

ENVY US Rosh Hashanah Day 1 5787 by Rabbi Lisë Stern, EHS

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I've been thinking about envy. This afternoon, we'll observe tashlich, a service in which we symbolically toss our sins into a body of water, releasing ourselves from those sins.

On Rosh Hashanah, the first day of our Days of Awe, the beginning of our annual self reflection, introspection,

We start the process of teshuvah, repentance.

We don't yet name all the possible sins today -- that will happen on Yom Kippur

We just open the door for contemplation.

And then we have 10 days to make good

As we should

Reflecting

Directing

Our thoughts inward

And outward

To ourselves, to how we are in the world

Toward ourselves

Toward others

Toward God.

Because God is in each of us -- we are

As the good books says

Created in God's image, which means, there is a bit of God in each and every one of us

And if we mistreat each other

We mistreat God.

In our Rosh Hashanah service, we don't yet have the list,

Of all the many many ways we can miss,

Injure, hurt, sin

At Tashlich, we'll begin the recitation

Resignation that we do miss

Despite perhaps the best of intentions

And conclude in full force

On our Day of Atonement

But do we actually need a list to know

Right from wrong

Weak from strong

How to not do unto others

What is hateful to you

Or, positive spin, how to love our neighbors

As ourselves.

I've been thinking about envy because I know I experience it, and I hate that I do.

It clouds my mind and truly feels like an evil inclination, covering my blessings with inky smog

Insidiously, deceptively

Making me

Receptive to unkindness being acceptable.

I've been thinking about envy, and its harsher cousin jealousy. These two shades of the same emotion -- desiring what someone else has, something we want for ourselves, be it success, or children, or abilities -- both involve resentment. Jealousy is the heightened version, ramped up to hostility, perhaps executed bad behavior toward the object of our discontentment.

I've been thinking about envy, and its harsher cousin jealousy, because these, let's call them sins, are present in full force in today's readings, both the Torah and the haftarah.

The Torah and haftarah we read today are stories. Iconic, the one setting the stage for the other. In the Torah we read, Genesis chapter 21, we learn that Sarah, at age 90, finally and improbably has a child, Isaac.

But Isaac is not, in fact, her husband Abraham's first son. Sarah had long been barren; 15 years earlier, she suggested Abraham take her "shifcha," שִׁפְחָה, translated as maidservant, handmaiden, Hagar, an Egyptian woman, as a surrogate.

Hagar becomes "like a wife" to Abraham, the Torah says, and conceives immediately, giving birth to Ishmael. Suggested surrogacy in the Bible rarely goes as planned.

Because, in fact, Ishmael stays his mother Hagar's son. There's no evidence that Sarah acted as his mother. Even before Ishmael was born, Sarah's jealousy of Hagar boiled up, and she "dealt harshly" with Hagar -- so much so, Hagar ran away while pregnant, only to return when encountering an angel of God, who told her to go back.

In today's portion, Sarah's festering jealousy of Hagar comes to a head. When she sees the older boy Ishmael playing with Isaac, she tells Abraham to expel both Hagar and "her son." Not hers, not Abraham's, but "Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac." Abraham, on the other hand, is deeply troubled by this request, "on account of his son." But God tells him "Listen to Sarah's voice." So he sends away Hagar and Ishmael.

In the haftarah, from 1 Samuel chapter 1, Hannah, a name that means grace, is also barren. She and sister wife Peninah are married to husband Elkanah. Peninah has children. During festival times, Elkanah would give Peninah and her children special portions -- but he would give double to Hannah. This sparked jealousy in Peninah, and she took it out on Hannah: "And her rival wife would taunt her cruelly to make her tremble with grief."

Ultimately, Hannah prays -- and is most known for her silent prayer, an example to us on how we can pray, we can petition God for something important to us. She prays for a son, and a year later gives birth to the prophet Samuel -- a prophet significant enough that he gets two books named for him. She made a promise as part of her prayer, that she would dedicate the child to a life of temple service. Once he is weaned, she indeed brings him to the Temple.

Let's look at the underlying themes here. There are two relationships shaped by jealousy, by envy, that cause one woman to treat another poorly. Sarah has been married to Abraham for decades -- childless the entire time. She offers her handmaiden to Abraham -- nevermind the distasteful idea of one person *offering* another. She

says, “Please, come to my maidservant. Perhaps I will have a son through her. And Avram listened to the voice of Sarai.” (At the time of Ishamel’s concept, God had not yet changed Avram’s and Sarai’s names.) But she becomes distraught when her plan is successful. She senses there is love from Abraham for Hagar, and that is painful for her. Hurt people hurt.

And Peninah, who the rabbis describe as Eklkahah’s second wife, is jealous at the evident love her husband has for Hannah. “Am I not worth more to you than 10 sons?” he asks Hannah, devaluing Penina and her sons and daughters.

This afternoon, we will have a symbolic service called Tashlich. תשל"ך comes from the Hebrew word meaning to cast away, to throw. It is a word that has biblical connections to jealousy. Joseph’s brothers are hurt by the favoritism their father Jacob shows Joseph. When Jacob sends Joseph to search for the brothers while they are shepherding, they grab him and וַיִּשְׁלְכוּ, and they toss him in a pit, then sell him into slavery. Similarly, a few centuries later, when a new Pharaoh is nervous about the growing Israelite population in Egypt, he orders the male babies תִּשְׁלִיכֵהוּ to be cast in the river to drown.

Tashlich, is, in a sense, a reclaiming of such casting away. We are not tossing a brother, a son, into the river, but symbolic birdseed representing our negative traits, releasing ourselves from the way they bind us to bad behavior.

And one of those traits is envy or even jealousy. We’ll declare, “Let us cast away the sin of envy, so that we will neither be consumed by desire for what we lack nor grow unmindful of the blessings which are already ours.” Toss away envy before it becomes jealousy.

Why do we tease, mock, belittle? A couple years ago, I faced myself when a friend called me on behavior I had dismissed as innocuous. It can be a gift when we realize on our own that we have hurt someone, so we can make it right right away -- I spoke in anger, I spoke harshly, please forgive me, I was wrong. But sometimes we close our eyes, our heart to our own motivations and actions. We rationalize. My friend expressed sadness at the way she had been treated by colleagues in her line of work. I thought, what is she complaining about? She is still successful in her field, and I said as much. She grew quiet, and stopped sharing her concerns. At the time I thought, she’s learned, now she can be grateful for what she has.

Later, she shared with me that my dismissive words had made her feel diminished, had invalidated her experiences. “Why did you tell me I was overreacting?” she asked. “You need to think about that.”

And I realized I did need to think about it.

Examine, turn it inside and out and acknowledge that even at the time

I was rationalizing

Deflecting

Self correcting but not inspecting

Not listening.

Because, yes, envy. My friend had success and abilities I did not have but wished I did, so by negating her sadness, I diminished her abilities, for me.

Humiliating her by not listening

Not acknowledging that I wanted what she had.

Forgive me I said, I was jealous and let that cloud me
I hurt you and I am sorry.

I've been thinking about envy.

Sarah, Penina, did not have the opportunity to self reflect,
did not attempt to correct
Situations bitter and disconnected
Once they spoke their words of cruelty, jealous of what their sister wife had, they did not repent
Only resented, no words of comfort offered.
No retrospect at the aftereffect
The fallout of their callout
For Sarah, Hagar had a child with the man Sarah loved, and perhaps had his love as well.
For Penina, Hannah had no child, but had the love of the man Penina loved.
Once they expressed their jealousy with cruelty, without ambiguity
they never speak again. Their envious words are their last words recorded in the Tanach.

I valued that friendship, and want only to admire my friend's talents and strengths. When we let envy override love, we lose a bit of ourselves, because the momentary actions can damage ourselves as well as those we care for. And we hurt God too, the bit of God that is inside each and every one of us.

With repentance, comes restitution, a restoration of something lost. Not back to its original state, damage has been done, but still, repair. We have to make good with those we have hurt before we can make good with God. Sometimes seeing our own blessings in our lives takes active listening, active observing. We can practice making the most of our own talents, even if we yearn for others. Envy is real, acknowledge it, and be tender with it, but don't let it overpower. Appreciate your own beautiful abilities, appreciate those of others, and gain strength from that power of realization, of kindness.

Shanah tova tikatevu.

May we all be inscribed in the book of life.

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