

## The Other Side of the Door

Rosh Hashanah 5779

Rabbi Aaron Brusso

I brought her to nursery school for her first day. Hana had started going back to work or she was too emotional....I don't remember exactly, so I did drop off.

As I walked her to the door I could feel her hand tighten around mine. When we got in the building she was attached to my right side and we were walking in lock step. When we got to the classroom door I had suddenly developed a 40 pound growth on my right leg. What followed was a blizzard of tears and limbs and foot stomping. The teachers had compassionate looks on their faces and tried to coax her into the room with calm voices. I was like "cmon guys! Could you dial it up a notch? You're the teachers of the dubim class, the bears and I am now being attacked by one!"

When I see parents post first day of school pictures on facebook with their smiling nursery school students I always think of the not ready for social media moment of my daughter and I acting out a scene from Orange is the New Black. As I'm kneeling in front of her trying to figure out a strategy an older parent walks by puts their hand on my shoulder and says "you know by the time they are ready to go to college they will have outgrown this." Super helpful.

As I walked out of the school the Nursery School director stopped me and said "you know you could always call her bluff." "What do you mean," I asked. "You could tell her that if she throws a fit again in front of the classroom you'll just take her home," she explained. "Isn't that what she wants?" I asked. "Its what she *thinks* she wants."

The next day I did exactly that. I told her what would happen if she threw a fit. And when we got to the classroom door and she did I simply took her hand and we walked back to the car. I strapped her in and we drove home. I got her out of the car and walked her into the house. She walked in looked around and froze. She looked at me with wide eyes and said "I wanna go back." And we did. With no problem.

The next day when we got to the nursery school door she looked at me as if she was about to start to lose it, took a deep breath, hugged me and walked in to the classroom. The next day there was just the hug. Pretty soon she was running ahead of me.

One day as we were saying goodbye I said "Are you ok?" "Yes" she replied. "Are you sure?" I asked again. She looked at me like I was being silly, turned around and walked away. "Call us if you need anything" I shouted after her. As she walked passed people pushing big plastic bins filled with cork boards, hanging clothes and printers and through the door of her dormitory, I felt that hand on my shoulder and heard the voice telling me she would outgrow it. They were right. She would outgrow it. All of it. Watching her disappear into the dorm, this time it was me saying "I wanna go back."

Something happens at a certain point in life. For so many years you feel like you are waiting forever for it to get started. Waiting to find out where you will go to school, who you will marry, what your kids will be like. And then when these things arrive someone steps on the accelerator and things seem to end before they even begin. I know what its like for the roller coaster to click clack up and for it to come whooshing down. I just don't remember when it switched from one to the other.

But she came from a loving home, a loving community and she's ready to bring all that to the world.

But I do worry. And not just the typical worries. It does seem though that the world is getting harsher. I worry that the world she encounters will not be as loving as the one she came from. I pray that the people on the other side of the doors she enters are as caring as they were in nursery school.

The Torah has always been concerned about building a world of care. In fact so concerned that even during the moments of greatest conflict, the Torah emphasizes it.

In a radical reordering of priorities the Torah actually frees people from military service even in a time of war and sends them home to care for their family. Standing before the troops the kohen gives the troops a pep talk meant to give them courage and strengthen them before the fight. And then after filling the troops with a sense of purpose an officer gets up and says “Is there anyone who has built a new home and not had a chance to dedicate it? If so, let him go back to his home. Is there anyone who has planted a vineyard but has yet to harvest it? Let him go back to his home. Is there anyone who is engaged but not yet married? Let him go back to his home.”

Life is meant to be lived. We build in order to dedicate, plant in order to harvest, engage in order to marry. The world should care and enable the fruits of our efforts to be gathered.

Of course the world doesn't always seem to care. Nature is an unforgiving thing. Illness, accident and war knife through our dreams.

To the armored troops, the Torah seeks to cast upon them a chain mail of values protecting not only an individual's ability to live critical moments of their life but also the Torah's vision of a world that is not meant to be torn apart and lived solely in relation to one's enemies. In spite of the cruelty of nature and the callousness of one's enemy, the Torah seeks to build a world of care.

And it does that by interrupting the moment of greatest testosterone.

The Torah seeks to bond molecules by sending people in the direction where they are needed. It does not tolerate free radicals. That is why we so often hear the Torah beseech us to share our holiday and our joy with the widow, the orphan and the stranger. Each of these individuals has become unmoored from their foundation and it is the community's job to reattach them and remind them they are not lost.

In this way the Torah fills in nature's gaps and creates a world that feels dependable and reliable. It makes us feel that the world cares about us.

So that separations feel more like hand offs.

I am grateful to my daughter's nursery school teachers who made her feel cared for when she was not with us. Who helped her understand that there were people other than her family who would get her a band aid, take her temperature and hold her when she was crying.

I am grateful to our Bet Torah community. To all of you who represented a web of caring. To those who checked in with her at kiddish and in the hallways. To Diana Binger who led her Rosh Chodesh girls group for the past 5 years. To Loen Amer who was there for her and so many of our teens. To Nili and the Cantor who trained her to read Torah and gave her Jewish life skills.

I have no doubt that her experiencing the world as a place that cares about her has informed her ability to care for others.

And this I think is the reason on Rosh Hashanah we read about Hagar. To show us what it looks like when no one seems to care. Sarah finally has her own son, Isaac. She sees Ishmael, son of her husband's maidservant, playing. Sarah has been envious of Hagar and is now jealous of her husband's divided attention between the boys. She views love as a scarce

commodity. "Expel the slave-woman and her son," she instructs Abraham. Abraham gives Hagar some bread and a skin of water and sends them away. Hagar travels for a while. The water runs out. She puts Ishmael under a bush because she can't bear to watch him suffer. She collapses in tears. Her network of support is gone. The world seems not to care. When all hope is lost God opens her eyes and she sees a well. She fills the skin and Ishmael drinks.

On the day we mark the creation of the world we don't step back and admire the brilliance of its design, instead in the Torah reading we are given a backroom tour of its unfinished parts. Its flaws. As if to say- I called you from the beyond to lend your body as bridge for this particular gaping hole in the structure of the world. In the places that don't care, I need you to.

This past spring I saw Hagar and Ishmael.

I saw them when I was present at one of the unfinished parts of the world.

After a member of our Bet Torah staff, Armando, was deported we traveled down to Mexico to escort him to the border so he could seek asylum.

In the background of our trip were news reports of a caravan of asylum seekers traveling from Central America. There were different reports about how many ranging from between a few hundred to a thousand. As the caravan neared the Tijauna border the members were referred to as "dangerous," Americans who had compassion for them were referred to as "naive," and the whole situation was labeled by some as a "disgrace." "If we let them in," some said, "everyone will take advantage of us."

We were so focused on getting Armando to the border that I only thought of this group and the media surrounding it as a distraction and something that would derail our mission.

When we got out of the taxi at the San Ysidro port of entry there was a group of about 100 people in a roped off area with a number of video cameras and reporters. We quickly walked passed them and headed towards a winding ramp that led to an elevated walkway leading to the border door between Mexico and the United States. We passed a number of people on the bridge but I was too focused and nervous to pay too much attention. I kept close to Armando rehearsing in my head for something none of us had participated in before.

As we approached the door two uniformed and armed members of the Border Patrol stood on U.S. soil just inside the entry. As we entered one of the Border Patrol guards who was asking for identification waved us forward. We stopped. He immediately became impatient. "C'mon!" He shouted out of frustration "lets go!" I said "we are with him" pointing to Armando, "and he has something to say." Armando began to speak. The Border Patrol guard said "there's no capacity here. You'll have to come back." We turned to the other Border Patrol guard who was much more patient and with a look of regret on his face he said "look these people over here have been waiting for days." He pointed to a group of people I had hardly noticed. On the ground, in the dirt, at the foot of the U.S. border door was a group of about 15 people mostly moms and kids passing around food that had been brought to them by volunteers. The kids' brought food to their mouths with dirty hands. Their clothes were dusty. One mother was doing her best to cheer up her child.

As we moved away from the door we met a lawyer who worked for a human rights group. She was there as a legal observer and explained that the United States as a signatory to international treaties had an obligation to hear these asylum cases and the excuse of "no capacity" was a way to deter people from trying to seek asylum.

These people were not dangerous or predatory or entitled. They were desperate. Desperate enough to travel miles in order to sleep in the dirt in

front of a doorway through which they had every reason to believe, there had to be a life better than the one they knew.

Here sat Hagar and Ishmael. Deter them? From what exactly?

Does anyone care about them? Do they think there is a place in the world that does?

Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira lived in the 20th century and bore witness to and died in the Holocaust. He believed that every action of kindness we demonstrate builds a world of kindness. He also believed the opposite is true.

At one point in the Torah Moses speaks to the Israelites and says to them “I stood between you and God.” Rabbi Kalman notes that the word for “I” that Moses uses is not “ani” but the more formal and weighty “anochi.” Its the difference between saying “it’s me” versus “it is I.” Kalman teaches that “anochiyut” or “I”ness is a certain preoccupation with one’s self, one’s status and the needs of one’s ego. When a person exhibits “anochiyut” it influences other people to seek to care for their own needs since they experience the world as one in which people are preoccupied with their own needs. People not only learn to be self sufficient but ultimately to not care for others. Our soul, Kalman, teaches is sensitive and when we are cared for we tend to care for others. When we do not experience the world as dependable and reliable WE become less interested in being dependable and reliable.

Indifference leads to indifference. Caring leads to caring.

When everything fell apart for Armando and his family you stepped in to bridge the gap. You sent them meals, you wrote letters, you donated money, you emailed offers of assistance. When I saw Armando, he kept repeating “I don’t know how to thank you.” His son Armando Jr. kept

saying to me “I have faith that things will work out.” It is only possible to have faith if you call out and someone responds.

The irony in believing that people are trying to take advantage of you is that it feeds on itself. Our own cynicism projects out into a world that feels that and becomes less and less willing to respond with grace, love and care making it a self fulfilling prophecy.

Closing doors creates a world of closed doors.

And here’s the thing, creating a caring world requires us not only to be caring towards others, it also requires us to not always insist on the things we are personally entitled to. Having a right to something and exercising it insisting on emphasizing one’s status has costs too.

I’ll give you an example.

The Torah teaches that if our brother’s animal goes astray or falls we are to care for it or help lift it. And most challengingly, we are to do the same for our enemy’s animal. The Torah understands how every one of our actions impacts the larger culture.

However according to the Talmud there are certain exceptions. Not everyone has to retrieve or help lift. For example, if a person is elderly or a learned person of high regard, they can ignore the situation.

The Talmud tells us that Rabbi Ishmael son go Rabbi Yose was walking when he came upon a man who was holding a load of wood. The man placed the load down and after a minute asked for help in lifting the wood. Rabbi Ishmael helps him.

The Talmud goes on to explain that Rabbi Ishamel was under no obligation to provide any assistance because he was a learned elder. It turns out that by law Rabbi Ishmael could have walked right by. Instead he figured out a



way to help out. The concept here is called *lifnim m'shurat had* - stopping short of insisting on everything the law entitles us to.

The Talmud teaches that the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed because of those who insisted on having every single right and privilege they were entitled to under the law.

It turns out that in order to build a caring world we must not only seek out the unfinished parts of the world, but for the sake of others we have to leave parts of our own world unfinished as well.

Dr. Christine Hayes, a professor of Jewish studies at Yale gives an example of this you will no doubt recognize. She tells the story that she was late for a connecting flight and needed a boarding pass. She ran to the gate where someone was in line discussing a future flight three hours from then. Dr. Hayes politely asked this person if she could get her boarding pass for the flight leaving in 5 minutes. The person in front of her said "I was here first." As Dr. Hayes told us when she recounted the story "and she was right. By rights it was her place in line."

Customs, rights, rules and law alone will not create a world of care. In fact they can sometimes be the very thing that, like nature, knifes through our dreams.

It was, after all, the law that was used to justify separating those families in the dirt when some of them, frustrated with waiting, crossed the border between the ports of entry.

A world of care requires that we care and that we show it.

We have the authority to draft you into the military, but we want you to go home to be with your new wife.

Its not our fault your spouse died, your parent died and you left your country, but you are a widow, you are an orphan, you are a stranger and I just might be the difference between you feeling that the world is cruel and callous or caring and dependable.

I have a right to keep my place in line. I possess the status that privileges me the ability to walk by and decline your request, but I choose to live in a different world.

It is up to us to make sure that instead of losing all hope, Hagar can give water to her son, to make sure that instead of giving up, Armando Jr can get his dad back and to make sure the asylum seeker instead of encountering a country preoccupied with our own rights and privileges based on our status under the law in the spirit of *anochiyut* or "I"ness, that this asylum seeker can walk through the doorway of America and at a minimum encounter a listening ear.

When the world won't do it, when the law won't do it, it is us, called from the beyond to be here in this imperfect world who must.

When we walk our children to nursery school we do so with confidence that the people on the other side of the doorway will help our children grow to believe the world cares about them. And grow to be so confident that one day having outgrown us they can walk out, on their own into a world as caring people themselves.

If we stop caring we may find that our children walk out into a world that doesn't either.

We should live in a world where whether you are walking your child to the nursery school door, the door of their dormitory for their first year of college or the door of our country you can count on the fact that on the other side is someone who cares.

El Rachum V'Chanun- merciful and gracious God. We are so grateful to have been given another year of life. We are grateful for our time with loved ones, friends and family. May we express our gratitude to you through compassion and justice. May we be given another year in which our actions reflect our awareness of this gift of life.  
Amen.