**RH-2 From Tears to Strength**

Once upon a time there was a prince who had everything. The finest clothing made by the finest tailors. The most resplendent jewels that sparkled in light. The tastiest delicacies from chefs in every cuisine. He had traveled to distant lands, seen carnivals and circuses and spectacles of every kind. He had met grand-dukes and sultans, dervishes and tribal chiefs.

The prince’s servants prided themselves on seeing to his every wish. Until one day, the prince made a request that no one knew how to fulfill. He asked to see God. First, they brought the most rugged mountain climbers to take him to the top of the tallest mountain. The view was breathtaking, but he didn’t see God. Next, they brought the trustiest sailors to take him to the center of the largest ocean. He was awestruck by the vastness of the seas. There was nothing but horizon in all directions. But he didn’t see God. They brought the greatest astronomers to accompany him in the darkest night, and he wondered at the cosmos as they showed him the stars, but he didn’t see God. They brought the most revered bishop, caliph, lama, rabbi, each took him to their most magnificent houses of worship — to the nave and the dome and the ark and the altar. He was inspired. But he didn’t see God.

Failing in their mission, they consulted with every wise scholar, seer, soothsayer, prophet, until an old woman presented herself with a simple suggestion. The prince didn’t need to travel far, she advised. He could find God anywhere, starting in his own village. She took him to a small house near his palace. There, inside the house, was a girl. The girl had lost her parents in a terrible accident and was injured and bereft. She told the prince her story as she cried.

The prince, hearing the girl’s story, and seeing her tears, cried tears as well. At that moment, the wise woman pulled out a small mirror and held it so that the prince could see his own tears.

She asked, “What do you see?”
And he replied, “I see myself crying.”

She answered, “Now you have seen the face of God. For as it says in the Book of Psalms: ‘God is close to the broken-hearted.”

Perhaps in this past year, we, too, have found God in our tears.

There have been so many reasons that we have shed tears in this past year.

We have cried for the families of those who have lost loved ones on *Shabbat Shahurah—*the Black Sabbath that was October 7th.

We have cried for the families who have sent their sons and daughters out to defend the State of Israel in a war that is still ongoing—many of whom have lost their lives, and for those who have returned with injuries that will last a lifetime.

We have cried for those who have survived and are still traumatized in Israel.

We can cry for the widows and orphans and homeless in Gaza who have become collateral damage through their Jihadist leaders who have brought upon them this suffering.

And here in the United States, we have cried for our children and grandchildren who have felt fear on their college campuses for proudly affirming their Jewishness and their support for the State of Israel.

And for some of us, there have been tears shed from personal losses such as debilitating illnesses and the death of close family and friends.

 As much as Rosh Hashanah comes each year to bring with it the possibility of renewal, on this Rosh Hashanah, we need this time of beginnings to hold a space for our heartbreak. Because whether in this past year you cried, or felt rage, or simply shook your head incredulously about the latest atrocities, it has certainly been appropriate to weep for a world that feels so badly damaged.

It turns out that God knows this feeling, too. In the book of Genesis, God creates human beings—the pinnacle of God’s magnificent creation on this planet—just lower than the angels, the Midrash teaches. We who are mere mortals are entrusted to care for this glorious place called Earth. In Chapter 1 of the Torah God gives humanity a charge – to tend to the earth, to protect it לעובדה ולשמרה — and only five chapters later, at the end of that first Torah portion in the Book of Genesis, these human reflections of the divine image have disobeyed. We see that they have committed murder, have figured out every ruse and way of cheating their neighbors and getting ahead, they have so desecrated the world they were handed that God feels regret, the text says: “***וַיִּנָּחֶם* יְהֹוָה כִּי־עָשָׂה אֶת־הָאָדָם בָּאָרֶץ וַיִּתְעַצֵּב אֶל־לִבּוֹ׃** – God regretted creating the human being on earth, and felt sad in God’s heart.” God, too, it turns out knows what it feels like to have your heart broken.

It turns out that we human beings have been disappointing ourselves—not to mention God—from the literal beginning of time. It’s true, today feels more dire, more urgent than it ever has before. But spiritually speaking, we’re dealing with something familiar, an eternal, essential human experience. One that our ancestors wrote about, and one that moved them to create the traditions we have today whose whole purpose might just be to give us tools for living in a world that breaks your heart—tools that help us resist the temptation to withdraw from life because the pain is so great. And these tools start from the very beginning of our story as a people—early on in the Torah.

In the Book of Exodus, when Pharoah decreed that he would throw all the newborn Israelite baby boys into the Nile, the midrash tells us that the Israelite couples stopped having sex—they didn’t want to risk the possibility of their child meeting such an inhumane fate. The world seemed impossibly dark and too inhospitable to imagine bringing children into it.

But there was a little girl, the midrash tells us, whose name was Miriam, and she was the one who said to her parents Amram and Yocheved, “Your decree is worse than Pharaoh’s! Pharaoh has only doomed the baby boys, but you, you foreclose any possibility of any child of any gender. Maybe our savior will be a girl. You could choose to create possibilities, or you could choose to close the door on possibility. But you **cannot** be complicit with Pharaoh in the destruction of our people.” The Midrash then teaches that her parents listened to her, and nine months later, Yocheved gave birth to a little boy, named Moses.

I think about those rabbis who wrote that Midrash, whose entire world had crumbled when the Romans conquered the land of Canaan, and with it, the *Beit Ha’Mikdash—*the 2nd Temple— the religious epicenter of the Jewish people. Now, Jews would be in exile from their land, a condition that would persist for close to 2,000 years. And yet it was these very same Rabbis, in the aftermath of chaos and dislocation, who envisioned a path forward and created a religious life that allowed this people to survive. And they did this by creating new rituals, festivals, and fasts. They created new ceremonies and new texts for a new generation of Jewish people they hoped and prayed would exist, even as all evidence in the present suggested that it was a ridiculous thing to hope for.

The Rabbinic Judaism that they created in the aftermath of the Destruction of the 2nd Temple is the Judaism that we practice to this day. But at the time, who could have imagined that the Jewish people would survive such cataclysmic destruction? With no land of their own; with no way to continue to worship God at the Temple, it would have hard to imagine that a path forward was possible. And yet, that is exactly what our Rabbis created—a Judaism that could be practiced at any time and in any place. A Judaism whose bold claim was that God had not abandoned God’s people, because the destruction of the Temple could never destroy God’s eternal Covenant with the Jewish people.

And I am reminded of the genius of our Sages every time I stand under the *chuppah* with a couple and prepare to chant the seven blessings, the *Sheva Brachot*. I think about those Rabbis who created a Jewish wedding ceremony imagining that one day there might be a couple somewhere in the world who would fall in love and get married. An idea that to them was like putting a spiritual brick in the edifice of a new Jerusalem, even as the Jerusalem they knew had been reduced to a pile of rubble. If you go to a Jewish wedding today you might not absorb the amazing truth that this deeply joyful ceremony was constructed against the backdrop of heartbreak. And I think there’s something for us here today, in these seven blessings, as we enter this new year after a year of heartbreak.

The first blessing, over wine, reminds us to find joy, wherever we are. *L’chaim*. The second blessing reminds us that everything in this world reverberates with God’s glory. The second blessing is a reminder that even as things seem to be falling apart, we are not separate from everything. Despite our hurt and our pain and our skepticism, our ancient Sages were able to affirm that there is a loving God capable of radiating blessing. Because in our Sages’ vision of the future, God was not just present in a Temple in Jerusalem, rather, God could be present with us wherever we are, in our joy and in the brokenness around us, as we strive to piece it back together.

The third and the fourth blessings celebrate the creation of the individual human being, the infinite creative potential of each human being. The fifth blessing says that anyone who has felt loss and pain and bereft needs only look and see at how these two souls have found each other against all odds, and that this in and of itself is cause for hope. For this very couple Zion now rejoices. The sixth blessing calls back to the first human beings in the Garden of Eden– before the fall, before humanity broke God’s heart, when we still lived in balance with the earth and with each other.

And by the seventh blessing the rabbis have imagined nothing less than the messianic redemption of the world, embodied by people singing and dancing and celebrating in the streets of a rebuilt Jerusalem, as the city, and the world it represents, has been rebuilt by love. That’s the Jewish wedding ceremony—a beautiful vision imagined from the world of rubble.

And at every wedding, I think of the dreams this couple holds—for a home, for health, for children, for the jobs and lives they imagine—and I know at some point their hearts will be broken. Because all of our hearts get broken. And yet, we stand under the *chuppah* and dream. And we break a glass for the unredeemed and broken world we still live in, they kiss, we cry, and we shout mazal tov, and then we dance like the world could end tomorrow.

And I know that each one of us comes here this morning with our own tears, and our own heartbreak—and hopefully, a few dreams. This year of all years, it would be false, a distraction, to focus only on the joyful sound of the shofar because there has been so much pain, loss, disappointment and heartbreak.

But I want to give you some contemporary reasons for hope that the tears we have shed in this past year will not be the end of the story—just as our ancient Sages birthed a new Judaism out of the ashes of a destroyed Temple. Because here in this country, when the campus protests against the war in Gaza intensified, when the protesters continued to shout: “From the River to the Sea, Gaza will be free;” when more and more student protesters called for divestment from companies based in the State of Israel; what I saw in this past year was a secret that protesters in university encampments and on city streets don’t seem to be in on: The more they demonized Israel, the more they reawakened Jewish identity for so many, and in so doing, they have contributed to the strengthening of Zionism.

Because paradoxically, since October 7, this rise in antisemitism and anti-Zionist rhetoric is inspiring Jewish pride and solidarity with Israel among so many young Jews. And it is not only among the young. My rabbinic colleagues and I have experienced the same phenomenon that people who had heretofore been indifferent to their Jewish identities were taking their tears and turning them into action.

Some confessed that they haven’t been to synagogue since their *B’nai Mitzvah,* but they wanted to come back now. Others have asked me how to get *mezuzot* for their friends to hang beside their front doors. I have seen more Jews sporting new jewelry expressing both pride and pain: prominent Magen Davids alongside dog tags calling to “Bring Them Home Now!”

Even as students who continued to support Israel on their campuses experienced a kind of social canceling for expressing empathy for Israelis, more and more of them have found that in their loneliness, they are not alone. They are rediscovering that they belong to a rich history of Jews who experienced othering and expulsions but whose greatest strength was in each other. They are rediscovering the millennia-old Jewish rituals and community structures that nourish belonging. And they are rediscovering Zionism.

According to many of the protesters, Zionism is a settler-colonialist Jewish supremacist movement akin to Nazism and dedicated to the displacement of Palestinians. But for most of American Jews, Zionism is the belief that Jews have a right to self-determination in their historical homeland.

At the heart of this Zionism is the security in having at least one place in the world that never closes its doors to displaced and oppressed Jews. This Zionism is dedicated to fighting for an Israel that is liberal and democratic and also holds hope for dignity of all you yearn for freedom—and all who are willing to acknowledge the humanity in their neighbor.

As a rabbi, I see this moment as a bittersweet opportunity. Antisemitism might be on the rise, but so is Jewish identity. Jews might have friend-circles that have disavowed them, but they are finding refuge, comfort and strength in each other. The protests unleashed a relentless antisemitic wave in America, but they also have awakened Zionism in the hearts of American Jews who now understand that Israel is at least one place on Earth that can truly guarantee that Jews will always be welcome.

When our people went into the depths of the sea on their way out of Egypt, they didn’t find sea monsters or dragons. According to one midrash, they found an orchard planted right at the bottom of the fearsome sea. When all was unknown, with the waves towering above them and Pharaoh’s army menacing behind them, there was fruit, there was beauty, there was sweetness, there was sustenance.

There might be dragons out there somewhere, but there’s also ripe fruit. And we are a people who knows that we need sweetness to sustain us on our way through the perilous seas. Who knows what we’ll find there? If we look close enough, through our tears, we may find the face of God.

And so we pray, please God, even with our pain, let there also be also tears of redemption and relief, of gratitude and delight, of strength, of love, of turning, and of salvation.

So that we all may merit the gift of inscription in the Book of Life of blessing in the coming year—*Kein yihe ratzon—*So may it be—*Shana Tova Tikateivu*