

### Yom Kippur Morning 2024: Sharing our Pain

Ten days ago, we read the *akeda*<sup>1</sup>, a harrowing and painful story where a man is asked to sacrifice his son to God. In synagogues which observe two days of Rosh Hashanah, the binding of Isaac is read on the second day. The first day is also devoted to a challenging and painful tale, the story of Sarah, Hagar, and Ishmael<sup>2</sup>. Both readings give us a window into a family who struggles through a series of difficult circumstances. On these Holy Days, we are asked to focus on our own lives, on our mortality and on our struggles.

Sarah, like many of us, longed for a child. She and Abraham had already been through so much in their lives. They had narrowly escaped Pharaoh's palace. They had traveled the length and breadth of the land, battling the local peoples. They had changed their names and their identities. But through it all, they remained childless. So Sarah came up with a plan. She told Abraham to go to Hagar, that perhaps Hagar would conceive. Abraham agreed. Hagar quickly became pregnant. But, something happened to Sarah. She became cruel to Hagar, who ran away.

Sarah's treatment towards Hagar used to outrage me. After all, it was her plan to bring in Hagar as a surrogate. Sarah is a strong woman, but when her plan appeared to succeed, something changed in her. I did not understand this change and why Sarah would suddenly act so maliciously. However, my own life experiences over the course of the past decade have forever changed my perception of Sarah, and the often-difficult journey to parenthood. Parts of the adoption journey that my family took were marked with heartache, loss, and pain.

Like Abraham and Sarah, my husband Shalom and I wanted children. A little more than a decade ago, we began to traverse the invasive, grueling, and unpredictable path of adoption. Our first adoption went smoothly. We were matched with a birthmother in late October 2016 after waiting one year. On December 7<sup>th</sup>, Eliza was born. A couple days later, her birthmother signed the paperwork and we took our precious daughter home. A few months later, on Passover as it turns out, we finalized the adoption.

We loved becoming parents, and we knew we wanted more children. A year after Eliza was born, we started the adoption process again. Several months later, we were matched. We flew down to Florida to meet the birthparents. We got to know them and videochatted throughout the rest of the pregnancy. We learned the birthmother was in labor, packed our bags and flew down with Eliza to meet our son, her little brother. He was born, but then in a Sarah-like twist, something changed. The birthparents did not want us to come to the hospital like we had planned. The next morning, when we were finally allowed to visit, Eliza was not allowed into the room. Shalom met the baby, whom the birthparents had already named. Later that afternoon, we got the shocking and upsetting call from the social worker that the birthparents had changed their minds and decided to keep the child.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 22

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 21

We were devastated, but we pushed forward and brought in a new agency based in Texas. Several months after our fall through, we learned that a birthmom who was going to be giving birth the very next day had chosen us to parent her child. We were elated and rushed to pack our bags and get on a flight. We arrived in Austin and bonded with the birthmother who was in labor. Several hours later, a baby boy was born. Shalom cut the umbilical cord, and we immediately started caring for the baby. For two days, we took care of him. But then, hours before we were to bring him home, the social worker came to see us. She was not her bubbly, excited self. Once again, we received the devastating news that the birthmother had changed her mind and decided to parent.

I share my pain with you this morning because each of us experiences pain in our lives. We all have pieces of us that shatter, and break. And, we don't talk enough about it. We want to hear good things. We want to know when a child is accepted into her first-choice college, when a surgery is successful, when a friend gets his dream job. We want to feel happy, and we don't see loss and suffering and sadness as part of that equation. Technology and social media have exacerbated the problem. We put up incomplete versions of ourselves online, posting and sharing and tweeting the good things that happen to us. There is nothing wrong with sharing good news. However, if we want to really build relationships and connections which are deep, purposeful, meaningful, and perhaps even holy, we need to find a way to hold joy and sadness together. We need to be able to find a way to share our pain.

We are not accustomed to sharing pain. The greeting, "How are you," has become little more than a sort of throwaway invitation for small talk. The expected answer to this question is, "I'm fine." Now there's nothing wrong with making pleasantries. But when we do not share what is going on in our lives, we risk shutting down and alienating ourselves from others. When we do not share our pain, it often goes unresolved and can cause even more *tzures*.

Let's return to our ancestors. When Hagar became pregnant, something changed in Sarah. She felt jealous, or frightened, or sad, or angry. Clearly, Sarah was in pain. But rather than express those feelings and try to share them or struggle through them, Sarah flipped the situation and claimed it was Hagar who was being cruel to her. The Torah states that Hagar became an object of scorn for Sarah. However, in the very next verse, Sarah speaks and one letter changes- the *taf* of *taykal*, and SHE, Hagar became an object of scorn, turns into the *aleph* of *aykal*, *I* became an object of scorn. Sarah says, *I* became an object of scorn.<sup>3</sup> Sarah's pain and her inability to share it caused her to retreat into her own world, lashing out at Hagar so that Hagar flees into the dangerous, untamed wilderness.

My interpretation of that scene is that Sarah was experiencing shame. Shame that she could not become pregnant, and shame that her handmaiden, someone in a lower class than she, was the one to produce an heir who continued Abraham's line. Shame covers pain in ways that are unhealthy and unproductive. Shame can lead to anxiety, or even rage. Shame makes it incredibly difficult if not impossible to process other emotions. Shame can cause us to act out towards the people we love.

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 16:4-5

After our adoptions fell through, I felt shame. I felt betrayed by the birthparents. I felt humiliated that I had taken time off from work and spent a good deal of money which was now gone. I felt frustrated that we had waited for so long and bonded with these people and they had changed their minds. I felt alone, like nobody else knew what I was going through and that this had never happened to anyone else. The shame prevented me from speaking clearly about these feelings and, like Sarah, warped my perception of the situation. I was unable to see outside of myself, to have empathy or compassion for the birthparents for what must have been incredibly difficult, gut-wrenching decisions. After returning home late at night from the second fall through in Texas, I went into the bathroom. I closed the door, took a few deep breaths, and suddenly, I was able to get past my shame and let out my pain. I cried. I cried big heavy sobs, as the realization of our losses and how deeply sad I was came over me. My wonderful Shalom gave me a great big hug, and he cried too. We were both so upset to go through this again, but we knew that we had each other. Even though neither of us was feeling particularly good, it helped to share our pain with the other

The High Holy Days is a time when we are supposed to open our souls, to look deep within, and to let out our pain. During these Days of Awe, we are provided with an appropriate mechanism to remind us about the painful things in our lives. On Rosh Hashanah, and at the very end of this day, we will hear the shofar. The ram's horn harkens back to the story in the Torah that we read ten days ago. After Abraham, at the very last second with a knife raised above Isaac's body, is told by an angel not to harm his son, he finds a ram caught in a nearby thicket and offers up the ram to God instead. The shofar and its piercing cries call us to be fully attuned to all that is around us, to remember that it was nearly Abraham's beloved son who was killed that day on the mountain. The shofar reminds us of the pain Abraham was surely experiencing as he prepared to kill his son.

In the Mishnah Torah, Maimonides explains the different sounds of the shofar and what each one may represent. On teruah, the sound composed of nine short blasts, Maimonides writes this: "It may be the wail that women wail amongst themselves while crying. It may be the sigh that one does, one after the other, whilst they are worried about a great stress. It may also be both together, the sigh followed by the cry, as it usually comes afterwards. This may be called teruah, as this is the way of a worrier, to first sigh, and then cry."<sup>4</sup> Putting aside the gender bias of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, according to Maimonides, the shofar's calls, specifically, the sound of teruah, is a cry of pain. The shrill blasts are meant to unsettle us, to make us uncomfortable, to remind us that cries of pain are upsetting. But we also learn something else about the shofar. We know that the mitzvah is not in the sounding, but in the hearing. Physical pain can sometimes be remedied with medicine, but spiritual and emotional pain usually does not require us to do anything other than offer a listening ear and perhaps a gentle touch.

The pain Shalom and I experienced was terrible, but I'm grateful to share that our story has a happy ending. A little over a month since the second fall-through, after leading a shabbat morning healing service in fact, I received a text on my phone. "Expectant mother in labor. Will give birth this afternoon." A few hours later, Simon was born and two days later, we took him

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<sup>4</sup> Mishna Torah, Shofar, Sukkah, and Lulav 3:2

home. Now he's five and thriving in Kindergarten and has recently started his Jewish education here at Temple Emanuel Religious School. A little over two years after Simon was born, we decided we wanted a third child. Thankfully, the process to adopt Stella was pretty straight forward and now we are a family of five. And in case you are curious, we are done!

Our children have been the greatest source of blessing in our lives. However, sometimes I still think about those two boys we thought would be ours. I wonder how they are doing- if they are healthy and happy. I wonder how their parents are doing- are they satisfied with their decisions? Are they happy? Are they struggling? Although I am in a much better place, I cannot say that I am completely "over" the two adoption fall throughs. Luckily, Judaism is not a faith that teaches that we should "get over" things. When a loved one dies, you may not ever get over it. Pain is complicated and unpredictable and has many iterations and phases. This afternoon we will gather for our Yizkor service to remember those who are no longer with us. At just about every worship service, we end with *kaddish yatom*, the mourner's kaddish. One traditional custom is that only those who are in mourning or observing yahrzeit rise and say the words. That is not to single them out, but rather so we can identify them and offer them some extra measure of comfort when the service ends. One explanation of breaking the glass at a wedding is to remember the destruction of the Temples. Our faith is filled with traditions, rituals, and prayers to help us remember and share our pain.

This morning, I have shared a little of my pain with you because I love this community, and I feel supported and blessed by it. In the days after our fall throughs, we were sustained by our friends and family who checked in, sent us messages of support, gave us hugs, and listened to our stories which allowed us to grieve. I have shared my pain because I am asking you to do the same. I know this is not an easy thing to do, but that is why community is so important. Temple Emanuel should be a safe space where you can share your pain with one another and with us, your clergy and staff. We want to hear your pain as upsetting and difficult as it may be. We cannot make your pain go away but we can hold you while you let it out.

At the end of this great and holy day, as the sun makes its way toward the horizon, we will hear *tekiah gedolah*, the great final blast of the shofar. *Tekiah gedolah* is a painful cry of hope. Its long blast encapsulates our humanness. It reminds us that each of us is a complicated and sacred being. We have all experienced successes and failures. Each of us has strengths and flaws. May the shofar's sound resonate with joy and with pain. We pray that 5785 be a good year for us, a year filled with sweetness, health and peace. And we also pray that when we struggle and when we are weary, that we may find the courage, the strength, and the resilience, like the shofar, to cry out, to listen to the pain of the other, and to share ours too.