

Shana Tova. It is so good to be with you on this first day of 5778.

Rosh Hashanah is also known as the birthday of the world. We channel the idea of creation as we go about our personal work of recreating our lives, what the author Mary Catherine Bateson beautifully refers to as composing our lives. So what do we read each year, on this birthday? We read a Torah portion about human conflict and misunderstanding. We read about Sarah and Hagar, who are locked in a struggle in which neither one can acknowledge, or even listen to, the other's perspective. In the end, they cannot even coexist together. In today's Haftorah portion, the priest Eli at first mistakes Chana's prayer as the act of a drunk person, dismissing her out of hand and completely missing the pain underneath her prayer.

These readings are actually a pretty good description of the predicament we can find ourselves in at this time of year. We want to focus on making the best of our lives. We want to hone our gifts and understand how we are being called to use them. But then, the moment we leave our private meditations, we have to deal with people in the outside world. Spouses or kids who irritate us, family members who hurt our feelings, work colleagues who drive us crazy, and social media posts that make us feel angry, even hopeless, about a whole segment of our society.

The Torah portions we read today suggest that there is a connection between our potential for growth and our ability to navigate the complicated world of relationships. Our capacity to connect with and see others, even others who tend to provoke us, doesn't come without a

struggle. The stories of Chana, and of Hagar and Sarah, make us face just how hard it is to see someone else's truth. Sometimes it is impossible and the only real answer is choosing not to connect. This is what Sarah chose when she sent Hagar and Ishmael away.

But even when we are willing, making real connections is truly difficult work. Today I will be talking about ways that we block connection, intentionally or otherwise, and how we might think about transcending old patterns that don't serve us.

One way of blocking connections is by focusing too much on the superficial construct of right and wrong.

In relationships, there is always a temptation to take sides, to find easy comfort in the ideas of being justified in your words or actions. But the narrative about Sarah and Hagar reveals two different---and compelling---truths. G'd recognized both of these truths. G'd counseled Abraham to listen to Sarah and send Hagar and Ishmael away. G'd heard Ishmael's cry and comforted Hagar, letting her know that she would finally have safety and nurturance to live a new life with her son.

As Rabbi Avraham Yitzchok Kook, the 20th century Jewish mystic wrote:

Torah contains all the truths that are out there -- including those that are at odds with one another...Everything is embraced in the soul of Judaism," he writes, "it includes all spiritual inclinations, the open and the hidden---just as everything is included in the absolute reality of the divine. "

This is wisdom that I need to remind myself of on a daily basis. I've learned that I engage in the right and wrong game quite a bit, and most

often with my husband. It is as if I think there is some scoreboard out there that will reveal someday that I have won the majority of our arguments and disagreements.

But what have I won, really?

In truth, this conviction that I have the correct slant on things leaves me in a narrow place. It prevents me from really listening to someone else and maybe in the process, embracing a more comprehensive idea of what my truth is.

This brings me to a second way that we block the possibility of connection. This is our habit of hanging on too tightly to our past.

Rabbi Asher Resnick wrote an article in which he calls Rosh Hashanah “the birthday of free will.” Resnick believes that one of the biggest mistakes we all make is to allow our past to govern and determine our future. He writes that the essential quality of our free will is that it be free and unencumbered. And it is the past, perhaps more than anything else, which is specifically what we find it difficult to be free of.

We see a form of clinging to the past in the priest Eli’s first response to Chana. Eli’s past experience with prayer and sacrifice made him believe that he knew what prayer should look like, so at first he wasn’t looking at Chana at all. He was looking at someone who deviated from the norm, a woman who was exhibiting what to him was strange behavior.

More often, the past trips us up with the people around us because we begin to anticipate what they will do or say based on past experience. And unfortunately we often remember the things that have wounded us in the past. In my Mussar class, a group member was talking about an

irritating way that her mother-in-law had of interacting with her. She was already dreading her mother-in-law's next visit. Rabbi Ira Stone, who led the group, wondered if this Mussar student could let go of past interactions, and imagine instead that her mother-in-law's behaviors were new to her. This imaginative technique proved incredibly helpful to this Mussar student, who later reported that she could view her mother-in-law's actions with a bit more curiosity and openness.

Along with holding on to our past, another way that we block connection with others is our inability to own and accept our vulnerability

Acknowledging our vulnerability is incredibly painful, and we can find ourselves doing anything we can to avoid it. Part of this vulnerability stems from personal wounds and rejections and humiliations we may have suffered in our lives. But in a larger sense, our vulnerability is also linked to how precarious our position truly is in this world. We see or experience discrimination, people who are disenfranchised because of their race or gender or because they were born in the wrong country. When we can imagine ourselves in this position, we have an opportunity to understand other people's experiences differently. But that point of view is hard to keep front and center.

I recently had an eye-opening experience with the Welfare system, when my son, who has received medical assistance for years, appeared to have lost his medicaid through some bureaucratic errors. And the more I tried to rectify the problem and failed, the more powerless and desperate I felt. I am used to being seen as a likeable and reasonable person, and I was stunned when, after many frustrating attempts to call and find out how to

solve the problem, a woman hung up on me because, as she said, I had a hostile tone. I then went to the Welfare office to get the problem solved, and the experience was eye-opening. You stand in long lines, you are given a number and you sit. And you sit. And all around me there were other people, including mothers trying to manage young children who were a lot more rambunctious than my son was. And I realized, many of these people had to do this on a regular basis just so they can feed their children, keep a roof over their head and get medical care.

My own problem was magically solved after I called my state representative. I mentioned to the office staff that I had recently been at a fundraiser for this representative. And in a week's time my son was reinstated into medical assistance.

It made me realize how fragile my identity is, how what I think is solid is really just dumb luck. And I wondered, what is it like for the other people I saw at the welfare office? What is it like to feel powerless, to feel less than, to feel like a number? It made me so aware of what other people have to endure on a daily basis, something that I couldn't tolerate for even a few months. But it is all too easy to forget this, to slip back into the comfort and blissful ignorance of privilege.

When we recognize suffering, when we open up to vulnerability, we can find new possibilities. When Hagar was at her most vulnerable, G'd opened her eyes in a new way and she could see sustenance where she had never seen it before. Chana channeled her suffering into a transformational way of praying, and she eventually bore a son, Samuel, who became one of the greatest biblical prophets.

Our greatness exists side by side with our vulnerability. As Adin Steinsaltz teaches us, God created us with a pure soul. It is the place of our potential and our goodness. And when we move beyond habitual ways of relating to others, and seek that goodness, we can find places of connection.

I recently learned about a beautiful construct that I believe comes from the psychologist John Welwood. He talked about cultivating the ability to look at our closest other and see in that person both vulnerability and magnificence.

This way of seeing the other helps so much in moments of conflict. Instead of seeing someone as less than you, or as the enemy, you gain a little space to see that person's gifts and uniqueness. At the same time, you are invited to imagine them as a young child, completely innocent and perhaps trapped in a drama that is not of their own making.

Seeing both the vulnerability and the magnificence in another, moving beyond right and wrong, and freeing ourselves from the past---all three of these things help us to connect with another. But most important of all, we need to remember that truly engaging with others always requires that we make an active choice to remain open.

Fear has just the opposite effect, closing you off to even knowing that you have a choice. Sometimes the fear is legitimate. We just need to look at how scared Sarah was that Ishmael might pose a threat to her son Isaac. We might disagree with Sarah's actions, but she was concerned for the welfare of her son.

The real danger comes when you bypass your freedom to think at all, and you react to someone else out of habit, without really choosing to be open. The great political theorist, Hannah Arendt, who believed that the root of “the banality of evil,” the culture that produced Eichmann and Hitler, is thoughtlessness, of acting without taking the space to consider your choices or to engage other points of view. Arendt equated this essential space with the idea of dialogue, of having real conversations with others, but even more importantly, allowing a dialogue within yourself. This dialogue takes courage because it involves seeing your own pain and narrow places.

But we lose the ability to have that dialogue at our own peril. The essayist Rebecca Solnit, wrote about this very thoughtlessness in a piece called The Loneliness of Donald Trump. She writes:

I have often run across men (and rarely, but not never, women) who have become so powerful in their lives that there is no one to tell them when they are cruel, wrong, foolish, absurd, repugnant. In the end there is no one else in their world because when you are not willing to hear how others feel, what others need, when you do not care, you are not willing to acknowledge others' existence. That's how it's lonely at the top. It is as if these petty tyrants live in a world without honest mirrors, without others, without gravity, and they are buffered from the consequences of their failures.

With these words, Solnit channeled Hanah Arendt's idea that dialogue is an essential part of moral life.

Relationships, as my mother would say, are a lot of work. During this time in our history, how we go about this work has become a compelling and complicated question. When you look at our community, our nation, and our world, we get a lot of “facts,” wildly divergent views inviting a

battle between who's right and who's wrong. But these facts miss all the nuances of who we really are and the ways that we come to see the world. Every now and then the New York Times puts together a piece that presents views from conservative, liberal and centrist columnists. I read the opinions of the other side and I can't imagine where they are coming from. As I read these other opinions, I can actually feel myself narrowing, my defenses coming up to protect me, and therefore shutting me off from these opposing views.

Here is where I got a valuable teaching from my Mussar hevruta Eugene Sotirescu. Eugene visited Israel to see his parents and while he was there, he ran into an Arab friend he had known for many years. As they were talking, Eugene's friend told him something about the Israeli army that Eugene knew wasn't true. Eugene was about to correct his friend, but stopped. Instead he looked at his friend, and thought, "There is suffering here." And rather than addressing the factual error, he began a conversation with his friend about what was true in his friend's life.

On Rosh Hashanah, we have the opportunity to change the way we connect with others. This affords us our biggest opportunity to grow. We move away from trying to change the other person and instead, make the space to listen, to think, to be curious and to love. And when we come to understand someone else's truth, we can learn more about our own. We stretch our ability to be compassionate, which ultimately leads us to be more compassionate with ourselves.

We benefit when we can envision the space between us, the space of relationship, as sacred. And in the words of the American mythologist Joseph Campbell, a sacred space is where you can find yourself over and over. In this New Year, may we all have rich experiences within the sacred space of our relationships. Shana tova