

Rabbi Mari Chernow – Yom Kippur 2017 - 5778

So...I pretty much used up all of my opinions last week...

And, it's Yom Kippur. So today I want to share a little Torah. Rabbis have favorite texts. They're like old friends. We come back to them every so often and the relationship just deepens. I want you to meet one of my dear old friends. Francesca Kay writes that literature is a means to fight off loneliness.¹ When we read, we meet characters. We feel empathy for them. We relate to their positions or argue with them - until we refine our own. Today's text² is in your handout. I first encountered it when doing work in the Jewish healing movement and in thinking about this Yom Kippur, it kept coming to mind. The text is a Midrash – an ancient commentary on the Torah. I call it the cure for loneliness in three short chapters.

Chapter 1

So, when I first came to Temple Chai, when I first met many of you, people regularly asked, "Is that the rabbi or the Bat Mitzvah kid?" Oddly enough we don't get that question anymore. I think it has to do with these lines right here. In fact, the last time I was ever carded, we were eating on an outdoor patio. I didn't

¹ In The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/jan/17/a-literary-cure-for-loneliness-pick-up-a-book>

² A compilation of Genesis Rabbah 65:9 and Baba Metzia 87a.

know why the server was asking when she said, “Can you remove your sunglasses?” I did and she said, “Oh OK, you can order wine.”

Our Midrash notices that although all those early characters in the Torah – like Methuseleh - live many hundreds of years, the word “old” isn’t mentioned until we get to Abraham. “And Abraham was old.” The Midrash comes in just before that verse. Abraham approaches God with a complaint. He doesn’t like the fact – believe it or not - that his appearance is young and fair. He says to God, “when my son and I enter a city no one can tell who is who. You need to find a way to let everyone know who is young and who is old so that the young can show honor and respect to the old.” God says, “OK, if that’s what you want.” In Midrashic language God says, “By your life, I will begin to distinguish between young and old with you.” Abraham goes to sleep and wakes up the next morning with white hair. I guess it wasn’t what he had in mind because he says, “You have made me a public spectacle.” Aha! Abraham also misses being mistaken for the Bar Mitzvah kid. God comforts him by saying, “Your hoary head is a crown of glory.”

Another old friend of mine is a book called *Einstein’s Dreams*.³ Author Alan Lightman plays with concepts of time and offers imaginary universes which don’t

³ By Alan Lightman. Warner Books, NY, 1993.

experience time the same way we do. In one, time is circular and people revisit crucial moments in their lives over and over again. In another cause and effect are disconnected, sometimes moving backwards so that a woman's heart soars. She feels inexplicably happy. Then days later she meets the man of her dreams.

Lightman imagines one world whose inhabitants have figured out how to stave off the effects of aging. He points out the fact that "Scientists discovered that time flows more slowly the farther you are from the center of the earth. The effect is miniscule but it can be measured with extremely sensitive instruments." And imagines a world in which, "...a few people, anxious to stay young, moved to the mountains. Now all houses are built..." on the highest ground possible.⁴ Everyone clamors for the real estate with the most elevation and people become obsessed with avoiding lower ground. "They know that with each downward step, time passes just a little bit faster and they age a little more quickly. People at ground level never sit. [they don't want to stay there and become old. So]. They run, while carrying their briefcases or groceries."

There is also a small subculture of those who won't spend their days, their months, their years, fighting off aging. They "...have stopped caring whether they age a few seconds faster than their neighbors. These adventuresome souls come

⁴ Pages 28-29.

down to the lower world for days at a time, lounge under the trees that grow in the valleys, swim leisurely in the lakes that lie at warmer altitudes, roll on level ground. They hardly look at their watches and cannot tell you if it is Monday or Thursday. When the others rush by them and scoff, they just smile.”⁵

Aging – put most simply – is living. The more we live, the more fully we live, the more we age.

The hair, the lines, the bifocals, the slowing metabolism. We think of them as the price we pay for surviving.

No, says God, not the price but the reward. Crowns of glory.

The hair, the lines, the bifocals, the slowing metabolism – crowns of glory.

There are prices we pay – ones that hurt in a much deeper way – losing loved ones, diminishing physical and sometimes cognitive abilities, worry about decreasing relevance and what one still has to contribute to this world. So too, there are deeper rewards - meeting one’s grandchildren, watching our own children grow and take responsibility for their lives. Rich internal landscapes built on experience and wisdom.

I won’t make a pronouncement as to whether or not the benefits of aging outweigh the costs. Truth is, I’d probably drink from the fountain of youth if I had

⁵ Page 31.

it available to me. But that's not the Jewish story. The Jewish story is one in which aging happens, and is, we pray, a blessing.

Chapter 2

Isaac says to the holy one, "Sovereign of the World, when someone sins you exact retribution from him all at once. Afflict him little by little and you are [still] exacting retribution from him. If you had brought afflictions upon the generation of the flood, they would not have rebelled against you. You, however, bestowed prosperity upon them. Therefore, they rebelled against you." "You have demanded afflictions," say God, 'By your life I will begin with you.'

In other words, Isaac argues that God should inflict suffering upon people as they are sinning, not after the fact, so that we'll know when God is unhappy with us and have the chance to do something about it.

The problem with chapter two is that it relies entirely on the Bible's recurring theme – that bad things happen to bad people and good things happen to good people. Before I argue against that party line – which I will - I want to acknowledge that we all carry this idea with us a little bit, maybe more than we'd like to admit. We couldn't ask the question – why do bad things happen to good people? – if we didn't basically believe that they shouldn't. It's related to this impulse – I know I have it – to find cause and effect. When we hear of a tragedy,

we can't help ourselves. We want to know – did he smoke? Were they drinking? Texting and driving? Did they not know they were living in a flood plain? As a colleague of mine says, “when people say, ‘It couldn't have happened to a nicer person.’⁶ – I've certainly said it – we don't mean this but we imply that the next time – Godforbid - that cancer, a car accident, a drug overdose strikes – next time, when it is not such a nice person – it will be more fair, more right. It's not that we think people deserve it. Of course not. But we have a need for tragedy to be logical and predictable. So that we can prevent it. Which of course we can't.

Back to our Midrash. Jacob requests a tweak in the way God metes out justice and we find a text that actually undermines the justice concept completely. It is meant to be a proof text – a quote from another source that supports the rabbinic argument. It comes from Job who says, “The tents of robbers prosper and those who provoke God have security.” In other words – plain as day – good things happen to bad people. And so too the reverse.

What's delicious about this chapter is that the proof text is not a proof text. It is a counter text. In disagreement but living in harmony with the main point.

In fact the book of Job is not a proof text for the Bible's promise of the good life. It itself is a countertext. The essence of the entire book is too much to go into

⁶ David Aaron as relayed to me by Ally Resnik Jacobson.

right now. Let's please study it sometime together, but the beauty is that the book of Job undermines one of the Bible's most significant ideas. From within the Bible itself. Which means that what it is really doing is elevating - holding up as sacred – a completely different idea.⁷ A more believable idea. That sometimes pain is meaningless. Without context, without reason, without a drop of sense.

And I can't help but feel just a little bit less lonely when I hear that voice from inside of the greatest pro-God, pro-justice document the world has produced, our beloved Bible.

And I can't help but feel just a little bit less lonely when I visit with this Midrash which longs for justice but will not force us into a dishonest position, which will not force us to gloss over the reality that suffering is so often – maybe always - profound injustice.

Chapter 3

Jacob complains that when death comes suddenly, it brings about shock and strife. If people could only have – this will tell you something about how medicine has changed –if people could only have – five or six days of illness before they die, he says – they could get their affairs in order and say what they need to say to the people around them.

⁷ As taught by Micah Goodman.

“Jacob, you have demanded illness,” says God, “By your life I will begin with you.” And we read of the messengers going to tell Joseph, Jacob’s son – your father is ill.

Jacob asks for a head’s up that we’re going to die. I did a funeral last year for Shelley Prager. Her family gave me permission to share a bit of her story. On her deathbed, critically ill, she said, “this has been the best month of my life.” That’s because as good as hospice and medical professionals are – and they’re really good - even they cannot predict a time of death. Shelley’s loved ones were told that she was in her last days, possibly last hours. “If she’s here in the morning, we’ll reassess,” they were told. So her family and friends stopped everything to come say goodbye. They rushed in from Washington, New Jersey and even Israel. And when they got here, she lived another six weeks. They cancelled all of their plans and did nothing but be together. They talked and laughed, remembered and cried. They massaged Shelley’s feet and gave her pedicures. They snuck Shabbat candlesticks into her room and enjoyed Shabbat dinner. At the very same time that they reminisced about the past they created new memories for the survivors. And for Shelley, they gave her the very best month of her life. Is there anything besides a sense of limited time that would get

us to put everything else on hold? Is it only the certainty of death that motivates us to squeeze every last minute out of life?

Israeli poet Zelda suggests that knowing that we will die is, in fact, what makes us live. It is our mortality that sharpens our focus on the beauty of this lifetimes and this world. Looking from the hills, down a tree-lined boulevard toward the Mediterranean she asks:

Does the pleasure of a red sunset
come from the mortal element in me?
and the pleasure of earth's perfumes,
and the moment when the sea bursts into spray
and the moment of return
to the stern gaze of Jerusalem's sky,
to the Supreme One -
is all this from the mortal element?⁸

The mortal element. The pleasure of the earth's perfumes. In our own desert, she would ask - does the creosote bush after a rain smell sweeter, brighter, crisper, cleaner because we know it won't last? Is it from the mortal element in all of us?

Illness, says Jacob, comes as a warning in case we somehow missed that all of this will someday come and go. The mortal element. Get in there and live while we can. With the people we love. It's the only choice we have. Diane Ackerman writes:

⁸ In *The Spectacular Difference*, translated by Marcia Falk. Page 81. The poem is called *The Invisible Carmel*.

*The great affair, the love affair with life, is to live as variously as possible, to groom one's curiosity like a high-spirited thoroughbred, climb aboard, and gallop over the thick, sun-struck hills every day. Where there is no risk... life will seem to have none of its magnificent geography, only a length. It began in mystery, and it will end in mystery, but what a savage and beautiful country lies in between.*⁹

Our Midrash, on the surface, explains why we encounter old age, suffering and illness. They entered the world, it says, because our patriarchs demanded them (as a side note, it is interesting to think about what the women might have asked for). The Midrash argues that because of the insight of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the human condition is better and richer because of these painful conditions we must face.

And maybe that's true. And maybe it's not. We don't have much of a comparison group – a population without these conditions - to test against. The Midrash – my old friend – really teaches that no matter who we are, they will come. If we survive long enough – old age, suffering and illness will come. And they can bring about a terrible existential loneliness. But the text beams itself through time to teach that we will be less lonely – much less lonely - if we face them with our old (and new) friends - with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. With Sara,

⁹ Quoted by Parker Palmer, at <https://onbeing.org/blog/living-from-the-inside-out/>

Rebekkah, Leah and Rachel. With Alan Lightman and the Prager family and with Zelda and Diane Ackerman and of course, above all, with one another.

It's just better to have company on the journey.

It began in mystery and it will end in mystery. But what a savage and beautiful country lies in between.