

My Father Was God and Didn't Know It – Stage Two
on the Path to Teshuvah
Rosh Ha-Shanah 5778

It's vividly emblazoned in my memory – like it happened yesterday. I was six years old, and my father had taken me to the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum to see my first professional football game, between the Los Angeles Rams (they wore blue and white then) and the Cincinnati Bengals (white, with plain orange helmets...the colors also remains vivid in my memory). There was a huge crowd at the game that Sunday, and as we made our way to our seats I somehow got separated from my Dad. The feeling of terror was all consuming! At that moment, I was utterly alone, without my anchor, my protection. I felt completely powerless, utterly vulnerable. The only thing I can compare it to is jumping into the ocean from a boat that's far from shore, with the knowledge that the bottom of the sea is hundreds or even thousands of feet below you. Now imagine the boat pulling away...that's how it felt.

The notion of a child alone in the world, exposed and unprotected, strikes a deep chord within us, pointing toward the abyss. It is clearly the reason why the “yatom,” “orphan” is the archetype of weakness and vulnerability in the Hebrew Bible, along with the stranger and widow.

If it's frightening to be a child abandoned, words can't describe the terror of a parent worried about losing a child, that which is most precious to us, more precious than our own lives. As I have learned during the last seven years, since the birth of our son Elijah, there is no greater sense of vulnerability than being a parent. I stand naked before the world, before accidents, before viruses, before earthquakes, looking at the radiant faces of Elijah and Na'amah...and try not to think about it.

So it goes both ways – children afraid of being abandoned, parents afraid for their kids. At the heart of both is vulnerability – kids are exposed and vulnerable without their parents, parents feel vulnerable in the face of nameless threats to the most precious thing in their lives. Today, on the second day of Tishrei, 5778, Rosh Ha-Shanah, I want to share some thoughts about vulnerability of parents and children, because it's this feeling that lies at the very heart of the *aseret yemei teshuvah*, the ten days of repentance. Indeed, I want to suggest that a sense of vulnerability is a second necessary step in the path toward the self-transformation, toward *teshuvah*, following upon the first, homelessness, which I discussed yesterday.

There's no better place to start than the *makhzor*. Our High Holiday liturgy draws from the model of the parent-child relationship to cultivate in us a sense of being unguarded, exposed, and susceptible to life's vagaries. In Avinu Malkenu,

we pray to our Father/Parent, please, Avinu, *bateil makhshavot soneinu*/eliminate the plans of our enemies/*shma kolenu, khoos ve-rakhem aleynu*/ hear our voice, be kind, sympathize with us, and most famously, *khoneinu ve-aneinu, ki eyn banu ma'asim, aseh imanu tzedakah ve-hesed ve-hoshiyenu*/have mercy on us, answer us, for our deeds are insufficient; deal with us charitably and lovingly, and save us!" A bit later on RH morning, during musaf repetition immediately after hearing the Shofar: *Ha-Yom harat olam, ha-yom ya'amid ba-mishpat....im ke-vanim im ke-avadim; im ke-vanim, rakhameinu ke-rakhem av al-banim*/Today the world stands at birth, today all of creation is called to judgment, whether as Your children or Your servants. If as Your children, be compassionate with us as a parent is compassionate with children...

God is likened to a caring, concerned parent, and we to God's children, in need of comfort and protection. It's a powerful metaphor, but its power is disrupted, or, let's say **complicated**, by two problems. First, we often have fraught, difficult relationships with our parents (whether living or passed away), and second, we often have a fraught relationship with God! What could be more complex than a daughter or son's feelings about his or her mother or father?! An entire intellectual universe has been constructed over the last century and a quarter that revolves around the feelings of children for their parents and seeks to unpack those feelings. And don't get me started about our feeling about God! There are

200 family or individual member of this congregation, and therefore at least 200 different ideas about God, how/if God acts in the world, etc. Even the most pious believers among us struggle and have doubts, as it should be. So the metaphor of vulnerable children seeking care and concern from a compassionate God-as-parent during the High Holidays is much less straightforward than it seems. If we look carefully at some of this imagery, we can uncover layers of meaning that teach us the value of feelings of vulnerability for the process of atonement, forgiveness, and transformation.

Let's start with is Psalm 27, said twice each day from the first of Elul through Hoshana Rabbah – it might be called the “official Psalm” of the season of repentance and introspection. The Psalm contains many beautifully poetic lines, but let's to focus on one in particular: *ki avi ve eemi azavuni va-Ha-Shem ya'asfeyni/* “Though my mother and father have abandoned/forsaken me, the Lord gathers me in.” The most unconditional, unstinting love and care we experience is from a parent – but the Psalmist suggests that there may be circumstances in which even that love would fail. In contrast, even in the direst of straits, God will be both father and mother. The great Hebrew literary scholar Robert Alter notes that this is the most extreme declaration of faith in God in the entire Hebrew Bible, calling its suggestion of parental betrayal disturbing. But “disturbing” doesn't begin to describe the midrashic treatment of this verse. A ancient midrash on this line is

Rated R, for mature audiences only, but I've done my best to bring it down to PG.

It begins with another verse in Psalms, 51:7: *hen-be-avon kholalti, u-ve-khey*

yekhematni eemi/ "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and my mother

conceived me in sin." Now fasten your seatbelts:

David ('author of Psalms') said before the Holy Blessed One, *Ribon Ha-Olamim, master of worlds*, Did my father (Yishai) intend to bring me into the world?! His intention (in the act of conception) was his own pleasure and enjoyment! The proof is that after my father and mother fulfilled their desires, he turned in one direction and she turned to face in the other direction, and it was You, God, who (without getting into the physical details) made sure that, um, fertilization would take place." And this is what it means when the verse says "Though my mother and father have abandoned/forsaken me, the Lord gathers me in."

I, we could spend a great deal of time on this fascinating and bizarre reading of the verse in Psalms, but for now let's just concede that for the midrashist the focus is less on God's care and concern and more on the anger of children toward parents concerned with their own physical pleasure instead of their children's needs; in this unsettling vision, children are an accidental by-product of that pleasure, implying a frightening absence of real parental love and devotion. This is only heightened by the depiction of the parents turning their backs on one another. For the midrash (and for Rashi, who draws on it), God protects us to fill the vacuum left by parents who are indifferent to our fate. It is an angry, unsettling depiction. The great medieval Spanish exegete Avraham ibn Ezra offers a considerably more empathetic reading, suggesting that our verse in Psalms refers to our feeling of

abandonment, of being left alone, after our parents have died; here the tone is less angry, more filled with pathos. Still, turning to God as a “replacement” parent, in response to our sense of loneliness and isolation from our own parents, whether out of anger or sorrow, is made still more complicated by the fact that if God does indeed become “Avinu,” our parent, on this Day of Judgment, wouldn’t we direct feelings of love and attachment, yes, but also anger, rebellion, resentment...toward God, the new parent, so to speak? The great Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai captures the delicate dance of attraction and repulsion we feel toward parents in his brilliant poem “My Parents’ Lodging Place.” (living or dead – his own parents had died long before he wrote these lines). Here’s an excerpt:

In their great love my parents saved me from disappointment,
from pain and sorrow. Now I am left with their savings
plus the pain I would like to spare my own children.
How all those savings have piled up on me!
My parents always told me, “I’ll show you,”
Sometimes threatening, sometimes in a voice of sweet love:
I’ll show you. Just you wait, I’ll show you.
“Someday you’ll learn,” sternly. “Someday you’ll learn,”
in a soothing, reassuring voice.
“Do whatever you want,” yelling and screaming,
and “Do what you want, you’re a free person,”
like the good angels singing in chorus.

You don't know what you want.

You don't know what you want.

The mystery of the image of "God-as-parent" deepens when we think about our fraught relationship with the Creator of the Universe. This is nicely captured, I think, in the Zikhronot/Remembrance section of the Musaf Amidah. We plead with God, using every verse from the Hebrew Bible at our disposal, remember us, remember us, take note of us. The Jews doth protest too much, me thinks. What are we afraid of? Of being forgotten by our parent-God? Of being left in oblivion, like the person swimming in the deep, watching the boat pull away? God needs a reminder: are You out there? If so, please, please don't forget us. Or perhaps God is afraid that we'll forget Him? Here's the poet Amichai again, playing with the boundary between our insistence that God remember us and God's insistence that we remember God, this time in his poem "Gods come and go, prayers remain forever."

When God left the land he forgot the Torah with the Jews,
and ever since they have been looking for him,
and shouting after him, "You forgot something, you forgot!" in a loud voice.
And everyone thinks that this is their prayer, the prayer of the Jews.
And ever since they endeavor to find hints in the Bible
of where He is found, as it is written, "Ask where God is found,
call the Lord for He is near." But God is far away.

Our Father our King, What does a father do
whose children are orphans while he is still alive? ...
Weep and not weep, not remember and not forget.

We pray to God in the Musaf, “Be close to us. Be near. Remember us...and we’ll remember You.” One might go so far as to say that in these prayers, we’re standing on verge of a permanent state of orphanhood, facing the possibility of being dead, so to speak, to Avinu she-be-shamayim, to our parent who art in heaven. Because in our tradition, to be forgotten, to have one’s name blotted out, is akin to death. And so we plead with the Master of the Universe, a God who sometimes feels very far away, to be remembered, to be taken note of.

To stand in prayer on Rosh Ha-Shanah therefore requires real effort, not just because of the length and difficulty of the liturgy, but because it demands a working through of some of our most complex emotions, those we feel toward our parents. Love, care, and protection rub up against rebellion, resentment, and fear of abandonment. It’s hard – but that’s alright...most things in life that are really worthwhile require real effort, and prayer is no different.

Fortunately, our labor is aided by the comforting knowledge that the tefillot of Rosh Ha-Shanah contain a beautiful metaphor of reconciliation with parents and with our Parent in Heaven, a clear path past the accumulated years of distance and pain toward a loving, close embrace. It’s right there in front of us. But rather than travel directly, let’s take the meandering road favored by our sages of blessed memory, the mashal or parable contained in a midrash: there once was a king (God) who sent his child on a far-away journey to lands that were very dangerous,

where enemies of the king dwelled, in order to carry out an important mission. In order to maintain communications with his child, he sent letters regularly. However, the enemies of the king carried out all sorts of nefarious deeds in order to intercept the letters and prevent them from reaching the king's child, in order to cut off communication between the two of them. Despite these plots and evil designs, the king managed to speak directly with his child one time year, face to face; in order to make sure that the enemies wouldn't understand what they were saying to one another, they spoke a special language that they had come up with together years earlier, which only the two of them understood. In this way, the connection between father and child was renewed each year. The parable then concludes: so too the Holy Blessed One has created a special language to make sure the lines of communication are open between God and the People Israel: It is the sound of the Shofar, which expresses our deepest yearnings and most profound pain, and is capable of cutting straight through everything that separates us from the Divine – our doubts, ambivalence, anger, the sense of distance that accumulates over time – all melt away before the piercing sob of the Shofar.

This does not mean that the fear of being abandoned, exposed, and vulnerable to life's challenges disappears with the blast of the ram's horn. In our story, it's possible to imagine the king's son filled with anger at his father for sending him far away, and for being unable to communicate with him. But

reconciliation, a healing embrace, and renewal of the relationship are at least possible once a year. Perhaps that's enough. During the days between RH and YK, maybe we're meant to experience our relationship with God like that of our parents – somewhat erratic, periods of closeness interrupted by angry distance, along with feelings of vulnerability and exposure... two steps forward and one step back. In this spirit, I'd like to close by citing the poet Amichai one final time, again his work "My Parents' Lodging Place." As we hear his words, I invite you to think about them in terms of your own relationship with your parents, whether still living or passed into the next world, and also your relationship with the Knower of Secrets, the Master of the Universe; Amichai intentionally blurs the lines between the two, and so should we. (note that he describes his mother and father in certain ways, but we have license to flip things around).

My mother was a prophet and didn't know it.

...my own private prophet, silent and stubborn.

I am obliged to fulfill everything she said

and I'm running out of lifetime.

My mother was a prophet when she taught me

The do's and don'ts of everyday...

That will do you good, you'll feel like a new person, you'll really love it,
you won't like that, you'll never manage to close it, I knew you wouldn't
remember, wouldn't forget, give take rest, yes you can you can.

And when my mother died , all her little predications came together
in one big prophecy that will last
until the vision of the end of days.

My father was God and didn't know it. He gave me
the Ten Commandments not in thunder and not in anger,
not in fire and not in a cloud, but gently
and with love. He added caresses and tender words...
and chanted "remember" and "keep" with the same tune
and pleaded and wept quietly
between one commandment and the next...

And he hugged me tight and whispered in my ear,
Thou shalt not steal, shalt not commit adultery, shalt not kill.
And he lay the palms of his wide-open hands on my head
with the Yom Kippur blessing: Honor, love, that thy days
may be long upon this earth. And the voice of my father –
white as his hair.

Then he turned to face me one last time, as on the day
he died in my arms, and said, I would like to add
two more commandments:
the Eleventh Commandment, "thou shalt not change,"
and the Twelfth Commandment, thou shalt change. You will change.
Thus spoke my father, and he turned and walked away
And disappeared into his strange distances.

Shanah tovah!

