

I Lift My Eyes to the Mountainsⁱ

A Sermon for Kol Nidre

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Shanah Tovah.

This summer, my husband David and I visited the Smokies. Our resort was on a steep mountain road. Our first morning there, I decided to briskly hike up that road to see what I could see. The first thing I “saw” was I wasn’t as fit as I thought. As I stopped to catch my breath, I lifted my eyes and saw the lush peaks of Smoky National Park before me. The words of Psalm 121 sprung to mind: *Esa einay el haharim... “I lift my eyes to the mountains, from whence comes my help? My help comes from the Lord, Creator of heaven and earth.”*ⁱⁱ

These words have comforted and strengthened countless generations with the promise that nothing is beyond the power of the One who created heaven and earth, certainly not the help so desperately sought.

But what if the help we pray for does *not* come? What do we tell ourselves, our children about the God we Jews believe in in a world in which too many bad things happen to too many good people?

These are good questions, timely, holy questions, questions our ancestors also asked after every destruction and persecution and in the face of personal tragedy. “If our help comes from the Lord, where was the Lord when we needed help?”

My friends, tonight I will not talk about the answers our great thinkers have offered over the centuries as to why there is evil and pain in the world. That is for another time. I will not speak about how extremists who do unspeakable harm in God’s name do not speak for God. I spoke about that on Rosh Hashanah when I shared four sets of our People’s stories about Father Abraham, one of which teaches us that God rejects religious extremism.

Tonight, I will share with you four other sets of our People’s stories, about the children, grandchildren and greatgrandchildren of Father Abraham, and those who emulate them, to explore where we may find God when we lift up our eyes to the mountains seeking help.

The first story opens as Mother Rebecca struggles with a difficult pregnancy. At wit’s end, she goes to inquire of the Lord. The Lord answers her: *Two nations are in your womb... one shall be mightier than the other and the older shall serve the younger.*ⁱⁱⁱ

The Torah does not tell us God healed Rebecca or lessened her pain. All we know is she has two healthy boys and the elder, Esau, is “mightier,” stronger, than the younger, Jacob.

One day, Esau returns home famished. He demands Jacob give him some of the stew Jacob is cooking. Jacob replies he will do so only if Esau swears to trade him his birthright.^{iv} It is an absurd deal. Was Jacob trying to get Esau off his back? We don’t know. We do know that Esau demands immediate gratification regardless the cost and trades his priceless birthright for a bowl of stew.

Rebecca’s husband, Isaac, is blind to Esau’s faults. Esau is the first born and thus the birthright, and with it tribal leadership, goes to him, period. But Rebecca sees clearly that Esau’s temperament is not conducive to the responsibilities of leadership. Esau is impulsive. He is a bully. He speaks without regard for the consequences of his words. Words have power and

words rashly offered cannot always be taken back. Though she loves Esau, though he is her first born, Rebecca knows she must do everything she can to ensure that Esau does not become Isaac's heir. And she does. Because women of her time have no authority in the family, she resorts to subterfuge, helping Jacob trick his father into giving him the first born blessing.

When Mother Rebecca lifted up her eyes for help all those years ago, God provided help, just not the kind of help she was looking for. God did not heal her. God comforted her with the knowledge that both her sons would thrive. God gave her the strength to do what needed to be done under painfully difficult conditions. And God opened her eyes so she would see each of her sons clearly, though the import of that help would not become clear until many years later.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, in *Nine Essential Things I've Learned About Life*, writes, "When our son... was one..., he stopped growing and stopped gaining weight. When he was three, his problem was diagnosed as progeria, the rapid aging syndrome. He lived until the day after his fourteenth birthday... Had I believed for one hour that God had chosen our son for this ordeal for whatever reason – to punish me for some long forgotten offense, to inspire others with our example of fortitude – I would have... never opened a prayer book or entered a synagogue again rather than pay homage to that God. Instead, I was able to see God ... as the source of our ability to cope..., to love and ... comfort..., to enjoy and ultimately to grieve for a very special child..."

"The miracle we prayed for was that modern medicine would come up with a cure for progeria... The miracle we got was a son who dealt bravely with an unfixable situation ... Rarely evincing self-pity, Aaron was bright, funny, feisty, kind... Where does an afflicted ... boy get all that courage and kindness from? I believe that was God doing for Aaron what He [*sic*] does for so many of His [*sic*] creatures in their hour of need."^v

When we lift our eyes to the mountain, the help we seek is not necessarily the help we get. That doesn't mean God isn't listening. And it doesn't mean God isn't answering. Sometimes the help we get is a clarity of vision to see what we need to do and to appreciate the blessings we receive even amidst tragedy. Sometimes the help we get is the strength to bear each day with wisdom and grace under unspeakably difficult, heartbreaking circumstances. Sometimes, we don't recognize the help we get until many years later.

This is what we learn from two stories about Rebecca's son Jacob.

The first story sees Jacob fleeing for his life after Esau realizes Jacob stole his birthright. That first night, Jacob finds himself alone, fearful of what the future may bring. He falls asleep and dreams of angels. Then God appears beside him and promises to be with him on his journeys and eventually bring him home. When Jacob wakes, he swears, "*If You return me safely to my father's house, You will be my God, and I will give you a tenth of what I own.*"^{vi}

At some point, haven't we all had such a Jacob moment, bargaining with God for something we desperately desire?

I taught a student many years ago in Religious School in Brooklyn. She was well behaved, attentive, a perfect student. At the end of the year, she surprised me by telling me she did not believe in God. When I asked her why, she explained her parents were getting divorced. She had promised God she would be a perfect student if only God would bring her parents back together again. She had kept her part of the bargain but her parents were still getting divorced. To her, that meant that God did not exist, otherwise God would have kept God's part of the bargain.

Like young Jacob or my student, we may also bargain with God in an effort to exert some control over what we have little or no control over. We feel betrayed when we fulfill our part of

the bargain but God doesn't, though that God never agreed to the deal. In our anger and pain we, too, may decide that God either doesn't exist or is not worth believing in.

The problem is that God is not an internet site, automatically delivering what we order when we click "submit payment." Tomorrow we will pray that *tefillah*, *teshuvah*, *tzedakah* -- prayer, repentance, and charity -- avert the severity of the decree. It is easy to misinterpret God's prescription for building a meaningful life as a way to bargain with God to get what we feel we need or deserve. It is easy to misinterpret the blessings and curses in the Torah as a list of *quid pro quo* rewards and punishments. But that is not how most of Jewish history, most rabbis throughout history, read these texts or understood the kind of relationship we have -- or can have -- with God. As Rabbi Kushner is fond of saying, "Tell me about the God you don't believe in. Maybe it is the same one I don't believe in."^{vii}

I hope as my student grew up, she was able to forgive God for not fulfilling her expectations of what God should be like and forgive herself for taking on the burden of trying to save her parents' relationship. I hope that as she matured, she gained a greater perspective of how God answers our prayers and thus of the kind of prayers that are most helpful. I am hopeful for her because this is how Jacob matured.

An older Jacob again finds himself alone and frightened at night. His brother Esau is coming to meet him with 400 men. He fears for his life and the lives of his family. He prays to God, "I am unworthy of all the kindness you have shown me. I left with nothing but my staff in my hand and now I return with enough people and property to create two camps. Deliver me from my brother..."^{viii}

This is a very different prayer than the one Jacob prayed as a young man.^{ix} Jacob makes no bargains. He is humble and thankful that God has been with him through every trouble he has faced. Jacob's prayer reminds me of a sign I once saw in a hospital operating room, "There is nothing you and God cannot get through, together." Jacob is confident, not in the outcome of his meeting with his estranged and possibly bloodthirsty, brother but that, whatever the next day brings, he will be able to get through it with God's help.

The Dutch Holocaust survivor, Jack Polak, of blessed memory, tells this story about Yom Kippur, 1944, in Bergen Belsen. He was working in the kitchen when the man in charge, a rotten man hanged after the war as a war criminal, came in and demanded, "Who is fasting?" Three young men stepped forward and said, "We are fasting." Would he beat them? Kill them? What did he do? He gave them food and told them to return to their barracks and pray.

Jack writes, "Here you have ...divine intervention in the middle of the most unbelievable horror... when you are a witness to what happened on Yom Kippur in Bergen-Belsen, you find out that God's presence has nothing to do with anything practical. Being open to the possibility that God does watch over us, that he [sic] does intervene in our lives, can only make life easier for people, and this was true in the concentration camps. It seemed to me that people who had faith died more peaceful deaths than those who did not. Those of us in the camps who put our faith in God felt we had something to live for."^x

When we lift our eyes in search of help, sometimes the help we receive is courage driven by the knowledge that, with God's help, we can get through whatever comes, however frightening or horrific.

This leads us to our fourth story, about Jacob's great, great grandchildren, the children of Israel enslaved in Egypt. They lifted their eyes and cried for help. What did God do? God did not

transport them directly out of Egypt. God sent them Moses with a staff in his hand. Why? Perhaps to teach the Israelites, and us, that one of the ways God answers our prayers is by sending us people who can help us through what we could never bear alone.

Listen to this letter that Peter DeMarco wrote to the ICU staff who treated his 34 year old wife for seven days before she died of a devastating asthma attack:

“...How would I have found the strength to have made it through that week without you? How many times did you walk into the room to find me sobbing...and quietly go about your task, as if willing yourselves invisible? How many times did you help me set up the recliner as close as possible to her bedside, crawling into the mess of wires and tubes around her bed in order to swing her forward just a few feet? How many times did you check in on me to see whether I needed anything, from food to drink...to...a better explanation of a medical procedure, or just someone to talk to? How many times did you hug me and console me when I fell to pieces, or ask about Laura’s life and the person she was, taking the time to look at her photos or read the things I’d written about her? How many times did you deliver bad news with compassionate words, and sadness in your eyes?...

“On the final day... all I wanted was to be alone with her... I was emotionally and physically exhausted, in need of a nap. So I asked her nurses. Donna and Jen, if they could help me set up the recliner...next to Laura again. They had a better idea. They asked me to leave the room for a moment, and when I returned, they had shifted Laura to the right side of her bed, leaving just enough room for me to crawl in with her one last time...I nestled my body against hers. She looked so beautiful, and I told her so, stroking her hair and face. ...I...laid my head on her chest, feeling it rise and fall with each breath, her heartbeat in my ear. It was our last tender moment as a husband and a wife, and it was more natural and pure and comforting than anything I’ve ever felt. And then I fell asleep. I will remember that last hour together for the rest of my life. It was a gift beyond gifts, and I have Donna and Jen to thank for it. Really, I have all of you to thank for it. With my eternal gratitude and love, Peter DeMarco.”^{xi}

Just as God sent the Israelites the help they needed in the form of Moses, God sent Peter DeMarco the help he needed, in the form of the countless doctors, nurses and hospital staff, who helped him bear the unbearable.

My friends, we are God’s hands. Each of us can help someone else in some way. Our Sages understood this, which is why they decreed that at least nine other people surround and support a mourner. I am sad to say that not enough of us are helping our mourners. It would be a great kindness if you can come once a week, once a month for this 15-minute service, any Sunday at 7:15 pm or Monday to Thursday at 7:30 pm. Bring your kids. Show them that this is also how we find God, by fulfilling God’s request of us to be the supportive presence of kindness for others. [*Help Beth Shalom's mourners.*](#)

Tonight is Yom Kippur. Despite our questions, about life, about God, our hearts are filled with prayers, for ourselves, for our loved ones, and for the world on this holy night. We do not know what tomorrow may bring. We only know that the stories of our People teach us that when we are fearful or confused, when we do not know how we can bear the unbearable, when we lift our eyes to the mountains seeking help, God sends us help. It may not be the help we ask for. Often it is not. But it just may be the help we need: strength, clarity of vision, courage, other

helping hands, and the spark of compassion that motivates us to see beyond ourselves to help others, all of which helps us cope in ways we never thought we could.

So let us sing the words of the psalm together, as we pray for God's help in the coming year, for us, for those we love, and for the world. The words are found on the little prayer card placed on your seat this evening. This card is a gift. Please take it with you after services. Use it when you need strength or clarity. Pass it on to someone who needs help. Let us sing together:

Esah einay el haharim may-i-in, may-i-in yavo ezri.
Esah einay el haharim may-i-in, may-i-in yavo ezri
Ezri me-im Adonai Oseh shamayim v'aretz
Ezri me-im Adonai Oseh shamayim v'aretz

Esah einay el haharim may-i-in may-i-in yavo ezri.
Esah einay el haharim may-i-in may-i-in yavo ezri
Ezri me-im Adonai Oseh shamayim v'aretz
Ezri me-im Adonai Oseh shamayim v'aretz

In the coming year, when we lift our eyes to the mountains, may we know we are not alone, for our help comes from the Lord, and thus there is nothing we cannot get through, together. And let us say, Amen.

Shanah Tovah.

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ⁱⁱ Psalm 121: 1-2.

ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 25:19-23.

^{iv} Gen. 25:27-34.

^v Harold Kushner, *Nine Essential Things I've Learned About Life*, 45-47.

^{vi} Genesis 12-22.

^{vii} Rabbi Kushner credits having learned this from the Protestant preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick who, in speaking to his young congregants, would say, "Tell me about this God you don't believe in. Maybe it is the same one I don't believe in. Maybe together we can find an understanding of God we can both believe in." Kushner, 18.

^{viii} Genesis 32:10-13.

^{ix} My appreciation to Rabbi Jack Reimer, in "How a Grown Up Prays," for pointing out a contrast between Jacob's two prayers. Rabbi Reimer credits Rabbi Kushner as the original source for the observations about the differences between Jacob's two prayers.

^x Jack Polak in *Inspired: The Breath of God* by Joanna Laufer and Kenneth Lewis: 192-3.

^{xi} Peter DeMarco, "A Letter to the Doctors and Nurses Who Cared for My Wife." *New York Times* (Oct. 6, 2016) <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/06/well/live/a-letter-to-the-doctors-and-nurses-who-cared-for-my-wife.html?smprod=nytcare-ipad&smid=nytcare-ipad-share&r=0> (Accessed Oct. 9, 2016.)