

## Sermon for Rosh HaShanah Day 1 – How Mom Taught us to be Jewish

One of the highlights of my year is spending two weeks at Camp Ramah in New England. Ramah, the Conservative movement's camping arm, is not only an amazing experience for our children, it is a truly fun and spiritual experience for me and Tami too. One of the nice things is that there are opportunities for classes and discussions for adult staff. One evening we were attending such a discussion about saying the *Imahot* during the amidah. The traditional version, on the 'a' pages of our regular Shabbat and Weekday prayer books, only has the *Avot* Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The contemporary Conservative version on the 'b' pages of our siddurim includes the *Imahot*, or matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, as well. The discussion that evening was about the background for making that addition.

At one point a woman critical of the practice asked, "Since the 80's when people started doing this, have more women started coming to synagogue and taking their Judaism more seriously than before?" I couldn't help but answer (you probably know how I love to answer questions – it's kind of what I do). So, I told the assembled that making more women come to synagogue was not really the point. I didn't grow up saying the version with the matriarchs and it wasn't a sense that it would make more women do more Jewish stuff that got me started. Not even close.

For me the change happened when I was fulfilling my Rabbinical School requirement to spend a year in Israel studying, and at that time, that meant attending the Conservative Seminary in Jerusalem called Machon Schechter. The president is a brilliant rabbi and master of Jewish law, but he is also very traditional in his rulings. Every morning we were expected to show up to morning minyan, and we were under no circumstances allowed to add the *Imahot* into the prayers. Now normally this wouldn't have bothered me because I didn't say them anyway, but I saw and heard how painful the experience of not being able to add them was to my fellow students, particularly, but not only, the female ones.

So what did I do when I was told we were not allowed to add the *Imahot*? I decided to start adding them. It wasn't that important to *me*, but darned if he was going to tell my classmates that they couldn't say them! I asked myself, "What if that were me, or worse my daughter, being told she could not pray the way she wanted? How would I feel if I were in their position? What would I want my female colleagues to do if the roles were reversed? So, I started adding the names of our matriarchs to my prayers, and you know what happened? The experience was transformative. It changed me and my spiritual life forever.

What I discovered when I started saying the *Imahot* is that I may have thought I was doing it to help my fellow Rabbinical School students, but the one who benefitted was me. I discovered that by adding our maternal ancestors to my prayers I uncovered whole aspects of my spiritual self that I did not previously realize were there. And then I realized how often in some of our oldest and most sacred texts both male and female are represented, like the Biblical book Song of Songs, where the people of Israel are referred to as a woman, and God is her male partner. And sometimes the roles are reversed. The presence of God in this world is called *Shechinah* and she is a female manifestation of God. Jewish mystics even refer to prayer as whispering sweet nothings into the ear of the *Shechinah* to draw her close, an image that I love. By recognizing both the male and female aspects of the soul, of God and the community, I gained a richer and fuller understanding of the spiritual world and my spiritual self. And it all started because I opened myself up to experiencing Judaism in a different way. My saying the *Imahot* may not have changed the world for my classmates, but it did change the world for me. That's the real reason we add the *Imahot* – not as some ploy to get more women to shul, but as a means to expand all of our spiritual experiences.

I was glad to be reminded of the story over the summer. It reminded me of the importance of the questions that drove me to add the *Imahot* – How would I feel if that were me? What would I want

someone to do for me in that situation? Those are the questions that inspire empathy, and I learned them not only from adding the *Imahot* but from the whole enterprise of the Modern Jewish Women's Movement.

The modern Women's Movement in Judaism is an incredibly vibrant and creative undertaking that has single-handedly reenergized Judaism in our time through approaching our prayers, our stories and our rituals through a process of empathy. By asking those same core questions of what it would be like to be in the shoes of so many disenfranchised characters of our Jewish past, present and future, the Women's Movement recaptured the art of *midrash*. They created stories from the building blocks of Biblical characters and tales as hadn't been done in centuries, so that they could further explore the women's role in Jewish history and take ownership of it. By asking the question what does my mother, my sister, my daughter need to have her Judaism speak in her life, they reinvigorated the creation and reinterpretation of ritual so that there would be ceremonies and language to celebrate and mark important moments in a woman's life that the rabbis had neglected, like childbirth and menopause and everything in-between. And the same is true for prayer and Biblical commentary and Jewish art and music. The creative class of the Women's Movement didn't create for themselves, but for all of us, by harnessing empathy for the underrepresented.

And because they injected the creativity into these things we have all benefited – not only because of the rituals they created, but also because it gave us all permission to do the same, to explore our faith through the eyes of those at the fringes. So now thanks to them we also have rituals and spiritual language for challenging moments that could affect any of us, like unemployment or chronic illness or a miscarriage and if the language does not exist, we have the opportunity to create and share it ourselves. Judaism is more relevant and more personally meaningful to each of us because of the Modern Women's Movement. Empathy was always at the core of our faith – the Torah tells us to treat the stranger kindly because we were strangers in Egypt; the rabbis of old taught us to collect money for the poor on Purim so that everyone would have funds for a Passover seder a month later. The Modern Women's Movement continued that enterprise after a gap of hundreds of years and I am so grateful to them for it. We all should be.

And today is the perfect day to thank them. Judaism is not known to be a highly egalitarian religion. You may have noticed, it tends to be a little male-centric. For thousands of years the women's role in the history and spiritual life of our people has been at best ignored and at worst intentionally marginalized. Whether it's our holidays, our stories, our leaders or our prayer language, masculinity dominates the narrative. This is true except for one important holiday every year. On one major holiday every year the reading from the Torah and the reading from the Prophets are dominated by women. And what day is that? Today! On Rosh HaShanah, this birthday of the world, we oddly do not read the passages from the Torah about Creation; instead we read the passages about Sarah and Hagar and how women decided the lineage of the Jewish people, as would Rebecca and Rachel and Leah and generations of Jewish women to come. In the haftarah we read about Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel, who literally sets the precedent for how Jews pray to this day, thousands of years later. All that rocking and mumbling? Yeah, that's Hannah; it's how she did it, so it's how we do it.

Today, in honor of our mothers from Sarah to Rashi's daughters, from Hannah to Golda Meir, from Hagar to Rabbah Sarah Hurwitz, we are talking about the most important lesson I learned from them – the transformative power of empathy. Because what I really discovered all those years ago when I started saying the *Imahot* was not how good it felt to stick it to the president of Machon Schechter for disrespecting my friends. What I learned was how valuable is the experience of putting ourselves into the shoes of others. How it changes us and helps us discover aspects of ourselves that we may not have previously recognized. That opportunity is there for all of us. Not just regarding our religion, but in

everything we do. It starts with putting ourselves in the shoes of others. When we ask the question “What if it were me in that situation?” we take our first steps to changing ourselves and visa vie ourselves, changing the world.

My friends, 5776 has been a difficult and frustrating year. After these last few months, I am emotionally exhausted. The problems of the world churn forward with seemingly no one willing or able to address them. We are bombarded by images of suffering all around the world and especially in Syria and Iraq. It seems every month we hear about another mass-shooting or terrorist attack, not in Israel, but here in America or in Europe. There is a perceived dearth of leadership to guide us forward or protect us. We worry. We are frustrated and it is exhausting. It’s not a day-to-day exhaustion, but a constant drag that just wears away at us. In the past, times like these caused folks to come together, but it seems that the divides between people are growing ever-wider, the walls between us ever-higher. What are we to do in times like these, times that make us want to crawl under the blankets and shut it all out?

It is times like these that call for our bravery, to step out from behind the barriers we have built and ask a few simple questions: What if that were me or my child? How would I feel if I were in their position? How would I react to that kind of treatment? How would I want someone to treat me if the roles were reversed? When we start by asking those questions, the way forward is plain, the way to make a difference is clear.

These questions are hard ones to face and the answers sometimes even harder, but to truly fulfill our calling as a people and our purpose as individuals, they need to become the questions with which we approach every situation. Through those questions we will not only change our hearts but we will also change the world. That is our purpose as the Jewish people – to partner with God in constantly recreating the world for the better and empathy is the key ingredient for accomplishing that task.

It is ingrained in the Jewish tradition from our origins until today. When Abraham argues for the sinners of Sodom, he is using empathy. When Moses strikes down the Egyptian slave master, it is empathy for the beaten slave that moves him. It is empathy that forces Esther from hiding in Shushan and empathy that moves the high priest Elie to pray on behalf of Hannah. That is our inheritance – we are a people of action, and we are called upon to take action today to heal the broken world we are living in one empathetic act at a time.

That means reacting with our hearts instead of our heads. It means, when we hear that a friend or neighbor is ill we reach out and visit or bring a meal. It means when we are sitting in traffic due to a car accident, instead of being annoyed we should stop and say a prayer for the health of those who might be hurt. It means when we see someone who looks like they’re having a bad day, we stop and share a smile or a kind word. From the simple to the profound, our faith tells us that we don’t look inward and hide, we look outward and act; to act with empathy means to react Jewishly.

We have the power to transform this world that seems so dark and confusing. All we have to do is stop asking ourselves, “How will things affect me?” and start asking, “How will they affect others?” When we turn our gaze from ourselves and into the world, it is amazing the beauty and sense of purpose we find there. May we all find the will and ability to ask the questions that turn our gaze outward and celebrate this Rosh HaShanah by doing our part to heal the world so that next year at this time we can look back at 5777 no longer frustrated, no longer mired in futility, but instead with the pride of true partners in Creation in a world that we have made better one beautiful act of empathy at a time.

L’Shanah Tovah and I wish you all a happy and fulfilling 5777.