

**ROSH HASHANA 2008 – KOL EMETH
ON THE ONENESS OF GOD AND HUMANITY**
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Last year, when I had the privilege of speaking to you on the second day of Rosh Hashana (for which I am very grateful to Rabbi Booth and Rabbi Graff), I talked with you about what I had learned about Jewish identity and about global citizenship from a Christian theologian from Sri Lanka. Today I have a story to tell you about an encounter I had with a Hindu scholar from Trinidad.

As some of you may remember from my sermon last year, I had had the remarkable experience of joining a group called, "Thinking Together," the World Council of Churches' think tank on interfaith dialogue, now in the midst of considering the contentious issue of conversion. My first summer with the group, I was astonished by my good fortune to be sitting with this remarkable group of people. There were theologians and academics from five religions and four continents, including a progressive imam and Islamic scholar from South Africa, a Buddhist professor of conflict resolution from Thailand, a professor of Hinduism from India and Trinidad, a senior leader of the Presbyterian Church in the US, an internationally known Christian scholar and leader of the interfaith dialogue movement, and a Buddhist monk and scholar from Sri Lanka wearing bright orange robes, among others.

Still, the meeting had had its challenges for me. Being the only Jew at that particular meeting of the group, I had spent a good deal of time wondering whether my colleagues – especially the Christians – really understood what it was for a people to have been on the receiving end of Christian missionizing efforts through history. By the end of the meeting, I had learned that the Christian theologians at this table knew a great deal about the historical suffering of the Jewish people at the hands of Christians. Several of the people at the table had written renowned books on the need for Christians to rethink their own theology in the light of the church's history of anti-semitism.

What is more, some of the Hindus at the table had even more recent reason than I did, as a Jew, to associate conversion with destruction of communities and cultures. I learned that in recent years there has been a great deal of tension, and some violence, related to the aggressive activity of Christian missionaries in Hindu communities in Asia. In fact, in recent weeks, the violence has intensified. The Hindus in the group had much more immediate experience of religious persecution than I did. For once, I was not the representative of the most oppressed minority at the table.

This summer I had the joy of joining the group for the second time, and I was joined by an old friend, a renowned Jewish educator from Israel, who was a long-time participant in the group. No longer the only Jew in the room, I knew I would be even freer to learn and stretch my heart and mind. This happened, though, in a surprising way.

Since the topic at hand was conversion, we expected that challenging moments might arise in conversation between the proselytizing religions represented at the table (i.e. Christianity and Islam) and those religions that tend not to seek converts aggressively (i.e. Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism). To our surprise, this year our attention was drawn to a different fault line in the group, the differences between those of us who consider ourselves monotheists and those coming from traditions that are not theistic, or emphasize multiple manifestations of the Divine.

In my opening remarks on Jewish perspectives on conversion, I had sought to articulate why seeking converts has not been a prominent part of Jewish practice over the centuries. I emphasized that Judaism aspires to serve as a "light to the nations" (Isaiah 42:6), but that this is about bringing the world to God and to justice, not about persuading the peoples of the world to adopt the particularities of Jewish practice. In the course of exploring this point, I cited texts including the second paragraph of the Aleinu, including,

"L'ha'avir gilulim min ha'aretz vaha'elilim karot yikareitun," "sweeping idolatry away so that false gods will be utterly destroyed," and "Bayom hahu yihiyeh Hashem echad ush'mo echad." "On that day God will be one and God's name one."

When I finished my introductory talk to the group, my Hindu colleague, Anant Rambachan, offered some appreciative words about what I had said. Then, very gently, he said that my remarks on bringing people to the one God and my references to prayers for the recognition of God's oneness were difficult for him. "Such texts," he said, "remind me of times when, growing up in Trinidad, people would break into our Hindu temples and destroy the *murti* (sacred images)." In the name of my belief in one God, his holy place had been defaced.

Anant is an elegant man, brilliant and gracious, and he commands great respect and love in the group. The room fell utterly silent as he spoke. I, for one, was mortified that I had said something that had been offensive to someone whom I hold in such high esteem. I rushed to tell him that I was sorry to have offended him, that that had certainly not been my intention. He made clear that he had taken no personal offense, but we all realized that something important had happened. We had encountered a point of profound conflict between the self-described monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, on the one hand, and Hinduism, on the other, with its rich teachings of the many different names and manifestations of the Divine in the world.

For me, this was a stunning moment. In my work in interfaith dialogue, I have sought to help Christians understand that some of the ideas, language, and images that are most precious to them resonate very differently for Jews, evoking our collective memories of many centuries of persecution. I have asked Christians to listen empathically to Jewish historical memory, though this must be very painful for them, and to examine their liturgy and their sacred texts in light of the Jewish experience. I have argued that Christians have a responsibility to look self-critically at their own tradition and history, to see how it has done harm, and to consider the implications for Christian practice in our own day.

Suddenly, my own religious language – words that I have known since I was a small child and recited daily for decades, was a source of pain to another, who had himself been on the receiving end of religiously motivated violence. This was deeply shocking. After all, the concept of monotheism lies at the very epicenter of Jewish tradition and Jewish self-understanding. How could this belief possibly be a source of harm to others? Yet here was my treasured colleague, challenging me to contemplate the ways in which belief in one God can convince people that theirs is the only truth, and to use this as a rationale for attacking the other. Real damage had been done in the name of the theological axiom that is our most cherished belief.

Suddenly, as a Jew in the group, the tables had been radically turned. In this encounter, I was not in my accustomed role as the representative of a persecuted people; rather, it was my text that had been a source of pain to another. It was now my obligation to suspend my own axiomatic truth long enough to hear someone who had a very different – and legitimate - perspective on that truth.

These were the very moments for which the "Thinking Together" project was created. Moments when each of us might enter into an entirely new understanding of our own tradition by seeing it through the eyes of "the other." In relationship with people of different religions and from different parts of the world, participants are drawn to consider hitherto unimaginable questions (like, "what do we mean by *"bayom hahu yihiye Adonai echad ush'mo echad," "on that day, God will be one and God's name one"*). Our relationships of respect and affection for one another lead us to examine unthinkable thoughts with care and respect, considering our own most treasured convictions from multiple perspectives, seeing our own worldview as only one among many imperfect human attempts to make sense of a world far beyond our own understanding.

From the moment of this encounter, I knew that I wanted to tell you about it, because it spoke volumes to me about two issues that are of profound concern to me, and which, I think, lie at the heart of our practice

during these holy days. First, my encounter with my Hindu colleague challenged me even more than before to think of myself not only as a Jew, but as a Jewish member of the human family, a citizen of the world in desperate need of repair. This was one more experience in which I was shown the sanctity and the thrill of cultivating relationship across religious and cultural boundaries, a process that for me is a direct response to the Psalmist's call to all of us to "seek peace and pursue it." And second, this encounter reminded me once again of the kind of empathy, commitment, and humility that are required if difficult conversations are to result in deep learning and connection, rather than in disdain, hate or even violence.

These same two issues: (1)exploring relationship with "the other," and (2)the qualities of being that facilitate healing and reconciliation in relationship, are expressed in our Torah readings of yesterday and today.

Earlier this year, through the work of Rabbi Arthur Waskow and feminist theologian Phyllis Trible, I was led to explore the connections between the story of the banishment of Hagar in Bereishit Chapter 21, which we read yesterday, and the near-sacrifice of Isaac in Chapter 22, which we read today.

In his wonderful book, *Tent of Abraham: Stories of Hope and Peace for Jews, Christians and Muslims*, Waskow persuasively enumerates no fewer than seven clear connections between Chapter 21, in which Avraham sends Hagar and Yishmael out to the wilderness, presumably to die, and Chapter 22, in which Avraham takes Yitzhak to Har Hamoriah, presumably to die. In brief, these are seven of the connections:

(1)"In both," Waskow writes, "God tells Abraham to carry out the mission that puts the life of his son in deadly danger. (2)In both, Abraham 'rises early in the morning' to start the journey. (3)In the one story, he lays a tree limb upon his son to begin the burning of the offering – while in the other, Hagar lays her son under a tree when he is at the point of death. (4) In each story, only an act of God saves each son at the very last moment. (5)In one story, Hagar lifts her eyes to see the well of Yishma'el's salvation, which she has already named "Be'er Lachai Ro'I" – the well of the living one who sees me; in the other, Abraham lifts his eyes to see the ram of Isaac's salvation, and Abraham names the place "the mountain of God's seeing." (6)In one story, Abraham's wife Hagar almost dies; in the other story, his wife Sarah dies as soon as the mission is accomplished." And finally, (7)In both stories laughter places a central role – since Yishmael's supposedly derisive laughter – "metsahek" – serves as the pretext for Sarah's demand that he be sent away; and since laughter lies at the core of Isaac's identity, for his name – Yitzhak – means laughter. (Waskow, *Tent of Abraham*, p. 35-6)

An impressive set of commonalities, don't you think? Given this extraordinary set of parallels, I think it is not too bold to assert that Chapters 21 – the Hagar story – and Chapter 22 – *Akedat Yitzhak*, are actually two versions of the same story. So, if we were to read these texts as one combined story of the near-sacrifice of a beloved son, what would the text be teaching us, particularly on Rosh Hashanah?

One answer may arise from a piece of midrashic evidence. The midrash imagines the angels breaking into loud weeping at the moment that Avraham lifted the knife to slaughter Isaac. The angels' tears fell on the knife, so that it could not cut Isaac's throat. Just then God called to the angel Michael, saying, "Why are you standing there? Do not let him be slaughtered!" Just then, Michael, with anguish in his voice, cried out "Avraham! Avraham! *Al tishlach yad'cha el hana'ar!*" "Do not lay your hand upon the boy! Do not harm him in any way!" (Louis Ginsberg, *Legends of the Jews*, vol 1, p, 281-2)

When read through the lens of this midrash, it is Avraham's tears that move God to spare Yitzhak's life, just as the Torah explicitly says in Chapter 21 that God intervened to save Yishma'el in response to the boy's cries (and implicitly, those of his mother, Hagar). What, then, does this pair of stories come to teach? It tells us that it makes no difference whose child dies - the child of a friend or the child of an enemy, the child of our own people or that of "the other." We are told that we may not grieve over "our" child's death and fail to grieve over the death of "the other," for as Chapter 21 records repeatedly, God cares deeply about "the other child" as well as about "our" favorite son, about Yitzhak.

The combined tale of Chapters 21 and 22 teaches us that we must care about all the families of the earth, even about "the other" or "the enemy," just as God does. Reading the two stories as one blurs the boundary between "us" and "them," between "our people" and "the other." We are one human family, and we must do whatever it takes not to close our hearts to "the other."

The second lesson that arises from reading the two stories in this way is that "our side" is not innocent. This, of course, is a familiar question. We have long wrestled with why God was willing to even pretend to honor Sarah's mean-spirited demand to send Hagar and Yishma'el to their deaths (even, knowing the end of the story, we know that they will survive the ordeal). And every year we struggle with a story that imagines God actually commanding the death of the beloved Yitzhak.

What does the combined tale teach? It demonstrates that not only are our ancestors deeply flawed people (as is so evident throughout *Sefer Bereishit*), but even our God acts in profoundly questionable ways. This story, then, is a stunning challenge to our own pride and certainty, both individually and nationally. We are neither perfect nor blameless. (Are you hearing echoes of the paragraph just before the "*Ashamnu*"? "*She'ein anachnu azei fanim uk'shei oref lomar lefanecha Adonai Eloheinu veilohei avoteinu: tsaddikim anachnu velo hatanu aval anachnu hatanu.*" "We are neither so arrogant nor so hard-hearted to say before You, O God, we are righteous and have not sinned; but truly, we have sinned.") The vivid demonstrations of our heroes' failings in the days' readings are a powerful check on our own defensive self-righteousness, on our own insistence that our worldview is "the truth."

These two lessons – the call to know the other and the call to humility, lie at the very heart of these *Yamim Nora'im*, for the process of interpersonal reconciliation, without which our long hours in shul on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are to no avail, depends on just these issues: (1) on empathy – the willingness to stand in the other's shoes, to stretch our minds and hearts to really hear the "other" 's experience of us, even when we can't imagine respecting their position, even it hurts; and (2) humility – the readiness to face our flaws and wrong-doing without denial or defensiveness, in order to reach not only for forgiveness but for transformation.

As I stood at the *amud* at our *shul* in Minnesota to lead the congregation for *Selichot*, marking that powerful transition into the holiday season, I was struck by how much of the High Holiday liturgy is about humility. Not only the *viduim*, in which we explicitly confess our own sins. But laced throughout the prayers about God's power and God's memory, and expressed wordlessly in the beautiful *nusach* of these days, is the powerful awareness of how small we are. Stepping from our usual posture of competence in the world into this radical awareness of the limitations not only of our virtue but of our capacities, is a profound lesson in humility that we are called to take to heart.

When that day arrived, the kingdom mourned its wise and caring leader. And then all eyes turned to the king's letter to see who would rule in his place. With great ceremony the prime minister opened the letter and read the instruction. Whom had the king chosen? Not one of his children, nor an adviser, nor a general. The king had chosen... the jester. The jester would be crowned king!

This deep personal work of self-examination, humility and empathy for the other's experience are central on three very different dimensions of our lives: (1) in the process of interpersonal reconciliation that lies at the heart of our practice during this sacred season; (2) in our experience as Americans during this highly contentious season in the political life of our country, and (3) about the process of stretching beyond a narrow construction of our identity as Jews to embrace more fully our larger identities as members of the human family and the global community.

Clearly, on the individual level, deep respectful listening, humble openness to criticism and genuine desire to hear another's perspective are essential if we are to atone for our interpersonal wrong-doing, and to heal hurts and estrangements in our lives. I believe that the very same traits that we practice with particular intentionality throughout this season – respect for the other, desire to learn, openness to perspectives very different from our own, humility and capacity for self-criticism, are precisely those traits whose absence

has given rise to the combative and disrespectful style of discourse that has become *de rigeur* in our national dialogue.

[I want to acknowledge here that I am absolutely as bad as the next guy when it comes to keeping my mind open to respect those who hold political views different from my own. It feels so good to be so sure that my perspective is correct; honestly, on some level, I really don't want to empathize with those on the other side. But on reflection, I know that falling into the normal and comfortable denigration of "the other side" contradicts some of my own most deeply held values.]

Most broadly, we have choices about how we construct our Jewish identities – as individuals and as a community. We can be the kind of Jews who are content to see every issue chiefly from the narrow perspective of "what's good for the Jews," or we can consciously stretch ourselves to be the kind of force in the world the prophet Isaiah must have imagined when he gave us the phrase "*or lagoyim*," "light unto the nations." To bring light to others, we must know more than our own familiar narrative. We must also actively seek out opportunities to learn how the world looks to others, even though such learning can be painful and difficult.

My Hindu colleague was moved when I told him that I would be talking with you about my encounter with him this summer. Not because he expected that I would renounce monotheism and suggest that we bring figures of the divine into our shul, or stop saying the *Shema* or the *Aleinu*. But because he understood that we had shared a moment of peace-making together, in which he was able to tell me about his own painful truth, and I let him know that I would be changed by having deeply heard his truth, so different from my own.

This sort of conversation is what reconciliation is made of. This kind of open, vulnerable and deeply respectful sharing of different perspectives – about a personal quarrel, an issue of national public policy or a matter of international diplomacy is the work of everyday peace-making. When we are willing to listen deeply to stories very different from our own, to grapple with "the other's" truths and allow them to affect how we think and who we are, we are doing the work of *teshuva*, turning toward God's desire for peace and reconciliation.

May the year to come be a year in which more of us stretch to hear and learn from others, and may the world be blessed by our efforts.