Sermon for Yom Kippur 5779 September 19, 2018
Rabbi Adam Zeff
Germantown Jewish Centre

Crying out to God

Min ha-meitzar karati Yah!
'Anani va-merhav Yah[1]

This verse from Psalm 118 encapsulates what we most long for in our relationship with God, what we ask for again and again in the prayers that we say throughout the High Holidays: *Karati Yah!* "I cried out: God!" *'Anani Yah* "God answered me." When we have the courage and the strength to call out to a force outside of ourselves, to acknowledge that we can't face our challenges alone, that we need help, we hope beyond hope for an answer to come to us, a response that can somehow support us and help us to get through whatever we face, not by magically solving our problems but by strengthening us and our ability to cope. There is even a prayer in our mahzor called *Aneinu* "Answer us," that recounts all of the times and situations from the Hebrew Bible in which our ancestors, the human beings who came before us, cried out to God, and God answered.

> May the One who answered Sarah past the time of her youth answer us.
> May the One who answered Abraham on Mount Moriah answer us.
> May the One who answered Isaac, their son, bound on the altar answer us.

But how can we ensure that our cry to God will be answered? What is the human condition that makes God hear us and respond?

The psalm gives us a hint. When we call to God *min ha-meitzar*, God answers us *va-merhav*. *Meitzar* comes from the word *tzar*, meaning "narrow" or "tight," and from that sense of physical tightness or narrowness the word very early on came to also mean emotional "trouble" or "distress." In its plural form, *tzarot*, this same word came into Yiddish as *tzuris*, "troubles." To be in a narrow place is to be in trouble, as expressed in the English expression "in straits." Grammatically, *meitzar* carries the implication of being put into narrowness or trouble by some event or force or person; *meitzar* is not something that just happens to happen. Because of this, the Biblical Hebrew name for Egypt, *Mitzrayim*, has often been interpreted as "the doubly narrow place," based on this same word, *tzar*. Egypt is a narrow place geographically, its most fertile and inhabited land forming a narrow strip on either side of the Nile River. And Egypt is a place of narrowness and distress for the Israelites, a place where they suffered not only because they were oppressed as displaced strangers but also because, eventually, they were enslaved, their bodies and lives controlled by the state. So it is no surprise that this verse from Psalms has often been interpreted as being about the Exodus from Egypt. From the doubly narrow place of Egypt, the Israelites called out to God. And God answered *va-merhav*, meaning "with wideness," "with openness," "with expansiveness." God brought them to the "wide place" of the Promised Land, a place where their distress would be

[1] Psalm 118:5.

soothed, where the pressure placed on them by their oppression and enslavement could be relieved.

But the Israelites were in Egypt for a long, long time, hundreds of years, struggling with injustice and slavery, and in all that time, God did not act. What changed to cause God to bring them from narrowness to wideness, from distress to comfort and relief? "The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God."[2] Hearing their cry, God speaks to Moses for the first time, saying:

> Now the cry of the Israelites has reached Me; moreover, I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them. Come, therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall free My people, the Israelites, from Egypt.[3]

It is only when the cry of the Israelites reaches God that God is motivated to send Moses on his mission, to release the people from the "doubly narrow place" of Egypt and to relieve their distress and oppression. It is the very straits that the Israelites are in, the way that the narrowness of Egypt squeezes and presses them, the crushing weight upon their spirits,[4] that produces a cry great enough to pierce the heavens and reach God, to allow for expansion, wideness, and release. The Israelites' cry does not magically set them free, but it does produce an answer, the assurance that their pain is being witnessed by One who cares, and that changes everything. Their cry is the source of their salvation.

If we look back at the examples given in the mahzor of our ancestors who were answered by God, we see similar levels of distress and pain in their stories. Sarah, as Abraham's partner, followed him and the hope of a relationship with God far from her home, into a strange land. There she saw her life constantly in upheaval as they wandered from Israel to Egypt and back again, while the promise that they would be the ancestors of a great nation remained unfulfilled. Finally, at the age of 90, she has lost faith in the path she has taken. Any reasonable person would conclude that she will never have even a single child, let alone many descendants. It is easy to see Sarah filled with distress as she looks back at the trajectory of her life, and to understand her reaction when angels foretell Isaac's birth as bitter, disbelieving laughter.[5] Yet it is then, at Sarah's lowest, most despairing moment, that God "takes note" of her, that God hears her pain, and God answers it, finally, as she has been longing for God to do, giving her hope for a future, for continuity and meaning in her life that will extend beyond the span of her years.[6]

---

[2] Exodus 2:23.
[3] Exodus 3:9-10.
[4] Exodus 6:9.
[5] Exodus 18:12.
[6] Exodus 21:1.

We see the same pain in the story of the *Akedah* that we read on Rosh ha-Shanah, the story of Abraham taking his son Isaac to Mount Moriah and binding him there to sacrifice him to God. How heavy are Abraham's steps on the journey, as he contemplates the end of all of his ideals and hopes, the death of his dreams. How painful is his conversation with Isaac, who innocently asks from where the sacrifice will come. And how shattering for Isaac is the moment on the mountain when he is bound to the altar, when he realizes that his father is willing to raise the knife against him. According to the Midrash, Isaac's eyes fill with the tears of the angels as his trust is dissolved and his world overthrown. And yet it is at this moment, at the moment when Abraham holds the knife high with terror and pain in his heart, when Isaac quakes with fear and distress, that God finally responds. God leads both Abraham and Isaac out of the narrow place in which they are caught. God can't erase their pain, but by witnessing it, God shows them a new way, a path to expansiveness and relief, a path marked by the horns of the ram, caught in the thicket.

Rabbi Hayim ben Shlomo Tyrer, known as the Be'er Mayim Hayim, taught that the shape of the ram's horn, the shofar, itself embodies the message of our verse from Psalms.[7] The shofar begins in narrowness, and those who would blow the shofar must channel all of their yearning for God into a very narrow stream of air that they force through the small opening of the mouthpiece. But as that air moves through the shofar, it expands and expands and expands until it becomes a great sound that can be heard by God on high, that makes even the angels quake. Its very narrowness and constriction is what allows it to produce a sound that can move the divine. Even more pointed is the teaching of Rabbi Moshe Teitelbaum, known as the Yismah Moshe, the ancestor of the Satmar Hasidim:

> Many have thought that when a human being is in great distress, God forbid, such that their heart is not really with them and their mind is unsettled, that they are released from the obligation for prayer, for how can they pray? Isn't the essence of prayer "the service of the heart"?[8] And that is not possible for them. But the truth is that when a person cries out to God in the midst of distress, God hears their voice more, as in the saying of King David, peace be upon him, "*Min ha-meitzar karati…* From distress I called..."[9]

Far from making it more difficult for us to pray, being in the midst of distress and pain and offering that up in prayer, in a cry to the heavens, makes us more likely to be heard by God, more likely to provoke a response of witness and compassion, to be led from the narrowness of our distress into a wider place of comfort and release.

[7] Be'er Mayim Hayim Genesis 1:1:76.
[8] Babylonian Talmud Ta'anit 2a.
[9] Yismah Moshe Bereishit 20:2.

If crying out from our pain is the formula, the way for us to reach God and to gain comfort from that encounter, why does it take so long for it to come about? Why doesn't it happen right away, for our Biblical ancestors and for us? The Yismah Moshe's answer seems to be that we, like our ancestors before us, are reluctant to cry out. We hesitate to truly feel the pain that our experiences bring us, the sorrow and distress and disappointment and upset and frustration and worry that our lives bring our way. We don't want to admit, even to ourselves, that such pain is possible, that these things have truly happened to us. We don't want to see for ourselves, and we certainly don't want to reveal to others, that our hearts are broken, that our hope is gone, that our worst fears have been realized, that our illusions have been shattered. We don't want to open our mouths when our pain makes our hearts not truly with us, our minds unsettled, our souls in torment. So we stay silent, even in the narrowest of straits. We don't cry out, to God or to those around us. And because of our silence, our reluctance to experience and to reveal the pain that dwells inside us, unexpressed, no one hears, and no one comes to comfort us. We stay stuck in that narrow place, in the *meitzar*, alone.

Many of you know that in the past year my father's health has been deteriorating, and in June, when there was a crisis, I made an emergency trip out to California to see him. In my hurried planning for the trip, I found myself very reluctant to let anyone know about what was going on with my dad. Of course, given the nature of my work, my responsibilities here at Germantown Jewish Centre needed to be covered by others, and I couldn't avoid at least some people knowing something of what was going on, but I did my best to conceal it. When I was in California, I actually dreaded returning home and facing the concern and the questions that I knew would come my way about how my dad was doing, even though I knew that those questions were only motivated by love. I couldn't bear the thought of discussing what was going on with everyone. Having accompanied so many people and their loved ones through the journey of illness, I marveled anew at their ability to speak of what they were going through, to be open about it with their community. My sister and I half-jokingly planned to have buttons made for us to wear that said, "I just don't want to talk about it." Why? What was I afraid of?

After reflecting on this for some time, I realized that part of what was going on for me at that time was opening my mind and heart up to the pain of the realities that I had never really faced before. My father turned 89 while I was visiting him, and we spent his birthday in the Emergency Room; I knew all about the health challenges confronting him. Yet despite intimate experience with death in my work as a rabbi, I had never faced the fact that, sooner or, God-willing, later, he is going to die. No one lives forever. I knew it theoretically, but I had never let its reality pierce my heart. And I didn't want to face that pain, didn't want to admit it to myself or to show it to all the people who so kindly asked about him, didn't want to experience it at all. I wanted to keep silent, somehow hoping that if I didn't name it, if I didn't cry out about it, then it wouldn't exist. Of course, we all know that's not really the way it works. The pain was still there, unexpressed, and people can carry that unspoken pain for a long, long time, just as the Israelites carried theirs in Egypt for hundreds of years. But as long as we are silent, we wall

ourselves off from the possibility of comfort and support. As long as we refuse to cry out, we make it impossible for those around us and even for God to answer and respond to us with love.

We come here today, on Yom Kippur, carrying so much pain in our hearts from so many sources. Some of us are carrying the pain of death, the loss of those close to us, whether recently or in years past, that reaches deeply inside of us and can make us question our ability to go on living in a world without the one we miss so much. Some of us are carrying the pain of illness, our own or that of a family member or friend, whose length or severity saps our strength and our hope for better times ahead. Some of us are carrying the pain of broken relationships, trust shattered and confidence betrayed, that make us question our own judgement and how we see ourselves. And some of us are carrying the pain of a world in which injustice seems to triumph, in which cruelty seems ascendant, caring seems absent, equality a myth, and love an illusion. And yet, many of us carry this pain in silence, concealing its depth even from ourselves. We hesitate to feel it, to truly experience it, and then to cry out our suffering and our loss.

Our reluctance is real, and it is not unreasonable. We know that what gives us such deep pain cannot be magically resolved; that is not the kind of answer we can expect. So it can be difficult, even excruciating, to open up our cracked and broken hearts and to feel everything that we are hiding there. It can be a shattering feeling to cry out, shouting for help, for comfort, for relief, without knowing whether our cry will be heard with compassion, our distress answered with kindness, our pain soothed with understanding. But this is the moment, this moment of Yom Kippur. This is the day for us to feel the pain of our lives, to acknowledge it to ourselves in all of its agonizing sharpness. And this is the day for us to open up our mouths and cry out: "God!" Only then can we be heard. Only then can we move from the place of narrowness and distress to a place of expansiveness and release. When truly we cry out *min ha-meitzar*, from the crushing straits we feel within ourselves, then and only then can we be answered, by God and those around us, with comfort, care, and love. May the One who answered all of the righteous and the loving, the pure and the true, the merciful and the principled, the One who responded to those whose spirits were crushed and those whose hearts were weary and hopeless—may that same One answer us, when we call.

Min ha-meitzar karati Yah!
'Anani va-merhav Yah