

Rosh Hashanah 5778: Bridging the Gap

Over the past year, we've been meeting with a speech therapist to help one of our children who has a developmental stutter. Along with suggesting some exercises we could do with her, the therapist also advised we change some of our own behaviors as well. First, he suggested we make our children take turns when they are talking to us. Now for those of you that don't know, I have three children - a six year old son and twin 4 year old daughters who seemingly never stop talking. The struggle is real. Second, the therapist recommended that we make sure and give our daughter enough time to talk, so she doesn't feel rushed and has time to finish what she is saying. Okay, I thought to myself. That's easy. I already do those things.

We left the therapist's office, walked outside, and I said to Daniel, "I don't think I do any of those things, do I?"

Daniel paused, and gave me that look that said, "do you really want to know the answer to that question?"---

"Me?" I said, taken aback. "Really?"

"Really." he replied. "Pay attention. You constantly interrupt her when she's talking and then finish her sentences."

In my head I was thinking "you are crazy and have no idea what you're talking about!!" But I said, "Umm...okay...I think you are most likely wrong, but I'll think about it. And if you are around, point it out to me so I know when I am doing it."

Over the next few weeks, I saw it over and over again. I would catch myself interrupting her and rushing her. I realized that I DO finish her sentences and press her to spit out her thoughts. I never would have thought of myself in a million years as the kind of person or mom who is impatient - and yet I am. Clear as day. The way that I imagined myself as a mom---I realized that this wasn't the way I actually *am* as a mom.

Just a few minutes ago, we read from the book of Genesis in the Torah. The binding of Isaac, known in Hebrew as the Akeidah, is one of the best known and most troubling stories in our

tradition. In it, God orders Abraham to sacrifice his son, his only son, the son that he loves, Yitzhak/Isaac, on Mt. Moriah.

And if it isn't troubling enough that our God would demand this of him, Abraham agrees to do this, to slaughter his son like an animal being sacrificed.

He straps him to the altar--just imagine the terror in Isaac's eyes, the willing vulnerability of a child trusting their parents.

But of course, he is prevented from this divine-murder. God sends an angel to tell Abraham to sacrifice a nearby ram instead.

It's a story that doesn't sit well with us. Over the centuries, our commentators - who also struggled with this story - have tried to understand and come to terms morally with what happened. They say: that God was testing Abraham - they say that Abraham never would have gone through with it OR this was Abraham's declaration of faith OR whatever other apologetic we might provide for just how awful this is.

But the truth is, the Akeidah is none of these things. Rabbi David Hartman, a philosopher of contemporary Judaism and the founder of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, looks at the Akeidah from an entirely different angle. He doesn't pull his punches - and bluntly says that what Abraham did was wrong, was evil, that it was destructive. There are no excuses for it. He calls out the Akeidah as the moment of Abraham's moral failure, not his success. On the other hand, Abraham's moral success, Rabbi Hartman teaches, is Sodom and Gomorrah. It was the Abraham who argued with God to save the people living in those cities that we should be following - not the Abraham who was willing to sacrifice his only son on an altar.

In the end, whether it's Abraham or us or the hundreds of commentators, we can come up with all the excuses we want to justify what Abraham did. God told him to do this. It's more important to listen to God. Abraham knew God would stop him in the end. These are all the things Abraham would have told himself to justify his actions on Mt. Moriah to make his behavior seem okay. But the reality is far from how Abraham imagined it. The reality is that he took his son, strapped him down to an altar, and prepared to kill him.

It didn't matter what story Abraham told himself about why he was doing this terrible thing--it was still terrible.

We have to imagine that he thought of himself as a good person, even in that moment. We all like to tell ourselves that we are good people, that we have tried, that our intentions were on point. But sometimes we have to look the gap straight in the eye and acknowledge the reality--I am not the person I like to imagine that I am.

And this is, of course, the first step in *tshuva*: acknowledging and owning the gap. We can't do the holy work of returning to a better version of ourselves until we do an honest accounting of our souls; *tshuvah* can't begin until we recognize our moral failures for what they are. Abraham can't do *tshuvah* until he admits the gap between how he justifies the Akeidah happening and how it really happened. Likewise, we can't do *teshuvah* for our own moral failings until we acknowledge them; until we look past the justifications and rationalizations and see who we truly are.

Daniel and I are both NPR junkies - 91.7 is pretty much the only station we listen to in the car. Now, this leads to some interesting conversations with our 6 year old. And recently, with everything going on with DACA and with immigration, Gavi has been asking a lot of questions about what it means to be a citizen of this country. These questions led to how the Jewish people came to this country, which then led to us having a family movie night watching "An American Tale."

Now, for those of you who haven't seen "An American Tale," let me tell you, it's amazing.

It's an animated movie by Steven Spielberg that tells the story of Jewish immigration to the United States through Feivel Mousekewitz and his family, a Ukrainian-Jewish family of mice, as they emigrate from Russian-Ukraine to the United States, fleeing the evil "cats" as they search for freedom. Throughout the movie, the Mousekewitz's dream of America as the perfect country: "America - what a place! What a place! In America there are mouseholes in every wall. In

America, there are breadcrumbs on every floor. In America you can say anything you want. But more than anything, this I know for a fact, in America, there are no cats.”

As we watched this movie, I felt that same pride to be an American Jew that I did when I was a kid. We were the country that people were willing to die trying to get to in order to make it their home; a country that symbolized the values of a fair and just society - freedom of speech, protection for vulnerable minorities, a place where dreams could come true, a place where we could finally be at home. In the words of Papa Mousekewitz, “America is the place where the streets are paved with cheese.”

I want to believe this is the America that we live in today. But of course our streets aren’t paved with cheese. In reality, we live in a country where the vulnerable are increasingly attacked and made to feel smaller. We live in a country where access to the American dream is twice as hard if your skin is dark. We live in a country where white households have roughly 20 times as much wealth as black households. We live in a country where 21% of all children live in families with incomes below the federal poverty threshold. We live in a country where on average women make only 80% of what men make. We live in a country where, in the parlance of an American Tail, the “cats” very much are real.

The gap between what we imagine our homeland to be and what we really are is growing wider and wider every day. And until we can admit our failures as failures and recognize where we have gone wrong, we can’t begin to do *teshuvah* and close the divide. We can’t begin to heal as a country until we can own the moral failures of our past.

Teshuvah begins with a real and honest reckoning of our soul; taking into account those things that we don’t even want to admit to ourselves.

Doing this kind of *tshuvah* doesn’t feel good. It isn’t easy. And it brings up all sorts of feelings we’d rather not deal with.

I didn't like discovering how I really treated our daughter. I still feel guilty and shameful for how impatient I was and continue to be. But the truth is, I can't become a better me in 5778 without opening that door. I can't change unless I own who I really am - not just who I imagine myself to be.

The great rabbis of the Talmud teach us that the Ten Days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are supposed to be spent examining our ways and exploring those times when we missed the mark. May we all begin 5778 by looking at ourselves straight in the eye, acknowledging the gap between who we really are and who we have been, and work to be an ever better version of ourselves in the year to come. May this be a year of sweetness and goodness for us all.

Shanah tovah u'metukah.