

If you grew up as I did, without much of a Jewish education, you might find the prophets a confusing bunch of characters. Sure, most of us know about Jonah, probably Elijah, maybe Isaiah. But there are lots of other prophets too. The Talmud records as many as 55 individuals who were thought to convey messages from God. These messages were not just predictions of the future. The prophets were advocates promoting change: social change, political change, and personal, spiritual change. The Biblical prophets urged and discouraged; they cajoled and they criticized.

One prophet stands out as the crankiest: Jeremiah, known as the “weeping prophet” for his unshakeable pessimism. Despite his irritating persistence, his Israelite community ignored his warnings, rebuffed him, even jailed him. Jeremiah’s great tragedy was his failure to prevent the destruction of the First Temple and the sacking of Jerusalem.

If Jeremiah was such a downer, why did the rabbis select his words for Rosh Hashanah, a day of celebrating renewal? After all, Rosh Hashanah is not one of those depressing Jewish holidays.

In the text chanted today, the Book of Jeremiah uncharacteristically takes a happy turn, as the prophet envisions the safe return of Israelites from exile. He offers a utopian vision of people gathered together, everyone from the original lost tribes of long ago to his own contemporaries taken by the Babylonians. From verse 7:

*And behold, I bring them from a northern land,
I gather them from the remote recesses of the
earth.*

In Jeremiah's own words:

[in Hebrew, chant 31:7] Hi-n-ni hay-na.

All the remnants of the Jewish people will be gathered, as a *kahal gadol*, living happily and peacefully, singing and dancing.

There is no contingency in God's promise of return,

Jeremiah tells us. God's love, and our return to a unified land, is unconditional. From the second verse:

[chant from 31:2] V'ahavat....chased.

*I loved you with an everlasting love;
Therefore have I continued in my kindness to
you.*

The eventual reunion of the diaspora is a promise made by God simply and unreservedly as an expression of love.

But if God's love and our return to the land is unconditional, what's the spiritual point of the High Holy Days? In our contemporary observance of Judaism, many of us think of the period from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur as a time not only for prayer but also self-reflection: *teshuvah*. While not necessarily a goal for each of us, the holidays certainly offer an *opportunity* for reflection, maybe even change.

There's some text in the haftorah which suggests that our return requires something from us; that we

don't just get to come back home. Here is the lament paraphrased from verse 17:

You've chastised me, and I was made to suffer...

But bring me back, let me return...

For, as I change, I have rethought my life...

In the lament, hear the assertion that a review of our lives, maybe even a “change” is in order?

Of course, the observance of Judaism has many such opportunities for reflection, but the High Holy Days can catalyze the process. The assembling of the congregation, the intensity of the liturgy, the music, the uncomfortable chairs, whatever: it's a charged atmosphere.

Especially, here under our tent. Some vivid moments that I will never forget:

- In 2010, the darshan took us on a cosmic sweep across Jewish civilization, courtesy of Google Earth. We started here under this tent, then swept out to survey the entire galaxy. Then the darshan compressed and expanded time. I felt

Judaism to be both monumental and molecular.

- A personally resonant moment: the drash titled “Fake it til you make it.” This bit of vernacular, rendered from the HHD bimah, reassured me that my Jewish study is valid and meaningful, even if I’m mostly davening from the transliteration.
- A dvar torah from 2012 about the Akedah. In his final words, the darshan suddenly switched to the first person, and he *became* our patriarch Abraham, trembling as he regarded his beloved, bound Isaac. And I understood the pain of sacrifice as I had not before.

The moments that ring powerfully in my memory will be different from yours. I contend that these insights are potentially transformative. That the High Holy Days do hold forth the possibility of change: changing perspective, changing minds, changing ourselves.

My own belief, my Reconstructionist contention, is that the changes that serve us best are the changes that connect us more deeply to our own humanity.

I also believe that our humanity is most truly realized when it connects to others.

I want to tell you about one of my most profound experiences of a transformational encounter. Many of you know me as a family medicine doctor.

Years ago, I cared for a woman and her two daughters, a woman I will call Maria, who worked cleaning houses. She and I did our best to prevent additional pregnancies, but we were unsuccessful. Maria would not end the pregnancy, so I referred her for prenatal care.

Later, she returned with her young daughters for their routine appointment, and she told me tragic news: her unborn daughter had a defect, a damaged brain, and would survive only weeks after delivery. Still, Maria would not end the pregnancy.

After the baby was born, Maria returned home with her three daughters, the newborn receiving specialized hospice care. So my team and I made a house call to see Maria and her girls in the single room that they shared. Maria was so proud

to receive us, and asked me to hold her new baby. “*Su nombre?*” I asked, and she told me, “Deborah.” “Ah,” I realized, “from the Bible. *La guerrera*, the warrior,” and Maria nodded.

I sat in the small room’s only chair and Maria placed Deborah in my arms, careful with her swollen, misshapen head. I looked into the baby’s face and saw – nothing. No eye contact, no reciprocating sentence.

But what I *did* feel was the most powerful surge of humanity on my part. I felt deeply, intensely happy. I felt inexplicably connected, *panim el panim*, as our rabbi teaches us. And several weeks later, when I was told that Deborah had died, I felt sadness, but also profound gratitude to have met her.

What’s the point of my story? Well, surely not to move you as I was moved. Epiphanies are hard to share; I will leave that to poets and musicians. But meeting Deborah was a glimpse of being joyfully connected to a deeper self, both hers and mine. And that connection led me to change in important ways. You see, again verse 7 of the haftorah:

[Chant 31:7] V'ki-batz-tim....i-var u-fi-say-ach....

I will gather them from the remote recesses of the earth. Among them are the blind and the lame...

I-var u-fi-say-ach, "the blind and the lame."

Jeremiah's vision of our future is explicitly inclusive. His *kahal gadol* includes farmers and shepherds, young and old, *and* differently abled people.

When I met Deborah, I fell in love with an infant who essentially was nothing but a body and a brainstem, but human. The profound wash of feeling I experienced affirmed something important, and eventually, I ended up changing jobs. I now work exclusively with people born with intellectual or developmental disabilities. Now, I happily connect every day with special people with special minds. My encounter with Deborah led me to make a real, substantive change.

Another point to my story: Jeremiah states that God will gather not only the blind and the lame, not only the old and the young. He goes on:

[Chant v31:7] V'ki-batz-tim.... yachdav...

*I will gather them from the ends of the earth.
The blind and the lame among them
Those with child and those in labor...*

Translations vary, but most translations I found render *harah v'yoledet yachdav* as two different groups of people, “those with child and those in labor.” This distinction suggests that not all of those pregnant with a child will become someone who delivers said child. My patient Maria chose not to end her pregnancy, although some people encouraged her to do so. She embraced a sorrowful future, knowing that her baby’s brief life would be suffused with her mother’s tears.

A mother’s tears – perhaps the same tears as our matriarch Rachel’s *b'chi tamrurim*, “wailing and bitter weeping,” from verse 14.

But Rachel was famously inconsolable. No reassurance from God could stanch her tears. Unlike Rachel, Maria faced her inevitable loss with equanimity. Perhaps instead of despairing, the pregnant Maria heard God’s promise in Jeremiah’s

words from the following verse:

*Hold back your voice from weeping,
And your eyes from tears...
Hope arises for your future...
For your children are returning to their home.*

Maria's choice to give birth changed the world.
Certainly my world changed.

As a people, we have lost so much. Along with Rachel, along with Maria, we have all wept tears: through plagues and pogroms, pandemics and polemics. The rabbis' choice of Jeremiah's joyful vision enjoins us to hope, to connect, to make manifest the *kahal gadol*. If that weeping prophet could interrupt his woeful jeremiad to inscribe a vision of our happy future, all of us – *all* of us – gathered together – how fitting to hear those words today, the start of the new year!

Shanah tovah; a joyful year filled with dance and song for each of us!

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