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Shabbat B'reishit 5784: *Finding the Words*

A few years ago, I opened my High Holy Day sermon with the following:

There's a great story in our tradition about a rabbi who walks down the street and notices a man with two heads. (Menachot 37a) Most of us might ask how that person came to be, but the rabbis are interested in a different question: "If a person has TWO heads, how many pairs of tefillin does he need to wear?"

Such is the curiosity of the halachic mind.

Tefillin, also known as phylacteries, are leather boxes, filled with prayers on parchment, attached to straps, traditionally bound on our heads and arms during morning prayer.

So, does the two-headed man need one set of head tefillin...or two?

Now, in order to answer that question, the rabbis need to ask another question, "Is this one person with two heads, or two people who share one body?"

Why is this important? Well, if it's one person with two heads - you only need one set of tefillin. But, if it's two people sharing one body, each head needs its own.

A midrash, from a different compilation, tells us that King Solomon was confronted with this exact same problem. What does he do? He pours hot water on one of the heads...and waits to see if both scream. If both scream, we have one person with 2 heads.

What looked to be distinct and separate turns out to be intertwined and inextricable.

In the mid-20th century Rav Soloveitchik, a luminary in his time, turns this story into a teaching about Jewish Peoplehood. Though the Jews have spread out across the globe, we are still united. In other words, WE are one body with many heads -- which means when a Jew screams in Israel, a Jew living in Los Angeles should feel that pain. **When a Jew screams anywhere in the world, 14 million Jews should feel a twinge.**

This week, we screamed alongside our brothers and sisters. We cried. We raged. We stared in horror. We collapsed. We refused to be comforted. We texted and called. We scrolled...endlessly. We agonized. We questioned. We wept.

On Yom Kippur, we spoke as a people our collective words of vulnerability: *Who shall live and who shall die, Who shall reach the end of his days and who shall not, Who shall perish by water and who by fire,*

There was no “who by kidnapping and who by execution; who by music festival and who by kibbutz-massacre.”

And as much as I want to list the crimes and atrocities, to remind us of the depth of injury and evil...I won't.

As much as this moment in my 46 years helps me to *finally* understand the commandment “to remember what the Amalekites did to the Israelites, not to forget what the Amalekites did to Israelites, and to destroy the Amalekites utterly” for the evil acts committed against our people - for going after the weakest in our community as we left Egypt, brutally killing the elderly and the children...deviating from the Ancient Near East's norms of war...I won't.

As much as I want for us to stand tonight and say “we will NEVER forget what human beings are capable of, and, so, as we do on Shabbat Zachor before the celebration of Purim, we remember the terror...” **I ALSO know, as we all do, that tonight is not Shabbat Zachor.**

It is Shabbat B'reishit.

And tonight is about fulfilling a different commandment, a different obligation carefully handed down through the generations by our ancestors...also part of the 613 mitzvot: Tonight is about observing Shabbat.

And Shabbat is our time to heal and to hold. To pray. To dream audaciously. To imagine a world as it could be, not simply as it is. And I want to invite us into that space with this D'var Torah.

Our world has radically changed. From last Friday night to Saturday morning, it is not the same world. I would hope this cataclysmic shift would be felt by all - but I can only speak for the Jews. We are destabilized. Disoriented. We are so far away, but the terror feels so close.

And so we need this sanctuary to find ourselves again. To find one another. To find a story that can comfort us. That might anchor us in this storm that has not yet abated.

We need this space to catch our breath. To place a hand over our wounded heart. To calm the adrenaline and the hypervigilance and the multi-generational trauma that has been activated in our DNA...to help us survive in this moment, as Noah survived in his ark, BEFORE the rains had stopped. BEFORE the dove returned with an olive branch.

This is where we are tonight: waiting for the darkness to be disrupted by God's powerful and redemptive light.

As the People of the Book, we know that we love our stories. They guide and inform us.

That's why we love the Exodus. No matter where we are, no matter what generation, the story seems to fit...Or, perhaps, we figure out how to fit **ourselves** into that story. Into that familiar cycle and rhythm - oppression, wilderness, redemption, a promised land. Over and over again.

We love stories. That's why we love midrash - stories that accompany our legal tomes.

Once upon a time there was a rabbi who prayed to God when tragedy would befall the community. The rabbi would go into the forest to a particular space, light a special fire, offer the necessary prayer...and tragedy would be averted. And when the next generation forgot the prayer, and the next generation forgot the fire, and the next the space...until all the community and its leadership had left was the story...they could tell the story, and somehow - even without the ritual - the pain and suffering and sorrow were ameliorated.

That's how deep our faith in narrative runs - stories can and will save us.

Emily Esfahandi in her book The Power of Meaning says storytelling is critical to finding our way out of tragedy and trauma. Storytelling...along with belonging and purpose and transcendence. 4 pillars of meaning that can hold us up even when we think we couldn't possibly rise again.

Of course, then there are moments - ruptures - in which words fail us. A moment in which no familiar story or chapter or sentence can describe our experience, the depth and breadth of tragedy. The scope of atrocity.

Nevertheless we try. Is this like the Yom Kippur War of 1973? Like WW2 and the Nazis? Like the Kishinev Massacre of 1903? Like the Crusades? Like Russia? Or Rwanda?

Is this an old story...or is this a new story?

A story of violence and hatred, of antisemitism and antiZionism...the beast that cannot be killed. The sickness that cannot be cured. The fire that cannot be extinguished.

And which feels more unsettling? To know that we've seen it all before? That we knew the depths of the terrorists' depravity. We knew what they were capable of.

Or is it more terrifying that there is a new story being written whose ending we cannot know or predict? To wonder, as Anne Applebaum writes this week in the Atlantic, if the international rules of decency and humanity during a time of war are in name only, no longer in practice. That our world is entering a new chapter of violence and vigilantism.

How classically Jewish...to debate which of these two god-awful choices is better for the Jews.

Or perhaps it is the third option: **This massacre broke us and it broke our stories...**and our sense of the world and how it works: The ratio of pain to joy that any one family should have to hold. The number of articles we could consume, the number of images that could be delivered to us...Each one more desperate than the next, daring us to imagine how much worse it could get.

This moment breaks the story we've told ourselves about Israel: the strength and preternatural ability of the Israeli army to know and respond, the fractures and fragility of Israel's government...

And the brutality.

The brutality.

The brutality.

The ripping away of any illusion that human beings have evolved. That the innovations and technologies of the 21st century might entice us away from savagery. That exceptions would be made for mothers and children. Grandparents. Holocaust survivors.

Terror is meant to stun and shock us. To destroy us through psychological trauma. To humiliate and denigrate. And our response may be to shut down. To hide. To despair. To harden. To seek revenge.

To determine that faith in humanity is a fool's errand or that faith in a future that could look different than today might ever be possible...

And, let it be said, the capturing of our imagination which prevents us from seeing beyond this moment, the tearing down of our faith in one another, the invitation to give up and surrender...**this is all part of the terror and trauma.**

And so we may turn inward. We may feel rage towards the other. We may long for that Purim-chapter of revenge - the massacre of 75,000 Persians who *would* have killed us had Haman's plan not been foiled...A story that feels very close to the wounded tonight.

And close to the neighbors of the wounded - Arab Palestinian Israelis who share citizenship with the bereaved. Men, women and children who live in mixed cities within Israel - which, thank God, have not yet erupted into chaos and bloodshed - who are treating the wounded in Israeli hospitals, checking in on their loved ones, and rallying to provide supplies.

Which story will we choose as our anchor?

On Rosh Hashanah, I recommended the book People Love Dead Jews, by Dara Horn. Right now, much of the world loves us as we count our dead. Will they love us when we fight back?

When the numbers of the dead increase in Gaza, as the innocent are swept away with the guilty, and the Abrahamic voice beseeching God to show mercy will be drowned out by the international choir of condemnation, who will remain by our side?

Who?

You should know, Pastor Boyd of First AME church, wrote a beautiful email to Rabbi Klein Miles this week condemning Hamas, pledging his support, and asking to bring his community to ours next week on Shabbat. To stand by our side.

Which story will we choose as our anchor?

I think about Brene Brown who asks us to live in this world with an open and wild heart - to have a soft front and a strong back to ensure we can protect ourselves but not harden.

This might be good advice for the unscathed, but what about for us? For right now? Who among us would dare to ask a mourner to increase their empathy? To imagine a future of light when there is only darkness? To imagine a world that is not created by terror, but by love. It might be too much.

It might be too much.

And still...

What if the story tonight could anchor in the opening words of this week's Torah portion, B'reishit? God's first creation - Or (Light)...EVEN as we sit in the midst of an eclipse, a world plunged into darkness.

As my colleague Rabbi Michelle Werner writes, "This moment feels like what it must have been like in ancient times [when our ancestors experienced their first solar eclipse] when time itself changed form and the outcome, the promise of the sun's return, was no longer the certainty with which it had constructed the sense of day, and promise, and step following step on the path of the world. How dark is this eclipse? And worse, how long can we hold a world in our embrace so set on **destroying** [it all]?"

A world that now feels unformed and void. (Genesis 1:2)

B'reishit bara elohim. (Genesis 1:1)

So, perhaps, we are back at the beginning, reaching out into the abyss - the unformed and void, searching for a new way to begin this story.

A midrash on Bereishit: Do not read the words "In the beginning", rather, "With beginnings" God created the world. With the threads of beginnings, God wove our world into a tapestry of possibility and potential. We are meant to experience not just ONE day of creation, or even 6, but a daily, hourly, minute-by-minute invitation to create and recreate, even when all we have are shards.

In so many ways, this massacre has broken us. Stolen from us. Shattered us.

For so many, we, the clergy, have spoken with this week, we hear the mourner's lament - *Aicha*? How could this have happened?

We are without a story to hold us. To guide us. Unless we find the words together. Tonight.

Two people were lost in the woods. Upon finding one another, the first traveler says to the second, "I'm lost, do you know which way to go?" and the second replies "I too am lost and do not know the way. But come, let us continue the journey together, and I will show you the paths I have already taken that will only lead us back into the darkness. Together, we will find a new path, and we will find our way home." (R' Chaim of Sanz)

So here is a story:

The family of a 24-year-old woman who was killed by Hamas terrorists at a music festival in southern Israel Saturday went online and asked if 10 people would attend her funeral, because the family had just moved to Israel and didn't know many people. About 10,000 Israelis showed up. (And I bet most of them have never heard the allegory of the two-headed man...)

Here is a story:

Elan Ezrachi writes from his home in Jerusalem: "No person in Israel is spared from knowing somebody who was killed, kidnapped, brutalized or injured. The mourning is deep and close to every home. AT THE SAME TIME...Civil society is realizing its greatest moment. Individuals and veteran NGO's together with multiple make-shift initiatives are raising money, providing supplies, replacing reservists, coordinating social and mental services, designing healing schemes and more. This demonstrates tremendous human capital that is here and here to stay."

If we have lost faith in humanity, can we pick up *these* shards and begin to rebuild? **And perhaps out of our particular story of love and loyalty, we will learn to author one for all of God's children.**

Shabbat is a weekly invitation for a holy pause to renew ourselves and move beyond the limits of our daily lives and our fears. On this day of rest, this is our work, though we are technically not allowed to labor, so perhaps this is our calling: To move beyond the limits set by the 6 days, and to see a new story unfolding before us.

The Jewish people are responsible for one another. This means that we feel each other's pain, and our sufferings obligate us – even across great divides. It obligates us to show up for a funeral, to mobilize and send resources, to support one another emotionally and spiritually. To check in with Evan, our emeritus Cantor and his husband Don. To be compassionate and curious as we reach out to our Israeli teachers and congregants - to not shy away from their tears, their rage and their unimaginable loss.

The Jewish people are responsible for one another. It obligates us to celebrate Shabbat when so many in the IDF cannot stop to pray, to say Kaddish in memory of the fallen, to pray for the redemption of captives, to expand our prayers of peace to reach ALL who are terrified and sheltering tonight, to never abandon our covenant with God - to bring forth the light, to continue to be a people who reveals holiness in this world, to search for the image of God in all human beings, and to hold onto our shared story, even if we are still learning the words.

As our colleague Rabbi Felicia Sol wrote: “Our grief is enormous, our disbelief profound and yet, the hope remains everlasting: **עוד לא אבדה תקוותנו**. Our hope is not yet lost. It will never be lost. The hope that those that are being held hostage will be returned safely. Hope that humanity, sanity, and love will overcome hate, violence, and terror. Hope that we can still pray for hope.

In fact, in Naftali Herz Imber's (1856-1909) original poem on which Israel's national anthem is based, he wrote that *only with the very last Jew, is the end of our hope*. And look around us. How many of us are here tonight and on the livestream.

We are here together to grieve, yes, but also to insist on sustaining our resilience and hope. We will need to shed our tears and we will have to cultivate our faith that hope is not only possible but necessary and even in the darkest moments, that we can be: **להיות עם חפשי בארצנו**. To be a free people in our land and in peace and security.”

What story will you hold onto tonight? What will anchor you to faith and light and love and hope? What will transform your despair into resolve? What will temper your rage and help you hold onto your humanity?

Once upon a time, our ancestors had the power to avert tragedy. Through forest and fire. Through words of prayer. But, there came a time, when all was lost. They did not know the words. They could not light the fire. They had forgotten where to go...but they remembered the story...and in its retelling, they were eventually redeemed.

May this be true for us, as well. And for our children. And our children's children. For all of God's children.

"God of the spirit of all flesh,
Here we are before You, broken spirits, torn by grief;
have mercy on us, mortals created in your Image.
Watch over us in a time of destruction and tragedy, terror, death and panic.
Please, please:
may our compassion be revealed, may the love within us
overwhelm the harsh judgment, vengeance and evil within us.
Behold: fierce, burning pain cries out, seeking revenge, not comfort.
Watch over us, Shekhinah, our strength,
over our scorched spirits, our terrified souls,
over our completely infuriated flesh.
May the Divine Image rise, shining like the dawn,
from our crushed hearts.
May we have faith that we will merit
to witness the goodness of the Holy One,
the goodness of humankind,
in the land of the living. And let us say, Amen"
(Dr. Melila Hellner-Eshed/Rabbi Zac Kamenetz)

אל אלהי הרוחות לכל בשר

הנה אנו לפניך רוחות קרועות וסועות מצער
חמל נא עלינו, בני האדם, הברואים בצלמך,
בפקד אותנו עת שבר וצרה, אימה, מות ובהלה
יגולו נא, אָנָּה, אָנָּה רחמנו והאהבה שִׁבְנו
על מדות הדין, הנקמה והרע שִׁבְנו.
שהנה בא הכאב העז והבוער הצועק ומבקש נקמה ולא נחמה.
שמרי עלינו שכינת עֲזֵנו,
על רוחותינו הצרובות, נשמותינו המבהלות,
על בשרנו שנעשה כלו חדודין
למען יעלה כשחר ויזרח צלם אלהים מלבנו המרסק.
ונאמין שעוד נזכה
ונראה בטוב ה' וטוב האדם
בארץ חיים.
אמן