

Rosh Hashanah 5769/2008

Al Tira Avdi Ya'akov:

Fear Not, My Servant Jacob

Today's parashah is all about fear. Everyone is afraid of everyone else: Abraham is afraid of Sarah; Hagar is afraid of Sarah; Sarah is afraid of Hagar; Sarah is afraid of Ishmael, at least for Isaac's sake; Ishmael is not initially afraid of Abraham, but he certainly becomes so after his father sends him abruptly into the deadly wilderness with no explanation and no history; Isaac isn't afraid of anybody, but perhaps this is due to obliviousness. Certainly, in tomorrow's passage, he seems mostly oblivious until the moment he's bound on the altar. Then I'll bet he's plenty afraid.

Fear is a great motivator. These ten days are called "Yamim Nora'im," literally "awesome days," but derived from the root yod-resh-alef: fear. "Days of Fear." Or better, "days of *confronting* our fear and of transforming fear into something useful.

And what about our catchword, our old theme: Teshuvah? Well, "transformation" could work as a translation of "Teshuvah." How about "teshuvah" as the process of transforming our fear into growth, into awareness, into mindfulness, into hope. Fear into hope. Teshuvah on these fearsome Days of Awe.

Who is the hero or heroine of the Torah reading on this first Day of Fear and Transformation? I pick none of the aforementioned characters. Not Abraham, not Sarah, not Hagar, not Ishmael, not Isaac. They have too much fear to work through, and I'm not convinced they've caught on by the time we leave them today or tomorrow.

So I vote for the angel, the "malach."

He is the one who shows up in the arid wilderness, just after Hagar has left her son Ishmael under a bush to die of thirst. He swoops down and introduces himself by an ingenious pun. He says “ma lach, Hagar?” “Ma lach” means something like “what is *with* you?” In other words, “what’s wrong with you?” But the word “malach” itself means messenger or angel. So the angel’s pun is confrontational: I’m the malach who has come to teach you to ask *yourself* the question “ma lach.”

Then the malach responds to his own question. He says “al tir’i.” Do not fear, Hagar. God has heard your son’s cry. God knows where your son is; where he is coming from. His fear is well-founded. Yours is not. You could have helped him, and helped yourself, if you had opened your eyes. The wellspring is right over there. It always was. Emerge from your deep place of fear. Take responsibility for your own fate, which you can only do when you stop trembling – stop fearing - and open your eyes to the truth and the possibilities before you.

Now don’t forget our friend, this malach. He will return tomorrow, and just in time. Then, he will mug Abraham as he stands there with the knife held high over Isaac’s throat. He will make Abraham wonder why he didn’t trust his own instinct and his judgment; why he didn’t confront God in the first place, when he received this impossible command to sacrifice his own son; why he didn’t do what he had always done throughout his life, which was to transcend fear by directly challenging the “judge of all the earth, “shofet kol ha’aretz.”

I will return to our friend, the one who mugs you with his name, “ma lach.” What’s with you?

But for the moment, I want to mug you a bit myself. I want to give you three things to take with you into the voting booth, five weeks from today. These three things I’m giving you are actually already yours. I’m only trying to “activate” them. I just want you to own them, and to own *up* to them.

I.

The first is a lesson which the Torah considers so important that it repeats it in one form or another thirty-six times: *ki gerim heyitem b'erezt mitzrayim*. You were strangers in the land of Egypt.

*Lo toneh*: Don't wrong the stranger, for you were strangers. *Lo til'chatzenu*: Don't oppress the stranger, for you were strangers. *Lo ta'anun*: Do not ill-treat the stranger, the widow, the poor, the orphan, the down-trodden, for you were all of those. "If you do mistreat them, I will heed their outcry as soon as they cry out to Me." Sounds just like our Torah reading today. Sounds like our malach, our angel, coming to Ishmael's rescue: "I have heard the cry of the lad 'ba'asher *hu sham*' – from where *he* is crying out to me. So I showed up, when no one else would.

*Ki yitz'ak elai v'shama'ti* – "When he [the stranger] cries out to me I will hear." But notice the pun on Isaac's name, Yitzchak/yitz'ak – to "cry out," and Ishmael's name, Yishma'el/v'shama'ti – "to hearken," as if to say, 'When either Isaac or Ishmael cry out to me in fear, I will respond.' That is to say, both Isaac and Ishmael have been exiled, estranged, made to be afraid. And they cry out. And I hear them. And now *you must* hear them, because you, acting from fear, have caused them to be fearful. You have remembered your experience in Egypt, yes, but you only remembered it as a time of fear, and all you have learned from it is to foist fear on others, and to live in fear yourself. You remembered the wrong lesson. Now do teshuvah; do transformation. Act from strength, not from fear.

You were strangers in Egypt. Try to remember your own crying out, your own terror. Now remember who and what caused that terror. Now, from your place of freedom, try to decide whether you will become that source of terror for others, or whether you will transform your memory into strength, in order to hear the other's cry for help.

And now take *that* memory with you into the voting booth. Vote as the free person who remembers bondage. Vote as the materially-blessed person who remembers sleeping in your pledge garment for lack of a bed. Vote as the secure member of society who remembers not being able to get justice for lack of status or a bribe. Vote as one who hears the cries of the legally unprotected, or of the barely protected whose rights hang in the judicial balance.

*Ki gerim heyitem*: Remember what it feels like to be estranged. To forget is to return to Egypt, where we were slaves and we didn't even know it.

II.

And here is a second teaching to take with you into that sacred voting booth: *Im eyn ani li, mi li*; "If I am not for myself, who will be?" *U'ch'sheani l'atzmi mah ani*; "But if I am only for myself, what am I?" *V'im lo achshav, eymatai*; "And if not now, when?"

Hillel's dictum, famous to the point of cliché. But as a voter's guide? Priceless. And most Jewish teachers would agree that it is a quintessential articulation our world-view, much like "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt."

Hillel would tell us to concern ourselves with self-preservation *and* with altruism at one and the same time. He would say that if both ends of this dialectic are not being served in equal measure, then we are failing in our human task. Yes, we should vote our interests. But we must always realize that the good of all *is* in our self-interest. We watch our own back, but we remain idealistic to the degree that we keep striving for a society in which we would not need to worry about what's creeping up from behind.

Will that dream ever come about? No. In a word, no. But we Jews live *k'ilu* - as though it's only around the bend, right after Kiddush.

We say *l'taken olam b'malchut shaddai*: "To repair the world so that God could rule it." Words from the Aleynu prayer, with which we end every Jewish service, but written originally for Rosh Hashanah, so that we would begin each new year with that wonderfully hopeful vision of a Messianic time.

And Hillel's coda nails it for us: If not now, when? What is he saying? Don't put off our altruism to a time when we imagine we can afford it, *and also* don't be so idealistic and altruistic as to forget our own basic needs.

That would include our own people's needs, i.e., the *Jewish* people. To all who think we don't need to consider the good of the Jews and of Israel when we make that pilgrimage to the polls, think again. Think of how risky it is for Israel to take the diplomatic steps it yearns to take for peace and security. Think of how important it is for Israel to have the United States there to watch *its* back; to support its negotiations and its brave territorial compromises; to be engaged and accompanied, rather than to be left alone like Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness.

Hillel's dictum would also have us consider the needs of our *American* people, to whom history in its remarkably unpredictable way has linked us as we could never have been linked to any nation beyond our own Jewish selves – never before this historical moment.

Our Americanism matters deeply to us. In the sacred writs of the American experiment, we see ourselves – our Jewish selves. We hear the echo of our own prophetic texts, and we know it is no coincidence.

That is why when we Jews vote here, we vote on behalf of the *gerim*, the strangers and the oppressed of this land. It is also why when we vote here, we vote on behalf of the *world's* victims of genocide and pandemic, whom we Americans are uniquely positioned to help. We hear the cry from Darfur, we who

were strangers in the land of *Europe*. We feel helpless, but we know from our ever-so-recent memory that we can't turn away in despair or exhaustion. So we organize, we march, we petition. We vote.

III.

And what is the third shtikl of Torah we can take into the voting booth? It's none other than the Torah of the malach, our friend the angel, who says "Do not fear." *Al tir'a. Al tir'i*. The angel says it to Hagar and shows her the well. God says it to Abram and shows him the stars. God says it to Jacob and promises to accompany him down into Egypt and out the other side. Moses says it to Joshua and hands him the reins of leadership. Isaiah says it to the Judean exiles in Babylonia and encourages them to find their way back to Eretz Yisrael.

On and on. *Al tira*. Don't fear.

And as for us? I think the malach would say: Go into the voting booth with the knowledge that the world is a dangerous place, and that there is much to be afraid of. But what's with you? Don't you know that it could become even more dangerous if you let your fear overcome you? Don't you know that your ancient covenant, which you renew each new year with the shofar blast, demands that you figure out a way to transform your fear into acts of healing and repair – *r'fuah v'tikkun* - not acts of revenge and despair?

In the end, *al tira* cannot mean "don't be afraid" in the usual sense, because indeed we *are* afraid: afraid of terror, afraid of financial collapse, afraid of growing older without love and community, and maybe without our pensions.

So it cannot mean “don’t be afraid.” Rather, it has to mean “don’t be afraid to turn *toward* the world; don’t turn *away* from the world.” Don’t be afraid to face the frightening world with all your heart, your soul, and your might. With all your beliefs. With your whole self. *Al tira*.

Why am I telling you all of this? Because when we go to vote as American citizens, I want us to go as Americans who are proud to be Jews, and to take that pride with us all the way in. I want us to think of ourselves as a people who stands for something great; not just the greatness of our heritage, of our history, of our “civilization;” but also the greatness of our great ideas, our great vision for humanity and the whole world.

We believe in *teshuvah*, the unending possibility of transformation and improvement *in real time and space*. We believe in *yir’at hashem*, the fear of God’s moral order, and not in *yir’at adam*, the fear of other human beings. We believe in listening for the voice of the oppressed, and of responding to it. We believe in *tzelem elohim*, the idea that every human being, regardless of sex, gender, race, origin, orientation, pigment, or religion, bears the image of divinity in his or her face.

We Jews deeply believe these precious things, and we must not let the fear of our circumstances scare these beliefs out of us. *Al tira, avdi Ya’akov*. Fear not, dear servant Jacob. Fear not, Hagar. Fear not, Abraham. Fear not, people of Israel, *ki imcha a’ni*, for I am with you.

“Ma lach?” asks the malach, the angel. “What’s with you? Have you lost your courage? Have you lost your sacred memory? The well is right over there. It was there all along. Take a drink for yourself, and give a drink to your desperate son. And fear no more, for I am with you.”