

**IN THE GAME OF LIFE, IT'S YOUR MOVE**  
*Rosh Hashanah 5770 — Saturday, September 19, 2009*  
*Congregation B'nai Jehudah — Overland Park, Kansas*  
*Sermon by Rabbi Alexandria Shuval-Weiner*

A woman wrote the following in a blog: Our family enjoys board games, a favorite was always the game of LIFE. I liked it because its exciting to see what you could do with your life in a few short hours. The obstacles along the way were ones we laughed about: Taxes, Debts, Insurance. The object of the game was to "win" and winning came from making all the right choices . . . those that would affect the outcome of LIFE. It was actually fun to see the challenges our fellow-players encountered that might let us get ahead of them just a few squares or two. We laughed at their poor choices and were there to judge what it was that put them in the mess they were in at that time.

This was a game based on taking risks and the risks were easy because the consequences weren't real. We might "win." Or we could go for broke and lose the game. And if this game of LIFE didn't work to our advantage, we could laugh about it and play it again the next time with new consequences.

We've put the game away now. This game like MONOPOLY and many others probably wasn't intended to teach us lessons. But now that I think about it, I confess that the game taught me more than I realized. Life is about choices. Real LIFE is about choices that affect real outcomes. Sometimes we make good choices and sometimes we make bad choices. And sometimes we have no idea what the reverberations of those

choices may end up impacting... Now, I would like to share a story with you about an encounter I had with a stranger a short time ago... It was on a flight across the country. I was seated next to a woman, about my age. She smiled when I sat down and immediately attempted to strike up a conversation. Are you heading home or off for a vacation? I said something, and returned the nicety, though honestly I was not interested in chatting. She said she was returning from her father's funeral. I extended condolences to her, which immediately elicited a flood of tears ...AND she BLURTED OUT there was so much that needed saying, but somehow we just ran out of time!

I was a bit uncomfortable with her boldness and yet I understood that she needed to talk. Without much prompting, she began to share her life story.

"...To the outside world, we looked like the perfect family. Well-to-do, we grew up in a nice neighborhood, good schools...people always commented on what a nice family we were. However, at home, life was difficult at best, my parents were older, dad was married to his job, and mom overprotective to the point of being stifling...and sometimes she would go into these crazy rages"

The woman's brother, who was considerably older, was the child from dad's first marriage. She recalled

constant fighting between her mom and her older brother. Sometime around his 18th birthday, he came home with a motor cycle and after another fight, mom kicked him out of the house. "That was the last I saw of him, he never wrote and nobody ever really talked about him. I was confused and angry... how he could have left me with them...and how could mom and dad so easily forget him?"

She shared how as she got older, all the pressure to succeed came crashing in on her. Her father had so many expectations and demanded that she follow in his footsteps...they never honestly talked she did not share his vision; she dropped out of college and went backpacking around the world...she just wanted to get away. Within a few months of her departure, her mother died...it was cancer...no one knew she was sick... She talked about the many mental conversations with them both, "I just wish that I could have put my feeling down on paper, she said. I carried so much anger and hurt. I just kept waiting for dad to make the move, to send that one letter...the one that would say I'm sorry, please forgive me; the one that would explain everything...the one that would take me home...but it never came...and then it was too late"

As this stranger shared her story, her pain was palpable. I understood what she wanted from her parents; so many of us struggle with our upbringing- the joys, the pain, the disappointments, the secrets, the muddled truths. I was most drawn to the emotional picture of the anguish that her distance must have caused to all the parties involved; herself and her parents. What a tragic story... what a familiar story.

In synagogues around the world this very story of family pain is what we study today. Abraham's eldest son, born to him from Sarah's maidservant Hagar, seen as a hindrance to Isaac's destiny is cast out into the wilderness.

Then the narrative continues, God commanding Abraham to take his son Isaac to the Land of Moriah, and offer him there as a sacrifice. Abraham unflinchingly heeds the call...he rose early in the morning, took along Isaac and necessary provisions, and set out for the Land of Moriah.

As we well know, the physical sacrifice of Isaac is thwarted by an angel of God and Abraham offers a ram which was caught in a nearby thicket in lieu of his son. While scholars argue over whether or not Isaac was physically sacrificed, he is certainly emotionally and spiritually sacrificed. His trust is betrayed in such violent way that even if his father's actions could be forgiven. How could they be forgotten?

And yet, strangely, at the end of Abraham's life, the words that the Torah uses to describe his state of being are "sah'veh'ah" contented.

I am not here to comment on the theological implications of the Abraham's choices. Rather I want to talk about the family, those human beings who were impacted by Abraham's choices and their state of being following the events of those days leading up to and on that mountain top? According to one Midrash, after the Akedah Isaac flees, going off on his own, never again to see his mother or speak with Abraham. Tradition teaches that upon hearing the news of Abrahams

trek, and the potential death of Isaac, Sarah dies from anguish...We have no idea what the young Ishmael thought of his father as he lay in the desert dying of thirst and hunger. Saved by God, yet scarred by his father's abandonment. Ishmael and Hagar live out their days far away from the Abraham's clan.

There is no more narrative in the Torah between the father and his sons, until Abraham's funeral. Whether they forgave or not, they come together to bury him.

And on that day what were the emotions?

I imagine that these two men yearned to understand how their father could have acted as he did. Waiting a lifetime for the explanation, for some inkling of comprehension, for the apology...none of which ever came.

Why do we read these stories during Rosh Hashanah?

I believe that one of the lessons that we can take away is the consolation that the Torah recognizes the reality of painful, irreconcilable relationships in life.

We know that the pain, the hurt, the anger and the disappointment from a traumatic relationship can stop us from allowing love into our lives, or living our lives to the fullest...The energy that goes into waiting for the apology that may never come, can blind us from building healthy productive relationships. As fragile humans we tend to replay the roles as victim or abuser, never breaking out or moving beyond the dysfunction.

What is it that compelled the woman I met on the plane to return home for the funeral? And what brought Isaac and

Ishmael back to attend to the death of their father Abraham?

Did they simply show up for the reading of the will? Or was it something else? I have to believe that their return was what Torah and this Holy Day attempts to guide us to do. To cleanse ones self of that which holds us back. To take back some control over their lives.

Many psychologists suggest that forgiveness is the answer to moving on in life. AS a Jewish community we look a this holy day season as the time of forgiveness. In many of today's therapeutic models forgiveness is described as a state of mind sought by the victim that requires no action on the part of the perpetrator. While it may help to move a person out of the role of victim, it does little or nothing to bring justice to the offender or the victim.

According to Susan Forward author of Toxic Parents, one of the most dangerous things about seeing forgiveness in this light is that it undercuts ones ability to let go of the pain and the pent up emotions ...it absolves someone of his rightful responsibility to confront their tormentor.

Forgiving can only come after anger-the anger over what was done to them-Ishmael is justifiably angry that his father sent him away to die, Isaac, had the right to be angry-for the terror of that moment when the knife was held at his throat.

These men had the right to be angry over the fact that they lost the sense of safety they deserved to have from their father...

They deserved to have Abraham acknowledge what happened to them, and take responsibility for his actions and show a willingness to make amends.

Our tradition offers a much more intense process for Forgiveness. There is *tochecha* (rebuke) and goes along with *t'shuvah* (repentance). *Tochecha* is about holding those who do things that are wrong or hurtful to us responsible for their actions. It is done out of love and the desire for the relationship to be healed:

You may not have intended to hurt me, but that didn't make it hurt any less....what you did to me has impacted me and my life and this is what I need from you now...we can't change the past but we can begin again.

It is through open *tochecha* that it becomes possible to create emotional healing. Forgiveness emerges from this stage. This is demonstrated in our holy day liturgy, God says to us individually and communally *Selachti key d'varecha* I forgive you as you have asked. We state our wrong doings and in doing so we are better able to do true *Teshuvah*, returning to a better state of being, where our relationship with God can improve. If this is to be done on the theological level, how much more critical on the human level?

*Selachti key d'varecha* But No one asked!!! There is only silence.

Apparently, Abraham was so focused upward that he was oblivious to or refused to admit any wrongdoing in his child rearing, since there was no *tochecha* or *teshuvah*; for Rashi tells us that he died without sin.

Isaac, Ishmael...the woman from the plane...they never invested in the process.

Clearly, there are times when the traditional steps do not work or cannot happen...when the one who has been hurt must do what they can to move forward. That may mean gently rebuking yourself for not demanding what you needed from your tormentor or simply accepting that the tormentor will never acknowledge responsibility for their actions. It does not mean forgetting what was perpetrated against you, rather it means finding a way to repair the damage to yourselves, to mourn what was lost and the potential of what could have been...

I envision Ishmael and Isaac standing over Abraham's grave together as brothers with a modern prayer on their lips:

I have missed the opportunity to tell you how much injured me I have lost the chance to share with you how I longed to feel safe by your side I craved for your love when you were deep in your thoughts.

I missed the words that you never spoke, the apology that you never gave, the relationship that we never had.

I have spent my life running away from you all the while desiring to understand you.

your faith, your thoughts, and your actions Now that you are gone, I can only cling to the hope that perhaps in your own way, you indeed did love me.

*V'yekbaru o'to yikzhak v'yishmael banav...*and they buried him, Isaac and Ishmael, his sons. Perhaps this was the best that they could expect from

Abraham in dealing with the emotional trauma that they experienced ...simply by being called his sons in the same breath.

What do we take away from this? How do we learn to move forward? We do so by viewing Teshuvah in a more wholistic manner. Constructing a life so that the hurt won't be repeated is the challenge of teshuvah. Even as we live with the scars of old pain, we can create families of our own, or extended families of friends. We can make sure that we don't repeat the sins of our fathers and our mothers or brothers and sisters, by getting the help we need to break the destructive patterns of behaviors. Recognizing and accepting our legacy and acknowledging that we don't have to perpetuate the pain of the past is a constructive way of viewing Teshuvah.

Contrary to the psychological definition that was stated previously, Teshuvah does not have to mean forgiving and forgetting; it can mean moving on with life. It can mean being healthier. It can mean we choose life today rather than the anguish of yesterday, even though we do not forget the scars we bare for a moment.

The woman from the plane, finished her story with these words.... "In burying dad, I will always be haunted by the what ifs and the I should haves...I realize all I can do now is to live my life with the hope that I won't have made the same mistakes with my own children"

Midrash teaches that when God looks over the books of life and death on the day of judgment, that the pages of our lives are written in our own handwriting

through the choices that we have made and the actions we have taken. We can write these pages not in spite of our lives' adversity, but because of it. During these aseret yameh Teshuvah, these ten days of repentance, may we each find the vigor to actively choose a life of peace, a life of goodness and life of blessing and play that hand in the Game of Life.

Kayn Yehe Ratzon- May it be God's will