

Rosh Hashana 5777

Dvar Torah - Leah Sarna

This summer I had the privilege of interning with the Pastoral Care department at Columbia Presbyterian hospital-- a major New York City hospital. I worked as a chaplain there for eleven weeks, connecting with hundreds of patients on what was usually the worst day of their lives.

Most of what I saw there reflected the utter chaos of the world.

Let me give you just one example: I was walking down the hall one day on my way to an intensive care unit. The unit was tucked away down a rather narrow hallway with many sharp angles. Usually this was not a problem. On that particular day, as I walked down the hall looking at my patient list and hoping not to find anything too gruesome in my unit-- I looked up, and I saw a veritable flotilla coming at me. There must have been at least ten doctors and nurses pushing and carrying an incredible amount of gear and machinery all surrounding this one man who was wearing a hospital gown, walking slowly in the middle, with a look of excruciating pain. I quickly flattened against a wall, making room for them to pass down the narrow hallway. I later learned that this patient was on ECMO-- a machine that bypasses the heart and lungs, aerating the blood and pumping it back through the body. I had never seen a living person before whose heart and lungs couldn't function. It was terrifying and just devastatingly sad.

On the other hand, some of what you see in the hospital is miraculous. Majestic, almost. One day I entered that very same intensive care unit, and saw a man playing music and laughing. I walked into his room and introduced myself. I asked him about the cause of his joy, and he told me that he had just undergone a successful and miraculous liver transplant. His son had come in to be a live liver donor, but mid-transplant something had gone just a little wrong. His son couldn't be his donor. Fortunately, while he was still in the operating room, under anesthesia, the hospital miraculously happened to find another matching liver. This second transplant was successful, and the next morning I found this man singing in his recovery room. Miracles. Utter majesty.

Today we remember creation-- in our davening we say עולם הרת היום -- today was the birth of the world. And in creation we see that majesty is the opposite of chaos and disorder. Before creation, the world was תוהו

וְבוֹהוּ, the world was a formless void. It was chaos. And then Hashem began to make order-- separating light from darkness, separating the waters under the earth from the waters above the earth, separating water from land, and on and on. The actions of Hashem in the Bereishit story would lead us to believe that there is a majestic God who, through creative activity, overcomes chaos. Majesty is order.

Chaos and Majesty. Chaos and majesty seem dichotomous. And so it comes as a surprise that they are brought together in the sounds of the Shofar.

First, majesty:

In a few moments, just before we blow shofar, we will recite Tehillim מז. Psalm 47

.For the leader of the Korahites, a Psalm -- למנצח לבני קורח מזמור

This chapter of Psalms is about people coronating God. And the Psalmist gives us the following instructions:

עֲלֶה אֱלֹהִים בְּתִרְוָעָה יִקְוֶה בְּקוֹל שׁוֹפָר:

God ascends with the Teruah. Hashem goes up with the sound of the Shofar.

When we blow shofar, we coronate God. We declare God's majesty through the Shofar's blasts.

But those very same majestic notes are modelled on chaos.

The Talmud in Rosh Hashana 33b asks the following-- The Torah in Bamidbar 29 tells us that Rosh Hashana is a Yom Teruah. What is this Teruah? The Targum, an Aramaic translation of the Torah from the end of the Second Temple Period translates Teruah as יבב, and we know what that word is because it appears in context in Judges, in the song of Deborah, as a descriptor of the mother of Sisra who sits by the window and cries.

בעד החלון נשקפה ותיבב אם סיסרא

The mother of Sisra is crying because she believes that her son has died. His chariot has not returned from battle. The *teruah* is this kind of crying. The crying of a mother who pines for her son.

The Talmud goes on to describe an argument regarding what this kind of cry sounds like: some say groaning, some way wailing. Our shofar blasts today are a mixture, some are the groaning sound, the three blasts of the *shevarim*, and some are the wailing sound-- the staccato notes of what we call the *truah*. And sometimes we combine them, in a groaning-wailing sound that we call the *shevarim-truah*.

Our Shofar blasts are majesty and chaos. Listen closely for these sounds when we blow shofar in a few moments, you will hear both elements. A majestic coronation of God, modelled after chaos -- wails and cries. There's a deep truth to this. Chaos and Majesty seem dichotomous, but they are inextricable. Majesty contains chaos. Chaos contains majesty. It's all a matter of perspective. We see this most simply in nature-- when we see God's creation untouched by people. When we look out at a beautiful vista, part of what appeals to us is its very wildness-- its wilderness. It's beauty and majesty are to be found exactly in its seeming chaos.

And in the hospital too-- some stories seem chaotic, others majestic, but that's a matter of perspective.

In my story of the man on ECMO, I focused on the chaos. But what about the majesty of the fact that he was alive, that his limbs were moving? That human brilliance and creativity poured into technology was able to prolong this man's life and potentially heal him. I saw a man *walking* without a functional heart or lungs! A miracle.

And in my story about that miraculous liver transplant, I didn't talk about the chaos that is the fact that this man needed a liver transplant at all. Or that his son was cut open just to find that he couldn't be a donor after all. There's some intense chaos there. But the gentleman I met was singing, because he was focused on the majesty.

The Shofar cry reminds us to break down dichotomies and alter our perspective. When we perceive chaos, remember, with a note of optimism, that it is tempered by majesty. When we perceive majesty, let us sensitize ourselves to look more deeply and notice the chaos as well. The world whose creation we celebrate today is intensely textured, full of things which are both themselves and their opposites. People, too, are textured, complex in this very same way.

It's much easier for us to see the world as straightforward. And this view is genuinely tempting. But our tradition tells us that there are no easy answers. In the laws of courts we learn that if the whole Sanhedrin voted unanimously, the trial is declared a mistrial-- because there is always another side to an argument. If we believe something to be clear, we haven't thought about it well enough.

In America today we have a terrifying presidential candidate who believes, and is leading others to believe, that the world is straightforward. That governance is simply the Art of the Deal. That

entire groups of people are either bad or good. And that bad things only happen to those who are bad at business. He is wrong.

Today we pray for the ability to stand up with a call to complexity.

And in our prayers on these High Holidays, we ask God and we ask ourselves to bear that complexity in mind. To remember that when we seem bad, when we seem worthless, when we seem chaotic-- at the very same time, to remember that we were created with the divine spark, we are majestic, and our actions are majestic. And with our actions, we, on this holiday of Rosh Hashana, with all of our chaos, coronate God, and celebrate His Majesty.

So as we listen to the calls of the shofar in just a few moments, let them wake us up. Let us experience them as a call to complexity. A declaration of majesty, and a cry of chaos.