

The Forest and the Trees  
Yom Kippur 5785  
Rabbi Elaine Zecher

On this Yom Kippur day, the metaphorical image that permeates the liturgy is an anthropomorphic God who sits on the throne of judgement. And we, humans, parade before the Eternal One. God calls upon us to account for our transgressions and demands that we return to a sacred life guided by the goodness we each possess. It is in that moment that God summons us to our better selves not in a punitive way but rather in the discovery of how we can be. Through our actions, our confessions, our taking accountability for our wrongdoing and our search for forgiveness, God, the righteous judge, moves from the throne of justice to one of compassion motivated by love for each of us.

The Talmud teaches that as we pray so does God.<sup>i</sup>

*“May it be My will that My mercy overcomes My anger,  
and may My compassion prevail...that I act toward My children  
(that’s us)  
with the attribute of compassion...”*

As God prays, so can we:

This year,  
May our compassion override our anger  
and prevail over our other attributes  
that challenge us, like impatience or self-righteous indignation  
in order to elevate our ability to show love and respect for one another.

This year has been a difficult year to feel love, to show love, and to act with a loving demeanor.

We have looked toward the Mideast and demanded that the people there figure out how to get along when we, here, in our country, but more to the point, in our own community, in our own families and at our own dinner tables have turned away, have cancelled each other, have berated one another and demanded that there must be some kind of corrective measure taken regardless of whether Anthony Blinken has called and asked for our strategic solutions.

We are also filled with worry and anxiety. It has been excruciating to witness all that has happened. The landscape of Judaism and the Jewish people has been devastatingly altered by the horrendous terrorist attack by Hamas on the people of Israel and all that has ensued.

We have mourned and mourned for human lives taken, stolen, tortured, and abused, so many snuffed out too early and too soon-innocent souls, Israelis, Palestinians, Lebanese. In war, hatred is the only winner, as Roger Cohen recently said.

This is a dangerous time.

In this changed landscape that is so difficult to navigate have we lost our ability to see the forest for the trees? Have we so narrowed our perspectives, citing details that prove a point that we miss complexity in the process? Have we assessed only a part of the whole picture but closed ourselves off to a comprehensive view that could deepen our understanding? And yet, have we also lost our ability to see the trees in the forest? Have we chosen only to gaze at the widest angle possible because if we get too close, the pain overwhelms us.

Can there be more to the story?

The rabbis of the Talmud knew of the forest. The image had great power. They called it an orchard with the Hebrew name of *Pardes*, פֶּרְדִּים. To go into the orchard was a perilous journey.

As the Talmudic story<sup>ii</sup> goes, there were four rabbis who entered into the orchard. Rabbi Ben Azzai gazed and died. Ben Zoma gazed and then went mad. Elisha ben Abuyah cut down the planting and Rabbi Akiba left in peace. While we have no details about what occurred in the *Pardes*, the orchard, we know how each Rabbi was affected by the experiences. The language of the Talmud is concise because it demands interpretation.

The Talmud story was meant to explain the dangers of learning about the esoteric, kabbalistic, hidden secrets of Judaism. It was a warning to avoid engaging in the complicated aspects of the tradition out of fear that individuals might be adversely affected.

I take this warning tale as a lesson for today when conversation, debate, protest, and being a Jew can feel precarious.

Let's look more closely at what happened to each of those rabbis and how it informs what is happening all around us with an eye toward moving forward.

The first, Ben Azzai thought that he knew and could comprehend it all. Though regarded as pious and diligent, he was notably insolent. It was the seed to his own destruction. Those who are so sure that they have deciphered the complexity and the nuance of everything usually have done neither. It is an example of people who are sometimes wrong, but never in doubt. Curiosity is nowhere to be found. Without curiosity, we plant the seeds of our own undoing. Ben Azzai gazed and died.

The second, Ben Zoma, known for gaining his wisdom by learning from each person, was pulled in every direction, wanting to hold every single perspective. He could not, however, land on any way to understand. He wanted to be all things to everyone. Though his intention may have been worthy, he could not hold it all. There is nothing wrong with having a perspective. It builds a foundation to understanding, yet carrying every possible argument leads to folly. Ben Azzai gazed and succumbed to madness.

The third, Elisha ben Abuyah, often referenced as "other" metaphorically cut the planting by cutting himself off from being part of the community. He separated himself with ideas and beliefs that took him beyond the boundary of what is within Jewish views and what is not. He criticized to an extreme degree and expressed no opening for discussion. As a result, he cut the cord tethering him to the greater community and disconnected himself. If we are not willing to examine whether we have excluded ourselves from the community with our views, we may lose sight of whether we are still connected at all.

But let us note that even while Elisha ben Abuyah was ostracized as a heretic, the Talmud does not give up on him and neither should we. There are those who express concerns based on the Jewish way of seeing the world through a universal, humanitarian lens which could be interpreted as cutting themselves off from the Jewish community, but it does not have to be. The life and

experience of Elisha ben Abuyah continues to invite us to ask how far is too far. Sometimes it is and sometimes it is not.

The last rabbi, Akiva succeeded. What did he do to survive the treacherous attempt to enter the paradoxical paradise of Pardes? He emerged in peace, יָצָא בְּשָׁלוֹם, *yatza b'shalom*. What we know about him is that he was learned and had thousands of students. He came from humble beginnings and spent his life studying. Nevertheless, his experience is summarized with the word, shalom. I see this as a signal regarding an attitude and an intention. Shalom means wholeness, wellness, and the ability to find ways and perspectives that bring people together.

We need a willingness to approach one another and the complex-complicated-nuanced-middle east-conundrum with an attitude of peace that brings people together even in our disagreement.

So what could peace mean for us?

We begin with a willingness to struggle internally:

Wrestling is a paradigm that is quintessential to the life of every Jew. In Genesis, Jacob wrestles with the angel in the middle of the night on his way to encounter his brother in a potentially precarious reunion. In that moment, the angel changes his name to Yisrael, explained as *the one who has wrestled with beings both human and divine and could prevail*.<sup>iii</sup> We are able to struggle because struggling defines Jewish existence, even when it is contentious.

I have heard from many people who say: “I don’t need to engage in any brave conversation or dialogue because I already am at odds in my own internal discussion.” Our inner exchanges are robust and soul crushing.

But it doesn’t just stop with ourselves.

When the Contemporary Jewish Museum<sup>iv</sup> in San Francisco chose 70 artworks to include in its open call in November, they faced a potentially difficult challenge from 7 artists who made institutional demands that could have harmed Israel.

Instead of responding by accepting their recusal from the exhibit, the museum chose a different response.

The curators decided to intentionally leave 6 (two artists had worked together) walls blank with the accompanying text: “to honor the perspectives that would have been shared..., and to authentically reflect the struggle for dialogue that is illustrated by the artists’ decisions to withdraw.”

While the artists may have walked away, the museum kept them present in the exhibit. It is a reflection of the difficulty happening within the Jewish community and we cannot ignore it, dismiss it, cancel each other, or set ourselves so far apart that we can no longer see either the forest or the trees.

Jewish tradition celebrates disagreement. The Talmud contains majority and minority opinions and elaborates on debate rather than squelching opposing points of view. It transformed critique and criticism into a diverse panoply of voices and opinions arguing, listening, and learning from each other. This way of Judaism was a revolutionary idea born out of a time when the walls of Jerusalem came tumbling down along with the Jewish community who had divided into warring factions.

The Roman destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem in the first century of the common era is most definitely not the end of the story. Rabbi Yohanan Ben Zakai left Jerusalem in a coffin as a ruse to bypass the restrictions of his fellow Jews.<sup>v</sup> He created Yavneh and others founded Usha<sup>vi</sup> both places originated on a shared understanding of the power of dialectic confrontation of ideas that enhance learning and strengthen argument. Yohanan ben Zakkai and others embedded in our tradition the possibility that we can disagree and still honor the other. The articulation of this idea is in the Talmudic phrase

*Elu v’elu divrei Elohim hayyim*, ואלו דברי אלוהים חיים-these and these are words of the living God.<sup>vii</sup>

Our tradition also recognized that there are differences that cannot be resolved. The rabbis declared these as “*Teku*”<sup>viii</sup> which is an acronym that places the resolution on a future time when Elijah the prophet will herald in the messiah and all controversies and difficulties will be resolved. Yet, in the world we live in now, sometimes we live with the discomfort of non-resolution. That may seem like a

treacherous balance beam to traverse---not even Simone Biles, well maybe Simone Biles--could cross. Or more likely solutions solved by those diplomatically directly involved.

At Temple Israel, our goal is to be clear of who and what we are.

We have approached the traumatic events of October 7th and its aftermath with intention. We harnessed that awakened spirit of commitment to Judaism and being Jewish. We increased learning about the geo-political situation and complexity in the Mideast and in all the places where it rippled out. We celebrated the support of our allies, welcoming our mayor to this bima and appreciating the Boston Police who guarded us without being asked even as we increased security. We have served as a gathering place for shloshim after October 7th, hosted Greater Boston's Jewish community's support of college students experiencing antisemitism on campus, and we have spoken about the devastating loss of innocent lives in the war between Israel and Hamas and now Hezbollah. We have convened conversation and created brave spaces where we encounter perspectives that may counter our own. As much as we have tried, we did not always get it right even as we continue to pursue ways of understanding the situation and each other better.

In this congregation of Temple Israel of Boston, we value *ahavat Yisrael*, ישראל אהבת, the love of Israel and the Jewish people and those in our orbit of community. We support Israel's continuity and security as a state, a land, and people. And while there is great room for dissent or criticism of Israel's policies, those who encourage her demise, destruction, or dissolution are not within the bounds of where we exist.

I encourage, implore, and invite all of us to lean in to *ahavat Yisrael*. A world without Israel is not just a world without the GPS app, Wayz, we would lose the ancient and modern navigational tool of Judaism. We cannot; we must not underestimate the significance of Israel's presence in the Jewish world and in the middle east. We must not and cannot disregard the existential crises it faces. And at the same, our concern for human rights is a universal Jewish value, even in Gaza and the West Bank and throughout the land of Israel and throughout the area. Our compassion extends to all who are suffering. We cannot turn away from them as well.

The midrash teaches that at the sea when Israel was redeemed, the angels celebrated the demise and death of the Egyptians in the sea. God chastised them, reminding them not to celebrate the death of their enemy.<sup>ix</sup>

Have we arrived to a place of *teku* where resolution and a path forward are unattainable? I don't think so. In moments like these the words of Rabbi Leo Baeck, a reform rabbi and survivor of the nazi death camps informs us in his description of Judaism as a religion of ethical optimism. Inherent in our tradition is the belief that each person has the capacity for doing what is right and just, guided by mercy. These holidays provide that path to rediscover it if we have lost our way. Shai Held, the author of Judaism is About Love preferred to call it ethical possibilism. We can't guarantee human behavior but we can believe in what is possible. Our tradition places the choice before us, blessing and curse, life and death. Our capacity for good is the foundation even within our many choices.

The Psalmist affirmed the presence of mercy in the world. The midrash on Psalms<sup>x</sup> takes it a step further. Compassion is what holds up the throne on which that metaphoric anthropomorphic God sits. The throne is regarded as unsteady just like a table in a restaurant that needs something under the leg. The ancients knew of this difficulty even for the divine. They asked what could stabilize the throne and answered that it is compassion itself. Not only does God pray to move from anger to compassion but the throne itself has it as part of its foundation.

I pray on this year's Yom Kippur that we will not have to wait until some idealized time to enter the messianic moment ushered in by Elijah the prophet or enter into the *Pardes*, that orchard represented as so precarious most did not survive. Instead, I pray we can enter and depart from each encounter with an attitude that finds peacefulness in our words, deeds, and actions and therefore does spread love.

It is the only way we can survive—and, God willing, thrive.  
May we and the communities in which we dwell be sealed in the Book of Life.  
Shanah Tovah and Shabbat Shalom

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<sup>i</sup> Berachot 7a

<sup>ii</sup> Hagigah 14b:8-9

<sup>iii</sup> Genesis 32:39

<sup>iv</sup> NY Times, June 8, 2024

<sup>v</sup> Josephus, author of The Jewish War

<sup>vi</sup> Detailed in the Hartman Journal, Sources, Spring 2021, "What Happened to Jewish Pluralism?" by Yehuda Kertzer

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<sup>vii</sup> Eruvim 13b

<sup>viii</sup> Horayot 14a

<sup>ix</sup> Sanhedrin 39b

<sup>x</sup> Midrash on Psalms 89:2