

## Questions to Guide Us on a Journey of Hope

Rosh Hashannah, 5773

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I admit candidly on this holy day, before you and before the Holy One, that I have felt blocked in approaching these days this year, emotionally and spiritually. It is soothing to be here, to have arrived, bringing all the scattered parts of self, as we all do, seeking wholeness and direction among other seekers, to be with each other. It has been my custom on the first morning of Rosh Hashannah to address social issues, rooting my remarks in themes of prayer and Torah. It is important to me to look at social issues through the lens of texts, that on these days my words remain a d'rasha, a seeking and teaching, not a political lecture. The textual sources are there, as they have been for millennia, and there are no lack of issues to address, but I have had a hard time opening to the page, whether of holy book or newspaper. As for many of you, in the personal realm, I have felt saddened and worried by illness among family and friends, by the struggles of so many whom I encounter. In relation to the global realm, I have felt a rare sense of despair. After so many years of social activism, obvious changes for good notwithstanding, I find myself discouraged. The world seems no closer to a time when war is obsolete, when leaders have the courage and the wisdom to transcend might as the way of conflict resolution. The planet is burning up with fever and some still put privilege and profit before the prophetic warnings that call for deep-seated change among all of us, individuals and nations. Justice still does not flow like a mighty stream, remaining a mere trickle for so many oppressed and abused human beings. As Jews, our calling as an *Am Kadosh* / עַם קְדוֹשׁ, a holy people, has been cruelly twisted by the violence and brutality of our own. In poignant counterbalance to all that makes my heart weep with worry, there were also tears of joy this spring, as I held my grandson, our first grandchild, at his b'ris, the warmth of our bodies intermingling, an affirmation of hope, a promise of continuity, as he was brought into the Covenant of our people.

As I wrote these words and speak them now, I cannot remain in a place of despair for long. I need to come up for air, to intersperse matzah and marmor with apples and honey. I think of the old folk song as sung by Pete Seeger, "it takes a worried man to sing a worried song, I'm worried now, but I won't be worried long." I share some of the process with you, the back and forth between despair and hope, all of it as yearning rooted in love for God and people and the world in which we live. I want to offer questions to guide us on a journey of hope that begins and ends with compassion.

Imagine a Yontev table, around which questions are being asked. It is not set for Rosh Hashannah. There is surely no round challah rising toward the heavens, the crown of the Holy One. There is wine, four cups to be raised during the evening. And, of course, there is matzah. It is the Seder table, at which we sat some six months ago. There is an intrinsic link between Pesach and Rosh Hashannah. Amid the flowering of new blossoms, one is the springtime festival of redemption and liberation, the sure-footed start of a journey to freedom, both collective and personal. Amid autumnal hues, brilliant and muted, the fruit of experience both ripened and bruised, the other is also a festival of renewal, both collective and personal, an opportunity to start again, to correct the course and find the way we have lost, or only thought we had.

As the weeping, broken *sh'vorim* notes of the shofar, there is a moment of brokenness at the start of the seder. It can pass quickly, as a mere stage direction, but it is more. In the moment of the seder called *Yachatz*, the middle of the three ceremonial matzot is held up and broken, wrapped up and put aside as the Afikoman. In S'fardic tradition, that becomes an opportunity for a dramatic telling of the Exodus story. Depending on the particular custom, either the seder leader or a child is given the wrapped broken matzah to carry on the shoulder or in a backpack. With all the added significance of the chosen one being a child, she or he steps away from the table to knock on the door. As the child enters, with some variation, as many as four questions are asked, each with a prescribed answer to start the discussion: "Who's there?" implies the essential question, *מי אתה* / "who are you?," to which the child answers, *בני ישראל* / the children of Israel. *מאין באת* / "from where did you come?," *ממצרים* / "from Egypt." *לאן אתה הולך* / "Where are you going?," *לירושלים* / "to Jerusalem." And if asked, the fourth question is: *מה לקחת* / "What did you take for the journey?," *מצה ומרור* / "(the broken) matzah and bitter herbs."

Asked on Pesach, these are essential questions to be asked on Rosh Hashannah, if we would help the world and our people find a way out of the ever deepening morass of violence and confusion that threatens all, sucking out the breath of body and spirit. We are not the only ones who have suffered from or are responsible for violence, hardly. But these are the *עשרת ימי תשובה* / the Ten Days of Turning, and we are Jews. *תשובה* / *T'shuva*, turning and returning to make amends, to reweave the frayed strands of connection, begins with honest introspection, *חשבון הנפש* / *cheshbon ha'nefesh*, an accounting of the soul, stock-taking. It requires courage and humility, and questions to guide, asking of ourselves, "who are we?"

Asked at the outset of the journey, at the start of the telling, that most basic existential question, "who are you?" When we hold up the mirror, there is so much that is uniquely beautiful about each one of us, identities refracted in infinite ways, each reflecting God's

image on the glass. In a Jewish context, how do you hear that question, "who are you...?" For all of our Jewish diversity, is there something at the core that unites us, beyond custom and calendar, language and observance, something that makes us who we are, who we strive to be, that tears us apart when it is violated? The answer given by the child at the seder is so simple, בני ישראל / *B'nei Yisra'el*, the children of Israel. A singular word ישראל / *Israel*, whether referring to the collective or to one Jew. It is the name given to Zayde Jacob when he wrestled with God and with people and persevered. That is our legacy and challenge. We walk away limping at times, as Ya'akov did, humbled, but walking surely forward toward wholeness, ויבוא יעקב שלם / *and Ya'akov (be)came whole*, the Torah says, that is, only after he wrestled. The most basic, the most achingly beautiful expression of what it is to be a Jew, to be of the seed of Abaraham and Sarah, is found in a medieval pietistic work whose author was so humble there is no trace of a name, only the name of the book, ספר החינוך / *Sefer Ha'chinuch*, the Book of Instruction. We are to be רחמנים בני רחמנים / *compassionate children of compassionate ancestors*. The humble author warns that deeds of cruelty testify against a person's standing as a Jew, שאינו מבני ישראל / *that one is not of the children of Israel*. Long before, the rabbis had already taught in the Talmud that one who is not compassionate toward all creatures is surely not of the seed of Abraham our father, בידוע שאינו מזרעו של אברהם אבינו (Tractate Betza, 32b). It certainly casts in a very different light the perennial question of who is a Jew.

The second question asked of the child of Israel follows naturally from the first. We cannot fully know who we are if we don't know from where we have come. We ask, and we are asked, מאין באת / "from where did you come?" The one word answer encapsulates our identity, ממצרים / "from Egypt." מצרים / *Mitzrayim* is much more than a place. From מצר / *narrow strait*, it is the lens formed of a tear drop that magnifies our experience of oppression, of being the victim, into transformative consciousness. It is the knowledge of having been a slave. We are reminded thirty-six times in the Torah, all in relation to our treatment of others, וזכרת כי עבד היית בארץ מצרים / *Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt*. With that statement, the victim is bidden to channel the memory of pain into becoming a moral actor. That is the triumph of our living the challenge to be רחמנים בני רחמנים / *compassionate children of compassionate ancestors*. How else shall we be if we would only abide the Torah's greatest teaching of transformation, of תשובה / *t'shuva* as turning toward wholeness?

And where are you going, לאן אתה הולך ? That is the question that leads into real life, into the world as it is, but also points to the world as it might be. It is the question that serves as a moral compass, that we not wander in the desert. As we need to know from where we have come, we cannot know who we are if we don't know where we are going and how we are going to get there. The vision needs a way, and there is no way without a vision. Where are we really going? Is it just to get to a place, or is it not higher than that? The answer, לירושלים / *to Jerusalem*, points to a place and it points

higher than that. The rabbis spoke of two Jerusalems, the earthly Jerusalem and the heavenly Jerusalem, the lower and the upper Jerusalem, **ירושלים של מטה וירושלים של מעלה**. On the one hand, it is not fair to confuse them. On the other hand, our goal has to be to make them one. As **מצרים**/Egypt is not simply a place on the map, but a place in Jewish consciousness, so too **עיר שלום**/the City of Peace/**ירושלים**. An expression of both the particular and the universal as we live the tension as Jews, Jerusalem is a test of our calling as **בני רחמנים** and an expression of our identity and destiny as part of the Jewish people. Wherever he went, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov said, "I am going only to the Land of Israel/**לכל מקום שאליו אני נוסע רק לארץ ישראל**".

And what did you take for the journey? Only **מצה ומרוור**, just a broken matzah and bitter herbs? That is all, symbols to awaken memory, to remind us of who we are, from where we have come and what it was like, even now, when we have a round challah on the table that rises toward the heavens, pointing the way.

All of the questions point to compassion at the core of our being, in our essence. It begins so deep within, in the place where life itself begins, in the womb. The word for womb is **רחם**/*rechem*, from which comes the word for compassion, **רחמנות**/*rachmanut*, perhaps more familiar in the warmth of its Ashkenazic pronunciation, *rachmonus*. Why does compassion at times seem so difficult, blocked in its truly being felt, for us, for others? In part, perhaps, because it requires our own vulnerability, to feel and reveal our own pain in order to feel the pain of another. The pain of the other is a reflection of our own, it is our own. The other is us, all of the same womb in God's being. God is called **הרחמן**/*HaRachaman*, the Compassionate One, literally, the Wombed One. As the name of God as Compassionate One derives from womb, so too does our name as **בני רחמנים**/*compassionate children of compassionate ancestors*.

These are the **עשרת ימי תשובה**/the Ten Days of Turning, and as a people we have lost our way. We have lost the questions meant to guide us, and the implications of answers that are far more than formulaic. Six months later, this is when we correct the course, remembering the questions and reclaiming the answers and their challenge. We are all interconnected, for better or worse, all people, all Jews, **כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה**/*all Israel are responsible one for another, or, interwoven one with another*. It seems preposterous. There has been so much violence committed by Jews during the past year. How can we be responsible for them, interwoven with them? According to the standard set by the humble Sefer Ha'chinuch, their deeds testify against them. Entirely lacking in compassion for those different than themselves, it would be too easy to write them off as Jews. But they are saying the same prayers today as we are, sharing in the same Torah stories of violence and of children suffering, of mothers weeping, of God calling out to stay the hand that holds the knife, enough! Why doesn't the message get through, why doesn't it penetrate? Enough of violence! It needs to penetrate our own hearts all

the more so, to make up for all the hardened hearts of our people impervious to God's tears, running away in rivulets as rain from off the parched ground. Perhaps their hands knocking even on hearts' doors closed so tightly will cause an opening of just a crack, just enough to let in a single ray of light, even if on the hearts of only one or two. That is my prayer when we come to Yom Kippur and take collective responsibility for the sins committed among our people, crying out in the plural as we knock upon our own hearts' doors, *דברנו דופי, גזלנו, בגדנו, אשמנו / we are guilty/we abuse, we betray, we are cruel, we destroy..., we oppress..., we are violent..., we are extremists....* We need the tune to soften words that seem to have been written for this year, unbearable to acknowledge, Jews engaging in a pogrom against African immigrants in south Tel Aviv, Jewish young people beating a Palestinian youth nearly to death with dozens looking on, oblivious to the youth's cries and to the shrieking voice of Torah that filled the Jerusalem square, *לא תעמוד על דם רעיך / do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor.*

Wherever we are in the Jewish world, we are interconnected and responsible for the encompassing Jewish soul and its lived expression. Part of the challenge of this season is finding the courage to respond to the words and deeds of others of our people that are hateful and hurtful, that serve to demonize another people or nation. With so much violence in the world, it is for us to address our own. When a child knocks at the door and is asked who are you, it is for all of us to model the answer, that *בני ישראל* / the Children of Israel is to be synonymous with *בני רחמנים* / compassionate children of compassionate ancestors. To inspire our children through Torah to respond instinctively to the image of God in every other is a sacred value of Nehar Shalom's family learning programs. It is a goal that fills me with an overarching sense of purpose. We strive to apply in real terms the values we teach, to speak in ways that allow new insights to emerge, to hear and see each other as bearers of God's image. In the public arena, in the Jewish community and beyond, we have forgotten that the way we speak of others influences the way we see them. Playing on fear, we preclude the possibility of creative thinking, of disarming with love. As toughness becomes the standard of support, the measure of loyalty, we fail to reckon with the conflagration sure to come, of the impact on Israeli children, Iranian children, Palestinian children, our own children, children all.

My head was down, my eyes closed in thought as a young woman began to speak from a floor microphone at the J Street conference that I attended in Washington last spring. I was jolted upright by the power of her voice, by her stance at the microphone, her words more of pleading and pain than of anger. I couldn't quite see her face, sitting somewhat to the side and behind her. And then she said it, not accusingly, but pleading for help to find her way home. She had lost her left eye to an Israeli tear gas canister at a demonstration on the West Bank. I turned in my seat, leaning forward, needing to look at her, unable to look for shame. She had gone to Israel to study art at the B'tzalel Academy in Jerusalem. We send our children to Israel to study, to grow, and we should

also want them to feel the pain. But not like this! Then I could see the left lens of her glasses, swirling lines painted in black and white filling the space that was no longer a window to the world, but now in vibrant witness a window to her soul. I tried to imagine her struggle against alienation from her own people, from Israel, from God. It was violence at the hands of her own while pleading on behalf of others that has scarred her for life. I spoke with her afterward and have continued to correspond with her. In her pain, there is poignant hope: "It's so hard to explain how I want to live my life to others who do not know what it is like to feel the weight of human suffering. Who don't know that my feelings for Israel-Palestine are far beyond politics.... I want so badly for Israel and Palestine to be free from horror. I want my life to start working again."

We need to know what it is like to feel the weight of human suffering, spreading it out over all of our shoulders, that one young woman not feel she bears it alone. We need to know that cries of pain are beyond politics, and national borders. Fear is ubiquitous and eats away at compassion on all sides. When we can hear the pain of the other, compassion is awakened within ourselves and we transcend our own fear. The questions asked at the Pesach seder with the breaking of the middle matzah are about who we are as Jews, highlighting touchstones of the Jewish journey, from Egypt to Jerusalem, exile to redemption. The answers to the questions, for all their simplicity, interweave our own story in with the stories of others. As questions to guide us on a journey of hope, we come to see compassion as the mediating force, as the thread of connection spun from our own suffering that joins us to others. Remembering the experience of slavery, we are meant to be *רחמנים בני רחמנים* /compassionate children of compassionate ancestors, even when we get to Jerusalem. All we need to remind us is a piece of broken matzah and some bitter herbs. Along the way, it also helps to have some apples dipped in honey to sweeten the journey, to remind us not to give in to despair.

In the intermingled themes of Rosh Hashannah, there is hope even in our tears. In the voice of the shofar, there is weeping and there is celebration for what might be, challenging us to bring the day that is neither day nor night, swords turned to plowshares. One of the least known names for this day, a name by linguistic association, is *יום יבבא* / *Yom Yabava*, "Day of Sobbing." It derives from a discussion among the rabbis concerning the weeping sound of the shofar notes and which one should be described as crying (Rosh Hashannah 33b). They cite the Torah's description of Rosh Hashannah as *יום תרועה יהיה לכם* / *It shall be to you a day of sounding the shofar* (Bemidbar 29:1). Looking to the *Targum*, the Aramaic interpretive translation of the Torah, the rabbis bring us to a place of deeper association and human connection with what we are to hear in the voice of the shofar. So different, the Aramaic says, *יום יבבא* / *It shall be to you a day of sobbing*. How do we know that *יום יבבא* means "sobbing," and whose sobbing is it? It is the sobbing of the mother of Sisera who waits for her son

to return from battle, knowing in her heart that he will never come. Sisera is a Canaanite general who gave Israel no peace. Fleeing the battle, he sought safety in the tent of Ya'el and met a brutal death at her hand. His mother is reassured, comforted for his delay, that he is gathering women and the spoils of war, but she knows: **בעד החלון נשקפה** **אם סיסרא** **ותיבב** / *through the window peered the mother of Sisera and sobbed* (Judges 5:28). In the broken notes of the shofar, it is simply the sobbing of a mother who has lost her son. That Sisera was an enemy of Israel is never mentioned. On a journey of hope, the shofar calls us to be **רחמנים בני רחמנים** / *compassionate children of compassionate ancestors*.