

## **Sometimes it's too much: spiritual leadership in times of crisis**

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This is not the drashah that I planned to give this morning.

There has been so much build-up to this Rosh Hashana, for us and for the entire Jewish world. Even before the pandemic began, I talked about these high holy days with the rabbinic search committee, imagining the beautiful community-building that gets to happen when a community prepares for and then immerses in the *yamim noraim*, the days of awe, together. We talked about the transition Nehar Shalom was preparing to make, from a *shtibl* model with a rabbi and rebbetzin who carried so much of the weight of leading and organizing the community, literally holding us in their home, to a more community-based model, with a part-time rabbi, and much more of the leadership distributed across the community. The high holy days would be an opportunity to deepen the relationship between a congregation and a new rabbi, but also to draw upon the incredible skills and gifts of community members, to truly co-create the holidays.

As the reality of the pandemic set in, we wondered, and then decided, that we would not gather in person for Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. Would that relationship- and community-building still be possible? Like each of us has had to do with nearly every aspect of our lives, we began the pivot, the adjustment, the recalibration. How will we make these holidays meaningful? How will we immerse in them together, when we can't be together physically? How will we care for those among us who live alone, or who are struggling? How will we cope with our grief?

I discovered that drawing on the gifts and skills of this community was not only still possible, but filled a painful time with tender collaboration, and these services, as you can tell, are a truly collective offering. So many community members stepped up to offer care, learning, song, and labor. And all of us are facing this time with courage.

I thought a lot about this drasha. I worked on drafts, wrestled with texts, trying to find the most compelling analysis of the current moment, the most interesting juxtaposition of texts to offer some reflection, some wisdom, some doorway for making sense of this senseless time.

Many of you know that I was in a serious car accident two and a half weeks ago. Thank God, I am physically more or less OK. But I discovered, in the past week, that I am less OK than I thought I was. The physical, emotional, and spiritual toll of the accident were more significant than I realized - and that's in part because I was already hurting, grieving, stressed, and overwhelmed. By missing loved ones I can't see. By the massive reorganization of life this pandemic has required. By the daily horror of reading about the state terror being committed by our government. By living in a society that is in a constant state of war against Black people, indigenous people, immigrants, and the planet. By so much fear and uncertainty.

I discovered that I couldn't give the drasha I was working on, which was about the ways that intimacy between humans has shifted over the past six months and what this moment demands from us in response. This offering of my heart came through instead, not about the ways we need to step up right now, but about how we need to take our trauma and our suffering seriously.

I share that truth about my own process to say: here I am, vulnerable and struggling, and doing the best I can with the tools that I have in this moment. And maybe that's true for you too. Maybe there are things you hoped to do, or write, or make happen, or help with in the past few months, and you couldn't do it – because the world is on fire. Maybe you weren't the teacher, or parent, or boss, or student, or lover, or teammate, or friend that you wanted to be. Maybe you were hard on yourself. And maybe you can be a little less hard. Maybe, in this season of forgiveness, you can forgive yourself.

At the beginning of the Rosh Hashana musaf service, the *ba'al tefilah*, the leader of prayer, offers a prayer called *hineni*, here I am, and in it, humbly offers themselves as an

imperfect leader. *Hineni ha-oniah mi-maas, nireshet v'nifchedet mipachad yoshev tehilot yisrael*. Here I stand, impoverished in merit, trembling in the presence of the One who hears the prayers of Israel. Even though I am unfit and unworthy for the task, I come to represent Your people and plead on their behalf. Accept my prayer as if it were uttered by one worthy of this task. Quiet what might trouble me.

Rather than diminishing the prayer leader, this heartfelt plea is a way of honoring the magnitude of their task, to pray on behalf of the community. We, too, in this moment of profound crisis for our planet and human society, face a task of great magnitude. Acknowledging our vulnerability and imperfection is a way of recognizing what is at stake, and also honoring how hard it all feels.

Here we are, flawed and vulnerable, overwhelmed and at sea; exhausted and fed up; outraged and hurting. What we can do is move forward an inch at a time. What we can do is breathe through the panic. What we can do is ask for help. What we can do is be with each other in our struggling. And though the togetherness, the connection, feels so compromised right now, we are here, each of us, because we trust in it. We trust that what feels hard is an expression of our care, and we trust that together we can continue to figure it out.

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In November 1939, less than two months after Germany's invasion of Poland, Rabbi Kalonymous Kalmish Shapira, the Rebbe of Piaceszna, delivered a drasha, a sermon, in the Warsaw Ghetto. It is a brave and vulnerable sermon; in it, the famed Hasidic master does not mention his own recent personal loss, which we know was tremendous. But the depth of his anguish comes through, as does his spiritual strength.

In the drasha, the Pieczner quoted a teaching from R Menachem Mendel of Rymanov. The Talmud teaches that "just as salt purges meat, so does suffering purify a person." But R Menachem Mendel added this: "Just as meat must not be over-salted for one to

enjoy it, so too must suffering be properly combined with mercy and carefully measured in accordance with a person's capacity to tolerate it.”

Teaching from the heart of the Shoah, the Piecezner acknowledged that some strength may be drawn from experiences of suffering, but that there is also such a thing as too much.

And then he turned to our mythic ancestors as examples of brave and loving spiritual leaders who also said, there is such a thing as too much.

Tomorrow, we will read akeidat Yitzhak, the story of the binding of Isaac, when God told Abraham to take his son Isaac to the top of Mount Moriah and kill him there as a sacrificial offering. Abraham followed God's instructions, not telling Isaac nor his wife Sarah what his intentions were. At the last moment, as Abraham was prepared to kill his son, God stayed his hand and offered a ram for Abraham to kill instead. The account ends with Abraham descending the mountain, and then what follows in the Torah is the death of Sarah, Abraham's wife and Isaac's mother. In his sermon, the Piecezner noted Rashi's question: Why does the Torah recount the death of Sarah directly after the binding of Isaac? And Rashi's answer: “When Sarah was told of the binding of Isaac—of how he was prepared for slaughter, and how the knife was laid at his throat—her soul fled from her and she died.”<sup>1</sup>

Rashi, drawing on earlier midrash, teaches that the horror of the possibility of her son being slaughtered as a sacrifice was unbearable for Sarah. The implication is that she couldn't stand to live in that world; she was so overcome with grief that she died. But the Piecezner gave another layer of nuance and meaning to Sarah's death. He wrote, “Even though our mother Sarah took the binding of Isaac so much to heart that her soul fled from her, she died for the good of the Jewish people. She gave up her life in order to show God that Israel cannot bear too much suffering.”

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from Rabbi Shapira's sermon are by Rabbi Or Rose

Sarah might have been able to bear her sorrow; but she died as an act of testimony, witnessing to God on behalf of her descendants: there is some sorrow, some suffering, that is just too much to bear. She died in order to urge God *not* to allow us to suffer as much as she did.

The Pieczner wrote this knowing that Sarah's testimony did not, so to speak, work. God did not, as it were, decide not to cause unbearable suffering – something the Pieczner knew all too well. And yet he celebrated Sarah as even more righteous than Abraham. I imagine him, in the depths of hell, trying to find some comfort in Torah, and finding it in Sarah's experience of unbearable pain. She couldn't escape her sorrow or her suffering, but she turned it into an offering – a protest on behalf of her descendants.

When we are in times of trial, we can take comfort in her longing for us, for a safer, more bearable world. And we learn from her to name it when it feels like too much.

It feels important to acknowledge how different the Pieczner's situation was from our own. I'm not comparing this moment to the Holocaust. But he wasn't comparing either. He wasn't saying Sarah's situation was like his own. He was identifying with the experience of grief and pain and sorrow. He was remembering Sarah's protest against a world in which her son could be killed by his father at the command of their God. Our world, too, is filled with unbearable suffering. We live in a world where families are torn apart by violence, by war, by gentrification, by incarceration. We live in a world in which extraordinary health care exists, and yet is not made accessible to those who need it. We live in a world that is burning, and where there is no political will to stop it. We live in a world of devastating inequity. And right now, we live in a world where a deadly virus fills our lives with fear, and takes away so many of the tools and resources we have for making fear and suffering bearable. Maybe your individual experience feels unbearable right now; maybe it does not. But as a collective, there is strength in crying out that it is too much.

The Piecezner's sermon goes on to draw our attention to Moshe Rabbeinu, to Moses who organized the Torah:

“So Moshe our teacher, the faithful shepherd, placed the death of Sarah and the binding of Isaac side by side in order to advocate on our behalf. Moshe is demonstrating what happens when a person's suffering is too severe, as was the case with Sarah—“her soul fled from her.” And if Sarah the great tzaddeket (righteous woman) could not bear such pain, how can we be expected to do so?”

Moshe, claims the Piecezner, also knew there was such a thing as too much suffering. Rabbi Or Rose, with whom I studied this text, calls Moshe's an act of “literary advocacy,” writing that Moshe, “sought to summon God's attention, to demonstrate forcefully to the Merciful One that the people of Israel cannot bear extreme suffering.” Sarah made this claim to God by martyring herself; Moshe did it by placing the account of her death immediately after the story of the akeda. And the Piecezner rebbe called on them both in his moment of extreme peril. All three were urging *God* to see things from a human perspective.

But I want to imagine that Moshe put those stories next to each other not for God, but for us. To say to *us*: there will be times when the suffering feels too much to bear, and you are not alone in that; your ancestor Sarah, a great righteous woman, also felt that way, and she protested on your behalf. To offer us Sarah's rage, and her solidarity. To offer us his own validation that sometimes it is too much to bear. To tell the story, so that we can continue the story: in every generation, to cry out in pain and in protest, on behalf of ourselves and all who are suffering.

Again – I'm drawing a strong distinction, not comparing the many layers of grief and oppression in this moment in our history to the grief and oppression of the Shoah. But I don't know how to do everything this moment asks of us, and I learn from the Piecezner to *wrestle* with the meaning of this hardship, not to deny it, but to name it, to cry out against it. Of course, the deep wisdom of our tradition goes beyond crying out: we know

we must work for our healing. We can't only beg God for change; we must partner with God to make change. But sometimes the crying out, naming that it is too much, and honoring the vulnerability in that is an important first step.

With clear-eyed acknowledgement of my relative safety, freedom, and well-being compared to his, I was drawn to the Pieczner's drashah from a place of fear and despair and pain at what I see happening in the world around me. And I come to you with vulnerability and humility, both facing the reality of that pain, and so lifted by the support, and love, and hope that I have found in this community, by the honesty and vulnerability that you have already shared with me. So moved by the dedication to carve out a Jewish home here in JP. To create a sacred community where we work to root out oppression when it shows up within, and to fight it in the world around us. To protect and defend one another, and all life. And to be a place of consolation and support in times of pain and sorrow.

I pray that this is a community where you can bring your suffering, and your despair, and your fear, and your exhaustion, *whatever* it is about. And I pray that this is a community where you can find support, and love, and hope, and be lifted.

There is strength in witnessing one another's hardships, the ones we share and the ones we don't share.

There is strength in crying out against the unbearable.

There is strength in acknowledging when it feels too hard.

And there is strength when we begin together, as a community, by holding the losses, acknowledging the challenges, naming what is too much, and offering our prayers from a vulnerable and humble place.

What emerges is co-creation. What emerges is deepened relationship. What emerges is righteous labor for a world that will be safer and more bearable for our future generations.

May we never have a Rosh Hashana like this again. And, whatever the coming year brings, may the spiritual leadership of Sarah, Moshe, and Rabbi Shapira inspire in each of us brave and loving leadership.