

## Erev Rosh Hashanah: Raise A Cup

Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom

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### Erev Rosh Hashanah 5782: Raise A Cup

“Jacob the Jew opened a coffee house... and there it was by some, who delighted in novelty, drank.”<sup>i</sup> The very first coffee shop in all of England was founded in Oxford in 1651 by a Lebanese Jew named Jacob. I can’t help but feel a little proud. England was a tea country of course, before the strange concoction of coffee arrived from the Middle East, and so, for the most part, it remains. It was in England, however, that I first started to drink coffee, as a graduate student desperate to stay awake in an afternoon seminar. My favourite spot, though was the *second* oldest coffee house in Oxford, founded in 1654 – just across the road from the first. Plus ça change, plus ça reste la meme.

I love the history of coffee: How it was first discovered by a goat herder in Yemen in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, who noticed his goats refused to sleep after eating berries off a shrub.<sup>ii</sup> How, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, coffee helped kabbalists stay up late, and inspired midnight vigils in both Judaism and Islam – because if you’re up anyway, why not pray? How in 19<sup>th</sup> century Western Europe, the price of a cup of coffee could get you a front seat to the meeting of minds and cultures in cafés. The story is told of how the foreign minister of Austria-Hungary “was warned that World War I might provoke a revolution... to which he replied, “And who will lead this revolution? Perhaps Mr. Bronshtein sitting at the Café Central?”<sup>iii</sup> As it happens, Mr. Bronshtein became better known as Leon Trotsky, and the answer was yes. I hope we don’t blame coffee for that.

For centuries, cafés have been places of both quiet camaraderie and passionate debate. You can change the world over a cup of coffee – and even write the occasional sermon. Last September, the word among rabbis was that you could download an app with the ambient noise of a coffee shop to help with inspiration. As you may have gathered, I miss it.

“But rabbi,” you may say, “cafes are open again! Show your vaccine passport and walk right in.” But I can’t. Or, perhaps more accurately, I choose not to. I have three kids in three different schools. Only one is old enough to be vaccinated. It

just doesn't feel worth the risk. So instead of writing sermons in the buzz of a café, my soundtrack this year has been Daniel Tiger's Neighbourhood, and Shelley and I take turns bringing each other coffee from the kitchen.

We have, at last count, 57 people sitting in our sanctuary, and many more at home. Each of us is making a different choice. Some of you have been counting the days until you could get back here; others decided at the last minute to come sit with strangers. Some may have wanted to be here, but decided at the last minute to stay home; others may have come to enjoy streaming services from the couch, perhaps with a cup of coffee in hand. At the beginning of the pandemic, it was often said that "we are all in the same boat." What has become increasingly clear is that yes, we are in the same storm – but we are in very different boats. Different boats based on whether or not we can work from home. Whether we have any financial buffer. Whether we have pre-existing conditions. Or kids. Or elders in care. How much some of us need social contact, and how much some of us fear it. For some, this has been an incredibly lonely time; others would give almost anything for an hour of solitude and quiet. Even two people in exactly the same situation can respond in different ways, steering their boats in opposite directions.

But whether online or in person, this is when we gather. Long before Jacob the Jew founded his coffee house, we have come together at this time to begin a new year. Two thousand years ago on Rosh Hashanah, we would go to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. But even then, we came in different ways:

כָּל הַנִּכְנְסִין לְהַר הַבַּיִת נִכְנְסִין דְּרָךְ יְמִין וּמִקִּיפִין יּוֹצְאִין דְּרָךְ שְׂמָאל, חוּץ מִמֵּי שְׂאֲרֵעוּ דְּבַר, שְׁהוּא  
מְקִיף לְשִׂמְאֵל

All who entered the Temple Mount entered by the right and went round, then went out by the left; save for one to whom something had happened, who entered and went round to the left.<sup>iv</sup>

We didn't just come to encounter God. We came to encounter each other. "One to whom something had happened" walks differently, in a way that invites notice. The Mishnah goes on to specify that this refers to mourners and heretics, people who have experienced a loss – but later, bridegrooms also are included, people who have reason for celebration.

Elsewhere, we are told that when King Solomon built the Temple, he included two gates for these two groups. On Shabbat, people would sit between those two gates, extending words of comfort to those who were grieving, and words of rejoicing to those who were celebrating. And after the Temple was destroyed, the same thing was done in synagogues and houses of study.<sup>v</sup> כדי שיצאו כל? Why? כדן ישראל ידי חובתן בגמילות חסדים – so that all the people could fulfill their obligation to do acts of lovingkindness. So that they didn't miss an opportunity to be kind, to those whose experiences had been different than their own.

In a recent book on trauma, resilience, and healing, Dr. Bruce Perry and Oprah Winfrey argue that our fundamental question when we encounter other people should not be “What's wrong with you?” but rather, “What happened to you?”<sup>vi</sup> And that is precisely the wisdom of our ancient texts. Why? Because we understand that our stories shape us. And when we see that, we can see each other – and ourselves – with compassion rather than judgment. Not only can we *choose* to act with kindness; in Judaism, we are commanded.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggests that “empathy is structured into the way the Torah tells [its] stories.”<sup>vii</sup> We feel for Cain when he asks why his sacrifice wasn't accepted, even though we know he is about to murder his brother. And God knows we feel for Noah when he gets off the ark after over a year stuck with his family and all the world's animals, and the first thing he does is plant a vineyard and get drunk. Sometimes, something happens to someone; sometimes, they make a choice. Always, we are human, trying to steer our ships through the storm.

Lea Seigen Shinraku tells this story:

When I was in graduate school, I was driving home from school one evening when I noticed that my car was overheating. Just as I arrived in front of my building, the engine stalled completely.

It was 5pm on a Friday, I was blocking the bike lane, and traffic was backed up behind me. Two cars sped past beeping their horns, and then a cyclist turned and waved his fist as he rode around me. I flipped on my hazard lights... [and] dialed Triple A.

[As people kept honking their horns...] I was startled by a knock at the passenger window. A guy with a goatee and a beanie stood next to my car,

and I suspected that he was going to give me a hard time for being double-parked. Reluctantly, I lowered the window.

“Hey,” he said. “I work at the cafe right here—do you want a latte or a chai or something?”

I stared at him, speechless, blinking through the beginnings of tears.

“We’ve also got hot chocolate and tea,” he said.

He actually meant it.

“Oh,” I said. “Wow. Thank you. I’d love some chamomile tea.”

“You got it,” he said and headed back to the cafe.

...All of my self-criticism had been completely silenced by this stranger’s spontaneous impulse of kindness. Suddenly none of this was my fault; it was just something that was happening...

A few moments later he reappeared with the chamomile tea and handed it to me.

“Here you go,” he said.

“Thanks.” I pulled a couple of bills from my wallet.

“Oh, no, don’t worry about it,” he said.

“Really?”

“Yeah,” he said.

I looked at him and took the tea.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Hey, I’ve been there.”

He tapped the passenger door twice as a goodbye.

But the story doesn’t end there:

I was startled again by another knock. He was back. I lowered the window.

“Hey, are you allergic to honey?” he said.

“Huh? Mmm, no.”

“Oh, good. I put honey in it. I didn’t think to ask if you were allergic. If you are, I can make another one.”

“Oh, no. I love honey. Thank you,” I said.

“No worries, then.” And back to the coffee shop he went.<sup>viii</sup>

I like to think this story shows some of the kindness of the coffee shop, of a culture of gathering and hospitality – not unlike what we try to cultivate here at Temple. And the honey reference is a bonus for Rosh Hashanah. But really it

simply shows the kindness of one human being to another. Because as much as we are all different, we are also all the same. In her book with Dr. Perry, Oprah Winfrey makes a striking observation. She notes that she has interviewed over fifty thousand people over the course of over forty years. With all these people and in all this time, she says, “...one common denominator has never changed: All of us want to know that what we do, what we say, and who we are matters.”

Like clockwork, whether it’s the President of the United States, Beyoncé in all her Beyoncéness, a mother sharing a painful secret, or a convicted criminal in search of forgiveness, at the end of the interview, the person sitting across from me asks, “How did I do?” as they scan my face for a reaction. “Was I okay?” they always ask. The longing to be accepted and affirmed in their truth is the same for everyone.<sup>ix</sup>

It’s not always easy to act with kindness, to hear and respond to each other’s stories – especially when we’ve been isolated with our own. Especially when the choices of the person sitting beside you actually have the ability to hurt you. And especially when the choice that someone else makes can make us feel judged for our own. This situation we are in, as Avi Sagi, a professor at Bar-Ilan University writes, has the potential to “[leech] from our lives the marrow of solidarity and empathy... but it also compels us to pose a question to ourselves: who are we and what is our connection to the other?”<sup>x</sup> I said at the beginning that some of us made the choice to come sit with strangers. But really, none of us are strangers, no matter where we sit tonight.

There’s a teaching that when you see someone for the first time, after not having seen them for a year, you say a blessing: *Baruch atah Adonai, mechayeh ha-meytim* – Praised are You, God, who brings the dead to life. I have mixed feelings about this blessing – just because you haven’t seen me, doesn’t mean I’ve been dead – but I think it speaks to how hard it can be to come back together, and how hard it has been to be apart. On a lighter note, I also think it’s the right blessing for the day’s first cup of coffee. But how do we actually bring the dead to life? How do we encounter each other, after these many months apart? *Mechayeh meytim berachamim rabim*, our prayerbook says: *God brings us to life with great mercy*. Compassion and lovingkindness: these are what give us life. Whatever fills your cup, whichever boat you may be on, and whichever gate you use to come in.

Let's raise a cup to a new year, a year in which none of us are strangers.

*L'chaim!* Shanah tovah.

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<sup>i</sup> Melanie King, *Tea, Coffee, and Chocolate: How We Fell in Love With Caffeine* (Oxford, 2015), p.58. Different sources suggest the year was 1651.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, p.55.

<sup>iii</sup> Shachar M. Pinsker, *A Rich Brew: How Cafés Created Modern Jewish Culture* (New York, 2018), pp.105-6.

<sup>iv</sup> Mishnah Mliddot 2:2.

<sup>v</sup> Pirkei d'Rebbe Eliezer, 17:15-16.

<sup>vi</sup> Bruce D. Perry and Oprah Winfrey, *What Happened to You? Conversations on Trauma, Resilience, and Healing* (New York, 2021), p.17.

<sup>vii</sup> Jonathan Sacks, "The Power of Empathy (Mishpatim 5778)," <https://rabbisacks.org/power-empathy-mishpatim-5778/>. This idea is developed further in Sacks' book, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (London, 2015).

<sup>viii</sup> Lea Seigen Shinraku, "A Powerful Lesson in Self-Compassion: Are You Allergic to Honey?" [A Powerful Lesson in Self-Compassion: Are You Allergic to Honey? \(tinybuddha.com\)](https://www.tinybuddha.com/a-powerful-lesson-in-self-compassion-are-you-allergic-to-honey/). With thanks to Rabbi Juliana Karol, in whose sermon I first encountered this story ([Self-Compassion by Rabbi Karol Congregation Rodeph Sholom](https://www.congregationrodephsholom.org/sermons/self-compassion-by-rabbi-karol)).

<sup>ix</sup> Perry and Winfrey, p.75.

<sup>x</sup> Avi Sagi, "Our Common Humanity: Notes from a Pandemic," *Sources: A Journal of Jewish Ideas* (Spring 2021), p.84.