

Earlier this month, we kicked off Temple Isaiah's 50th anniversary celebrations with Isaiah Fest. Nearly two years in the planning, with hundreds, possibly thousands of emails exchanged — the day was fast approaching. As we counted down to September 8, on a pretty consistent basis, Ellen Strichartz and Sue Green reminded me that I needed to "put in an extra prayer for good weather — we're counting on you Rabbi!"

When the day arrived, just the right amount of cloud cover; the back lawn perfectly dried out due to the appropriate amount of rain, despite the after-effects of Hurricane Dorian; the temperatures dropped from the sweltering 90s earlier in the week to a lovely 70–80 degree day — dozens of you came to thank me for arranging the perfect weather!!!

And I think I answered the same to each of you: People ask me to pray for good weather for a special event — Isaiah Fest, an outdoor wedding, a bar mitzvah in the winter — it's not really the kind of God that I believe in, nor that my prayers are (as Pam is fond to remind me and others) any more special than anyone else's!!! Buuuuut... if we're going to wind up with the kind of spectacular day that Isaiah Fest was, and so long as folks asked me to pray for it... I'll take full credit!!!

In all seriousness, though — the God who would answer my prayers for Isaiah Fest weather is not my God.

This year, I decided to make a change to the *Haftarah* reading of our *Rosh HaShannah* service — but one that many are likely not to have noticed, so I'll point it out. For generations, the traditional *Haftarah* for this morning is the story of Channah, drawn from the book of First Samuel. Channah is introduced as one of two wives of a man named Elkanah. Almost immediately, we read: "Peninah had children; but Channah had none." The story unfolds, telling of Channah's sadness and despair at her infertility. With a perfect mix of cluelessness and bravado, Elkanah responds to Channah's sadness with "Am I not better to you than ten sons?!" Channah does not deem the question worthy of a response. Rather, she rises and goes to pray to God for a child. Her prayer ultimately becomes the paradigmatic basis for all Jewish prayer — something to note in a tradition as patriarchal as ours! Ultimately, she makes a vow that if God will give her a child, she will dedicate that child to Divine service "all the days of his life." If you've paid attention before on *Rosh HaShannah*, you remember or could easily guess that God indeed "remembers" Channah, and she delivers a son, naming him Samuel, *Sh'mu'el* — meaning "I asked God for him." And that is why this is chapter one of the book of First Samuel — this important prophet's back-story.

But there is so much more here than the "happy ending." It is a trope, a story that repeats again and again in the *Tanakh*, the Hebrew Bible. A couple, though often identified purely as a woman, is infertile — unable to conceive. There is either some kind of wrong that they have done, on account of which God has "locked their wombs." Or, God has decided it's not time YET for them to have the specific child that they need. Or, they haven't yet prayed the right prayer. And the outcome is always the same. In our traditional *Haftarah* here, "*VaYiz'ke'reha Adonai* — Adonai REMEMBERED Channah" and she bears a son.

It is a pretty simple calculus. If you are infertile, you will become fertile when God decides or when God remembers. And so long as you ask in the right way.

As a rabbi, as a father, as a friend, I cannot continue telling this story without comment — knowing that our congregation — literally every congregation assembled on this holy day — is filled with individuals and couples who have confronted the pain of infertility; struggled with pregnancy loss, sometimes repeatedly; even, and perhaps especially, with the knowledge that some emerge on the other side of that struggle holding a baby who is a singularly precious gift to them, no matter how they arrived in their arms. I have rejoiced at these *simchas* with many of you. There is a special quality to tears shed at those baby namings and *brisses* — one that is an indeterminate mix of present joy and lingering pain. And, of course, we all know others who have gone on from infertility to life plans different than they once imagined, lives also filled with joy.

It is not just because this text, which comes to us filtered through centuries of human hands and quills, is at a minimum insensitive and quite possibly devastating to those who struggle or have struggled with infertility that I chose our *machzor's* alternate *Haftarah* this morning. It is, rather, because Channah's story is emblematic of a particular theology that may have offered structure (and even hope) to earlier generations, but which must be addressed in our own age as either naive or wishful, but ultimately dangerous theology.

(Advance Notice: I am going to be talking a lot about God in this sermon! Some will take that as a reason to tune out. Please stay with me.)

Theology — from the combination of the Greek terms *Theos* — meaning God, and *logia* — meaning sayings or reasoning. In short, Theology is the systematic study of how God works — as if any of us would know for sure! It is, of necessity, an art rather than a science. And in Judaism — where we tend to reject the notion of any one ultimate authority on literally anything! — Theology has been an ongoing project in every generation.

Our beliefs about God are also, of essence, personal. So, I want to make clear at this point that "the views and opinions expressed in the context of this sermon are solely the views of Rabbi Axler and do not in any way necessarily reflect the views of Temple Isaiah, the Board of Trustees, his parents, in-laws, wife, children, or anyone else!!! Additional restrictions may apply."

But, because I am a rabbi, people often come to me with questions... uncomfortable questions... painful questions... often unanswerable questions. But I will do my best, acknowledging my own human limitations.

I reject the idea of a God who will cause infertility on account of some perceived wrong committed by the affected individuals; and the same goes for illness, war, addiction, abuse, you fill in the blank. If there is a God who inflicts suffering on human beings as part of some test, some purification, some growth-based challenge, then count me out. I want nothing to do with that God.

But, because Theology is systematic, if I reject the notion of a God who punishes through things like illness, I must similarly reject the idea that God rewards good behavior with success, power, health or good looks. Or, for that matter, sunny days when a major program of the synagogue is dependent on it. Sorry, Ellen and Sue — I didn't make the Isaiah Fest weather — which is why I can't predict what the weather will be like at this afternoon's *Rosh HaShannah* in the Park — though you should come either way! We had a great time in the rain last year (and, it wasn't my fault that it rained!).

This might easily lead to the assumption that God is not real — that all of this is made up. So, before you check your tickets to see if you are in synagogue on *Rosh HaShannah* or in your undergraduate Philosophy seminar, I also want to say that I deeply and passionately believe in the reality of God, and even more so in the connection between God and humanity, between God and the Jewish people — the connection manifest most clearly through the heritage of *Torah*, the voices of the generations of her teachers, and the words of the *machzors* in your hands right now.

I find my own approach to God most clearly articulated in the writing of Rabbi Harold Kushner. Kushner's most famous book is also among the most mis-quoted titles in all of western literature. I consistently meet people who say "Oh, yes, I read 'Why Bad Things Happen to Good People.'" And the mis-quoting is the very essence of this sermon. I could just sit down after saying this (though you know I won't!). The title is not WHY, but "WHEN Bad Things Happen to Good People." Of the few things that we can be 100% certain, we know that it will ALWAYS happen that there are perfectly good and blameless people who suffer. Of the few things that I believe we will NEVER know, the question WHY is at the top of the list. What remains is the response, how an individual, a family, a community or nation reacts to the WHEN which will visit us again and again and again.

Rabbi Kushner wrote the book in the years following the loss of his son, Aaron, who was 14 when he died after a prolonged illness. His book has been a comfort to countless individuals and families in the 41 years since its publication. It first articulates the argument that Harold Kushner devotes his career to — the notion that suffering is not the will of God. In his subsequent books, he passionately makes this case, even up to his most recent book, published at age 80, titled "Nine Essential Things I've Learned About Life." There he writes: "More than anything else, my half century of congregational service and my dozen or so books have been dedicated to reformulating — traditional theology. I've done this not to protect God from bad theologians and people's righteous anger, but to rescue people who need [parenthetically, I would add 'or want' —C.A.] God from having to choose between a cruel God and no God at all."¹

Others have made similar points, but none as succinctly as Rabbi Kushner, and none speaking so essentially to the nature of what I would profess as your rabbi, and what I try to live in our interactions together: the choice is not between a cruel God — the God often found in Biblical text that grants and withholds, afflicts and cures on the basis of whim or flattery; and no God at

1 Rabbi Harold Kushner, *Nine Essential Things I've Learned About Life*, Anchor Books, 2015, p. 7

all — the answer found among so many who profess that it is impossible to be a modern, rational individual and maintain any semblance of a belief in God.

The answer to the first claim about God lies in our changing conception of God over time. The influences most present on our ancient ancestors were the surrounding cultures of primitive, polytheistic religion. Like familiar realms of Greek myth, their neighbors saw the answer to suffering or prosperity in the question of how well or poorly one had satisfied the god who controlled that particular realm. And, when the human beings appeared to do all of the right things and still were met with unpleasant, even catastrophic results, it was chalked up to Divine Fiat — "What can you do? Argue with the gods? They're in control and we are not!"

Early Judaism reveals glimpses of rebelling against that notion of being powerless against a God who holds all of the cards. Abraham is encouraged to argue with God in regard to Sodom and Gemorrah.² "הַשֹּׁפֵט כָּל-הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט" — will the Judge of all the Earth not practice justice?!?" Moses questions time and again. The prophet Jeremiah laments: "מַדּוּעַ יִרְדּוּ רְשָׁעִים צְלָחָה" Why does the way of the wicked prosper?"³ The template is picked up by later generations of the Rabbis: God wants us to passionately argue, to question and nudge, to be active participants in our journey. The last thing God seems to want is a flock of sheep who will blindly go where they are told. How boring would that be for God?!?

But some time in modernity, many of us have lost the will or the ability to wrestle with God, to engage in this holy debate. Or, perhaps as has been argued, the inexplicable nature and scope of the tragedies of the 20th and 21st centuries have rendered us unable to give room for this exchange.

So, if God is not to be found in the traditional form of Master of the Universe, doling out favors or striking with punishments, then where is God to be found? I would argue that God is to be found in the ordinary and extraordinary moments of human interaction and connection.

God is present when a member of this congregation's care committee delivers a meal to one who is recovering from surgery, or a family that has just welcomed a child.

God is present when a child learns their first Hebrew words of prayer because a dedicated teacher in our schools has given of their time and talent to pass on sacred teachings.

God is present when we open the doors of our beautiful temple building to host the Cold Weather Shelter for a week — even (and perhaps especially) when our guests pose challenges and push our volunteers beyond their zones of comfort. Yes, God is present in every meal served, every overnight shift not slept, every ride to and from the Mall, every smile and human interaction with our guests who are often not treated with the humanity they deserve... God is present.

2 Genesis 18:23 ff.

3 Jeremiah 12:1

God is present when we stand around the bed, as we did with our friend Harry Adler just over a month ago, and accompany a good soul out of this world. Forty or so of you were there in the Adler's living room as we prayed and sang late into Friday night with Harry and his whole family. God was present as Harry drew his last breath, and as we all held ours in that moment; and God was present in the sobs and tears that followed; in the torrent of stories that filled the days of *shiva*; and in every kindness offered. Do I believe in a God who would strike a kind and giving soul, as *guttes neshama* as Harry, — ANY person in any place or time — with cancer or any serious illness? Positively not! And yet, I absolutely do believe in the God who enables medical providers of every kind to offer a smile alongside an injection or treatment; in the God who is present in the often dark and inappropriate humor shared by patients, staff and family alike in every hospital wing I've ever visited; in the God who rests between the individuals comforting one another with a hug in the midst of deepest suffering and sorrow; and in the God who gives us the capacity to, somehow, find the strength to rise from illness, to rise from mourning, to rise and rise again — some being called upon to rise too many times to fathom from loss and challenge beyond imagination — and yet, somehow, they rise.

Rabbi Kushner writes: God "will not cause the rain to fall and give us an abundant harvest, nor ... cure our disease or help us win the lottery. God's role is not to make our lives easier, to make the hard things go away, or to do them for us. God's role is to give us the vision to know what we need to do, to bless us with the qualities of soul that we will need in order to do them ourselves, no matter how hard they may be, and to accompany us on that journey."⁴

Day in, day out, through every experience under the heavens, that is the God that I witness.

That the world as we experience it today, on a personal, familial, communal, national or global level — is not perfect, or just, or kind, or even very pretty; That this world often appears to be catastrophically broken is not an indictment of a God who is powerless, or an indication of a God who is some kind of cruel and manipulative chess-player. Rather, it is the greatest and most powerful opening for each and every one of us, alone and together, to actualize the very purpose for which humanity was created in the first place. To bring healing to the broken, to mend the societal breach, to seek out places of need on both grand and small scale and to see our role in answering the call. This is the very essence of what it is to be a human being, a person created *b'Tzelem Elohim* — in the image of God — a manifestation of God's care in mortal form. And, at the same time, we know it is an endless and necessarily impossible pursuit. We mend, and there will always be another stitch coming loose at the very same instant. Were that not the case, there would no longer be a need for human beings and I believe we would cease to exist.

I offer up just one example of a way in which God's presence may be manifest through the work of our hands. Later this year, members of Temple Isaiah will participate in a number of simultaneous Mitzvah Projects, coordinated in celebration of our 50th anniversary. Among them will be a team that will construct at least 15 sturdy wooden beds that will then be delivered to the homes of children here in Howard County — children who have no bed to sleep in. The national organization, Sleep in Heavenly Peace is dedicated to making sure that all children in

4 Kushner, *Nine...*, pp. 33-34

the United States have a bed in which to sleep. The Howard County chapter is more recent and has provided over 130 beds, new mattresses and linens to families in need in our local community over the last few years. A team of forty or so adults and teens will gather to follow the fairly simple instructions and build these beds from scratch. That there are children sleeping on couches and floors in our County is not, I believe, an act of God. It reflects the inherent inequality of the socio-economic system in this country; it stems from the legacy of institutional poverty that has been inadvertently and deliberately upheld over the course of our history; it flows from a breakdown of family and community that is too complex to enumerate. But it is not, by any stretch of the imagination, the will of God. It is, rather, an opportunity for us to exercise our God given abilities to reach out with a hand of support in the form of lumber, labor and *tzedakah* to right a wrong. And that, in my opinion, is the affirmation God in this world.

I began by sharing the decision to substitute the story of Channah's infertility with an alternate *Haftarah* posed by our *machzor*. I will close with just a few words from the selection we heard chanted (beautifully I might add!) and read. Isaiah is preaching in Babylonia following the destruction of the First Temple, when the majority of the Jewish people have been exiled from Israel. He wants to encourage his kinfolk to see the power of their actions, the necessity of their faith, and the ways God is waiting for them to bear witness to what ought to be rather than what is. The reading began, "קראו הוֹדוּ בְּהִיוֹתוֹ קְרוּב, דַּרְשׁוּ יְיָ בְּהַמְצֵאוֹ" Seek the Eternal while there is yet time, cry out while God is near!"⁵ This particularly connects our holy season with this reading. If anything, the purpose of *Rosh HaShannah* through *Yom Kippur* is to remind us that we have both time and opportunity to do what we were meant to do, to return to our highest visions of self, our aspirational *Tzelem Elohim*, the instrument of God's presence that we are in this world. There is yet time so long as we draw breath to do this work, and no person has strayed so far that they are disqualified from joining in these holy pursuits. The result of choosing this path? The prophet continues: "וּבְשָׁלוֹם תֵּיבָלוּ" and you will be returned home in *Shalom*!" You will live, says the text, in a way that affirms the goodness and sacredness of this world, the joy there is to be found — despite the abundant brokenness, which will be transformed into opportunities to bring wholeness, to bring one additional measure of *Shalom* to God's world, to play your part in the human/Divine story with every breath you have, up until your final breath — at which point, you will be returned Home in Peace, in *Shalom*.

How fortunate we are, we human beings who are charged with reflecting, embodying, bearing witness to God as the essential partners in this world of creation; this beautiful, broken spinning orb whose 5780th birthday we commemorate today?!? Let us mend, build, fix, comfort, rise and find joy in this New Year!

From me and my family to you and yours, I wish you a Good, a Sweet, a Healthy 5780!

5 Isaiah 55:6