

Rosh Hashanah - Day 1 - Epstein

A few months ago, I received an interesting call from a colleague in Argentina. He asked if I would help convert the daughter of one of his congregants, once the baby was born to a surrogate mother here in Boston. Seeing as conversions are one of my favorite parts of being a rabbi, I said yes without giving it much thought. This would, I figured, be a fairly routine conversion, and a nice favor I could do for a fellow rabbi. What I was not expecting was to still be thinking about it months later.

Perhaps more than any other Jewish lifecycle event, conversions resonate with me on an emotional level. If the person converting is an adult, the transition marks the end of a long period of thoughtful preparation, deep soul-searching, and a vulnerable foray into the liminal space between insider and outsider of a community. For some, this journey takes decades; for others, it is only a few years. Being fortunate enough to accompany someone through their final steps of this journey, shepherding them through the change from “not Jewish” to being counted as part of a minyan, is a blessing and a privilege.

If the person converting is a child, though, I feel doubly blessed to witness the conversion. As a rabbi, I am honored to help the parents give their child the great gift of Jewish tradition, legacy, community, and spirituality. And as someone who revels in those particular aspects of Judaism, I am delighted to witness a child accept that gift and begin to make it his or her own.

So it's obvious that, when asked to participate in the conversion of a newborn, I was ecstatic. In my email exchanges with the father-to-be, Alejandro (Alex for short), we stumbled over the language barrier, worried about whether a newborn baby is too young to immerse, and discussed details such as who would go in the water with his daughter. At times I felt like I was more diplomat than spiritual guide, as I shuttled between the doctor, father, and Mikveh representative to complete the arrangements. Finally, after seemingly endless back-and-forth, we had a date and a Beit Din.

Feeling nervous about my first time converting a newborn and my limitations with Spanish, I turned the facilitation of the afternoon over to my very talented Spanish-speaking colleague from TBZ, Rav Claudia. As we sat in Mayyim Hayyim's conference room, she asked Alex to tell us about himself and his Judaism; she translated, occasionally getting so caught up in his story that she would forget that to relay his words. Alex shared stories about growing up Jewish in Argentina,

working hard with the gay Jewish community to fight for the rights of same-sex couples, and told us of his desire to raise his daughter with the same Jewish pride and connection that his parents gave him. Eventually we explained the process of immersion with a baby and he left to prepare.

We next saw Alex standing outside the mikveh, in a bathing suit, holding his naked three-week-old daughter; both were the epitome of cool, waiting patiently, eyes open wide, with daughter quiet and content in her father's arms.

As they descended the stairs into the water, my heart rate picked up; although I had been told that this was the best age for babies to be immersed, I was certain something would go wrong. Alex did exactly what he was told to do: he played around in the warm water with the baby for a few minutes to acclimate her, immersing her up to her shoulders while crouching down to be at eye-level with her.

Then, with just a nod of his head to us, he blew in her face. Instinctively, she shut her eyes and closed her mouth --- and he let go. Three-week-old baby Emma sank under the water.

In one swift motion, he scooped her back up, hugged her to his chest, and recited the *bracha*.

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו על הטבילה.

Blessed are You, Adonai, Ruler of the Universe, Who has sanctified us with the mitzvot and commanded us concerning immersion.

Moments later, he again lowered her in the water up to her shoulders, blew in her face, and let her go. Catching her before she fell too deep in the water, he gathered her back up and said another blessing. By the time he finished dunking her a third time, the entire room of observers was ready to say a very tearful “amen” to his heartfelt *Shehechyanu*.

Truth be told, I think I had a harder time watching this than the baby did experiencing it. She didn't start to cry until she was out of the water and was cold and wet; everyone else in the room, however, had tears streaming down their faces from the first dunk. The immersions went so perfectly, the Mikveh director commented that she wished she had a video camera in order to show others how it should be done.

After hugging and kissing everyone present, Alex and Emma left to get dressed. As I stood in the lobby, still feeling a high from creating a new Jew, it occurred to me: we had just witnessed a modern retelling of the Rosh Hashanah Torah readings.

Like Abraham, Alex was a man told by his religious authority figures קה-נא אַת-בְּנֵךְ - to take his precious daughter, his beloved only child, into the water... and to let go. By doing this, he was promised, he would ensure that Judaism would live on into the next generations, through his descendents. And with the calmness of Abraham he followed instructions - and all turned out as promised.

It takes immense faith to drop your 3-week-old child in a pool of water; to believe with your whole heart that God and the Jewish tradition have your child's best interests at heart. Rationally, it is easy to say that we've been doing immersions in *mikva'ot* for thousands of years, therefore the system works. But when the time comes to let go - to physically *drop* your child into four feet of water - thousands of years of history and faith are not always enough to overcome logic and fear. Fortunately, tradition won out - and now Alex has a beautiful *Jewish* daughter.

My first time immersing at Mayyim Hayyim was a few days before my wedding. The trip marked not only my transition from fiancée to wife, but also from planning and anticipating the wedding to being present and allowing myself to celebrate the weekend, moment by moment, and to ensure it didn't go by in a blur.

I visited the mikvah yesterday morning for the same reason. My pre-Rosh Hashanah immersion marked the end of my preparations for the High Holy Days and the beginning of my celebration of the holiday. It has allowed me to focus on beginning this new year with intention - being here, now, with you, marking Rosh Hashanah, instead of worrying about what didn't get done. And the ritual allowed me to mentally transition from thinking about the holidays only as a rabbi - whose job it is to help others experience the Days of Awe - to allowing myself to experience them with the excitement and trepidation of anyone pleading her case before God.

For me, the mikvah is a holy place - a sacred space. The experience - from the moment I approach the building until I return to my car - is calm and inviting, nurturing and inspiring. Mayyim Hayyim took great care to make sure that the building, its staff, and most of all, the mikvah itself all offer a space to heal from sadness, to mark transitions, and to celebrate new beginnings.

In a middle school workshop on Mikveh, Lisa Berman, Mayyim Hayyim's education director, asked students to write a story from the perspective of the window that looks down upon people immersing in the water. One student suggested that the window takes pleasure in watching the transformation, or in the student's word, the "changingness" that happens with each immersion. Another student wrote that the window is honored to be trusted with people's secrets about their trauma and illness.

I imagine that the window, watching the joy, love, and faith surrounding Alex's daughter's immersion, would revel in the emotions in the room: gratitude towards God for this holy ritual, relief at the child's safe return from her submersion, and awe inspired by the tradition that baby Emma was entering.

I also imagine that the window might take note of the role that water plays in our lives. It grows us before we are born, sustains and nurtures us throughout our lives, and is part of the cleansing ritual after death. In Judaism, water plays an immense role in our ritual lives: we use water when we wash our hands before making *motzi* and when we leave a cemetery. Some people kasher their dishes by immersion in a mikvah. Later today, our Cohanim will ritually wash their hands with water before doing the Priestly Benediction during the repetition of the Amidah.

In our tradition, as in biology, water has always played an important role. At its most basic level, water is the basis of all life. It is also the one substance that the Torah tells us existed before God created the world. In the opening words of the Torah, we read:

בְּרֵאשִׁית, בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים, אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם, וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ.

1 When God began to create heaven and earth -

ב וְהָאָרֶץ, הִיְתָה תְהוֹ וְבִהוּ, וְחֹשֶׁךְ, עַל-פְּנֵי תְהוֹם; וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים, מְרַחֶפֶת עַל-פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם.

2 the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water.

The earth was unformed and void - but still, that there was water was a given. And we see this throughout the Torah; many stories reference, allude to, or center around water.

Each morning when we pray, we recount the ultimate redemptive water story in the Torah when we sing the words of Shirat HaYam, the song of the sea. As the Israelites fled beyond the Red Sea, they knew nothing of what their future held - only that they had survived slavery and the dangerous journey. The passage through the Red Sea was a mikveh of sorts for the Children of Israel; marking their transition from individual slaves to a collective people. Together they brought their

hopes for the future into the water, and as they passed through, their dreams became their present reality.

There were many reactions to this miracle. Midrash tells us that Reuven and Shimon, who were oblivious to the miracle taking place, crossed the Red Sea noticing only the mud on the ground. Other Israelites took the opportunity to praise God with song for their safe passage through the dangerous crossing - Shirat HaYam. For those people, the waters served as mikvah, cleansing and purifying, while marking the transition and readying them for the next stage in their journey. For Reuven and Shimon, the water all around them merely created mud; same water, drastically different experience. Reuven and Shimon's lack of preparation, their lack of awareness of the moment, caused them to miss the transformation entirely.

The role water plays in today's Torah reading is subtle - but crucial. When Abraham sends his handmaid Hagar and their son Ishmael into the wilderness, he sends them with only bread and a skin of water to sustain them. Distraught and convinced of their impending death, Hagar leaves her child for dead, sits down, and cries. However, God speaks to her, telling her that both she and Ishmael will live, and וַיִּפְקַח אֱלֹהִים אֶת-עֵינֶיהָ, וַתֵּרָא בְּאֵר מַיִם - God opens her eyes so that she sees a well of water. It's important to note that God did not *place* a well there for her, but

merely allowed her to see the water that was already there. God helped Hagar do what Shimon and Reuven could not do for themselves - see the miracle in front of their eyes.

Midrash, in fact, tells us that *all* people are blind until God opens their eyes.

Sometimes the situation is so dire that when God does help us see, God literally gives life - such is the case with Hagar. At other times, we are content in our bubble and God opens our eyes by giving us the opportunity to witness deep faith in action. No matter the situation, we leave feeling touched by God, lingering in the moment a bit longer than usual.

When Hagar loses her way in the wilderness, she is naturally distraught and leaves her child תחת אֶחָד הַשִּׁיקָהּ - *under a bush*. Without fully processing the scene, she wanders away so as not to watch her son die from lack of water.

When God opens her eyes to see the well of water, *we* know - as observers - that the water must have been there all along - because Hagar placed Ishmael *beneath a bush*. Of course, we think, vegetation does not grow without water - so there must have been water nearby. But in her despair, Hagar was blind to the life-saving resource right in front of her.

Rosh Hashanah is a time to ask: what have we been blind to in our lives? What wells have we been missing? In what parts of our lives are we so overcome by fear that we cannot see the well even if it is right in front of us?

It is a radical decision that, in making this the first parasha of the year, our rabbis chose to elevate Hagar's story above others. Today's Torah reading could have been the beginning of Genesis seeing as Rosh Hashanah celebrates the creation of the world. But that's not what the rabbis chose. This is because Hagar's story can serve as comfort and inspiration when the pain and difficulty of our own lives seem too overwhelming, and it feels seems impossible to take the next step. In making this decision, our sages' message is: there are always unseen possibilities right before our eyes, if only we look for them.

Rabbi Alan Lew is the author of “This is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared.” He reacts to a story similar to Hagar’s by saying that the present moment:

is the only place we experience ourselves as being alive, the only place we experience our lives at all ... The focus on the path, on the process of life, rather than on some goal or end that exists beyond the present-tense reality of our lives - this is the answer God [provides]. [We need] to inhabit [our own lives], not dwell on the “what if’s” or “should-have-been’s”. Being present is the only way to live life to its fullest.

In Hagar’s confusion and anxiety, she could not live in the moment - it was simply too much. We recite her story today to demonstrate the possibilities of what could be, if we are able to uncloud our vision and be fully present, living without fear, truly in the present.

Our haftarah is a different angle of the same message.

The well-known part of today’s Haftarah is the story of Hannah praying for a child. Childless and devastated, she goes to the Temple to pray; there, Eli the priest sees her lips moving and no sound coming out, so he assumes she’s drunk. She corrects him, saying that she’s not drunk, she’s merely longing for a child. At Eli’s urging,

Hannah prays - and before long, her prayers are answered: Hannah and her husband have a son. It's easy to remember this part of the story; what comes afterwards is less memorable, but perhaps more important. The last ten lines of today's haftarah are a poem sung by Hannah; after her prayers were answered, after receiving a child, she stayed in the moment and sang her thanks to God.

Hannah's story reinforces the importance of dwelling in the moment. Upon receiving a gift that we had longed for, many of us would joyously engage with it, thinking ahead to the future and leaving behind the frustration of hoping, waiting, and praying for it. Not Hannah; she lives in the moment, singing her elation and thanks to God, sanctifying the moment by bathing it in praise.

I invite you to try the same during musaf. Close your eyes, sing or hum along, and lose yourself in the moment, feeling yourself connect to God and the community around you. Sometimes the songs have words that we find in our siddurim or machzorim. Other times, they are niggunim, wordless melodies.

Hannah came to Shilo yearly to make offerings with her family before finally deciding to petition God. I don't know why Hannah picked that particular year to start praying, instead of standing on the sidelines as she had done every other year.

Something in her shifted, she felt empowered to change her situation, and she prayed. Each year leading up to that moment was merely a trial run.

Today is Rosh Hashanah; like Hannah, we have been preparing for today for a long time. Practice time is over; the moment is here. Today we lose ourselves in song, praising God. When Hannah finally approached God, she got great results; what will happen when we do the same?

Between now and the water-filled Yom Kippur haftarah of Jonah, water will play one more part in our Rosh Hashana experience. Later this afternoon, we will perform the ritual of *tashlich*, in which we toss our sins - in the form of pieces of bread - into a flowing body of water. In this way, we will free ourselves of these sins, watching as they are washed away. Standing on the edge of a transition - from one year to the next - we will honor the moment with the ritual of tashlich.

Much the same, forgiveness comes from washing away our hurt and anger. When we let go of whatever pain we have been holding onto, we allow ourselves to be fully present.

As a teenager, I spent my summers working on the waterfront of Camp Grossman. Over the years I watched many kids learn to swim and I noticed that some kids are practically fish, taking to water immediately with complete confidence that the it will hold them - or perhaps oblivious to the idea that it might not. Others have a hard time letting go; no matter how many times they are reassured that they won't sink, no matter how many "bubbles" or "floaties" they are wearing, their anxiety about the water makes swimming a struggle.

Faith and floating are based on the same principle: at some point, you've just got to let go and trust that God won't let you sink. Although humans are naturally buoyant, we have a tendency to get in our own way while trying to stay afloat. Allowing ourselves to float takes practice and patience.

That is the essence of Rosh Hashanah: the shofar calls us to be present and reminds us to strive for the connection with the Divine Spirit. Each Rosh Hashanah offers the opportunity to leave behind the past and fully live in the now.

This year, I invite you take advantage of that opportunity. Spend some time in the next few days thinking about your own liminal moments: what transitions are

happening around you... to you... *through* you. How often are you really in the moment, dwelling in the here and now and seeing what God has put in front of you?

Like Alex, who faithfully let go of his daughter in the mikveh; like Hagar, who ultimately saw the well in front of her eyes; like Hannah, whose prayers were answered when she finally put words to them; we too must accept that faith is like water and trust that when we let go, we will float.

Shana tova.