

Bitterosity
Rosh Hashanah eve 5778
Rabbi Elaine Zecher

Just weeks ago a unified faith community gathered in this sanctuary and we reminded ourselves and each other of the power and strength we exert together. The beauty of that gathering lifted our spirits even as the memory of ugly chants, sticks, stones, and even tiki lamps in the hands of raging extremists continue to break any complacency we may have soothed ourselves into.

There is no way to love them as we can love ourselves. *V'ahavta l'rei'echa camocha?* Love your neighbor as yourself? They preach: hatred of Jews, Blacks, Muslims, GLBTQ. We don't have to love them but we all don't want to become like them either, full of resentment, deceit, jealousy, and hate.

So here we are, about to begin a new year, once again in this sanctuary, to refresh, reclaim, and rediscover our best selves. How do we arrive at a place to settle our souls?

I go to one of my favorite prayers and I bring you there with me.

The soul, O God, you have given me is pure.
You created it. You shaped it, You breathed it into me, and You protect it within me.

Within these sacred words lies the very essence of our tradition. We are born pure, good, and upright, without malice, grudges, anger, or bitterness. All of these emotions and responses are God given opportunities to embrace or to release.

Where do we start? In the Garden of Eden, of course!

The story in this Biblical paradise is not really about an apple or even a tree. It is definitely not about a wrongdoing. The use of the word for sin or transgression is not used. The consumption of the fruit was the presenting problem. The story is about how the characters responded to God's injunction not to eat from the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and bad. (Genesis 2:17) But, since they did. Adam blamed Eve, Eve impugned the snake, and the snake earned its reputation of being a—snake. No one took responsibility. Adam and Eve were born pure, their souls, their souls breathed into life by the Divine.

As a consequence of their actions, they learned that their behavior and choices made a difference, an ironic twist of tasting the fruit from a tree of knowledge of good and bad. So they had to leave Eden to make their way into the world. They discovered the power of their own agency.

As do we, learning that how we act, how we react and certainly how we hold on to that which makes us joyful, content, and righteous along with that which brings on greed, resentment, and jealousy.

The Israeli poet, T Carmi, wrote:
It's hard for two seashells to have a real conversation.
Each listens to its own sea.
Only the pearl diver or antiquities dealer
Can determine without fear; it's the same sea.

The purity of our soul is dependent on each of us but is so often influenced by our interaction with others. How we maintain the purity of our soul is about how we maneuver and manage in the world, how we listen and respond to one another.

Once out of the garden, Adam and Eve had two sons. Cain and Abel. I hope I won't ruin the story if I reveal that Cain killed Abel because of jealousy, bitterness, and resentment. As the story goes, they both make an offering but *God paid heed to Abel...but not to Cain and his offering. Cain was much distressed and he face fell.* (Genesis 4-7) God asked him: *Why are you distressed, And why is your face fallen? Surely, if you do right, there is uplift. But if you do not do right, sin couches at the door. Its urge is toward you. Yet you can be its master.* The translation uses the word, sin, but it is the Hebrew word *Chayt*, which really means to move away from that place of the purity of the soul. Later, out in the field, Cain spoke to Abel but the text does not say what he said. Was he able to articulate his sadness? More likely Cain expressed anger and resentment. The very next action is the first fratricide with the human condition on full display.

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As we embark on these holy days, a time to discover the awe and wonder of ourselves and what is all around us, we ask how do we protect and nurture that soul that God has given us and protects it with us?

Adam Gopnik, the wonderful New Yorker writer, wrote a phrase coined by his daughter, Olivia, when she was only three years old. Her perception of the universe was clearly beyond her years.

Like many children, Olivia, had an imaginary friend. His name was Charlie Ravioli. Olivia, who lived on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, projected many of the New Yorker characteristics on her dear made up Charlie Ravioli. He ate out frequently, lived in an apartment and who arranged his meetings with Olivia. Unfortunately, Charlie Ravioli was a very busy person and often was not available to get together. One day, Olivia reported to her parents that Charlie Ravioli had gotten married to a woman named, Kweeda. Little Olivia described the wedding and their honeymoon at a place she concocted called Cornfields.

A few days later, Olivia shared the sad news that Kweeda had died. When asked what poor Kweeda had died of, Olivia responded that Kweeda died of a disease called Bitterosity. In his book, Through the Children's Gate, Gopnik reflected what this horrible ailment might actually be. He wrote: "Bitterosity, born of betrayal and disappointment, jealousy and resentment is a plague we all work at safeguarding ourselves from." (page 180)ⁱ

This is true whether in New York City or Boston, Massachusetts.

Especially at this time of year, our tradition asks us what we want to do with that time in between birth and the inevitable end of our lives. Do we want to plague our souls with bitterosity, the heavy heart that the world has not regarded us in the way we think it should so we hold on to that anger and thereby create a narrative of sadness and disappointment that eventually sucks the life force out of us? We can choose to hold on or not, to be consumed by bitterosity or let it go.

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This applies to us on a much larger scale!
Whenever the topic of peace in the Mideast arises, words like intractable, impossible. But I believe there is hope. In meetings in Israel through JCRC or when I have been to JStreet programs, I am moved by individuals who have lost family members, experienced violence and incomprehensible loss. They are Palestinians, Jewish Israelis, Arab Israelis, Ethiopians, and settlers, some in the same room at the same time and some not. Their stories are inspiring. They tell how they have worked to overcome their despair, their bitterness, their deep seeded distain, and their real hurt to sit together with people they regarded as a reviled enemy. It amazes to see how they embody grace, justice, and morality as they work together to improve economic and social disparities and model a peaceful shared society. They found compassion within their souls, an ultimate reckoning of a return to its purest form.

If they can do it, so can we. The high holidays come to push us toward that pure soul and away from the pain of bitterosity, but not without effort.

Enter T'shuvah, the watchword of this time of year. At its core, it means to return, to come back to that place of our pure being. Always available to repair, renew, restore, restart, refresh, and rebuild—if we so choose.

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In these grave times of real and metaphorical hurricanes, it's hard to stay attached to the pure soul, and yet, it is never too late to return, to come back, to find the path

that creates, shapes, enlivens, and protects every relationship we have, even when it is with ourselves. The purity of our soul is accessible to us by our actions and attitudes to move us back there.

It is the lesson sorely needed in our world and it begins with each of us; souls, divinely inspired, shaped, and protected, who are able to send forth blessing, contentment, and compassion out into the universe and then, to find peace and love returned back to us.

ⁱ I'm grateful to a member of the congregation who called my attention to the idea of Bitterosity after hearing a lecture by Sylvia Boorstein.