

Heshbon Nefesh HaMishpaha: An Accounting of the Soul of Our Families
Rosh Hashanah 5767

Rabbi Sharon Brous

We recently found out that my grandfather had had a younger brother named Harold. Apparently when they were in their early 20s there had been a fairly significant rift between the two and Harold disappeared. It was not until he was 86 years old that he reappeared hoping to make amends before he died. 65 years of complete disconnection -- weddings, children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, love, loss, success, failure -- literally a lifetime -- and they shared nothing of it with one another. For about a year the two took small, tentative steps toward one another, beginning to open their hearts to each other once again, but my grandfather never got to ask Harold face to face all the questions he had for him (Where have you been? How could you abandon us? How could you not show up at our parents' funerals?) because Harold died, just a few months before my grandfather did.

This morning's Torah reading is extracted from the most intensely rich parasha in Torah -- Vayera, which contains two of the most significant narrative pieces of Torah: the destruction of Sodom and Gemorrah on one hand and the Akeidah/ Binding of Isaac on the other. But the reading chosen for the first day of Rosh Hashanah contains neither episode. What happens in today's reading? Broken hearts, ugly jealousies, unbridled competition between siblings and spouses.

But today is *hayom harat olam* -- the moment in which we contemplate the birth of the world:

Where are we?

What have we done to our earth?

What direction do we need to move in the future?

Why do we take the time to bear witness to the conflict and dysfunction, the fears and jealousies of one family?

And especially as we are living through a *truly* momentous hour -- one in which history is unfolding fiercely all around us -- why no story of inspiration? of mission?

Why not read “צדק צדק תרדף” - *Justice, Justice shall you pursue*” (Deut. 16:20), or “לֹא תֵּן עֵצְמְךָ עַל-יְדֵי רֵעִי -- *Do not stand by as your neighbor bleeds*” (Lev. 19:16) -- and talk about our obligation to intercede to protect innocent victims of genocide and atrocities in Darfur and Uganda?

Or what about regulations regarding “הַגֵּר אֲתֶם -- *The stranger who resides among you*” (Lev. 19:34)? Then we could have discussed the plight of 12 million undocumented workers in our country and our ethical responsibilities toward them.

Why not study God's promise to Abraham “לְזָרְעֶךָ אֶתְּן אֶת-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת” -- *To your descendants I will give this land*” (Gen. 12:7) in light of the commandment to “בְּקִשׁ שָׁלוֹם” -- *Seek peace and pursue it*” (Ps. 34:15)? Then Rosh Hashanah could have been an

opportunity to contemplate the most responsible ways to build a secure and democratic Israel -- one that reflects our tradition's core commitment to dignity, equality, justice and peace.

YES, our tradition says -- we must stake our religious lives on these questions -- but first we need to pay attention to the small stories, to devote ourselves to *Heshbon haNefesh* -- An Accounting of the Soul, as we did last night, and *Heshbon Nefesh haMishpaha* -- an Accounting of the Soul of Our Families. The placement of these stories, both in the Book of Genesis and in the High Holy Day liturgy, indicates that the way we engage our families can impact, in meaningful and dramatic ways, the way that we engage the world.

Over the past decade we have witnessed in our country the abuse of both religious doctrine and the very notion of family as an excuse to put forward a blatantly exclusionary political agenda. "Family values" has come to mean the delegitimization of certain models of family, gay and lesbian in particular, models that some claim to undermine the foundations of American society. "Family values," we have come to understand, means *our* families, *their* values.

But it seems to me that if we are truly concerned with the welfare of our city, country and world, then it is incumbent upon us, both spiritually and politically, that we not abandon the conversation on family to those who use the word as a cudgel with which to slam their political opponents. There is a very different way to approach family in the context of religion -- an approach that embraces the Jewish historical and ethical tradition as a framework within which to build loving and supportive homes and strong, confident and purpose-driven people.

The Talmud teaches that a parent has 5 obligations toward his child.

תנינא להא דת"ר: האב חייב בבנו למולו, ולפדותו, וללמדו תורה, ולהשיאו אשה, וללמדו אומנות וי"א: אף להשיטו במים

A parent is bound to circumcise his child, to redeem the child (*pidyon haben*), to teach him Torah, to help him get married, and to teach the child a craft. (Some say to teach him to swim too.)

-Talmud Bavli, Kiddushin 29a

This teaching offers us the Jewish version of family values, and in doing so offers a pretty compelling take on the meaning of life:¹

First, how do we understand *brit milah*, the redemption of the first born and Torah study as primary parental obligations? The first thing that a family communicates to a person is context. You are not alone in the universe -- you are part of a people that has a rich and compelling history, driven by a covenantal relationship -- a partnership -- with a loving God who took you out of slavery in Egypt to be in relationship with you. In the Rabbinic imagination, family

¹ I am grateful to Rabbi David Hartman for his thoughtful treatment of this sugya in *A Heart of Many Rooms*, which inspired my reading of the text.

becomes the foundation of hope, the promise of redemption, the source of morality. How do you know not to despair in times of darkness and suffering? Because deep in your consciousness is the memory of your walk from the depths of darkness toward the Promised Land. How do you know not to mistreat, abuse or ignore the vulnerable? Because “you know the feelings of the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Ex. 23:9). How do you know that you are never alone? Because you live and practice in a community of other Jews, driven by the same *raison d’être* as you. The family’s principle purpose is to create a context for moral identity, spirituality, community and purpose.

Then what about the parents’ obligation to help marry off their children and teach them a craft? The family is the context within which real independence is fostered, preparing children to work and live with dignity in the world, to identify and cultivate their unique gifts. It is in the home that a child should begin to see herself as worthwhile, a person who deserves respect and loving partnership. Thus the family has the potential to communicate worth, uniqueness, and the capacity to love and be loved.

In other words, the Rabbis reject the dysfunctionality of families in the Torah, articulating that the family, rather than being the seat of deception, hurt and conflict, *has the potential* be the wellspring from which spirituality, community, purpose, uniqueness and worth pour forth. And one does not have to be raising children for this to be relevant. Any family relationship, whether it be between parent and child, between siblings or between partners, has this potential. The “family value” about which our tradition is most deeply concerned is the ability to communicate, within the context of loving engagement, what it means to be a Jew and a human being in the world.

What a shame that for many of us it is precisely the family -- the entity with the greatest capacity for shaping a person in the most positive, meaningful ways -- that undermines our sense of self, distracts us from our broader purpose, strips us of feelings of worth. *Every single one* of us has some bruise or shadow in our family stories -- some brokenness, some hidden, unresolved conflict, some seemingly irreconcilable rift.

We can easily bury ourselves in our work, our distractions, and minimize contact with our families, we can brush over the issues that challenge us the most. But the Torah of *Yamim Noraim* challenges us to ask the questions we don’t want to ask about our lives, and our families, our home bases, are usually the last place we want to look for resolution. Rosh Hashanah comes and says *stop everything*. Take two days off of work and contemplate the relationship between Isaac (the beloved, chosen one) and Ishmael (the older, more rebellious child), and what their parents’ favoritism must have done to their self understanding. Think of how painful it must have been for Sarah to see her beloved Abraham with another woman. Think of how excruciating it was for Abraham to be forced to hurt Hagar in order to preserve his relationship with Sarah.

And think about our own families --
the marriage that is no longer a partnership,

the calcified dynamic between parent and child (which no longer allows either to grow),
the bitter scripts we continually reenact with our siblings,
the aggressive stubbornness that we reserve only for those closest to us,
the lack of patience, the dismissiveness and insensitivity we show to members of our
family that we never would show anyone else.

What would it take to break those patterns, to infuse new life into our old, damaged relationships? How do we reconcile the Jewish call for families to be the heart of purpose, dignity and worth when they are so often the source instead of confusion, pain and disorientation? This is what it would mean to take seriously the moral message of the *haggim*.

What kept Harold away from my grandfather for 65 years? I don't know exactly, but I suspect it had something to do with his fear that things could never change. He probably didn't believe that *he* could actually change, and knew that even if he had changed, his brother, sisters and parents would never change their perception of him.

It is the question of change that makes conflicts within families so intractable. When someone has known you your whole life, or lived with you for years, it is so much harder to believe that you, or she, can change. That's why so many of us still feel like rebellious 17 year old kids around our parents. And that's why our parents still treat us like we're rebellious 17 year old kids (even if we're 40). In families, we simply don't allow the dynamics to change.

But our Rabbis taught that change was always possible:

Each person was created with full capacity to change the nature he was born with, so you must make every effort to improve yourself as soon as you can...

-Rabbi Elimelech of Lizensk, *Tzefl Katan* #16

With stubborn and sustained effort and commitment, we can make *teshuvah* -- even the most strident among us can change even the most foundational aspects of our selves. It is not easy, our tradition says, but it is possible.

Rambam says that the essential principle of *teshuvah* is that we have free will, and therefore the ability to choose to be whomever we want to be, to change whatever we need to change in our lives (*Hilkhos Teshuvah* 5:1). Without being pollyanish or dismissive of the pain many of us have experienced through years and years of complicated dynamics within our families, it seems that we have at least two choices:

We can fight to change the dynamics of our families -- trusting in the incredible power of *teshuvah* to transform ourselves and others.

Or we can say *ad kan* -- it can go this far and no further. We will no longer let the complexities of our family dynamics bleed into our lives. We will no longer be paralyzed by what isn't or wasn't right in our homes.

HaYom Harat Olam -- It is possible that *this very moment* is the beginning of something completely new.

This could be the moment in which our heshbon nefesh hamishpaha -- Accounting of the Soul of our Family -- allows us to turn to the person beside us and say, I'm willing to try to do this differently.

This could be the moment in which we choose to end the endless cycle of hurt and retaliatory hurt that defines our relationship with a family member.

This could be the moment in which we commit to speaking more gently and engaging more sensitively with the people most vulnerable to us.

This could be the moment in which we reach out and connect with the person we haven't spoken to in weeks or months or years.

This could be the moment in which we commit to realizing the full potential of family -- to communicating the purpose, the hope, the moral identity, the uniqueness and worth to our children that we perhaps didn't receive in our own homes.

Judaism affirms that the essence of life is contained in the small grievances that Sarah, Abraham, Hagar, Isaac, Ishmael and *we* continue to struggle with. This year, let us make *something* change in our lives, let us find a way to model the justice, compassion, dignity, and peace we dream of for our world in our own homes.

We don't have to wait until we are 86 years old to start.