

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5781
The Abyss, the Shard, and the Song
(Based on Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 10:2, 29a and Bavli Sukkah 53a-b)
Rabbi Betsy Forester

On this Rosh Hashanah I'm going to speak to you from inside a story, actually a story within a story. I hope that this story will connect to our experiences at this strange and uncertain time, through the lens of a wise and feeling tradition.

It had been a strange year in the town of Nosidam in southern Nisnoctiw. A disease had come to the land sometime around Purim, bringing communal life to a screeching halt, province by province, city by city. Pesach came, and Shavuot, and Tisha B'av, and the Jews of Nosidam went from worried to restless to grateful to angry and back again. A profound sadness cast a shadow over everything--birthday celebrations not held, bris's and baby namings without guests, then weddings recalibrated and lonely funerals where the bereaved did what they could to bury their dead without the help of those who would have come. Schools were cancelled and kids climbed the walls as parents, exiled from offices, coffee shops, and meeting rooms tried to focus on tasks that often felt like they were blinking into another planet where life was normal. Those were the lucky ones. Hundreds of thousands got sick, and died alone, attended by frightened medical staff dressed like astronauts. Blame abounded and social inequities glared from sick bays and streets, where workers, hardly noticed before, but now considered "essential," straggled home at the end of their shifts to their terrified families. Businesses failed as the economy tanked. Disparities and injustice brought riots, protests, and destruction of property, for better and for worse.

Yet there was also a newfound gratitude for front porches and simple conversations, a rediscovered pleasure in the budding of flora and the antics of wildlife, and curiosity about social responsibility, belonging, where God hides, and the magical properties of sourdough.

Lag B'Omer came, and Summer, then the leaves began to turn, the wind blew cooler and people knew they would soon be spending more time indoors. The dread of shuttering further steeped with the fear of contagion like the aroma of a bitter brew.

A few days before Rosh HaShanah, the Rabbi received a short note from a man who asked if they might go for a walk together. Something was bothering him and he hoped that maybe she could help. She rode out to his side of town for a walking conversation. As they stepped along a lake path, a northern cardinal fluttered across at eye level. The Rabbi noted for the hundredth time how merrily oblivious the birds seemed and wondered if Nodisam had always been home to so many varied species, colors, and calls.

The man, Isaac, spoke of his business, which seemed destined to survive; his marriage, which was kinder than it had been in years; and his adolescent children, who were doing a lot of puzzles, kissing mirrors, taking up ukulele, reading books they had missed along the way, and had become surprisingly communicative in spite of themselves. They had all but stopped setting goals beyond the next week. His spouse's business had gone dormant. His parents on the west coast were lonely and stir crazy. Many of his friends had it worse than he did. Isaac was putting one foot in front of the other, getting by.

The rabbi wondered why she had been summoned. "It sounds like you're in a rhythm," she said.

I have so much to be grateful for. I've been lucky," Isaac responded. "But I thought that by Rosh HaShanah...I don't know, I thought I would have figured out how to give more of myself, that I'd be ready for a fresh start. There are things about myself I'd like to change. I go for walks every day and I think maybe I'll stumble upon some insight, you know, gain clarity on how to open up to a deeper sense of purpose. But I just walk."

"Hmmn," the Rabbi said, "a deeper sense of purpose?"

"Yeah," Isaac continued. There are ways I'd like to be more helpful, more effective, more intentional. I thought if I cleared out some of the stuff in my closets, if I went through boxes of old things, if I organized old photos and letters and books and stuff...It's hard to explain."

"Is there too much clutter in your life?" the rabbi asked.

"It's more like I'm in some kind of holding pattern," Isaac said.

"A holding pattern?" the rabbi asked.

“I’ve had months to go through all that stuff and I haven’t opened one box or cleared one shelf. It’s almost like I’m afraid to touch it. Like I’m afraid to revisit all of the bits and pieces of how I got to where I am in my life and put them in order.”

“Why do you think that is?” asked the Rabbi.

Isaac just shrugged. They walked quietly, listening to their steps, the chatter of birds, scamper of squirrels, and the quiet lake.

“I feel like my toe is holding down a cyclone,” Isaac whispered.

“Yesterday, a friend called. His company is going bankrupt. He’s in the travel business and obviously no one is traveling. His investors are gone and he’s worried about losing his house.” Suddenly, Isaac burst into tears. He moved off the path, leaned against a majestic oak tree, and sobbed.

The rabbi had a feeling she understood how Isaac’s friend’s house connected to Isaac’s toe holding down the forces of disaster. “We are all holding so much sadness, so much anxiety,” she offered.

“So much frustration,” added Isaac, “and fear, and loss. The intensity of everything wears me down and makes me irritable.”

“Can I tell you a story?” the Rabbi asked.

“Of course,” Isaac said.

“It’s from the Talmud,” said the Rabbi.

Isaac said, “I’m listening,”

“It was not God’s will for King David to build the Holy Temple,” the Rabbi began, “but he went ahead and dug its foundations anyway. He dug and dug, deep down, fifteen hundred cubits, where he found a little clay pot, actually just a shard of a pot, a piece of ancient trash. He picked it up and aimed to cast it out of his way, when the shard spoke up:

“You can’t toss me away like that.”

“Why not?” asked the surprised king.

“I am here to subdue the abyss.”

“What abyss?” David asked. “I have been digging and digging with no sign of an abyss.”

“Primordial chaos,” said the clay, “you know, that stuff that was here before our world was created.”

“Since when have *you* been here?” the curious king asked.

“I have been in this spot, holding down the abyss, from the time that God spoke at Sinai. The land trembled and sank, and the chaos went underground. And I was placed here to subdue it,” said the shard of what looked like any old pot.

David did not believe it, not being the sort of king who took counsel from pot shards. He tossed the shard aside, and the abyss rose up as if wanting to overflow the world.

“This story is not exactly making me feel better,” Isaac piped up.

“Yeah,” said the Rabbi. “There’s more, but I’ll cut to the end. So David went and picked up the shard. He wrote the Name of God on it and threw it into the widening, swirling abyss, and the chaos receded, slithering sixteen hundred cubits down.

Suddenly the earth around the king grew dry and began to crack. He looked up and saw the roots of trees loosen and begin to break, and he realized that the chaos he had banished had moistened the earth.

An ordinary person might have gotten the heck out of that pit, but David, being hyper-ordinary, did what made no sense to do. He composed a song of ascents--in fact, not one song, but 15 songs, and the chaos rose up fifteen hundred cubits, where it remained one hundred cubits beneath the little shard. Useful, and controlled.

The roots of the trees above settled into fertile earth once again, and the humbled king climbed up out of the pit, fifteen hundred cubits, singing as he went, a song for each one hundred, until he climbed out of the pit, turned his face toward the sun, and walked home, where he had work to do.

“Is that it?” asked Isaac.

“Pretty much,” the Rabbi said.

“What does it mean?” Isaac asked.

“I don’t know,” the Rabbi answered. It’s very old.”

“Why did you tell it to me?” Isaac asked.

“Like you, Isaac, there are days when I feel that close to the abyss,” said the rabbi, “like I’m holding it down with my big toe. Many people have told me it’s hard to stay steady these days.”

Isaac said, “I like how in the story, David writes God’s name on the shard and throws it into the abyss, like ‘You deal with this, God. It’s way beyond my pay grade. And then he climbs out of the pit.’”

“Yes,” said the Rabbi, “David cannot possibly overcome the chaos, but he doesn’t have to. All he has to do is climb out of the pit. God will take care of the rest. That’s a reassuring idea to me, too.” the Rabbi asked.

“It makes sense to me right now,” said Isaac, “but when I let myself tap into the anxiety and grief that’s hanging over us, I feel hopeless, and that’s a bit different.”

“Do you feel like there’s nothing you can do to help?” asked the Rabbi.

“I do what I can, but I wish I could do more,” Isaac said.

“I do, too,” said the Rabbi. “When we see so much pain and suffering, it’s hard to trust that whatever we do to keep ourselves going and support others makes a difference. But I have to believe that our efforts matter if our lives are to have purpose. And I believe they do.”

“I believe that, too,” Isaac agreed, then added, “Rabbi, whatever that weird story means, I just want to say, something precious happened just now.”

“Yes,” said the Rabbi, “and I’m glad we got to unpack the story a bit,” said the Rabbi. “You know, for me, connecting with other people is like writing God’s name on a shard of pottery. It helps settle those feelings of chaos.”

Isaac nodded. Above, branches rustled as a bluejay zoomed into her nest amidst welcoming chirps.

Isaac and the Rabbi looked up, smiled for a brief second, and commenced walking back along the path as the lake began to lap at the shore along the land of Nosidam.

*Why did I tell **YOU** this story?*

Over the summer, I had the opportunity to study with colleagues over several weeks. We explored many texts, looking for support in our tradition to help with the challenges and anxieties of this time. There were many sources that uplifted me for a moment but none that stuck with me like this midrash about David in the pit, so close to the abyss. It really got under my skin.

Since March, each of the many life cycle events I have officiated has been a new and challenging adventure. Each week is filled with a series of intense and emotional interactions, very long days, and a constant, demanding process of assessing and striving to meet needs. I know that what it's been like for many of you. Yet it has also been a time of growth and inspiration. There is much I am grateful for even though it has been, and still is, very, very difficult. I couldn't shake this story because it illustrates exactly how I have often felt--like I'm a shard of clay away from chaos one minute, and lifting myself and others up from the depths the next.

What I shared with you was some of my internal conversation as I sat inside the story myself. I wrote the dialogue between Isaac and the Rabbi a dozen different ways. That is what this time has been like for me and I think for many of us--constant uncertainty, upheaval, rethinking, recalibrating, never feeling quite sure if our responses are enough.

I believe, in the end, that our responses must be enough. We are plugging chaos every day. Despite everything, we are showing up and doing our best. When I see your faces on a screen at daily davening, classes, and other events, and you tell the assembled screens about some little thing that happened that day, all of our hearts open up. We are savoring bits of joy despite everything. And--this is very important--I have faith that we are learning and growing in ways we cannot yet know. I do believe that with God's help we can emerge from this trying time a bit wiser, more humble, and more compassionate.

I pray that we can find it in our hearts to accept that this will be more than enough.

May we all be inscribed for a year of resilience, a year of hope, a year of faith, a year of compassion, and a year of peace. L'shanah tovah u'm'tukah tikateivu. May we know goodness and sweetness in the year to come.