

Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon, 5778 (2017)

Rabbi Debra Rappaport at Shir Tikvah

[Please note: I have bracketed the sections which I did not read on Erev Rosh Hashanah; but they remain in this written version.]

Shana tova. Thank you for being here tonight.

I'd like to invite you to reflect for a moment on **why** you come to high holy days services.

For many of us, it's the music. For many it's about this community. Some may be with us for the first time tonight. Some might say, "it's what Jews do on Rosh Hashanah." But taking it a little farther, now that you're here – what are your expectations or hopes? (I won't ask you to "share", so please be honest with yourself. It is your space.)

With the honor of speaking to you on the 5778 "season opener", I've been thinking a lot about "what is the call or purpose of this season, the *chagim*?" Where do we find ourselves in the myths and metaphors of Rosh Hashanah? With the shofar blasts to wake us up, I see our work of *teshuvah* (returning) as spiritual closet-cleaning. The question that **each of us** needs to face as an individual is "what matters?" And "how can I be more awake to what matters? – and let go of what doesn't?"

I've known since May that I would be speaking tonight; but I couldn't come up with a thing to offer you tonight without going through my own tears. So I'd like to share with you tonight what my tears have taught me, [*l'shem yichud ha-kadosh baruch hu u'shechinateh* – dedicated to the unification of the Holy Blessed One with physicality here on earth.]

My body has been grieving. I genuinely didn't know that, until I tried to write something meaningful to share. Everything I wrote felt superficial, so I sat down with my journal instead of the computer and learned that my body grieves the cycles she used to know. For nearly 40 years, new life potential lived in my body, and flushed from my body more or less every moon cycle, until exactly one year ago.

I am still in this same body; in many ways just getting to know it, each year more grateful for all the ways my body functions, even as things I used to do are less accessible. Through my tears, I know that this passage, this grief, is making room for something in me that I don't yet know.

I have often wondered about how to understand the plethora of biblical stories that – to the extent that they spoke of women at all – focused on barrenness or child-bearing. I have understood these stories as metaphor for the human need – male and female – for creative expression. In tomorrow's Haftarah, we'll hear the story of Hannah, longing for a son. A son to give over to God's service. All is well in Hannah's life, her husband adores her and her needs are taken care of – but she feels incomplete without that son. She goes to the temple and pours out the longing of her heart in spontaneous prayer. So heartfelt that the priest thinks she is drunk.

The story of Hannah is not just about having a baby. It's about having a male baby, and giving him to the priest as soon as he is weaned – as soon as he can eat for himself! - to serve God.

The priority in our culture, for many centuries, has been on that active, male procreative energy. Too often at the expense of the female body,

feminine energy, the earth. Matter. Physicality. This distortion affects us all, regardless of gender identity.

I live in a woman's body. For many of the last 15 years that I've been leading High Holy Day services, I got my period with the new moon of Tishrei, the new moon of Rosh HaShanah. There I was, not just a woman at the Torah, but a menstruating woman at the Torah; the Torah which women were denied access to for two thousand years because we *might* be bleeding. And why couldn't women on their cycles be near Torah? Because the menstrual blood is not only **symbolic** of death; it is a physical sluffing off of potential life; what might have been a home for new life.

What does it mean for a Jewish community to have a bleeding woman at the Torah? It speaks, certainly of a new age of egalitarianism, even as that is the case in only some of our communities. But it also points us to face and embrace life **in relationship with death**, not in rejection of it.

[When I was in rabbinical school, we had an assignment to take on any mitzvah that wasn't already part of our practice, and do it for a semester. I took on tefillin. I loved wrapping the tefillin around my arm and my head; I loved the sense of being physically bound to the mitzvah. But I was already bound in this body, heavy with the ebb and flow of my cycles, cramping.

I loved the weeks I got to live in the world of my mind, and stay in the world of externality and productivity. But inevitably the hormones would shift, and I would be confronted by my body again. During most of those years, I was much more aware of the loss of my ability to live in that world

of mind over matter than of the loss of potential life leaving my body. I resisted my body's call to turn inward, to lose and to grieve. It's so hard learning to appreciate the wisdom of our bodies. And by extension, the earth.]

We **all** live in bodies that experience death, aging, and all the cycles that go with it, including the loss of potential life. Some of you have lost dear ones in the past year; some are facing illness at this moment. How do we hold that and why am I talking about it?

The ancient Israelites created rituals to separate life from death. They tried to keep death at bay by keeping anyone who has encountered death – either contact with a corpse, or through menstruation or “wasted semen” – away from the holy of holies – the Torah.

Of course we want to keep death at bay - and to save a life is no question the highest mitzvah. But the silence around death; the closeting of death, does us harm. The closeting of death keeps us from fully embracing life.

Each bodily cycle, each ending can cause sadness – but nothing is wrong. This is living life! For me, feeling grief, crying my tears, is what re-connects me to life. The path of tears is my most reliable way out of the daily build-up of numbness, stuckness, self-centeredness.

So - within moments of feeling grief in my own body this season, I was crying uncontrollably for the earth. Entire forests and neighborhoods and the people and animals in them burned to our north and west. To our south and east, winds, floods, ocean surges wiped out villages.

We are called by this season to reckon with death as a natural part of what we all must experience. But how do we hold it? I imagine I'm not alone in swinging back and forth between overwhelmed, shut-down and simply ignoring it so that I can manage to get my groceries.

There is a difference between the ordinary loss of a life cycle and what is happening to the earth right now. We don't need more data that climate change is real – any more than we needed to wait for science to prove that cigarettes cause cancer. Rather, we need to **digest** what we know. In a powerful book called *Active Hope*, Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone write,

“When we **feel** our grief, we know not only that the loss is real but also that it matters to us. That's the digestion phase – where the awareness sinks to a deeper place within us so that we take in what it means. Only then can we find a way forward that is based on an accurate perception of reality.... Honoring our pain for the world is a way of valuing our awareness, first, that we have noticed, and second, that we care. Intellectual awareness by itself is not enough. We need to digest the bad news. That is what rouses us to respond.”¹

That is the wake-up of the shofar!

How do we do this? By deep listening. To ourselves, to one another. I hope for all of us that the rituals of High Holy Days provide space and inspiration for this deep listening, for our truths. That we turn off the news – we really don't need more information; we simply need to digest, to feel,

¹ Joanna Macy & Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope*, p. 71

to hear ourselves into feeling – so that we can call out **our** authentic prayer like Hannah did.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur come to wake us up to life, by reminding us through ritual and poetry, through fasting and self-affliction, that it is only by grace of God that we live!

Today, Rosh HaShanah, is known as *Yom HaDin*, The Day of Judgment. In English, the primary meaning of “judgment” is *discernment*: “The mental ability to perceive and distinguish relationships or alternatives.” - not censure or criticism, but rather discernment. The central metaphor of Rosh Hashanah is of God on the throne weighing our deeds. There is one of those old-fashioned scales, with *Din* on one side of the scale, *Rachamim* – compassion on the other. We all root for *rachamim*, compassion – which shares a root with *rechem*, womb – and trust that *rachamim* wins out by the end of Yom Kippur. But we take the metaphorical trial seriously.

Rabbi Nancy Flam² teaches of *din* as a morally neutral fact of our existence. She writes, “Disease and death are expressions of *midat hadin*, (the divine attribute of judgment). Physical bodies are limited; they are created with a finite capacity for life and health. They are vulnerable to disease, injury and decay. We are created and, without exception, pass away. This is part of God’s holy design.”

² Nancy Flam, “The Angels Proclaim It, But Can We? ‘The Whole Earth is Full of God’s Glory’”, *CCAR Journal: The Reform Jewish Quarterly*, Spring 2009, LVI/II, pp. 16 – 25

In opposition to the forces of *Din* at Rosh Hashanah, we have *Rachamim*, compassion. *Rachamim* comes to soften the decree of our finitude. In the declaration of God's 13 attributes we chant at the Torah, we remind God first and foremost of God's compassion: *Adonai, Adonai el rachum v'chanun*. Many of the mitzvot are examples of *rachamim*: to clothe the naked, visit the sick, comfort the mourner, bury the dead. We have examples in Torah of acts of *rachamim* actually moving the boundaries of *din*. Nancy Flam invites us to

Consider Rabbi Akiva's visit to his sick disciple. Upon the cleaning of the sick man's room and tidying up, a simple act of care and dignity cured the patient of his ills (Talmud, *Berakhot* 39b). Or the various people Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai would visit: upon honest conversation and a show of care, Yohanan Ben Zakkai would reach out his hand and the fellow would be cured, not just comforted. As if our very human love, compassion and empathy, as well as our research and treatment, could move nature to overcome previously known limits. As if our love, our attention, our presence, our bestowal of dignity could heal both spiritually and physically.

In other words, even as we face the finitude of life, we can and do fight it. Fiercely. With compassion.

Rosh Hashanah is a joyful time. The joy of the Jewish New Year is a different sort of joy than the often-drunken celebrations of the secular new year. It's a joy that comes from our spiritual closet-cleaning; from the safety we know in our bodies when we are living in our truth and integrity.

Hannah teaches us that there is value in formulating the longings of our hearts, and speaking them aloud. Her son is named Shmuel, God heard.

In order to stop living routinely, to make time for what really matters, we do have to let some things die – conscious or unconscious commitments to certain activities or maybe people that distract us from what matters. Nature models this life-death-life cycle; the trees are glorious in their radiance as they turn colors and let their leaves die. There is even a Hebrew word, *shalechet*, for the trees sending off their leaves in the fall, so that they can direct their life force deep down into their roots, and regenerate for the next season's growth. Trees teach us that life, while it has linear aspects, is also cyclical. And death is not always the end, but also makes space for new beginnings.

We begin the year with gratitude, celebration, song. Thank God. When we start with love and connection; appreciating even the smallest good in ourselves and others, we can create space where it is safe to feel what we need to feel – the whole range, laughter and joy, tears and mourning. And space to know what we need to know. To make amends where we need to make amends.

God willing, through this process, we end the season connected to an even deeper more authentic knowing of connection and love.

May we have the space, the courage, and the patience to listen to our own truths this season. To bring awareness to what is ancient and what is still-in-utero. May we face death in order to embrace life. *Shana tova u'metukah.*