

Shana Tovah u Metukah a sweet and good year to all. Thank you for having me here to speak on Rosh Hashanah. I'd like to start with a poem.

And when they bombed other people's houses, we

protested

but not enough, we opposed them but not

enough. I was

in my bed, around my bed America

was falling: invisible house by invisible house by invisible house.

I took a chair outside and watched the sun.

In the sixth month

of a disastrous reign in the house of money

in the street of money in the city of money in the country of money,
our great country of money, we (forgive us)

lived happily during the war.

- Ilya Kaminsky, from his poetry collection, Deaf Republic.

Early on in Loomings, the first chapter of my favorite novel, Moby Dick; or the Whale, Herman Melville's Ishmael muses on why the Fates picked out for him a role in the drama that is to come. Talking about life as a series of performances, he says "I take it that this part of the bill must have run something like this:

"Grand Contested Election for the Presidency of the United States

"Whaling Voyage by one Ishmael

"BLOODY BATTLE IN AFFGHANISTAN."

A juxtaposition that has occasioned my friend Dan to describe Moby Dick as the first post-9/11 novel.

I want to talk about Fate a little. Not in the sense that is more or less alien to Judaism, that is, a sense of predetermined history, things being planned and going accordingly to plan, God as watchmaker, meticulous and unmoving. That is a sense that is overthrown early in Bereishis, when Hashem takes Avraham Avinu, our father Avraham, out under the sky and says look to

the heavens, which the midrash interprets as God saying “leave the stars, which govern all other peoples’ fate, out of this. The stars say you’ll have no son by Sarah? Then ignore them.”

Rather, I want to talk about fate, in the sense of overwhelming events, life as something that happens around us, inscrutable and beyond our control.

I was 14 years old when 9/11 happened. I was not able to stop the teachers wheeling in the TV set, I was not able to stop them turning it on, I certainly couldn’t stop the towers from falling on the screen. Why did I think I could stop the war that came?

Nevertheless I did my part, I walked out of school the next year, to protest the buildup. I marched. I signed petitions and tried to get my parents to sign them. Some friends protested the RNC, got kettled by the cops into a “free speech zone”, got arrested, got traumatized out of activism for a few years. We kids watched as the grown ups all went mad. We didn’t understand them. We did what we could. It was not much. It was not enough.

Robert E. Lee, watching his Confederate Calvary brilliantly repel an attack at Fredericksburg, famously said “it is good that war is so terrible, or else we should grow too fond of it.” This war, with its far away, video game controller controlled drones. This war, with its soldiers you rarely meet unless you seek them out. This war, happening somewhere, anywhere else, up some mountains where they don’t even have roads that would be recognized as such by us, where they don’t speak our language, where they don’t look like us or cook like us or dress like us . . . How terrible was it, really? How fond of it did we grow?

I want to talk about Isaac. You remember Isaac, we read about his birth today. The boy who made his mother laugh - what boy doesn’t? The boy whose birth was foretold in the vision I just mentioned, when Avraham was taken out under the stars, and in fact, some commentators say, was miraculously positioned above the stars, that is to say, the fates, to look down on them. How did he get here, this Isaac?

In the Torah portion before the one we read today, there’s a problem that was very tricky for Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berdichev, a Hasidic rebbe of the third generation, that is, a student of the students of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism. Rabbi Levi Yitzchok writes in his commentary on the parshas, Kedushas Levy, that he can’t understand how it is that Avraham our father could go to war, as he does against the kings that kidnap his nephew Lot. “Avraham Avinu,” says Rabbi Levi Yitzchok, “hu hesed gemur” he is complete kindness and love. Rabbi Levi Yitzchok is referring to a very old Kabbalistic tradition, that identifies Avraham as representing this very loving side of God, the Universe, Reality. How could this paragon of kindness not only wage war, but do so brutally, successfully? Because, says Rabbi Levi Yitzchok, for this episode in time, Avraham our father needed to clothe himself in Gevurah, in strength, God and reality’s aspect of stringency and violence. He needed to do this, so as to understand and then conceive his son Isaac, who kabbalistically is identified with Gevurah.

War taught Avraham about his son.

My grandfather, Melvin the Marine, surely had a World war II story or two he'd teach his sons, no? Four young boys, growing up in the peaceful shade of Beth Page, Long Island, they'd eat up a war story, wouldn't they, from their father, their hero? Here's what grandpa Mel told them and told us, "imagine a truck, with a 4x4 loading area. Big army truck. Stack it about a man's height high with bodies, laid in lines. That's war." About adventures, duty, honor, glory, he'd say no more. Just the truck, in the high heat of the pacific islands, stacked tall, carrying off young men.

I am often told, as an anarchist, as a socialist, as a leftist, as a liberal, that I am impractical, that I do not deal in reality. That I fly off on utopian flights of fancy. That I am not realistic.

War is the most realistic tool we have. It is pragmatic, logistical, it is material. We have waged war for 20 years. Moby dick was written in 1851.

"Grand Contested Election for the Presidency of the United States

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War changes everything and moves the world not one inch in a new direction. So now what?

This year, 5782, as we pray together, live together, work together, I want to talk about fate, in the sense of things we can't stop, won't be able to change. I want to talk about rising seas, and hurricane seasons that get longer and louder. I want to talk about structural racism, the kind this country is built on. I want to talk about the war. And I want to step outside those stars that say we have to be this way, and look down on them from above, and listen to Hashem as God tells us that fate knows nothing, and that one day, we will have a new child in our arms, and we will laugh.

Thank you. May we all be inscribed in the book of life.