

Rosh Hashanah morning
 September 23, 2006
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I'd like to begin this morning with two short stories from the Torah. First, shortly after the Children of Israel escape from Egypt, they arrive at a place called Rephidim, where they are suddenly attacked by a tribe coming at them out of the desert, the Amalekites. For the first time in their lives as free people, our ancestors were forced to take up arms and fight to defend themselves. And they win that battle by what seems like a miracle. During the battle, Moses stations himself on top of a hill, with his brother Aaron on one side and his brother-in-law Hur on his other side. Moses raises his hands. And as long as he holds up his hands, the Israelites prevail in battle. But when he drops his hands, the enemy, the Amalekites prevail. After hours of battle, Moses' hands grow heavy; he gets tired!, and so they bring a stone for him to sit upon, and Aaron and Hur each hold up one of his hands. In this way, says the Torah, his hands remained steady until the sun set, enabling the rag-tag collection of runaway Israelite slaves to triumph in this, their first experience of war.

The second story: years later, Moses' sister Miriam and his brother Aaron both die, and Moses has to go forward leading the people alone. And making his task even more difficult, God has told Moses that he will not enter the Promised Land. Then the text says *vatiktzar nefesh ha-am baderech*, the spirit of the people contracted on the way. (2x) Their morale collapsed. And they began to speak against God and against Moses, saying "why did you make us leave Egypt, to die in the wilderness?" (Why did we have to go on this stupid trip?!) And God doesn't seem to be in a great mood either, because in response to the people's unhappiness, he sends poisonous snakes to bite the people, causing many to die. The people beg Moses to intercede with God on their behalf, and God instructs Moses to fashion a copper snake, and to mount it high up on a pole, and when a person was bitten by a snake, they would look upon the copper snake and they would recover.

Two kind of incredible stories: first, the military power of Moses' hands and second, the healing power of the copper snake. Incredible, in both senses of the word. Incredible in the sense of wonderful and amazing. And also incredible in its original sense of not entirely believable. When my son Ari was about seven or eight years old, he made a comment that stopped me in my tracks. I don't remember what we were talking about, but he referred in passing to "the Torah and its lame lies." I guess he had stories like these in mind, in which the world of the Torah seems to operate according to different laws than the world in which we live today. That was quite a few years ago, and you will have to ask Ari what he would say now. But that cutting remark remains stuck in my mind: the Torah and its lame lies. And I am fully aware that many members of our synagogue, when they hear these stories, smile and think to themselves, "there is so much unbelievable stuff in the Torah." When asked the question, "do you consider the Torah important?" the answer is usually: "I guess so, but it's pretty out of date."

This is a problem for us as a community, and for each of us as individual Jews. Because when we are in need, all of us want a religion that will actually help in whatever

battles we face in life, and will actually help us get well...in real life, not just in a fairy tale.

It is not a new problem. In the mishnah's discussion of Rosh Hashanah, we find that 2,000 years ago, the great rabbis of Judaism had exactly the same problem with the stories of the Torah. Rabbi Judah the Prince, editor of the Mishnah, wrote the following in Tractate Rosh Hashanah about these very two stories: **But could the hands of Moses make any real difference in the battle? And could the copper serpent really make the difference between whether a person would live or die?** Like us, Judah the Prince was living in a world in which magical signs and gestures worked well in fairy tales, but not in real life.

His answer in the Mishnah is both radical and simple; ancient and modern: **Both of these two stories, says Judah the Prince, are about the power of emotion. Moses' uplifted hands, in the battle with Amalek, lifted up the hearts of the Israelite warriors. And the copper serpent, mounted high on the pole, lifted up the thoughts and emotions of the people who needed healing. When their minds and hearts were directed toward heaven, they won their battles; when their hearts and minds were lifted up, they were healed.**

Rabbi Judah the Prince rejected a literalist, magical reading of the Torah stories, in which God saves the people with a miracle. Instead, he found in these stories a profound and **practical, human** lesson, which is that whether we succeed or fail, whether we are healed or remain ill may often depend upon our inner state, our psychic, emotional reality. Are we hopeful, or are we discouraged? Are we cheerful, or depressed? Are we confident, or frightened? Throughout the ages, Judaism has understood that God brings salvation to the world **not** by playing games with the laws of nature, but rather, by changing the hearts of human beings. Rabbi Judah includes these two stories in his discussion of Rosh Hashanah, specifically because the Blowing of the Shofar is an event in the external world of the senses which is designed to penetrate to the inner world of our emotions. **Rosh Hashanah...more than any other time of year.... is the season of the human heart.**

Rosh Hashanah's questions are: How do we turn our heart from fear to faith? From sadness to joy? From despair to hope? If Judaism can offer real answers to these questions, then it has something powerful and important to say to the world today.

Our religion does in fact have quite a bit to say about this topic, which is classically framed as the problem of exile. Exile is not always a geographic condition. Over and over in our lives, we human beings find ourselves in exile, from the Garden of Eden, from our mother's comforting arms and breast, from the people we love, and from God. Rosh Hashanah is about returning from exile, the journey from broken-ness to wholeness.

Today I would like to offer three simple pieces of Jewish wisdom for this journey of return. The first arises directly out of my personal experience, and speaks to why Marian and I live here in Santa Barbara. Twenty years ago right now, Marian moved out to Santa Barbara from New Jersey, where she had been living. We had decided during that summer, the summer of 1986, to get married, and she uprooted herself to come to join me here. The months leading up to our wedding were, to put it mildly, difficult. There were a lot of very emotional issues to be decided: how traditional it would be,

whether we would circle each other, whether she would wear a veil, who we would invite and who not, and so forth. It was stressful.

More important than all of that, to be honest, was the fact that I was completely terrified! We had set the date, planned the wedding, there was no turning back...and it suddenly dawned on me that we hardly knew each other! So I provoked arguments, and I snapped at her, and we were both miserable and scared....we were spending all of our time together, but we were in exile from each other. For me, at least, there was one thing that cured that psychic illness, and that was going into the ocean.

The salt water, the sunlight, the wind all washed through my body and, by some mysterious mechanism, carried away the fear.

Over the years, hikes in the mountains, camping trips into the desert, rafting on a river, and even just sitting out on our back patio as the sun is setting, have been among the best medicines I have found for heartache and fear. This, by the way, is the ancient wisdom of Sukkot, the festival coming up in two weeks which calls us to go out of our houses, out of our secure and insulated dwelling-places, and out into the wind and weather of the natural world. "When we return to Nature," wrote the early Zionist thinker A.D. Gordon, "we return to ourselves, and feel heavy, hard oppressive fragments fall from our hands, feet, body and soul." We came from nature, and in returning to nature, we return to ourselves. Go camping, or hiking, or simply walk on the beach or sit, eat, even sleep in the sukkah and return to nature. This is Judaism's first teaching about returning from exile.

The second simple but difficult wisdom regarding the journey of return is to turn toward each other. It is a fact of human nature that we pass our emotions to each other. Joy, faith and courage are contagious...and of course so is fear. The officers of the army in ancient Israel would ask their men before battle; "**mi haish hayareh, v'rach halevav?** who is the man who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go and return to his house, and let him not melt the heart of his fellows like his heart." It's true of soldiers in battle, but also children in a classroom, or neighbors on a street, members of a committee, or the members of a synagogue. We pass our emotions to each other, and catch them from each other, infinitely more quickly than we pass our germs...and often with greater impact.

Our faces, in particular. Our inner life, in Hebrew our *pnim*, is revealed most truthfully by the expression of our face (*panim*). And our emotions travel from one soul to another across the synapse between two faces. **Feelings...** of well-being, or of anxiety, of confidence or of fear, leap instantaneously from face to face via the light of our eyes, and the unconscious relaxing and tensing of our jaw, lips, cheek and brow. So we call the gathering before a wedding *kabbalat panim*, meaning "receiving faces." And this is **literally** what happens: the bride and groom see the faces of their guests, and in each face to face meeting, they receive the face...**they receive the emotions flashing across that face**. Happy emotions, we hope!

Many of our most basic *mitzvot* involve the exchange of human emotions: visiting the sick, comforting the mourner, welcoming guests, even giving tzedakah, about which Maimonides says this: "Whenever a person gives charity to a poor person, but does so with an unpleasant look on his face, and not looking the person in the eye, he loses and destroys the merit of his act, even if he gave him 1,000 pieces of gold." The person who is sick or impoverished is faced, obviously, with a physiological or a financial challenge, but also, with an emotional problem. How can he or she find the courage, the confidence,

the optimism that may help him or her to recover? In each of these cases, Judaism encourages the person to look into another human face, receiving the human emotions of a friendly visitor. In face to face encounter, we can lift up each others' hearts.

Finally, the third Jewish secret for returning from the exile of our heart is Religion. Ritual. Symbolic gestures and poems that become prayers. Music, dance, and art clearly, all have this function of making us feel something new, of opening our hearts, of lifting our spirits....but I'm here tonight to speak about religion.

After all is said and done, for what other purpose do we light Shabbat candles, or recite the shma, or set a mezuzah on our doorpost, or stand under a chuppah, or listen to the shofar, if not to cause a transformation **inside** ourselves?

With ritual, we perform magic. The tradition gives us certain essential ingredients: objects of beauty, fragments of memory, verses of poetry, and music...ingredients which touch and awaken all five of our senses. We mix those ingredients together and add the most important ingredient of all....which is kavanah, meaning intention, or open-ness, or love. We mix these together into a magic potion and drink it, and feel our hearts unfold.

Here is a personal story about ritual. My tallit tonight is new. My previous tallit I purchased over twenty years ago, and when my daughter Rachel was born eighteen years ago, at her naming ceremony Marian and I made her some promises. I promised her that when she turned eighteen and left for college, I would give her my tallit. I think that there may be two of you here tonight who were at that ceremony, eighteen years ago, outside in Ronit and Avner's front yard off of North Patterson. To me it seems like yesterday. Over the years, I wore that tallit almost daily, and prayed in it in the mountains, and in the desert, in our backyard, and in Jerusalem. It is filled with the smell of me, and with my prayers. This past June, Rachel graduated from high school, and four weeks ago, she left home for a year in Israel. The day she left, I told her the story of her naming, and gave her my tallit. She already had her own, which Marian made for her Bat Mitzvah. But I wanted to fulfill my promise from her naming ceremony. And I hope that one night, when she is feeling lonely, or sad, or frightened, she might pull out my tallit, and wrap herself in it and pray. It's possible that she never will. But I believe it could give her comfort, and that gives me comfort, as I send my daughter off into the world.

Ritual...if we allow it to...can overcome our exile, and make us whole.

And so we return to Rosh Hashanah and the shofar. On a spiritual level, the world in which we live is not so different from the universe described in the two Torah stories with which we began. We are on a long, long journey, a journey begun by our ancestors...and which will continue long after we die. From time to time, enemies come out of nowhere to attack us, and sometimes in moments of discouragement we suddenly find the ground at our feet swarming with poisonous snakes.

In these moments, how will we lift up our hearts? For this purpose, God has given us three gifts: The first, the natural world, with its healing elements of earth, wind, sun and rain; second, the people around us, who with a smile and a kind word can give us hope and courage; and third, the ancient rituals of our religion, which need only to be mixed with love to perform their magic of making us whole.

The voice of the shofar this morning is just such a ritual. Open the ears of your soul to the shofar. The first blast, **t'kiyah**, is a call to listen. Next come the **broken** blasts of **shvarim t'ruah**, sighing and weeping sounds of sadness and heartbreak. And in

the end, **t'kiyah g'dolah**, a single unbroken sound...the voice of healing, of consolation of the world rebuilt and our hearts made whole.

May this New Year be a year of health and wholeness for you and your families; a year of hearts uplifted, with your eyes set upon God. L'shanah tova.