

YK Sermon Sisera's Mother

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The old woman sat at her window, worried. Her son should have returned by now. She peered out through the lattices, and started wailing. "Why is he so late? He should already be back." The other women present try to comfort her, making up all kinds of excuses as to why her son is delayed. But in her heart, she knows the truth. He's not coming back. His lifeless body lies somewhere in a ditch, flies buzzing around his eyes, his own blood on his clothing. She knows that the words her companions speak aren't true. He's not coming back, and she begins to wail.

The preeminent symbol of the High Holidays is the shofar. There are many different explanations for why we blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. On the second day of Rosh Hashanah we read about the Binding of Isaac, and how a ram was sacrificed instead of Abraham's son. The shofar is a ram's horn, and by blowing the shofar we remind God of Abraham's merit, and hope that he will be merciful to us for Abraham's sake. The shofar is bent, symbolizing our contrition over our sins and failings. In ancient Israel, as throughout the ancient near east, the shofar was used as a battle cry, telling the troops what to do in the heat of the fighting. So Maimonides tells us that the shofar is the battle cry of our soul, rousing us from our spiritual slumber and calling us to fight against the evil inclinations which want us to remain complacent.

But there is another explanation for the shofar with which you may be less familiar. According to the Talmud in Tractate Rosh Hashanah 33b, the sounds of the shofar are supposed to remind us of the sounds the woman I mentioned a couple of minutes ago made as she looked out the window and realized her son wasn't coming home. There is no sound in the world that is more pitiful, more broken, than that. If the sound of the shofar is to arouse compassion, there is no sound more appropriate than this.

And who is this woman who sits at the window crying over her lost son? Is it Hannah, the heroic woman who lost seven children in the fight against Antiochus and the Seleucid Empire which gave us Chanukah? Perhaps it is Samson's mother, waiting for her heroic son to return from fighting the Philistines? But no, the woman who sits at the window and wails, whose pain we

reenact as we sound the shofar, is Sisera's mother. Unless you come to synagogue on the Shabbat when we read the Song at the Sea, and pay attention that morning to the Haftarah, you may well be asking yourself who Sisera was and what his mother has to do with anything.

Sisera was the Canaanite general who was seduced by the heroine Yael who drove a tent-peg through his forehead while he slept. The bloodthirsty enemy general Sisera, whose well-deserved death meant our ancestors enjoyed peace and quiet for 40 years. The passage which we read as the Haftarah on Shabbat Shirah reminds us that even brutal bloodthirsty generals have mothers, and that they suffer when their sons are killed. As the Orthodox Union's website says, in explaining that the shofar sounds are those of Sisera's mother, "Perhaps this is the point that the Sages are making: so great is the grief of any parent for the loss of a child, that we all are left completely bereft. The universality and commonality of suffering over the loss of a child transcends names and identities." Or as Rabbi Ed Feld of the Jewish Theological Seminary writes: "on Rosh Hashanah we are to feel not only the pride of victory but the pain that was caused to the mother of our enemy even when we fought in a righteous cause."

There are times in the Jewish calendar when we recall our own pain. Holocaust Remembrance Day, Tisha B'Av, numerous minor fasts that few of us observe such as the 17th of Tammuz and the Tenth of Tevet. But during the Days of Awe, the Talmud wants to remind us that if we are to get God's attention and motivate God to have mercy on us, we need to recall not only our pain but someone else's as well. Our suffering is not a "get out of jail free" card and we are not exempt from having empathy for others -- even the mother of the bloodthirsty enemy general.

If you were raised in a Jewish family, chances are that some of your earliest Jewish memories are of the Passover seder. When we come to the ten plagues we spill a drop of wine at the mention of each plague. Why? Because our recollection of the sufferings of the Egyptians tempers our joy at our own deliverance. And in so doing, we're reminded of the Midrash that God prevented the angels from rejoicing at the parting of the Red Sea, saying "my creatures (the Egyptian soldiers) are drowning in the sea, this is not a time to sing songs of praise." The idea that we should have empathy for others, even our enemies, is ingrained in us from an early age.

There's always the danger in preparing a sermon connected to current events that the situation will change drastically and render the sermon useless. And while I was trying to finish drafting this sermon on Monday afternoon, my phone was pinging with all kinds of notices that President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu had agreed on a 20 point peace plan for Gaza, that Saudi Arabia was going to join the Abraham Accords -- or maybe not --, that Hamas was upset because it hadn't been consulted. Then yesterday there were reports that Hamas was leaning towards accepting the plan. As I said on Rosh Hashanah quoting Yogi Berra, "making predictions is difficult, especially about the future." What I can tell you is that large majorities of Israelis, Right, Center, and Left, support the plan. At the same time, large majorities of Israelis, Right, Center, and Left, also think it is unlikely to succeed.

But I didn't plan to talk about policy anyway. I want to look at what the Gaza situation is doing to the Jewish soul and what it is doing to the American Jewish community.

I've long maintained that if you are being attacked from both the left and the right you are probably about where you need to be. Nevertheless it was an unnerving experience to be attacked as a genocide apologist when I told a college classmate and now-former Facebook friend that I found her suggestion that American Jews be targeted because of Netanyahu's policies antisemitic; and the same week to be called a kapo by other DC-area Jews when I pointed out *in a supportive comment on a Facebook post by the Jewish Community Relations Council*, that "Allah" is not a different deity but simply the Arabic word for "God", and that Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians also call God "Allah." In fact Maimonides in his *Guide for the Perplexed*, which he wrote in Arabic, not only calls God "Allah" but translates the word "halachah" as "sharia."

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl gave a sermon on Rosh Hashanah which she called "The Cries of Isaac and Ishmael." I am going to quote the opening of her sermon at some length, because what she says encapsulates my feelings and, I am pretty sure, those of many other rabbis right now:

*I want to tell you about my unconditional love for the Israeli people
and our beleaguered homeland,
still desperately struggling to bring its hostages home,
still trying to eliminate Hamas –*

*terrorists that not only refuse to lay down their arms
but intentionally trap their own people inside a combat zone.
But if I tell you these things,
all of which I believe,
some of you will just stop listening.
And decide that I'm no longer your Rabbi.*

*I also want to tell you how my heart breaks
over the civilian deaths, and tragic suffering in Gaza,
the shattering destruction of Palestinian homes and cities. I
want to denounce settler violence in the West Bank.
And the rhetoric from far right government ministers
who talk about annexation of the West Bank and expulsion of Gazans
instead of ending this war and bringing our hostages home. But
if I tell you these things,
all of which I also believe,
some of you will just stop listening.
And decide that I'm no longer your Rabbi.*

This Israel conversation is ripping our community apart.

The Jewish tradition teaches us that we have concentric circles of responsibility. Our first obligation is to our family, then to the needy of our city, then those of other places, until the circle widens to embrace the entire world. Last night I quoted Hillel's famous dictum: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I?"

If the Jewish people do not protect itself and its well-being, with rare exceptions no one else will either. If we don't take care of each other -- including the mutual responsibility between Israel and the Diaspora -- the Jewish people will not continue to exist. But if our concern is limited **only** to ourselves, we have no reason to exist.

When we pour water from a vessel into another vessel, there is less water in the original vessel. But when we light a candle from another candle, the first candle is not diminished. Empathy isn't like water from a jug, it's like a flame.

Rachel Goldberg-Polin, whose son Hersh lost his arm on Oct. 7 and then was murdered by Hamas after almost a year of captivity, recently said: "I can feel sorry for the innocent in Gaza, because my moral compass *still works*.

You don't need to choose."

On Rosh Hashanah we blow the shofar whose sounds remind us of the grief of a mother who, like Rachel Goldberg-Polin, has lost her son. On Yom Kippur during the *Al Chet* and *Ashamnu* prayers we strike our chests over our hearts, symbolically opening our hearts as if we were opening a hole in a wall. Again quoting Rabbi Buchdahl:

A "heart of many rooms," our tradition calls it.

A heart that is big enough to care for our own, and the other.

A heart that is strong enough to respond to the cries of both Isaac and Ishmael.

A heart with empathy enough for ALL God's children.