



Rosh Hashanah Sermon

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Kol Nidrei 5783

Congregation Beth Elohim

It seems that these are the worst of times.
Nearly half the country indifferent to treasonous crimes.
What is true, what's a lie, what's the law, why comply?
We move under a pall of uncertainty and fear
The end of democracy could be near.
Don't know how to bridge the chasms, divides
While civilization seemingly unravels before our eyes
Books banned, speech gagged,
Guns in the hands of those who've been flagged
The lonely, the ill, abusive, despairing,
So many massacres, not enough caring.
Women's bodies no longer their own
Whether raped or consenting, young girls or full-grown;
Fires and floods, hurricanes and drought
Mass extinction no longer in doubt.
Billionaires in charge, elections are bought
Schools underfunded, civics not taught.
When it seems that the world as we know it is dying
We find ourselves doomscrolling, paralyzed, shraying.
But all the while something else is unfolding
If only we shift and consider beholding
New worlds born, imaginations on fire



Leaps in consciousness: witness, admire
Dedication to equity, diversity, inclusion;
old myths of equality no longer illusions.
Reckoning with our history, and how to repair;
Initiatives abounding to address what's unfair.
Bursts in understanding our bodies, our minds;
the nervous system, trauma, and healing combine.
Empathy, self-awareness, mindfulness, and learning;
Advances accelerating our powers of discerning.
Questions about rest, work, and play
How we organize ourselves, how we live out our day.
Reconsidering assumptions on human primacy:
Conscious octopi? Networked trees?
Self-restoring ecosystems on land and sea?
Rapidly shifting power to sun and wind,
renewable, clean, whole new ways to begin
Now we can see ourselves among the stars
Our context, our company, where we really are.
We find ourselves here between dissolution and promise.
Don't know what's next, but a new age is upon us.
How do we live while so much is dying?
What do we fight for, and what is worth trying?
I cannot say what it is you should do.
I do not know, this year that's true.
But when at a loss, I find that it's best
To ask those before us
What they did when pressed.



You think we're the first to face uncertainty and decay?
Our ancestors mastered that back in the day.
In fact, this Rosh Hashanah we hear four women described
Who faced some kind of death yet kept hope alive.
Sarah, Hagar, Hannah, and Rachel
Their stories are fanciful, might sound like fables
But listen carefully; they have something to teach
Glean strategy, vision, and wisdom from each
And while we're learning about this moment on earth
We'll recast the conversation about women and birth.
Hayom Harat Olam, tradition teaches
Today a new world is conceived.
And that is the lesson that this sermon preaches.
Each of the four mothers faced something dying
Hannah: her society
Rachel: humanity
Hagar: her own child
Sarah: her vitality.
Each employed determination, perseverance,
Vision and courage,
Emotion, intelligence,
Toughness, endurance.
To birth something new that never existed.
The odds seemed impossible
Nevertheless they persisted.
Let us listen to our foremothers with voices so clear
About death, about birth, and how to live while we're here.



We begin with Hannah
who we heard in today's haftarah
begging God for a child.
It is not what it seems.
Hannah believed from her youth
that her worth was in her womb.
Childless, she was mocked. She was pitied.
But worse, she came to doubt the value of her very life.
She began to pray in the deep anguish of night.
It was her anger that empowered her to confront God.
Until those nighttime reckonings
she was not bold enough to consider herself
in relation to the Master of the Universe.
However, as she was frustrated month after month,
as she asked in the dead of night why she was created,
she began to take that question seriously.
For the first time it occurred to her
that perhaps she was here for something other than mothering.
She had another purpose.
She had not imagined any other way a woman could be.
Now, the question opened a vista before her:
what was she here to give?
And she saw a choice.
It was known that her nation was lost.
The priesthood had become corrupt.
A system that once called the people to their highest purpose



Was now self-serving, cynical.

Hannah faced a moment we know all too well:

she realized that in a society she'd believed to be just and good,

the old ideals were never really quite true,

the pillars she took for granted had to be questioned.

And she lived in a time

when the institutions had been hollowed out,

so it all felt dangerously fragile.

Though she knew that big change was needed,

she wanted to defend and preserve what was worthy.

In addition, they thought then, like most of us think now,

that childbearing made a woman's life complete.

They, like us, were so immersed in patriarchy it was largely invisible.

We, now, are fighting vocally about choice, as we should,

but it's mainly choice about when to give birth, not whether.

Let us not pretend, Hannah tells us, that human children

are all we're here to birth.

Most of us cannot birth a child through our bodies,

and some will choose not to.

But all of us, children of the great Creator, give birth

to ideas, visions, relationships, enterprises, possibilities.

We birth worlds.

Hannah saw in those dark nights

that she had a world to birth.

Her people had lost faith in each other and their way of life.

They'd forgotten what was possible.



They needed prayer

Personal articulation of inner truth and longing,
democratic communication with the Source of Life.

And they needed leadership, a prophet,
a trusted voice of guidance and vision.

One part she could do by herself.

The other, ironically, required a son.

Once she realized this,

Hannah took on Adonai with a cleverness and determination
that even the Rabbis of the Talmud noted with reverence.

They said of her:

“There was no one who called the Holy One
Adonai Tzeva’ot [a term of war] until Hannah.”

The Talmud records her direct challenge to God:

“Master of the Universe, are You not Adonai Tzeva’ot, the Lord of Hosts,
and of all the hosts of creations
that You created in Your world,
is it difficult... to grant me one son?”

She threatened God, the Rabbis say, she reasoned, cajoled.

She spoke to God like Elijah did, they say
like Moses did.

Some said it was impertinent.

Turns out it was effective.

Hannah’s prayers became a model for us and all who followed,
the greatest achievement of her generation.

And she gave birth to prophecy through Samuel
and gave him directly to the Sanctuary,



to serve right in the center of power.

Thus restoring trust
in leadership, ethics, truth,
and the system itself.

Hannah gave birth to prayer,
and Hannah gave birth to a future.

When the world was closed to her as a woman,
she found a new way.

She discerned what she was here to do in the world,
made her choice and fought for it.

She teaches that we can fight too:

To rise to the moment with audacity and courage

To choose what we will give with our lives

To birth what must be born.

Rachel, who we meet in tomorrow's haftarah,
also dedicated her life to birthing.

In fact, she died giving birth.

And in the process, Rachel birthed compassion.

Forever, she is the one who weeps
when we suffer: when we're afraid, when we're alone,
when we face the dying that's around us.

In the words of the prophet Jeremiah,

who saw Rachel watching our people marched into captivity and exile:

"A cry is heard in Ramah

Wailing, bitter weeping—

Rachel weeping for her children.



She refuses to be comforted
For her children, who are gone.”
Rachel cries against the destructive impulse in God and in us,
the urge to exile, the drive to despoil, the itch to lay waste.
She cries for the routine violence
against women in their beds and in the fields and by the river and behind the shed.
Against children who dropped the bucket or failed to keep up or dared to speak back.
For the innocent villages in the path of the marauding army.
For the conquered.
How often it has been our people in particular,
located on that strange throughway between continents,
the spoil of empires.
Then scattered, despised,
the target of demagogues.
Perhaps worse, sometimes we have been the conquerors,
the ruthless, the destructive, the occupying forces.
Rachel will not be comforted.
Will not let God off the hook.
Will not be appeased or placated,
Will not resign herself to the way of the world as it is.
She will never accept what is unacceptable.
She will grieve, and she will not stop,
until all of the cruelty comes to an end.
She knows that violence is grief unfelt.
She sees us now, more than 150 years without war in this land,
Yet immersed in violence —
in our streets, in our prisons, in our schools, in our homes.



She sees us in our loneliness,
surrounded by the collapse of life,
death and dying on a planetary scale.

She sees us hide our grief,
medicate ourselves,
pretend we don't feel it.

She sees our little children crying for the polar bears
The rhinos and gorillas, pandas and blue whales
The monarchs and the bees,
Salamanders and frogs
Parrots, plovers, and owls
Rainforests and coral reefs
Glaciers and beaches.

Every sweltering, storming day a reminder
Of the world dying before our eyes.
Of our grandchildren and their potential demise.

She sees that we are so bound by our failure to grieve
that we destroy not because we are indifferent,
but because we are locked in not feeling.

She cries because she knows that someday when we cry,
when we turn toward our mourning,
pour out our tears,
let all the wounded,
guarded places within us
come undone,
then we can make choices.
then we can love the world again.



then we can choose life.

God, seeing Rachel unrelenting in her mourning, inconsolable,
has made a promise.

The people will be gathered.

The blind, the lame, the pregnant, the nursing,
will come home again, radiant.

By the streams, by the rivers, along the grassy plains

The feminine will encircle the masculine,

And together they'll find balance.

Compassion will overtake violence.

Rachel shows us there's another way.

Anger and action have their place.

But so does protest in the form of lament.

She counsels that we do less and feel more,

softening armor, growing compassion,

disengaging from harm,

defending what's alive and endangered.

Perhaps, she advises,

we will learn to breathe, to simply breathe

with everything that lives,

To listen,

And end ruination.

Hagar, from the Torah today, also birthed something new.

Ishmael was her sun and dawn, moon and horizon.

But more than her child, Hagar birthed vision.



When she and her sweet boy were sent away
with a skin of water and a piece of bread,
The desert was hot,
the sun harsh
the earth scorched.
and her child, her precious child,
she carried him as long as she could
But when the water was gone and he was nearly done
She placed him down.
And closed her eyes so as not to see.
She could not bear to watch, so she tried
to hide from the unfathomable.
And that was when she finally cried.
Thank God Something caused her to open her eyes
and look right at her dying child.
Then she could see what she couldn't before.
Her vision expanded.
And right there:
Water. Life.
To Abraham and Sarah she seemed not much more than property.
But to God, Hagar was worthy of prophecy.
She was seen and she could see,
Naming God El-roi,
Naming the place wellspring of life and vision.
When her eyes were opened
Hagar saw choices before her.
What looked like death could become new beginning.



Freedom was hers

A new life in what seemed like the end.

She and Ishmael became the ancestors of twelve chieftans
and a great nation.

Before, she was a slave, a servant, a concubine, a stranger,
Family, yet not family.

Now she was a free woman

Matriarch to a great line.

With choices abounding,
a new world she'd define.

Hagar had loved Abraham, and Sarah in a way.

And later, after Sarah died,

Abraham asked Hagar to marry,
and she decided to forgive.

Together they had six more children.

And after Abraham died,

Isaac and Rebecca came to live near Hagar.

So, in the end, she was family

But now on her terms

Belonging to no one, thriving in dignity.

What Hagar comes to teach, different from Hannah and Rachel,

Is that just when it seems there's no hope, no way out,

Something else is beginning, put aside all your doubt.

There is real occasion for heartbreak and grief;

the world can be crushing, without much relief.

But what seems a dead end contains possibility;



don't you dare think that it's all just futility.
More freedom is waiting, says this daughter of Pharaoh
If you cannot see choices, your vision is too narrow.
Lift up your eyes, you'll find ways through no way
This is a message of deliverance for our day.

And now we turn to Sarah,
whose wizened voice is defensive, defiant.
She knows we're judging her; the Torah judges her too.
There's a lesson here about pursuing our goals
With such determination and focus
We fail to see the people around us,
we fail to see the ways we harm others.
But Sarah asks us to remember that it was not her idea
That she and Abraham would transmit covenant
through their child Isaac.
It was God's idea.
Her goal all along was simply to do what God asked
To trust that her life was an instrument of a larger mission.
"Go forth," God had called them long ago, "to a land that I will show you
I will make of you a great nation and you shall be a blessing."
"I will give you a son, and I will bless you and you shall give rise to nations."
"You will bear a son named Isaac and I will maintain my covenant with him,
an everlasting covenant for generations."
So when Ishmael became the eldest son
And Sarah, by far the older woman,
knew she would die long before Hagar,



leaving no one to fight for Isaac's birthright,
(And honestly, she didn't trust Abraham's judgment when it came to Isaac...)
She chose to take a stand, for covenant, for God, for her child.
So that her husband could see his younger son as inheritor
of this promise to which they'd given their lives.
She did not ask that Hagar and Ishmael be left in the desert to die
All she asked was to send them elsewhere to live
Why Abraham sent them off without much water, or food, or a way to survive
She did not understand
Why he was so ready to risk their two lives
Foreshadowing the Akedah which was about to transpire.
But before all of this Sarah gave birth to faith in emergence.
(Now, the story tells us that she gave birth at age 90.
If you doubt this, don't worry, the lesson's still timely.)
God said that Sarah was alive on the earth to birth a new future,
To create a people who would be a blessing for all humanity,
but then it did not happen.
Year after year, cycle after cycle, decade after decade. It. did. not. happen.
Waiting and waiting, how could she not doubt?
Too often, she thought:
it's hopeless, too late, there's no way, just give up.
When Sarah was told she'd give birth at age 90,
she laughed, of course,
At 90 you're dying, not birthing.
Laughter was the only response:
she could not bear more disappointment.
But there was some tiny spark within



that still believed, against all odds,
that she could play her role, be of use,
bring the world toward redemption.
Even as she herself was so near the end –
it's silly, it's absurd, it makes no sense,
but she decided to try.
That was her choice, to try,
not give up, but give effort.
At age 90. To try.

If she can do that, we can believe
that our world can be saved, be given reprieve.
Imagine that you had a deep sense of purpose
Felt that your life was about something of service
You could see the way the world should move forward
Your vision was clear, your goal determined
You set up your life as a way to contribute
And then it all went backwards or sideways or stagnant, at least on the surface.
Your hopes, your dreams, they all seemed to be dashed.
You thought to give up, step aside as it crashed.
But the lesson of Sarah is to believe, to have faith
Persist, persevere, through all doubt, toward your fate.
That even when it seems it's all over, time is up
Change might appear out of nowhere, and it could be abrupt.
There is always gestation that we cannot see.
The trick is to believe without guarantee.



Hannah, Rachel, Hagar, and Sarah.

All of them used tactics we might need now:

Prayer

Discernment

Protest

Lament

Endurance

Forgiveness

Laughter

Perseverance.

Each of them birthed something new against the odds:

Leadership,

Compassion,

Vision, and

Faith in emergence.

And us, in this room?

There are many things we do not choose —

our own births our wounds our sickness our talents —

but there are many things we can choose —

what we create, what we nurture, what we give, how we live.

You are the midwives who help new creations be born

You are the ones who do not give birth, so something else can become

You are the fathers, the stepmothers, the nannies, the coaches

who take in life you did not gestate,

who care for life and help it grow.

Make for yourself a new creation

Make for yourself a microcosm



Make for yourself a burst of awareness

Make for yourself a garden

Make for yourself a diorama

Make for yourself a vision

Make for yourself depth of feeling

Make for yourself a small group

Make for yourself an act of chesed

Make for yourself the future that should become
right in your neighborhood,

right where you live

Nothing is stopping you.

You choose what you give.

It's always the end and it's always the beginning.

There is dying and there is birthing

And there is living and there is nurturing life.

And we are so small

And we are bigger than we can imagine.

And Hannah is fighting for the future

And Rachel is crying for her children

And Hagar is seeing water in the desert

And Sarah is laughing, because she gave birth when everyone thought she was dying.

Hayom harat olam. Today a new world is conceived.

And we are doing the birthing.

Shanah Tovah.



Thanks to Rabbi Dr. Tamara Eskenazi; Joell Hallowell; Rabbi Lydia Medwin; Rabbi Stephanie Kolin; Michael Echenberg; my son Benji, the rapper; and my son Eitan, the adviser, all of whom made this possible.