

One is silence—whether refusing to speak out or act in the face of injustice, or more generally, engaging in denial and self-deception about one’s inner and outer reality. Therefore, central to “building up the highway” is the commitment to speak truth (“For the sake of Zion I will not be silent, for the sake of Jerusalem I will not be still . . . I have set watchmen who shall never be silent”).

The other roadblock is destructive anger. Indeed, the prophet imagines God reflecting on God’s own anger and the damage it caused, serving as a role model for human beings in doing the same. This combination of emotional maturity (regulating anger appropriately) with a commitment to speak truth and act on it, coupled with reclaiming a sense of joy and delight, seems to constitute the “royal highway” to a renewed self and society.

Food for thought:

- When have you been angry in a destructive way, in a way you now regret?
- How can you make amends and repair what you damaged?
- When have you remained silent when you should have spoken or acted?
- Are there things you need to say or do now?
- Is it possible to speak truth and address injustice without indulging in anger that is destructive?
- What role do joy and delight have in finding that balance

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Nitzavim 5778
Rosh Hashanah 5779

נצבים תשע"ח
ראש השנה תשע"ט



Remember the Children!

Rabbi Daniel Nevins, Pearl Resnick Dean of The Rabbinical School and Dean of the Division of Religious Leadership, JTS

The cries of children, and the sobbing of parents, ring in our ears each Rosh Hashanah. The Torah and haftarah readings emphasize the perils faced by sons Ishmael and Isaac, and the terrors experienced by mothers Hagar, Sarah, Hannah, and Rachel. To witness a child in danger evokes a nearly universal response to rush to the rescue. Implicit in this collection of texts is the plea that God look upon us—the Jewish people—as vulnerable children, that divine mercies might be stirred, and forgiveness extended to us all. Just as the mothers of Israel were stirred with mercy, we ask that God be moved to show us love.

This shift from human to divine mercy is made explicit in the special prayers written for Rosh Hashanah, especially in the *Zikhronot* section of the *Musaf* service. In each of the ten verses, there is an association between human vulnerability and divine mercy. It begins with reference to the frightened people (and animals) on Noah’s ark, continues to the terrorized slaves in Egypt, and extends to the Israelite refugees on their trek through Sinai. In each case, God remembers that the people—pictured as children—are in danger and responds with mercy and rescue.

The most touching of all of these passages is the final one, from Jeremiah 31:20. “Is not Ephraim My dear son, My precious child, whom I remember fondly even when I speak against him? So, My heart reaches out to him, and I always feel compassion for him, declares Adonai.” This text, which is also the finale of the haftarah for the second day, has inspired generations of cantors and popular singers. It speaks to the complex emotions of a parent faced with a wayward child. Jeremiah is channeling God, imagining that God feels fondness for Israel even when Israel has acted provocatively, like a parent does

for a child. Midrash Vayikra Rabbah observes that whenever God claims someone as “Mine,” it is forever—in this world and in the world to come (Parashat Vayikra 2:2).

Two verbs are doubled in the Jeremiah verse, *zakhor ezkerenu*—I will surely remember him; and *rahem arahamenu*—I will surely show him mercy. Curiously, these words have a gendered association, since *zakhor* (remember) is related to *zakhar* (male), and *rahem* (show mercy) is related to *rehem* (womb). It seems that God is promising to be both father and mother to Ephraim. Gender assumptions may be at play. Jeremiah addresses the male aspect of God with reminders of our loyalty to Him; the female aspect of God is addressed by recalling Her motherhood and mercy. Neither aspect suffices; a blending of roles is required to reverse our estrangement and to be welcomed back in love.

This theme of reconciliation between parents and children is foreshadowed just before Rosh Hashanah on Shabbat Nitzavim. The Torah reading from Deuteronomy 29:9–30:2 is suffused with imagery of childhood, with God “entering into the covenant” with Israel, and concluding, “that you and your children will live” on the land. The haftarah from Isaiah 61:10–63:9 concludes the cycle of seven messages of consolation with a climax. As Midrash Pesikta Rabbati (#37) observes, this haftarah takes us to the border of messianic redemption. And what triggers this divine outpouring of redemptive love? It is God’s realization that “surely they are My people, children who will not play false” (63:8).

There is a darker side to this dynamic, which gives it more power and pathos. Adults are not always protective of children. Sarah exposes Ishmael to mortal danger in a misguided attempt to protect Isaac. Abraham tries to protect his elder son, and when God rebuffs his attempt, Abraham falls into quiescence, proceeding with the command to sacrifice Isaac without a word of protest. These images of Abraham and Sarah as broken adults point to an even more disturbing concept of God as a broken parent, who has forgotten to show mercy to the people. It falls upon the children of Israel to remind God to show mercy. Again and again we remind God of our dependence, demanding that God respond with compassion. The danger of Rosh Hashanah is that God might act like Abraham, failing to protect us; the shofar is meant to pierce the fog of divine inattention, awakening God’s mercy for our people.

As we complete the year 5778, it is important to connect these timeless themes with our own experiences. Like many of you I have witnessed the blessings of healthy children entering the world, embraced by their loving parents. I have also expressed gratitude over the recovery of children threatened by terrible disease. But not all children are safe and healthy, and it is not only disease that threatens them.

Some American politicians and officers imposed cruel suffering on young children this year, separating them from their parents at the southern border, and failing to plan adequately for their reunion. Across the political spectrum these cruel actions evoked outrage and activism, but not remorse from those who enacted the policy. Lasting damage was committed in our name, and we all share responsibility to pay attention and prevent such outrageous conduct from recurring. If we cannot show mercy upon children, then what right do we have to claim God’s love?

Standing before God on the final Shabbat of 5778, and then again as we open the year 5779, we remember the children who depend upon our responsible behavior. When have we succeeded, and when have we failed to protect them? Let the children guide us back to responsibility and love, and let God then respond with love for us, beloved children to the Holy One. May we be remembered with mercy, forgiven for our failures, and blessed with a sweet and good new year!

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The Voice of the Prophet

BRINGING THE WEEKLY HAFTARAH TO LIFE



Seventh Haftarah of Consolation

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We might expect that for the seventh and final haftarah of comfort, the Sages would have chosen a passage recounting complete redemption. Instead, we are given a vision of the removing of obstacles, and the building of a solid foundation, to permit a path forward. Two such obstacles—“rocks” to be removed—are highlighted.