

“Sweeter than Honey”

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Psalm 19:7-11

Close your eyes for a moment, if you will, and imagine a long, curly, ram’s horn—a *shofar*. Picture someone holding it up to their lips and blowing. Hard. The sound that comes out is like a long, low note on a trumpet, resonant with invitation and promise. Hear it with your imagination and let it reverberate with your heart...

OK, you can open your eyes now. I’ve always been a little envious of our Jewish sisters and brothers. They do the ritual thing really well. We Christians could learn a few things.

Tonight is New Year’s Eve for Jews. This night of the new moon marks the beginning of the Jewish year and of a month of commemoration and ritual. Next Sunday we’ll look a bit at Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. And the following Sunday Missy will help our young ones explore Sukkot, making connections between this Festival of Shelters—a remembrance of the Jews’ time of wandering in the wilderness—and our own remembrance of those among us who lack homes and the food they need.

Rosh Hashanah, which starts tonight at sundown, is considered the birthday of humanity, the anniversary of God’s creation of human beings. (I sometimes wonder if God has had second thoughts.) *Rosh* means “head,” or “top.” And the root of *shanah* means “change” or “repetition.”

Those two words, *change* and *repetition*, seem at first glance to be in opposition to each other. But Rabbi Arthur Waskow, co-founder of the Shalom Center in Philadelphia, explains that life is like a spiral. As each year comes around, it brings a repetition of rituals—and also a hope for change—and prayers for getting it right this time as we seek to follow the law of Love and live in peace with one another.

On this day, many Jews observe the ceremony of *Tashlich*. They go to rivers or lakes, where they spread bread crumbs on the water or throw pebbles: symbols of the sins and burdens of the previous year that they want to release. Assured of God’s grace, they open themselves to the newness that another year will bring.

The turning of a year is a time to release what needs to be released, and to embrace what needs to be embraced. It is a moment for turning back to God’s ways of love and for sharing blessing. Our Jewish brothers and sisters offer this blessing to one another on this day: “May you be inscribed and sealed for a good year, and for a good and peaceful life. Amen.”

They often share special foods—especially apple slices dipped in honey. This is to assure a sweet new year. On this day, the braided challah bread is shaped into a ball, to resemble a crown, reminding partakers that today we celebrate the head of the year. Often a little extra honey and some raisins are baked in, another dose of sweetness for a sweet year.

The honey is also a reminder of the words from Psalm 19, which we heard tonight as our Call to Worship. Hear them once more, and ponder them—close your eyes again if you want—as I read them slowly:

The law of Love is perfect, reviving the soul.

The testimony of Love is sure, making wise the simple.

The precepts of Love are right, rejoicing the heart.

The authority of Love is pure, enlightening the eyes.

The spirit of Love is wondrous, enduring forever.

The rites of Love are true, awakening compassion.

More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold.

Sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.

By them the loving are alerted.

In keeping them there is great reward.

We inhabit a culture that loves the fad, the ever-new, the next great thing. We cherish freedom—and money. So the idea that following traditions and disciplines could be better than gold and sweeter than honey is challenging to our minds and hearts. But, “in keeping them there is great reward,” the psalmist promises us.

What are the traditions and disciplines that resonate with your heart and inspire your faith? Have you slowed down enough to know? Could this turning of another year, and the arrival of the first cool breezes of a new season, be an invitation to pull our spirits in from the high activity of summer and settle in to some new rhythms of focus, prayer, and listening?

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I had a vague notion before yesterday about the *shofar* announcing the joy of a new year. But I did not know, until I read some of Rabbi Waskow's musings on it, that the blowing of the ram's horn is also intended to be a reminder of "the cry of the mother of Sisera." I had to consult the fourth chapter of the biblical book of Judges to find the story, a disturbing tale of political intrigue, deception, and murder.

Sisera was the general of an enemy army, who commanded nine hundred iron chariots and had cruelly oppressed the Jews for twenty years. Deborah was a Jewish judge and prophet, who sat under a palm tree where she was visited often by people who desired a wise arbiter for their arguments and troubles.

Deborah spoke to the commander of the Jewish army, a somewhat less-than-courageous man named Barak. She told him that she would stealthily draw out Sisera and then turn him over to Barak. Barak's response was: "If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go." Now, there's a nice turn of the tables: the army man needs the courage of the wise woman judge.

Well, it's actually a pretty gruesome story. Sisera's army gets thrown into a panic, and the general flees on foot to Jael, a woman he believes will protect him. She hides him under a rug. And just when he thinks he's safe...well, she takes a tent peg and drives it with a hammer through his skull while he's sleeping off the battle.

The fifth chapter of Judges opens with the "Song of Deborah." It's a celebration of triumph in war and of the ghastly death of Sisera—the kind of thing that makes me cringe when it appears in our Holy Scriptures. But it ends in a most unexpected way:

*Out of the window she peered,
The mother of Sisera gazed through the lattice:
"Why is his chariot so long in coming?
Why tarry the hoofbeats of his chariots?"*

She comforts herself by deciding that Sisera just got waylaid with dividing up the spoils—"a girl or two for every man...two pieces of dyed work embroidered for my neck." So, I don't really like this woman, who seems callous and selfish on the topic of spoils of war. But, I feel sympathy for her as a mother who is looking out longingly—and is about to discover the depth of her loss and her grief.

I find it truly amazing that the sounding of the *shofar* is intended to remind Jews of this obscure and nameless figure in history, the mother of Sisera. What a beautiful gesture of reconciliation. It carries this sentiment: Let us remember, sisters and brothers, that one people's triumph almost always means another's grievous suffering, if not demise. Might nations act differently if we remembered that every general is a mother's son?

I also find it rather amazing that Rosh Hashanah inserts itself into our world just as we have remembered again the tragedy of 9/11—and as Muslims erupt in anger over an offensive, hateful film, and an attack in Libya takes the lives of a U.S. ambassador and others. Once again the mobs come forth, and the politicians promise revenge, and the generals drag out the chariots—and the bombs. And there is no end in sight.

Today is also the first anniversary of the Occupy movement. Rabbi Waskow and others issued a call for Occupy Rosh Hashanah, with demonstrations going on at this moment in New York City and the San Francisco Bay area. Those who are gathering are seeking personal and social transformation, more integrity from our banks and corporations and as individuals in money matters, and greater care for the

earth. They are borrowing a phrase from Jewish philosopher Rabbi Abraham Heschel: “My legs are praying.”

On this eve of the new year, Jews are reminded to turn toward and embrace two central commitments: *tshuvah*, or loving-kindness, and *tikkun*, or healing that which is broken. So very much in our world is broken. And only loving-kindness will fix it. The endless spirals of vengeance and counter-vengeance, the rattling of swords, the vilification of those named “enemy” will get us nowhere.

Remember the cry of the mother of Sisera. Remember the pain of one labeled “other.” Remember her humanity. It’s the only way forward.

Thankfully—and stunningly—there are those in the Middle East on both sides of that conflict who have taken this message to heart. United Hatzalah is an emergency medical service in Jerusalem that was run by Orthodox Jews for more than fifteen years. Its members observed that state ambulances were always very slow to respond to calls in East Jerusalem, the Arab sector of the holy city. Entering that part requires a military escort, and, according to one paramedic, during the time it takes to wait for one, “a patient can pass away ten times.”

In 2010 United Hatzalah decided to employ Arab paramedics. It’s an odd sight, observers say, to see Arabs wearing orange vests bearing the red Star of David, working alongside ultra-Orthodox Jews. Volunteer paramedics have also joined the effort, including a Jewish fish merchant and a mosque security guard. “Saving lives is a religious act for me,” says Fadi, one of a hundred Muslims who have volunteered. He got involved after a friend died for lack of medical care. “Forget all the politics and the mess,” he says. “A person needs to live.” As a result of these courageous souls who have crossed boundaries that others will not, hundreds of lives have been saved.

Bereaved Families for Peace, also known as the Parents Circle-Families Forum, was formed in 1995 by Israeli families in Jerusalem and Palestinian families in Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem that have lost loved ones in the conflict. Their hope-drenched efforts include Dialogue Meetings that reach 25,000 students every year, introducing young Israelis and Palestinians to one another so that they can exchange their stories.

Another of the group’s projects is “Fabric of War,” a traveling exhibition created by Palestinian and Israeli women from materials associated with their killed loved ones. And the members have established a phone line called “Hello, Shalom, Hello, Salaam.” When you call, if you want to talk with an Israeli about peace, you push one; if you want to talk with a Palestinian, you push two. More than a million people have called the line.

This morning on the radio program *On Being*, Krista Tippett interviewed Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain and the author of the book *The Dignity of Difference*. He stated that we must learn to cultivate our own deepest truths while finding God in the “other.” The strongest antidote to violence, he said, is conversation: “Feeling the pain of others is the beginning of reconciliation.” In this era of political bickering and religious rancor, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, he warned, “We must love one another or die.”

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Our own Ken Sehested has faithfully issued the call for sharing our truths across boundaries, including in *Peace Primer*, the most recent edition of which he created with Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb and Rabia Terri Harris of the Muslim Peace Fellowship, who has been here in our pulpit. “The purpose of interfaith conversation,” they wrote, “is not to have exotic friends or engage in literate conversation at dinner parties. The purpose of crossing these boundaries is to affirm the God of Creation, the God of Humanity, in the face of rampant efforts to debase both creation and humanity—efforts that are generally defended with reference to some divinized ‘greater good.’”

Friends, as the sun creeps lower, and the new year descends upon us, may sweetness like honey anoint you. “May you be inscribed and sealed for a good year, and for a good and peaceful life.” And may you remember these words of Rabbi Sacks: “Religion warms, but it also burns. And we are the guardians of the flame.”

Amen.