

Sermon by Rabbi Aviva Goldberg
Rosh Hashanah Day 2 (Tuesday, September 11, 2018)

Last evening, just before Eden Nameri was about to speak, I discussed the genre of story telling which she was presenting as her Erev Rosh Hashanah sermon. I mentioned the relationship we as Jews have to this form of discourse.

This morning, I would like to continue this train of thought. For though we as Jews are often called the people of the book, though text study is our heritage and to be literate, to be able to read, is essential to our culture – in fact story telling, repeating a tale orally *b'al peh* - literally as ‘masters of our mouths, is integral to our tradition. We regale our children and grandchildren with Torah tales from the books of Genesis and Exodus. We share with them and each other *aggadot* and *midrash*, legends and parables of the Talmud. We relish the Hassidic tales of the Baal Shem Tov and laugh and cry at the Yiddish folk stories of Shalom Aleichem; and today we carry on this tradition as we listen to the stories written and told by contemporary Jewish authors, humorist and story tellers – Alice Hoffman, Meg Wolitzer, Michael Chabon, Billy Chrystal, Mel Brooks, Judy Gold, Sara Silverman – to mention just a few.

What is it though that makes us so prolific as tellers of tales, weavers of words? How incredible is it that for a people who comprise less than .2 % of the world’s population 15 Jewish men and women were awarded the coveted Nobel prize for literature in the past 100 or so years. Is it that story telling is imbedded in the very cadence of our speech? Is it perhaps that it is a component of our shared DNA, of our very cellular structure? Or is it simply, that to laugh, to cry through stories is our attempt to heal, to make sense out of what is often both personally and publicly a senseless and random world.

And so, I come to that aspect of today’s service that we call healing. At our synagogue’s inception, over 20 years ago, the late Shelley Shira Duke took on the responsibility to bring to our second day service her understanding of Jewish healing. She offered us her unique mode of prayer, chanting, movement and meditation. And in one way or another as the years have progressed since her death, we have continued her legacy and opened this second day of Rosh Hashanah to healing. But each year as I prepare for

this service I ask myself what does it all mean. What is healing? How do we heal? How do we approach chronic illness, terminal illness, diseases that have no rhyme nor reason and little or no cure? What do we do as caregivers, as friends, as family, as those who are stricken by tragedy? What comfort does our tradition offer us?

Rather than giving you platitudes or pontificating, by citing a variety of rabbinic theologies that offer solace in a world to come for those who find no hope in this world here. Rather than giving you questionable statistics on how prayer has the power to heal the broken and the desperate. I offer you in keeping with our tradition, a story – well actually more than one story and actually, not even necessarily a complete story that has a conclusion. For what I am intending to do is a variation on the kinds of books my sons read when they were young adolescents. In the 1980's there was a series called *Choose Your own Adventure*, where the reader had a choice of a number of endings for the book they were reading. And my sons Daniel and Benjamin, would love these books. They could not wait to turn to page 45 for this ending or page 72 for another ending. There were even stories in which they themselves had the opportunity to be the protagonist and thus truly create their own endings.

And that is what I propose to do today. I will share with you a story from the Talmud, as it was written and then I will expand upon it, fill in the gaps, shall we say, and propose to you a couple of scenarios with which you, from your own perspectives, can choose the ending you prefer. No longer will you be merely a static audience, but rather you are now offered the opportunity to fully engage with the two scenarios you are being given and to make a choice.

In a section of Talmud Bavli, called *Ketubot* (104a) there is a short anecdote that goes as follows. The great Rabbi Yehuda Ha'Nasi was close to death. His students and other rabbis gathered around him, offering prayers for heavenly mercy, urging the Divine to allow him to live. His handmaiden, who cared for him deeply, ascended to the roof of the building they were in to pray in private for him. "Eternal One," she said, "the angels want Rabbi Yehuda to join them and the mortals desire him to remain with them. May it be your will that the mortals may overpower the immortals." Returning to his care she witnessed the great discomfort he was in, and how often he resorted to the privy, painfully taking off his *tefillin* (phylacteries) and putting them on again. Once again, she

ascended to the roof to pray in private, but this time her prayers were different. "May it be the will of the Almighty," she called out, "that the immortals who wish Rabbi Ha'nasi to be with them in heaven may overpower the mortals who wish him to remain on earth." As the great rabbis' students and peers continued their prayers, their voices rising in supplication begging the Eternal to prolong his life, the rabbi's handmaiden took up a jar that lay beside her and threw it down from the roof to the ground below, where it loudly shattered into pieces. For a split second there was stillness, the cacophony of prayers ceased and in that moment the soul of Rabbi Yehuda Ha'Nasi departed to its eternal rest.

And now to fill in the gaps. As you may have noticed, we do not even have a name for the hero of this story, so first let us give this handmaiden a name. Let us call her Adira Nechama, a name which means strength combined with compassion and as this is a healing tale and according to our tradition when a person is called up for a healing Aliyah in an Orthodox synagogue it is the only time they are referred to by their mother's first name as well as their fathers. Let us therefore honour our handmaiden by referring to her as Adira Nechama bat, daughter of, Rachel Leah v'Yitchak the names of two of our matriarchs and one of our patriarchs. As well, in this particular story we are told that Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi was close to death, but we are not really told anything more. Yes, there are many stories in the Talmud about this great rabbi, about his kindness, his knowledge, his relationship to his students and more. But, in fact, we are never told in this short piece the circumstances of his illness and more so, he is the silent presence in this tale. Nor are we told of the relationship between him and his handmaiden, or how he and she understood his illness, nor indeed what kind of illness he had. And so, with apologies to rabbis both classical and contemporary, I will now attempt with my own *aggadah*, my own narrative, to fill in the gaps of this story, to flesh out the characters, to expand and explain this event, so that perhaps we can more fully appreciate the significance of this tale.

My name is Adira Nechama bat Rachel Leah v'Yitzchak. I have been a part of Rabbi Yehudah's family for over two decades, not as his handmaiden but as his friend. In so many ways I want to tell you that you got the story wrong. Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi was not dying – physically that is – nor did I throw the jar from the roof in frustration at the

caterwauling cries of his friends and peers. I did not want to shock these friends into silence, though certainly I was tired of their constant intrusions. No, I threw the jar because what I wanted was to wake up Rabbi Yehuda. I wanted to force him from his bed. I wanted to tell him that life is still worth living – that sickness and death cannot alter the sun coming up in the morning and the star lit sky illuminating the night. It cannot alter friendship and love. I wanted to tell that though he had lost faith in an entity that would literally help him and his family, in fact it might be that his concept of this entity was wrong. I wanted him to see that the friends below us though annoying and cloying and sometimes thoughtless were in fact there for him. I wanted to tell him that he must somehow see that we can love our children unconditionally. We can give them our guidance. We can move obstacles out of their paths, but we cannot ultimately take their path as our own. That at a certain point they must take responsibility for their actions. And that at a certain point, no doctor, no soothsayer, no therapist, no tool of technology can cure them. Rabbi Yehuda is not physically dying – he has instead given up living. What, tell me, would you do?

My name is Adira Nechama bat Rachel Leah v'Yitchak. Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi is dying. He is my friend. His death is a slow process, but it would appear relatively painless at this point. I see his illness as it takes him slowly away from the living, from the healthy and I am amazed at his stoicism, his ability to get up each morning and keep on going. I do not know if it were me if I could face things as he does. I read once that there are five stages of grief not just for someone facing illness and death but for those who love them. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. I seem to have jumped over some of them and gotten stuck in others. Rabbi Yehuda is a unique man. He told me that I may want to say *tehillim*, psalms, not so much for him as for me. He told me that I may want to go to shul, not so much to pray as to be with community. He admitted to me that he too is grieving and angry and that these emotions come and go and he is letting them and not fighting them. He told me that grief, that illness, that death, are all natural, a part of living. He told me that coming to terms with this reality for some, takes a great deal of time. I am not as sophisticated, as emotionally healthy perhaps, as he. I throw things, I yell, I eat too much, I eat too little, but I am trying. Rabbi Yehuda is ill. Rabbi Yehuda is dying. He is my friend. What, tell me, would you do?