

Sermon for YK Yizkor – 2018 – Ki HaAdam Etz HaSadeh

When I was in Rabbinical School we used to hold the Passover Seder at my parents' house. Eventually my father transferred leadership of the Seder to me and I had this great idea that since the seder is all about questions, we would start by going around the table and asking Jewish questions that were on people's minds and we would either answer them at that moment or through our telling of the Passover story. There were maybe 12 people at the seder and as we went around people asked some softball questions and others seemed eager to ask a real stumper on a detail of law. Then we got to the second-to-last person. It was my Grandma Shirley.

Unfortunately, none of you, well almost none of you, had the opportunity to meet her. She was tiny and funny and pretty unassuming and if you knew her you wouldn't think she was any kind of great theologian. Earlier in the year my grandfather who had been suffering illness most of his life and a severe decline over the previous three years, had succumbed and died. So when it was her turn, my sweet little unassuming grandmother who never made much of a fuss says "Well Jeffrey, I do have a question. How come sometimes you can pray and pray and pray for something and God just doesn't answer."

It was like all the oxygen had been sucked out of the room. We all knew what she was asking. I prayed Jeffrey. I prayed for your Poppa David to get better, to not suffer. And where was God when I needed him? Why didn't God answer my prayers? I wish I could tell you what I answered her, but to be honest, I don't remember what I said. Whatever I said, it was enough to mollify her in that moment and we went on and had a beautiful seder. Little did I know that her question would become a frequent refrain throughout my career.

In my time as a rabbi, I have had the privilege of being with many people, many of you in fact, during your most difficult moments. I can't tell you how many times I have heard that same question in one form or another. "Where is God now that I need Him? Why doesn't God seem to be present in my life when I need God most?" I can say now with more confidence than I could muster seventeen years ago, God *is* answering you. You just may not recognize what you are hearing.

While we are often told nowadays that there's always a shortcut to a goal, instant-this and quick-fix that, but the truth is that having a good life, a life of happiness and satisfaction, doesn't happen in an instant. True happiness is not the same thing as a quick fix of pleasure. Those inevitably burn out and fade and leave us feeling emptier than before. No, a good life is created by having the deepest and most meaningful relationships – and that takes effort, everyday effort. And the same is true for our relationship with God.

Think of the first time you met someone, even someone who would become very important in your life, your spouse, your in-laws, your longtime friend or coworker. That first encounter was probably a little awkward. With time and shared experience you came to love and understand each other, perhaps being deeply impacted by the relationship. Nonetheless, the first time you spoke or tried to work together, you probably didn't click just right.

So I ask you, when you are in crisis, when you turn to God for help and solace, is it a first conversation, or do you already have a relationship? The effect and effectiveness of your prayer, your ability to recognize God's reply, will very much depend on the answer to that question. That's why Judaism insists that we pray everyday – so that we know how to talk to God and we know when God is talking to us. As Rabbi Harold Kushner put it in his great book **When Bad Things Happen to Good People**, “People who pray for miracles usually don't get miracles, any more than children who pray for bicycles, good grades, or boyfriends get them as results of praying. But people who pray for courage, for strength to bear the unbearable, for the grace to remember what they have left instead of what they have lost, very often their prayers are answered.” God speaks to you, but do you have ears that have practiced hearing? Has God really put the distance between you, or have you grown distant from God?

And forming a relationship with God is not just about prayer. Yesterday I referenced Naomi Levy's book **Einstein and the Rabbi** and I want to bring up another passage from it. She talks about the two kinds of SOS we experience in life. The one we all know is the crisis situation – SOS! The ship is going down! We recognize those crises and so we act to correct them. But, she explains, a much more insidious SOS is the “Same Old Stuff,” the mundane grind of life that wears us down and we might not even recognize it. Judaism is good during life's liminal moments, during the *simchas* and the tragedies, but it is even better at helping us recognize the holiness in the world each and every day and allowing it to fill our lives, making actions more purposeful and relationships more meaningful. Judaism helps us draw all of the beauty and meaning out of the Same Old Stuff. The real brilliance of our faith is in making God part of our lives daily, through prayer, through rituals, through how we think and make our decisions and how we connect with our neighbors and our community; it is in how we are taught to give and when we are supposed to take, in the respect we give to others and how we are supposed to respect ourselves. You can create a relationship with God through volunteering, or a Journal of Gratitude; through meditation, or being in the beauty of nature – anything that allows you to connect with the Divine and create the time together and shared experiences that are the foundation of any good relationship. Judaism gives us the context in which to experience that relationship in all the little things we do and experience.

Tami and I have a favorite tree. It sits in our backyard and is, I believe, the most admired tree in Ghent. It is a Purple Smoke Tree and it is big and happy and when it blooms every May the flowers are these bizarre soft, purple tufts that inspire us to call it our truffula tree and keep our eyes out for the Lorax. It blooms every year just in time for the Stockley Gardens Art Festival and people stop by to admire her strange blooms like she is one of the exhibits. She grows strong and puts beauty into the world.

Recently, looking at our truffula tree I was reminded of something Moses says in Devarim, “*Ki HaAdam Eitz HaSadeh?*” In its context Moses has just commanded that trees should not be cut down during a siege. He justifies his command by asking, “*Is a tree like a person* that can move out of the way when trouble is approaching?” But the words can literally mean the opposite, “Because a *person* is like a tree,” and I think the ambiguity is intentional. In so many ways, a person is like a tree and our tradition is riddled with examples where the comparison is made.

Trees thrive when their growth is slow and steady and they are able to have their needs met each day with sunshine and water and nutrients. That way they can grow tall, strengthen their roots and grow their branches. Then, they are better able to stand strong and straight even in the face of the worst storms. People are like trees. We also need slow and steady attention to our needs, spiritual as well as physical, to strengthen our connection to God, grow our sense of purpose and enable us to reach for the light, even when life sends storms our way.

Like a tree we have branches and fruit and beautiful flowers. At our best, we reach for the light and nourish those around us through *tzedakah* and *gemilut hasadim* – acts of loving-kindness. We are an integral part of *Tikkun Olam*, of making this world better and those things are our fruit and the beauty we have to share. Branches, though, need the support of a trunk. Judaism teaches us that our trunk, our stability and strength, comes from knowledge, wisdom, values and practice. That's why we need to strive to always be growing in our Jewish practice and learning. Not because God or the Torah says so, but because that is how we insure our lives have purpose and meaning, that is how we learn what God is saying to us all the time!

And then there are the roots. Our truffula tree is happy and grows quickly because it has deep roots, and that's what Judaism recommends for us too. Our roots are our stories, the stories we tell about ourselves and the stories we hold dear – religious stories, family stories, favorite books and tales that influence us everyday consciously and unconsciously. Our roots are our also relationships – our teachers, our friends, our parents, our grandparents, all of our loved ones still with us and who have left us, the ones we knew and the ones we only know in family lore. Our roots are even our *neshama*, our soul, that little piece of the divine that animates us and guides us and connects us to something so much greater than ourselves.

Ki HaAdam Eitz HaSadeh, Because every person is like a tree - So how will you regularly tend to your *neshama*, tend to your relationship with that which is greater than you? How will you care for your roots - sharing your essential stories and nurturing relationships carefully as we are taught to do on this holiday? How will you keep your trunk straight and strong with regular practice and learning and growing your connection to your faith? How will you continue to reach your branches toward the light sharing the fruit of your talents and bringing goodness and holiness into the world? All of these things will make you stronger and your connection with God stronger, so that you will feel supported and connected in your times of need.

My friends, Cantor Wendi and your Beth El family and I are here for you when those tempests come. Please don't be afraid to share your pain and your need with us. But we are also here everyday to help you maintain your relationship with God and your spiritual self, *Ki Adam Eitz HaSadeh*, because a person is like a tree of the field and you don't need to grow wild or alone. We are here to help you tend your roots, strengthen your trunk and nurture the world. We are here to get you through the awkward stage of your relationship with God so that it can be deep and meaningful because that is what Judaism helps us do.

As we turn to our Yizkor prayers, many of us will be remembering some of our hardest times and it is the strength of our faith and the support of our community that enables us to remember those that are our roots and hopefully to glean inspiration, direction and if we are lucky, even joy, in remembering their continuing influence in our lives.

-Please Stay...

-Turn to Yizkor Books and please rise...