



Rosh Hashanah I Sermon – 5779 Challenges

By Rabbi Zimbalist

Shanah Tovah and Gut Yontif! There is a story of a young man who, like all of us, faced many challenges in his life. He struggled with the idea that no matter what decision he made, someone would be upset with him, disappointed in him, or wished for another outcome. Because of this, the young man was constantly pained by the uncertainties of his future and avoided anything that seemed remotely complicated or confrontational. Realizing this was no way to live his life, and feeling tired and desperate, the young man approached his father for help.

His father took him into the kitchen and the young man felt comforted by the thought of a home-cooked meal. Three pots of water were already boiling on the stove. Without saying a word, the father began to put one ingredient into each pot of boiling water. Into the first pot, a few eggs. Into the second, a handful of carrots. Into the third, a heaping spoonful of ground coffee. The two of them watched the stove in silence until finally, the father removed the carrots and eggs and put them on a plate and ladled the hot coffee into a cup. He placed the food in front of his son and asked, “What do you think just happened?”

His son, with a confused look answered, “You made lunch?”

“Well,” his father responded, “it’s more than that. Imagine that each pot of boiling water is one of the challenges that you’re facing, and each ingredient is a way you could respond. The carrots faced their challenge hard, firm and seemingly unrelenting. However, when placed in the boiling water and thereby fully engaged in meeting their challenge, they became soft and weak – unable to stand firm again. But the eggs – they were fragile from the start and could have been easy broken, but after encountering the same situation, they toughened up on the inside. Even when their shells were broken, they were still whole and intact, but different – harder and more firm. And the coffee – well, the coffee transformed itself and influenced the water, too. The coffee grounds abandoned their original form and embraced the water, while the water absorbed the grounds and became delicious coffee.” As the father and son ate together, the son wondered: Which food was he most like – the carrots, the eggs or the coffee?

This question is something we need to ask ourselves today – in looking back at the past year and simultaneously planning for the year ahead: How do we approach our challenges in life? How do our responses depend on the nature of the challenges? How do we respond when we know that something about ourselves is the challenge or the problem? And how do our challenges transform us and those around us – for the better or for the worse? Today as we embrace this holy season and a new year together, we should all wonder - how can we change

ourselves and be a more positive influence when addressing the complicated situations that we will undoubtedly face?

Illustrations of life's challenges and individual responses to those challenges can be found in the Torah reading on both days of Rosh Hashanah. The portion that we read today highlights the miraculous birth of Isaac, and tomorrow we read about the *Akeidah* – the binding of Isaac. Both stories are as deeply troubling as they are enormously hopeful. The challenges faced by the central characters – Abraham, Sarah and Isaac – are connected in that the decisions they have to make are transformative to them, and ultimately shape our history as the Jewish people.

I suspect that many of us respond to challenges like our matriarch Sarah does in these portions, whose actions and decisions mirror the egg. Sarah reveals her fragility through laughter as an attempt to mask her growing concern about her problems, like her adulterous husband or her consuming worries about having a child of her own. Her laughter could also be an attempt to hide anger and frustration with many who influence her life – perhaps God, her family or even herself. The genesis of Sarah's self-transformation is the discovery that the only thing she can control is herself – a practical realization for us all as we look to better ourselves in the year ahead. By gaining control of herself, Sarah develops a stronger voice in response to others when in she finds herself in difficult situations. Her laughter that once symbolized weakness now epitomizes strength, comfort and fulfillment with the birth of Isaac, whose name means “laughter.” Sarah becomes hardened to the relationship she once had with Hagar, her maidservant, especially after the birth of Hagar and Abraham's son Ishmael. She instructs Abraham to send them away, and who knows, maybe she laughed in doing so – a laugh embodying power or revenge. Sarah's newfound strength and her transformation does not come without a new set of challenges, as Abraham is pained and perhaps resentful of her when she instructs him to send Ishmael away

I also suspect that many of us are like Abraham, who in today's example we will consider our patriarchal carrot – one who is dramatically affected by challenges and transforms from a strong, stoic figure to a softer “do as you're told” kind of person. While Abraham is recorded in our history as a man of unwavering faith, I am a bit concerned that within his faith, he may have lost his voice, his ability to question the demands of others, and his freedom of choice – that is, his ability to say “no.” God puts forth unimaginable challenges before Abraham – from leaving his father's home and going to an unknown place, to banishing his son Ishmael from his camp, to binding Isaac on an altar to prepare him to be sacrificed. What might it be like to face those types of demands – particularly from God? Would it be possible to stay strong and firm like a raw carrot, or would we have to acquiesce?

In his book *Passing Life's Tests*, Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson explores what many consider to be the most troubling encounter and challenge in Abraham's life – the *Akeidah*, the binding of his son, Isaac, upon the altar. In very simplistic terms, God commands Abraham to take his son Isaac on an inexplicable journey up a mountain, bind him upon an altar, and slaughter him. One would think that even the softest of carrots would push back hard on that command, but not Abraham. Rather, he doesn't say a word and gets up early in the morning to do as he is told. I can't imagine that anyone in this room would respond in such a way. But I can imagine a few choice words we might want share with the Almighty if given such a command. Rabbi Artson addresses this perplexing scenario and writes (p.8), “Is it possible that

God doesn't know how Abraham will respond to the test? Could the outcome be in question? Spiritual responsibility is grounded in radical freedom: humans are free agents capable of distinguishing good from evil, right from wrong, and are free to make a choice between them. In that sense, then, only Abraham can determine what his response will be, and even God can't know that response in advance. Or, alternatively, the test is to show the world that it is possible to sacrifice one's all for an ideal; it is possible for human beings to put everything on the line for what they believe." Idealism has its merits but being grounded in freedom of choice and knowing the difference between right and wrong poses the greatest chance for success, personal growth and improvement even in the most challenging situations.

And then, there's Isaac. At first glance, he could be seen as the character closest exemplifying the coffee as a response to the challenges in our lives – a representation of someone who has the ability to transform himself and influence transformation in whatever or whomever he may be encountering. Birth was a natural transformation for Isaac, from a Divine promise to a physical being, and his mere presence influenced Sarah to have a stronger voice, feel more confident and experience unconditional love. Isaac's presence and subsequent binding in the *Akeidah* also plays a profound and transformative role for both himself and Abraham. I don't believe that anyone can fully comprehend the magnitude of the *Akeidah*; however, it is clear to me that both Abraham and Isaac were very different men on their descent from the mountain than on their journey up the mountain. All the more so, it appears that Isaac's willingness to die and Abraham's willingness to sacrifice him transforms the entire situation from a *mitzvah* – a commandment from God – to a mission of mercy needing God's immediate attention and response.

All of that said, going back to our story of the uncertain young man, I wonder what would have happened if he chose not to approach his father and consequently, did not receive the poignant lessons of the carrot, egg and coffee. What would have happened if he continued to avoid his personal questions, concerns and challenges? We all know the answer – avoidance leads to even more, and more complicated, problems in the future. Yet avoidance and the inability to ask for help are far too common responses to challenging times. Take the prophet Jonah for example. On Yom Kippur afternoon, we read the entire Book of Jonah. Most of us remember Jonah as the guy who lived inside of the big fish, but we don't all remember the other important details of his story. To recap: God commands Jonah to go to the city of Nineveh and tell the evil people there to change their ways. But Yonah is not up to the challenge and decides to flee, boards a ship and sails to the city of Tarshish. He is set in his self-serving ways and doesn't really care about others. He has no interest in changing his ways or potentially influencing others to change.

God becomes angry with Jonah and the seas become rough. Jonah is ultimately tossed overboard where he is swallowed by an enormous fish. Jonah prays to God and vows to change. And as a result, God commands the fish to release him, gives him a second chance, and Jonah goes to Nineveh. Jonah pleads with the people of Nineveh and they perform rituals designed for repentance and atonement. They change, and God holds back His fury.

I suspect that many of us here today are a lot like Jonah, somewhat apathetic to personal change and unmotivated to put in the necessary effort to potentially change others. Jonah has an important job to do, but he really doesn't want to do it. He procrastinates and tries to run away

from responsibility. Jonah gets himself into tremendous trouble and ultimately, he can't hide and must face the situation from which he ran. This is something that we do too often. We know what has to be done, but rather than meet the challenge head on, we run from it, we hide from it, and we do whatever necessary to avoid it. And when that happens, we feel just like Jonah: overwhelmed, miserable, and in a dark place. But God gives Jonah a second chance, just as God continually gives us second chances.

Much like other prophets, and just like many of us here today, Jonah has a confidence problem. In many ways, Jonah fears success more than he fears failure. To Jonah, success means change, and change is scary. It is easier for him to run away and hide. And it is easier for him to simply give up. Jonah needs to first change himself before he can inspire change in others. And while that's very hard to do, and while we might try to avoid that task and hide from ourselves, we can't. Rabbi Sidney Greenberg wrote in the book entitled, *Words to Live By*, "...wherever we go, we take ourselves along. God finds Yonah even in the belly of the whale. The only way to 'get away' from ourselves is to effect a change within ourselves. What we need is not a change of scene, but a change of soul."

That change of soul – that commitment to reach deep into our personal depths of shortcomings, failures, and insecurities – is what many of us run from most of our lives. That change of soul – that transformative experience that makes some of us harder and more confident, or softer and more understanding, or something completely new and different – is what frightens us but needs to inspire us. That change of soul – that understanding that nothing can happen unless we begin with ourselves – is critical to our personal health, growth and well-being, and vital to our ability to motivate others. But perhaps most of all, a requisite for that change of soul is recognizing the value of, and the necessity of, a relationship with God.

As the father and son from our story finished lunch, the son experienced a sense of revelation. The agent for change in each of the three pots was the water which metaphorically represents God in our lives. Genuine experiences with God change us and can have the ability to change how we view ourselves, how we address life's challenges and how we can influence others to change. During these High Holy Days, if not every day, God can be, or should be, or hopefully is a powerful source of our personal inspiration. We can and should change. All of us have the ability to make better choices in the year ahead and witness not only how those decisions affect us, but also how they impact our family, friends and greater community. We can meet our challenges, and we should. A better and more satisfying life awaits us in the year ahead. Let's go for it and let's do it. Let's make the new year 5779 an incredible year for ourselves, our families, our congregation and our greater community.

Zochreinu l'chaim, Melech chafetz b'chaim, v'chatveinu b'Sefer Ha'chaim, l'ma'ancho Elokim chaim – Remember us for life, Sovereign who delights in life, and inscribe us in the Book of Life, for a happy, healthy, peaceful and prosperous New Year. Shanah Tovah and Gut Yontif!