



## **Kol Nidre 5783 : Quatre histoires Rabbin Grushcow**

### Kol Nidre 5783: Four Stories

I want to tell you four stories tonight.

For the first story, we are in Tiberias, on the Sea of Galilee, almost two thousand years ago. A rabbi named Elisha ben Abuyah has done something very hard to do in Judaism: he has become a heretic.<sup>1</sup> Some say it is because he saw the tongue of one of his teachers who had been martyred by the Romans, hanging out of a dog's bloody mouth. Others say it was something even worse. Elisha saw a child, asked by his father to climb a tree and shoo a bird away from her nest before gathering the eggs, fall from the tree and die. These two acts – honouring one's parents, and showing compassion to animals – are said in the Torah to lead to long life. But instead, the child falls, and with this, Elisha's faith is shattered. He starts to live his life in flagrant violation of Jewish law. Elisha walks away from God.<sup>2</sup>

And God, it seems, walks away from Elisha. An edict comes forth from heaven that repentance is open to everyone – everyone except for him. Despite this, Elisha's beloved student, Rabbi Meir, stays connected with him, learning from him and honouring him. After Elisha dies, fire comes down and burns his grave. People run to Rabbi Meir, and they say, "Your teacher's grave is on fire!" Rabbi Meir spreads his cloak over the grave, and stands his ground: "Elisha," he proclaims, "You can rest. If God is unwilling to redeem you, then I will."<sup>3</sup> God yields; the fire goes out. But later, we are told that God sits in heaven, recounting the teachings of all the rabbis except for two: Elisha ben Abuyah, for rejecting God, and Rabbi Meir, for being loyal to Elisha. God refuses to say their names. It is as if – I hesitate to say this – they have been cancelled. Another rabbi, Rabba bar Shayla, objects. "Rabbi Meir

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<sup>1</sup> The word "heretic" is not actually used until the 4<sup>th</sup> century in the Holy Roman Empire, with the social and political rise of Christianity; in the Talmud, Elisha ben Abuyah is known as the one who "uproots the saplings."

<sup>2</sup> The stories about Elisha ben Abuyah being drawn on here can be found in the Babylonian Talmud, Chagigah 15a-b, and the Palestinian Talmud, Chagigah 2:1:9-11.

<sup>3</sup> The way that the story of Boaz and Ruth is woven into the Palestinian Talmud's telling of the story of Rabbi Meir and Elisha ben Abuyah is explored by Devora Steinmetz, [Interpretation and Enactment: The Yerushalmi Story of Elisha ben Abuyah and the Book of Ruth](#) | [AJS Review](#) | [Cambridge Core](#).

was able to separate the pomegranate seeds from the rind,” he protests. He could take the good from Elisha’s teachings, and leave behind the bad – can’t God do the same? Once again, God yields, but only a little. Rabbi Meir is once more spoken of on high. But not Elisha. To this day, he is known as “the Other,” *Acher*: the one who went too far.

There are many questions we could ask. Here is the one I want to ask tonight: Why is Rabbi Meir so loyal to his teacher? Elisha pushes beyond boundaries; Meir stays within them. Elisha is an outsider to his former community and his God; Meir is in relationship with both. But Meir is also in relationship with Elisha. Why?

For this, we need the second story. If the first story is a mystery, the second is, without a doubt, a tragedy. Meir was married, once. He had an extraordinary wife named Beruriah, who was a scholar in her own right, one of very few women who are named and whose teachings are transmitted in the Talmud. It was Beruriah who, when their two sons died, helped Meir make his peace with their passing; without her, his faith, like Elisha’s, might have also been shattered. And it was Beruriah who helped Meir understand, when their neighbours were driving them crazy, that it is better to pray for a person to change than to pray for them to die.<sup>4</sup> Beruriah would have gotten Kol Nidre, this night when we confront our vulnerability and mortality, and still commit ourselves to living life wisely and well. But Beruriah, like Elisha, pushed boundaries. She mocked the scholars who said that women shouldn’t learn; she insisted that her voice should be heard.

Rabbi Meir and Beruriah could have been a great match. For a time, it seems, they were. But then, something went wrong. Maybe it was hard for Rabbi Meir to have such a smart and accomplished wife; maybe what drew him to her initially, later repelled him. He says to himself: “My wife is so certain that women are strong? Let’s see how strong she really is.” He sends one of his students to try to seduce her. Some say the student succeeds; others say that he gets just far enough for Beruriah to realize what her husband has done, how he has set her up to fail. She sees no way back from this, and she kills herself.<sup>5</sup> A tragedy.

And still, a mystery. How does this second story relate to the first? How is the Rabbi Meir who betrays his wife so terribly, the same Rabbi Meir who is so loyal to his heretical teacher and friend? For this, we need the third. To quote Jeanette Winterson, “I’m telling you stories. Trust me.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The story of the sons can be found in Midrash Proverbs 30, 10, and the story of the neighbourhood hooligans can be found in the Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 10a.

<sup>5</sup> See Rashi’s commentary on the Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 18b, “the incident with Beruriah.”

<sup>6</sup> Jeanette Winterson, *The Passion* (1988).

The third story comes from Mimi Lemay. Lemay is the author of a powerful book, *What We Will Become: A Mother, a Son, and a Journey of Transformation*. She tells the story of her experience raising her young son, Jacob, who is transgender. But she also tells her own story, in a way that will intersect with those we have heard so far.

“How did we get here?” she asks:

It started with a birth. A girl born in 1976 in a hospital overlooking the foothills of Mount Scopus, in Jerusalem. Her mother was her entire world, and that world, one of rarefied ultra-Orthodox Judaism, began to collapse on her when she discovered the price she would have to pay to live an authentic life.

“How did we get here?” she continues:

It started with a birth. A boy born in 2010 who was his mother’s world, a world that began to collapse in on itself when she discovered the price her child would have to pay to live an authentic life.<sup>7</sup>

Stay with me. Growing up in ultra-Orthodoxy, Lemay sought out Jewish learning, even as she bristled at the limitations that she faced. Elisha ben Abuyah’s rebellion against God, and Beruriah’s rejection of traditional roles; both their stories spoke to her. “They are of a common essence and spiritual temperament,” Lemay realized, one pushing against the boundaries of faith, and the other, gender – “and Rabbi Meir is their connection.”<sup>8</sup> Why was Rabbi Meir so determined to redeem Elisha? she asks. Because of what he did to Beruriah. He can’t undo the wrong he did his wife, but he can try to do better for his teacher. He is no longer willing to accept that people should be set up or cut off, abandoned for pushing boundaries.

These stories of Beruriah and Elisha and Meir – why do they matter to Mimi Lemay? And why should they matter to us?

This brings us, of course, to our fourth story. A rabbi stands in front of her congregation. This is her twentieth year as a rabbi, twenty years standing up on Kol Nidre and trying to find the right words.

So here is my own heresy:

Maybe we are better at some things than God.

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<sup>7</sup> Mimi Lemay, *What We Will Become: A Mother, A Son, and a Journey of Transformation* (Boston, 2019), xi.

<sup>8</sup> Lemay, p.148.

Maybe God can't take Elisha back, not because Elisha has gone so off track, but because God doesn't know what it's like to be lost. God doesn't know what it's like to be Rabbi Meir, who has made a mistake that cannot be repaired. God doesn't know what it's like to be Beruriah, trying to live in a society that undermines her every step. We pray for God's compassion on this night, but really, we need each other's.

We live in this world as imperfect, complicated human beings in relationship with other imperfect, complicated human beings. Maybe you are a parent of a child, who you thought from the time of the ultrasound was a girl, and from the time your child can speak he is telling you he is a boy. And you may not understand, but you learn, because you love him and you don't want to lose him. Maybe you are that child's grandparent, and the pronouns and name changes confuse you or even hurt you, and at the same time you are afraid for being judged for getting it wrong. Maybe you are a spouse growing in a new direction than your partner, and you don't know how to talk about it, and whether you are growing together or apart. Maybe your friend shared something with you and you replied in a way you wish you could take back, but there the words are, hanging in the air between you. Maybe you thought you were aligned with someone, that you shared the same values and had each other's backs, and they post something that offends you to the core. Maybe you want to do better than those who came before you, while realizing, as you get older, that those who came before you wanted the same. Maybe you are a rabbi editing this paragraph again and again, fearing you made an analogy or an implication which would cause harm. Maybe you are human.

Twenty years ago, I would have written this as a sermon about forgiveness and repentance. But I think it's more complicated than that. It's about deciding – not always, but sometimes – to move forward with compassion. To value connection over perfection, relationships over needing to be right.

I recently read about a study of estranged siblings: “Despite years of unhappy distance, they *all* said they would be willing to reconcile if their brother or sister approached them to say “I'm sorry.” But *not one* intended to initiate an apology.”<sup>9</sup> It's stunning; think about it. Every single one of them wanted to reconcile. But not one was willing to take the first step. Activist adrienne maree brown, writing about

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<sup>9</sup> Cited in Molly Howes, *A Good Apology: Four Steps to Make Things Right*, p.27. Also informing this sermon are, from a Jewish perspective, Danya Rutenberg, *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World* (Boston, 2022), and from a psychological perspective, Harriet Lerner, *Why Won't You Apologize: Healing Big Betrayals and Everyday Hurts* (New York, 2017), Janis A. Spring, *How Can I Forgive You: The Courage to Forgive, the Freedom Not To* (New York, 2005).

relationships in communities, asks why we are so quick to sever ties, and distance ourselves so vociferously from those who have made mistakes. It doesn't need to be this way. She writes:

I have a vision of movement as sanctuary. Not a tiny perfectionist utopia behind miles of barbed wire and walls and fences and tests and judgments and righteousness, but a vast sanctuary where our experiences, as humans who have experienced and caused harm, are met with centered, grounded invitations to grow.<sup>10</sup>

Not every relationship can or should be repaired. But I wonder, if we could be a little braver and kinder, a little more willing to try to understand and a little less willing to walk away, if our world would be more whole.

Sometimes, I get a glimpse of what that would look like, through the privilege of sharing in your lives. If I have gained any wisdom over these twenty years, that has been the source. One of you wrote me a message in this New Year. You said:

I went [home to where I grew up] recently for my mother's funeral service. As a family we have tried on two other occasions, and COVID-19 always seemed to cancel it out. Third time was a charm, and we were able to... finally, finally, honor her, her memory, her life, her impact. It was the most perfect of days; all of us siblings together, the grand-children, great-grandchildren. It was a beautiful day, full of sun and a cool autumn breeze, a perfect day... I could not have ever anticipated the beauty of the day. We are all older now, and looking down on years past was not on anyone's mind. It was a special day.<sup>11</sup>

There is so much in, and between, those words. Imperfect humans, choosing to make a perfect day.

And so, we come to tonight, to Kol Nidre. Tonight, we ask permission to pray with the *avaryanim*, with the sinners – in other words, with each other. You and me and Mimi Lemay, Elisha and Meir and Beruriah too. Imperfect humans, in an imperfect world. We pray for God's compassion on this night, but really, we need each other's.

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<sup>10</sup> adrienne maree brown, *We Will Not Cancel Us: And Other Dreams of Transformative Justice* (Chico, CA, 2020), p.11.

<sup>11</sup> Personal correspondence, shared with permission.