

The Time to Take Note of Ourselves – Part 1

Rosh Hashanna Morning

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Beth Chayim Chadashim

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Monday morning holds central importance in my week. As I re-gather with my classmates to get ready for the week ahead, Monday morning is a time to review the events of the weekend. Often there are significant experiences at a student pulpit to reflect upon. World events are regularly a topic of conversation. Perhaps one of us went on an exciting date and needed to report back to the group. Sometimes, we speak about our literary choices for the weekend. Without fail, before my classmates and I delve into the issues of the Talmud or the Mishna, we deal with the previous night's showing of *Desperate Housewives*. With this in mind, let me ask you an important question...

How could Brie Vandecamp possibly abandon her son on the side of the road? Yes, he did try to frame her for allegedly physically abusing him. And yes, he did seduce her boyfriend as a means to torment her. However (DRAMATIC), does this possibly justify taking him on a road trip far from Wisteria Lane and leaving him to fend for himself, thus disowning him; even though he is of her own flesh and blood?

For those of you who have resisted the temptation to join the *Desperate Housewives* craze, mazel tov! For your information, I have just set forth one of the central dilemmas of the popular TV show.

Wouldn't you know, that this morning's Torah portion is also rich with marital strife, complicated issues of child care, questionable acts, and yes, even silly laughter. Let's take a look...

First, God, "takes note" of Sarah. In her old age, Sarah conceives a child who is named Isaac, meaning laughter, for when she first heard about her blessed gift, her response was to laugh. Sarah didn't like the way Isaac played with Ishmael, Abraham's son with the servant Hagar. And so, Sarah pleads with Abraham to banish Ishmael and Hagar from the household. Abraham is distressed, but gives in to his wife's request after receiving reassurances from God.

Perhaps I should start this sermon again. How could Abraham simply abandon his son? Yes (DRAMATIC), he would present competition for the birthright, and yes, this would allow Abraham to focus all his attention on the beloved Isaac, but does this possibly justify banishing him from the household and sending him off to the desert to face a frightening future, leaving him to fend for himself, thus disowning him even though he is of his own flesh and blood?

To ask these questions is quite natural. As a society we are always wary of those around us, examining motives, trying to understand the acts of our neighbors. I would like to spend some time today getting to the root of these judgmental questions. In what ways do we

focus on others and why is this problematic? Do we spend enough time looking deeply into our own souls? How can we redirect our thoughts to ourselves as individuals? I've begun with a TV analogy as an example of the prevalence of judging others everywhere in our society. I will continue by grounding judgment as a central Jewish theme. My hope is to bring this global theme back to each of us as individuals. Acknowledging that we are a judging people, let us map the way for the coming year as a people more focused on ourselves.

Back to Abraham and Sarah, the commentators of the Bible have tackled today's Torah portion for centuries. For instance, there is much discussion on the term, "played." The sages suggest that Sarah may have been concerned with Ishmael playing with Isaac in a cruel or lewd manner. It has been pointed out that Ishmael would have been deserving of a share of Abraham's estate unless he was granted freedom. The Classical commentator, Samson Raphael Hirsch suggests that Sarah's demands likely stemmed from anguish and fear. Abraham could not possibly ignore such a passionate plea from his wife. Our contemporary scholar Jeffrey Salkin is less understanding in his commentary. He points out that the reader is forced to take note of Abraham and Sarah's wrongful acts. In doing so, one potentially connects these acts to personal stories of being wounded, betrayed and disappointed by one's own parents.

We can make lots of educated guesses as to the motives behind these Biblical characters. We can learn from their successes and their mistakes. Their stories can serve as guidelines to our own experiences. And yet, we are not in a place to judge these men and women. Similarly we are not in a place to judge those around us in our contemporary society. None of us can possibly know what it's like to be in the shoes of another. However, we are certainly capable of discerning and exploring what it is like to be wearing our own shoes.

Let's look at one more Biblical example that points us to the importance of self-analysis. The book of Samuel focuses us on our ignorance with a powerful image of a clueless King. King David fell in love with a married woman, Bathsheva. Longing to have her as his own, he sent off her husband Uriah to the frontlines of battle. Just as hoped, Uriah was killed, and King David was able to take Bathsheva for a wife. Very angry, God sent Nathan to present David with a parable: "There were two men in the same city, one rich and one poor. The rich man had very large flock and herds, but the poor man had only one ewe lamb that he had bought. He tended to it and it grew up together with him and his children: it used to share his morsel of bread, drink from his cup and nestle in his bosom; it was like a daughter to him. One day, a traveler came to the rich man, but he was loath to take anything from his own flocks or herds to prepare a meal for the guest who had come to him; so he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him." King David was furious at having heard this tale. He demanded that this selfish man deserved to die as he had showed no pity! Imagine King David's response when Nathan proclaimed that the man was representative of the King!

We are quick to point fingers at others, yet we often forget to see our own faults. Yes, we too are responsible for similar transgressions. How often are we guilty of the wrongdoings that we accuse others of committing? How much of our conversation is dedicated to

gossip? Are we generous with our deeds? Have we given enough attention to those who we care for? It's easy to see the wrong in the acts of others, and yet, to open our eyes to our own misdeeds is challenging and often ignored.

Judgment is a theme that comes up over and over again in our Jewish tradition. As mere humans, we are cautioned in our usage of judgment. Our Midrash speaks of an incident where one of King Yannai's slaves' killed another man. Being responsible for that which he owned, the king's presence was demanded at the trial of the slave. The king attended the trial, but refused to stand when asked. The presiding sage Simeon b. Shetah responded, "Stand up on your feet and let the witnesses testify against you. It is not before us that you stand, but before God, who spoke and the world came into being." And King Yannai then stood. Our texts affirm that God is the ultimate judge. The Ethics of Our Fathers teach us that one shall not judge another until one has stood in that same place. R. Joshua b. Perayah teaches to, "judge everyone with the scale weighted in that person's favor." As an aside, our tradition holds a special place for the officially sanctioned judges of our community. Such judges are seen as partners of God in the words of creation.

And so judgment is powerful and present, valuable and determinative. Judgment is so weighty that we are asked to use caution in its dispensation, never using it inappropriately and always remaining humble before God. Judgment is a central theme of the Days of Awe. Let me suggest that now, in these days of judgment, it is the time for us to look carefully at how we use judgment in our own lives.

Our Torah portion begins: God took note of Sarah-V'Adonai Paqad et Sarah. The term Paqad can mean: to review, to remember, to recall, to think of and most typically, to take note of. In the context of the text, God took note of Sarah and remembered the promises that had been made to her regarding progeny. In our context today, let's reflect on this term paqad and direct it at ourselves as individuals. How can we reflect on our year, reviewing, remembering, recalling, thinking and taking note where we succeeded and where we went astray? Can we recall the consequences of our actions? Can we look deep within, finding the authentic motives behind everything we do? Which promises remain unfulfilled? Can we set forth on a new vision, more centered, more focused on ourselves?

The Rosh Hashanna morning liturgy emphasizes the theme of judgment. The Days of Awe have two foci: judgment and forgiveness. It is a time to reflect on our acts and repent for our transgressions. God is described as a strict judge but also a forgiving parent. As we right our wrongs, God's sacred covering is near. Included in the heading of judgment are concepts of kingship and remembrance. These themes remind us that the world is meaningful because of a Divine ruler who has holy expectations for the creatures of the earth. We alone are responsible for all of our actions. It is now the time and place to take responsibility for those things that we can control. Our liturgy today on Rosh Hashanna paints the image of a grand trial. Let me suggest that we can potentially serve as both judge and defendant. For what transgressions are we guilty? How can each of us, as the judge, sentence ourselves with rehabilitative verdicts that focus us on a holy path?