

Rabbi Fine  
RH Sermon 1 5770

### **The Hidden Well, The Spiritual Heart**

Shana tova. It is my great pleasure to be here for my first Rosh Hashanah with the Temple Sinai family.

Today I want to explore the spiritual process that our tradition calls upon us to go through during the High Holidays.

The high holidays are designed to guide us through a spiritual process of self-reflection and transformation, a process our tradition calls *teshuva*.

The promise of the high holidays is that if we take the spiritual challenge of these days seriously, it will prove to be a time of personal and communal renewal and an opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to life itself.

To begin to explore this process today, I want to share a story from my own life.

\*\*\*

Two summers ago, I worked as a chaplain at the University of Washington Medical Center in Seattle, Washington. My main units were the Heart and Lung Transplant ICU and Acute Care Units.

I had the honor of working with patients, and families of patients, who were facing life and death situations.

That summer I spent time with patients from all walks of life, some of whom were waiting anxiously for transplants, some of whom were working to recover from a transplant or other life-saving procedure.

Over the course of several months, I saw patients walk out of the hospital with new hearts and lungs, and I accompanied others in their last days and moments of life.

I learned a great deal from these courageous individuals.

One was a native-American man, in his 50's, who I will refer to as Mr. Katori.

I met Mr. Katori early in the summer as he waited on the list of patients hoping and praying for a heart transplant, and in mid-summer he did receive a transplant.

He recovered well, and I remember the last time I met with him towards the end of the summer. He sat in a chair, the long scar of the incision down his chest, healing well beneath his hospital gown.

We talked about what these months had been like for him, and he told me about how the way he looked at his life had changed.

With amazement at what had taken place, he told me he was now grateful for his life in a way he hadn't been before. He told me how when he was younger he had been addicted to drugs and alcohol, the great plagues of an impoverished Native-American community. Many of his friends had died at young ages. He had broken his addiction years before, but he still didn't feel he had dedicated his life to things that were really important.

As he sat recovering, with a sparkle of awe in his eye, he told me that he now knew he needed to help the young people in his community. The youth in his community had so few options in life other than resorting to drugs and alcohol.

He now wanted to dedicate himself to being an elder to the younger generation. "The kids need my help", he told me.

*When I heard Mr. Katori speak, I said to myself, this is teshuva.<sup>1</sup>*

This is the spiritual process that our tradition calls upon each of us to undertake during the High Holidays.

Through a confrontation with his own mortality, Mr. Katori went through a transformative experience that allowed him to approach the challenges in his life as opportunities.

While it was awe inspiring that modern medicine enabled Mr. Katori to walk out of the hospital with a new physical heart, the thing that was truly miraculous in my eyes was that he walked out with a new spiritual heart.

\*\*\*

Each of us has faced real challenges in our own lives this year.

Some members of our community, like Mr. Katori, have faced physical illness. Others have struggled with mental illness. Some have suffered the loss of a loved one. In a year of a terrible financial crisis some have lost a job this year, or had no luck in a search to find one. Others have seen the retirement money they expected to live on disappear or shrink drastically. Whether small or large, as we gather together this Rosh Hashanah, we each have real challenges in our lives.

The promise of Rosh Hashanah is that like Mr. Katori, we too can go through a process of teshuva that allows us to face the challenges of our lives with renewed courage, in a

---

\*\*\*

way that doesn't lead us to despair, but leads us to a celebration of life, and the commitment to use our life for good.

I want to take a look at this process more closely through the lens of the story of Hagar that we read in our Torah portion earlier this morning.

Hagar's story seems to be a powerful metaphor for the transformative spiritual process that the High Holidays are designed to help us each go through.

The first stage of the process is not an easy one.

Hagar has been promised by God that her son Yishmael will be the father of a nation. But when she is banished to the desert by Sarah and Avraham, with the approval of God, and with only some bread and a flask of water that soon runs dry, this promise seems empty and hopeless.

*We read, "And Abraham got up early in the morning, took bread and a skin of water, gave it to Hagar, placing it on her shoulder with the boy, and sent her away; she went and lost her way in the desert of Beer Sheva. The water in the skin was used up, and she cast the boy under one of the bushes. She went and sat facing him, about the distance of a bowshot away, for she said, "Let me not see the death of the boy"; and she sat facing him and raised her voice and wept."*

While the text doesn't tell us what is going on internally for Hagar at this moment, we can imagine.

People faced with crisis look at the world differently:

What is important changes. The normal daily worries that occupy us most of the time fall away, and larger questions of meaning arise. As the raw stark truth of our mortality tears down our usual sense of security, we are left in the face of the great mystery of life.

We find ourselves humbled and vulnerable, and amidst our brokenness our heart cries out like Hagar's. Sometimes what we cry out to has a name. For us Jews, there is a unique power in calling out in the name of the God of our ancestors. We connect ourselves with a chain of human beings who have come before us and who have faced their own challenges with courage. This cry of the heart is one that summons our deepest inner resources.

On the high holidays, we reenact this sort of confrontation with our mortality by entering a spiritual drama.

This is why Rosh Hashanah can be an emotionally confusing day on the Jewish calendar.

On the one hand. It is a festival, a joyous time, when we gather with our families, eating festive meals together.

It is our new year, a time of celebrating that we are here together. Elul, the month leading up to today is comprised of letters that have the acronym “Ani L’ dodi V’ Dodi Li,” I am my beloved and my beloved is mine.

The imagery is that this is a time of the great joy of two lovers reuniting, God and the Jewish people.

At the same time, Rosh Hashanah is referred to as *Yom HaDin* – the day of Judgment. Through this drama, each of our lives is on the line today.

In our prayers, we use the metaphor of God as a King who is weighing our merits and deciding on our fate for the next year.

No where does this idea show up more starkly than in the image of the Book of Life that shows up throughout our liturgy.

During the amidah today and through Yom Kippur, we add in the plea’s – *zochreinu l’ chaim, catveinu b’ sefer chayyim* – recall us for life, write us in the book of life.

In the u’netanah tokef in the musaf service, we sing, *b’ rosh Hashanah yicateivun uv’ yom tzom kippur yeichateimun*. -- on Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed.

This idea originates from the Talmud. In one expression of it, Rabbi Yochanan says that there are three books open on Rosh Hashanah, the Book of Life, where the righteous are immediately written, the book of Death, where the wicked are written, and a third book for all who are in the middle.

This stark imagery can evoke an uneasy feeling in our gut. But certainly it is supposed to do more than that.

The liturgy is modeled to humble us, and to open our hearts to ask deep questions about our lives.

Entering the spiritual drama of the high holidays is meant to allow us to reflect on our lives with a depth that is often reserved only for the moments when we confront issues of life and death in a more literal way, as Hagar and Mr. Katori did.

It is designed to get us to face the things in our lives that we perhaps turn away from during the rest of the year.

**If we do this, the tradition promises a wondrous shift will take place.**

As Hagar sits in despair, from a distance, looking at and hearing her crying son, not wanting to see him die but also unable to look away, her perception begins to shift.

Instead of the cries of Yishmael, she hears the voice of God. Instead of a barren desert, she sees a life giving well.

We read:

*“And God heard the voice of the boy, and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What’s wrong Hagar? Do not fear, for God has heard the voice of the boy in the place where he is.” “Arise, lift up the boy, for I will make him a great nation.”*

And then the story continues with a sentence that the rabbis point out is unusual and remarkable.

*“Va’yiftach Elohim et eyneha, va’teyreh b’er mayim” – And God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water.*

The Torah doesn’t say that God created a well of water that wasn’t there before.

Nor was Hagar physically blind and then made able to see, Maimonides tells us.

In fact, in Pirke Avot, the Teachings of the Fathers, the rabbis even go so far as to say that Hagar’s well was one of 10 things created on the eve of the first Shabbat when God created the world.

Hagar had a shift in perception that enabled her to see something that was there all along.

This, I believe, is the same transformation that Mr. Katori went through. His new life of meaning wasn’t to be found by running away from the life he had lived.

Just the opposite, the very things that had been his greatest life challenges, would now provide him the context to live a life of meaning, giving others guidance and opportunities that he never had as a young person.

The promise of the high holidays is not that if we pray, and do tzedakah and teshuva, that God will take away all of our life challenges.

The promise is that that God will be with us in facing those challenges.

The promise is that we too can come to see our challenges through new eyes, and to respond to them with new hearts.

This I believe is what teshuva is really about.

We re-turn to the present moment with a sacred courage to do well with the cards we are dealt.

I saw this happen in the hospital not only in cases like Mr. Katori where patients survived, but even more profoundly in cases where patients didn’t survive.

These were people who were not blessed with a miracle that would extend physical life, but from deep in their hearts, they had a shift in perception that allowed them to look at their situations with courage, with thankfulness, with dignity – with a deep and sacred humanness.

I saw this when I spoke with a Hispanic man in his 30's who tenderly cradled his premature baby boy who had just died in his arms. With tears in his eyes he told me that while he and his wife now had 3 "above," 3 losses, he felt grateful for the 3 "below," the 3 living children, that they were blessed with.

I saw it in a 55 year old black woman in end stage heart failure, who made the courageous personal decision not to pursue painful aggressive treatment anymore, to remove her self from the heart transplant list, and instead to go home to die in peace. Again and again she told me, "I just want to put my life in God's hands. I don't want to rush Him, but if it is my time, I am ready." She wasn't expecting a miracle that would save her physical heart. Putting her life in God's hands meant something else.

While our liturgy impresses upon us that our lives are at stake today, the high holidays aren't really about whether we will be alive in a year from now as much as how fully we will live our lives now.

Or in the words of my grandfather Rabbi Jacob Segal, who died of Leukemia three years before I was born, "I may not be able to add years to my life, but I can add life to my years."

One of my favorite teachers, the Sfas Emes, Rabbi Yehudah Leb Alter of Ger, the great Hasidic master who lived outside of Warsaw in the early 1900's, said something similar when he taught about what we mean when we say, "catveinu l'chayim" – inscribe us for life.

For the Sfas Emes, God was not a man living up there somewhere deciding who will be inscribed in the Book of life and who will be inscribed in the Book of death.

The book of life is within us the Sfas Emes tells us! Our souls are the original inscription of life that God put within us!

Our spiritual task on Rosh Hashanah is to rediscover this Divinity that has become buried within us, and to recommit to a life that strengthens the writing and doesn't cover it up.

Hagar's well is right here, we just need to do the work to be able to see it and draw water from it.

\*\*\*

I believe that the shift in our perception that can take place during these days starts with the way we approach the High Holidays themselves.

Despite all of the weighty imagery and language that we use today, the high holidays are not a time to fear or dread, rather they are a precious opportunity.

I want to conclude with a favorite story of mine that expresses this point.

One year, the great spiritual master the Baal Shem Tov was traveling the week before Rosh Hashanah, and he stopped in a town he had never been to before.

He went to the local synagogue for the selichot service in which we recite penitential prayers, prayers pleading for God's forgiveness.

When the local prayer leader sang the prayers, he did so with great joy. The Baal Shem Tov was amazed.

He went over to the prayer leader afterwards and said to him, "I don't understand, how is it that can say the selichot, the penitential prayers with joy?!"

The man answered him – "If you were sweeping out the courtyard of your King, wouldn't you also do so with joy?" The Baal Shem Tov replied, "May my lot be with you."

According to this man, each of us is like the courtyard of the King, and it is a joyous opportunity to clean the courtyard out on the High Holidays.

May we all be blessed to take a hold of this opportunity of the High Holidays with joy.

***L'shana tova tikateivu***

May we be all be written and sealed in the book of Life. Shana tova.