar plummets to the role of outcast, wandering the wilderness with her small son in search of water. And Hannah's prayer of thanksgiving tells of the descent of her rival, the many-childed mother now bereft. Nothing, the readings seem to warn us, lasts forever—not even that which is most important.

WHAT DO WE MAKE OF THE READINGS FOR THE FIRST DAY OF ROSH HASHANAH? —the belated, joyous fulfillment of an aching and overwhelming desire, and at the same time, the sense of impermanence that pervades everything, including—perhaps especially—that which we most desire.

I am reminded of the assertion of the Jerusalem Torah scholar and teacher, Avivah Zornberg, that Abraham saw himself as childless even after the birth of Isaac and Ishmael.* That is, Abraham existed all his life in a condition of childlessness. Perhaps this feeling reflected his sense that all emanates from God, perhaps it enabled him to heed God's command to sacrifice his child, perhaps it resulted from having received that command. Perhaps it resulted from relinquishing not one but two sons. Or perhaps it came from having been so long childless that the condition of childlessness became so deeply embedded in his personality that he could not see himself in any other way—like a wealthy man whose recent financial success cannot erase the many years of poverty. If so, we might pity Abraham his inability to seize this new joy.

But Zornberg takes this idea of Abraham's childlessness in a different direction. She notes the linguistic relation between the Hebrew word for "childless" (*ariri*) and the word for "awake" (*er*), and links the condition of childlessness to the condition of wakefulness.

What might this mean? In the Rosh Hashanah readings, for each of the characters, the meaning of life is bound up with the birth of a child. For Abraham and Sarah, the covenant with God and the promise for the future all hinge on their having a son. And without that son, nothing in their lives can make them feel fulfilled—not even experiencing a mystical encounter with God. For Hannah, the rare and intense love in her marriage does not prevent her from feeling hollow in her childlessness.

On a deep level, it seems to me, these readings are about the question of meaning—the intense search for that which will make one's life meaningful.

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*I am grateful to Linda Zisquist for bringing this to my attention. See Zisquist's "Letter from Jerusalem," *Harvard Review*, 1994, p. 160.

Each character searches for that one thing, so significant that it will finally enable him or her to say with certainty, "My life has meaning." In our readings, the longing for a child—deep and intense in its own right—also represents this longing for life's meaning.

And, as God grants each character something very important, each finds that such a sense of meaning is more elusive than anticipated. It's not that they want the wrong things, it's just that no one thing can do it. Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden did not worry about meaning; they were to live forever, and were at one with being. But we, plunged into time and history and mortality, we thirst and quest for the meaningfulness which always seems just beyond reach. Nothing remains in place, all is in flux, whatever we have or do is impermanent. Finally we are reminded of our mortality, which always thwarts us in our desire for the certainty of meaning.

Abraham, as I imagine him, did not think of himself as *literally* childless—that is, he did not forget the birth of Isaac to Sarah or Ishmael to Hagar. But he felt unsure of the ultimate meaningfulness of his life. He felt *ariri*—childless, solitary, alone—the way each of us, regardless of the satisfactions and successes in our lives, is ultimately alone with ourselves and with God. And this feeling, *ariri*, kept him e*r*, awake, alert. Because Abraham realized that no one plum can make your life meaningful, once and for all—not a child, not a book, not a great love, not financial success, not even the Nobel prize. The feeling of living a meaningful life, a life worthy of the gift of existence we have been granted, is earned anew each day. Earned in consultation with our deepest self, earned in our relationship to others—those close to us, and those not close to us.

In this light, childlessness comes to represent not deprivation, but the very condition of our being. With this realization comes the redemptive possibility that life need not be played as a zero sum game, that the touch of anguish in each person's life breed not competition but compassion. Instead of bitterness, which numbs us to life's blessings, may come a connectedness with the sweet joys and jagged sorrows of others; instead of envy, something we might call love. In the final tally, we all taste of life's bounty and, at the same time, it eludes us, each and every one.

IN THE SONG OF SONGS (5.2) WE READ, *ANI YESHEINA VE-LIBI ER*—I AM ASLEEP, but my heart is awake. The speaker, a woman yearning for her beloved, sleeps, but her heart remains alert for his presence. Reading this verse in the context of the Torah and Haftorah portions for the first day of Rosh Hashanah, I would suggest this: We are entitled to the sleep, to the inner peace by which we may enjoy whatever we have been blessed with. But a part of us, something of our heart, must continue to feel *er*—awake, alert, solitary, yearning. If not, sleep becomes complacency; we stop searching for meaning, and may miss something important in ourselves, in others. *Ani yesheina ve-libi er; kol dodi dofeik; pit'hi li*—I am asleep, but my heart is awake; the voice of my beloved knocks; open to me.

On Yom Kippur, the closing thought of the final prayer, *Ne'ilah*, invokes a heavenly gate ever-open even at the moment of closing. This image reminds us of the infinitude of God's lovingkindness. And we may think, there is enough for all, enough lovingkindness for all, if only we learn to nurture that quality in ourselves.

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