

Rosh Hashanah 2012/5773

First Day

Mei Hayeshuah – The Waters of Salvation

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She was three or four years old when it happened. Visiting my great-grandmother Rose at her country home along the Richelieu River in Ste-Hillaire just east of Montreal as she did so often, my mother was playing down by the water. The river was swollen, the waters higher than usual, and in the midst of her fun my mother fell and landed in the swift, swirling current of the Richelieu. Unable to swim or fight the momentum of the river, she flailed her arms and legs and thrashed about to no avail.

Out of the corner of his eye, a young teenager working with my great-grandmother in her garden noticed a lot of splashing in the river and thought maybe it was a big fish. He kept trying to get my great-grandmother's attention but she was focused on her gardening. When he realized it was my mother in trouble in the water, he yelled to my great-grandmother who raced to the river, climbed onto the retaining wall, jumped several feet down into the water, grabbed one of my mother's braided pigtails and pulled her to safety seconds before the river would have swept her away.

If you knew my great-grandmother Rose, you wouldn't be surprised by her heroic act. She was an assertive and accomplished businesswoman with a strong and decisive will who made things happen. But in that particular feat, she not only saved my mother's life, she saved mine.

In that courageous moment, my great-grandmother allowed for the path of my mother's life to continue to unfold, which eventually led to me, with a few other notable accomplishments along the way, like my siblings, I suppose. But enough about them.

Our family grew up to spend a lot of time around water: summers on our lake in the Laurentian mountains and winters skating, playing hockey and snow shoeing on her frozen face. The natural beauty and wonder of water continues to play a big role in our family's love of nature and of life.

But the story of my mother's near-drowning hovers in my consciousness, not only because it nearly took her life and prevented mine from ever becoming, but because the power of water to be simultaneously a source of birth and a cause of death, a place of playful relaxation and total dread, a symbol of both renewal and despair, makes it a beguiling if alluring presence in our world.

Perhaps precisely because of this, water plays a central role in the story and the experience of teshuva, of repentance and re-creation, the story that brings us all here today. Like the force of water, our freedom as human beings can lead us either to be the people we dream of being, to build the lives we deem worth living, or to submit to fear and insecurity and unleash pain and suffering for ourselves and those around us. Freedom, like water, can birth or kill. The choice is ours.

Scientists only discovered last year that water has existed in the universe since its inception. But the Torah has been telling us for thousands of years that water existed before the earth as we know it was created. The Torah opens in Genesis with a story of creation wherein the world is literally

formed from the primordial deep. From then on, throughout our tradition, water is seen as the symbol of rebirth. Into the living waters of the mikveh we submerge for purification and new beginnings, and into the metaphorical waters of Torah we immerse for wisdom and healing.

Water, in the Jewish mystical tradition, is a metaphor for self-reflection. Its surface reflects, but because water has depth, if we look closely enough, we can see what's obscured beneath.

The Kabbalah understands true reflection, real teshuvah or return to take place in the context of relationship. By truly engaging with one another we can heal not only the relationships that connect us but by doing so we come closer to fulfilling our own individual potential and our own truths.

Rabbi Bunam said: It is written in Proverbs: "As in water, face answers to face, so the heart of man to man." Why does the verse read "in water" and not "in a mirror?", asked Rabbi Bunam. He explained: a person can see their reflection in water only when they bend down close to it, and the heart of a person too must lean down to the heart of their fellow, then it will see itself within their heart."

To be in relationship with another requires that we look not superficially at one another, as we might glance into a mirror, but that we look deeply at one another – into each other's eyes, into each other's hearts. When we do so, we are able to behold the depths we each contain, to appreciate the subjectivity of each other's lives, and of our own.

What's happened to you in your life that makes you, you? What experiences or feelings lie deep within you that shaped whom it is you've become?

When we make the effort to bend close to one another, to see what's behind the eyes and deep in the soul of another human being, then we understand each other on a whole new level, and respond to each other more compassionately and more generously. But also, of equal importance, we open ourselves to embracing our own depths and accepting who we are and how it is that we've become ourselves. This is what opens the door to growth.

Water, we know, is always moving, flowing and changing. As the surface ripples or waves ebb and flow, so does our reflection in the water change, and so does whatever it is that lurks further below.

When we lean in for a closer look into each other's hearts, as Rabbi Bunam taught, we gain appreciation for the constant flowing and changing that animates a person's soul. We become more sensitive to the changes others go through, and more accepting of the changes and flow of our own lives and our own hearts.

But water, we know, can be threatening. There is a haunting Midrash that tells the story of how Satan tried to prevent Abraham from sacrificing his son Isaac as God commanded him -- the story of the Akedah we'll read tomorrow. The Akedah is referred to as a test -- but by whom, and of whom? The Rabbis suggest that Satan tried to convince God that Abraham was not the faithful believer God thought him to be. To prove to Satan that Abraham is in fact totally loyal and can pass any test of

faith, God tells Abraham to do something outrageous: to sacrifice his son. God thinks Abraham will comply. Satan thinks he won't. When Abraham gets up early to go do God's bidding, Satan panics. He's going to be wrong and look bad. So the Midrash says that Satan turned himself into a deep river along the path Abraham was walking to go sacrifice Isaac in order to prevent him from reaching his destination on Mount Moriah. But Satan underestimated Abraham, who proceeded to wade into the waters with Isaac. Soon the waters rose too high, and Abraham cried out: *Hoshieni Elohim, ki ba'u mayim ad nafesh/ Save me God, for the waters have reached my soul.*"

"The waters have reached my soul"? While in the Bible "nefesh" can mean "body", in rabbinic terms it more often translates as "soul". *Hoshieni Elohim, ki ba'u mayim ad nafesh/ Save me God, for the waters have reached my soul.*" Why wasn't Abraham worried about his body? Why doesn't he cry out that the waters have reached his neck? That soon he won't be able to breathe? What does he mean, "the waters have reached my soul"?

When we reflect as deeply as the process of teshuvah demands, when we gaze into waters and see not just our reflection but the depths within us, the discoveries can be devastating. A mirror reflects what we put out to the world. Water allows us to see what's lurking in the depths behind that image. And it's not always pretty.

When we're brutally honest with ourselves and are willing to confront why we do what we do, why we treat others the way we do, why we judge and criticize as we do, when we are willing to acknowledge our own pain

and fear and anxiety, the effects can overwhelm our souls. We may feel like we're drowning.

Maybe that's what Abraham saw in the waters engulfing him – the truth of his motivations, the pain his choices were inflicting on the people he loved. The river wasn't only an attempt to block his physical path to his calling, but maybe his spiritual path. The rising waters were threatening his sense of self, his sense of purpose -- his soul. That he pushed through the waters and proceeded with Isaac is indeed problematic, and we'll wrestle with it tomorrow. Maybe he proceeded with a fuller understanding of himself and his need to not pass the test but unleash one on God instead by seeing if God would really allow him to go through with it. We will attempt to understand him tomorrow. But for now, allow the image of "*ba'u mayim ad nefesh/the waters have reached my soul*" to linger a while.

Paradoxically, his loss of spiritual footing is precisely Abraham's lifeline. Prompting us to cry out, as Abraham did, being in the overwhelming presence of our own truth is what leads us back to shore. Recognizing ourselves in the deeper reflection is the first step in taking responsibility for who we are and bridging the divide to whom it is we wish to be. The Midrash closes by saying that as soon as Abraham cried out, the waters receded. "*Shuvu eylay, ve'ashuva aleychem*", promised the prophet Malachi – Turn to me and I will turn to you.

It seems so simple; the promise of restoring ourselves so tantalizing. But we know it's not so easy. We take that first step over and over again, acknowledging our failures and weaknesses. So why doesn't anything ever seem to change? Why do I make the same mistakes over and over

again? Why can't I learn? Why can't I grow? It's so wrenching. It's so painful. It's so humiliating. It brings us to tears.

Tears are yet another kind of healing waters that flow on this day of teshuvah.

Rabbi Mordecai Gafni points out that all of the scriptural readings for Rosh Hashanah speak of tears. In the Torah reading for today we encounter the desperate crying of both Hagar and her son Ishmael at having been rejected and sent away. In the Haftarah, it is the crying of the barren Hannah as she pleads for a child that moves us so deeply. In the second day's reading of the binding of Isaac, tears are notable for their shocking absence. So disturbed were the sages by this glaring omission in the story that they corrected it by teaching, "*tears of angels fell into Isaac's eyes as he lay on the altar*". In the Haftarah for the second day we witness and identify with the tears of joy of the Jewish people returning to Zion and the tears of Rachel for her children who are still in exile.

Even the different sounds of the shofar were devised by the rabbis to echo the sounds of crying: the tekiah, shevarim and teruah are meant to sound like the mournful wailing, sobbing and sighing of the mother of Sisera who collapsed with grief at learning of her son's death in his battle against the ancient Israelites.

The Zohar teaches that Rachel, Hagar, Sisera's mother, Hannah, the people, the angels and Isaac are indeed all of us. Our stories are their stories; our tears are their tears.

We all come to this day full of thoughts and prayers, regrets and hopes, many of which defy verbal expression. Maybe the words of the Machzor don't seem to fit. Maybe they just don't say enough. Maybe we haven't been able to fully comprehend our feelings to begin articulating them. Maybe some of our dreams we dare not speak, for they may seem too bold. And so we too cry tears of prayer, letting the watery depth of our souls emerge into the atmosphere when words simply can't carry them through.

We cry for the suffering we have caused others. We cry for the suffering others have caused us. We cry for the suffering we have caused ourselves. We cry for our frustrated dreams. We cry for the pain that often comes with change and growth.

We cry for the uncertainty we face, for a future unknown and sometimes terrifying. We cry for the overwhelming suffering that continues to plague our world.

We cry with relief at hurdles passed and dangers averted. We cry for the strength it takes to stand proud of who we are despite the perilous journey we've made to get here. We cry with joy for the blessings that fill our lives. We cry in awe of nature's beauty.

The mystic Rav Yitzchak Luria suggested that anyone who does not cry on Rosh Hashanah finds no blessing the following year. If we can't connect with the deepest recesses of our souls, with the deepest feelings we keep inside, if not deny, every other day of the year, if we don't let it all out, then we won't release the healing and redeeming waters of teshuvah necessary for our own growth. By bringing the waters out from within we

make space inside for the renewed energy and spirit that will carry us forward into a new year.

I have childhood memories of an elderly man from my shul in Montreal. He'd daven with such intense fervour. His body would rock, his voice would rise and fall, thunder and whisper. And his tears would flow. To be honest with you, he frightened me. His unselfconscious display of emotion and feeling made me uncomfortable. But now, these many years later, I envy his ability to make the most of his chance to get it all out, his trust in his community to see him through his desperate yearning for forgiveness and wholeness. Let's not fear our own feelings or those of our family and friends. Let's let them out.

Relieving ourselves of our pent up tears calls to mind another Rosh Hashanah ritual of unburdening that involves sacred waters.

The river of the Midrash, the river in which Abraham and Isaac nearly drowned, is one explanation as to why we do Tashlich this afternoon, the ritual of throwing away our sins in the form of little pieces of bread, into a body of moving water. Some see being by water for Tashlich as a nod to Abraham's faith and perseverance in the face of Satan's attempts to block his way to the Akedah. But others see a deeper connection to the process of teshuvah.

Taking pieces of bread as symbols of our sins and casting them into the water is a powerful way of saying that our failings are not systemic blemishes on our characters or our souls. Our guilt for mistakes of the past does not determine our future. We determine our future. By throwing our sins into the water we demonstrate that with the right amount of reflection

and commitment, we can unburden ourselves of our baggage, lighten the load of our pain and hurt, and freely move forward into a time of repair and renewal. We cast our sins into the waters of creation and rebirth and we walk away ready to begin again, ready to rebuild our lives.

The path towards our rebuilding is rooted in Torah – in the traditions and stories of our people. It is the Torah that gives voice to the values that shape the Jewish vision of purposeful and meaningful living. And the Torah too is compared to water.

After crossing the Sea of Reeds and leaving the prison that was Egypt behind them, the children of Israel travel in the desert for three days before finding any water. The mystical tradition teaches that water really stands for Torah, as the prophet Isaiah said, “Let all who are thirsty come for water.” (Isaiah 55:1) It was later instituted that just as Israel trekked for three days until finding water, the Torah should be read no less than every three days, which is one of the reasons why we read it at services on Mondays, Thursdays and Shabbat. Just as water is a necessity for life to survive and thrive, so too is Torah necessary for moral integrity and spiritual vitality. Just as water is cleansing, so too the study of Torah helps us to clarify our struggles and elucidate our goals.

While there is water that comes from surface sources like oceans and lakes, there is also water that emerges from deep within the earth. Similarly, there are lessons in life that we derive from simple or straightforward analyses of issues, and those we arrive at after much searching and digging within.

Wells figure prominently in the Torah. Miriam's well followed us in the desert and Eliezer found a wife for Isaac by a well, as did Jacob find Rachel. In Biblical times the well was the town center and the natural place for people to meet. But Jacob removing the heavy stone from the mouth of the well for Rachel represents a deeper lesson. It foreshadows his ability to engage in a deep inner quest, to reach down into his own depths to understand himself, his relationship to God and his sense of purpose in the world, which he does when he struggles with the angel as he prepares to reconcile with his estranged brother Esav.

The well becomes another resonant symbol for us as we dig deep within ourselves in this season of reconciliation. When Hagar and Ishmael cry out in the life-threatening heat of the desert, God miraculously provides not another skin of water or two or three or four, but an entire well. The waters of reflection and renewal are in endless supply because it is we who summon them with our crying out, with our willingness to confront our feelings, to truly wrestle with life's challenges, and to sustain a connection with what we deem holy. As the Torah states about Ishmael, "and God was with the boy."

Just after that, at the end of the portion today, Abraham and Avimelech King of the Philistines make a pact establishing Abraham as the owner of a well that had been seized. Taking ownership of our wells, claiming the space to delve deeply into our lives is paramount. Maybe Abraham was struggling with what he had done to Hagar and Ishmael and desperately wanted to do Teshuvah. The well in question gets named Be'er Sheva, translated as the Well of Seven for the seven ewes that were exchanged between the men. But Be'er Sheva can also be called the Well of the Oath, the oath Abraham perhaps took to be mindful about his choices

and his actions, to be thoughtful and contemplative about how he lives his life, to keep reaching down into his well of self-study and growth.

We've taken the same oath so many times and we more often than not fail to live up to it, as Abraham himself seemed to have failed in tomorrow's reading of the Akedah. But the oath is critical; the striving essential. As Reb Simchah Bunim taught his students: our failure is not that we sin -- we're human and temptation is strong. Our failure is that every minute we can work to do better, we can try to grow and change, and we don't.

If the well was Abraham's symbol, his reminder to work on himself and do better, what is ours? Quite literally, is there something in our lives, in our homes, something tangible or intangible – a mantra, a memory, an image – that reminds us to strive to do better, to be better? I'll tell you mine.

Andy and I, like most couples, enjoy a life that is incredibly fulfilling but also stressful. The strains of our modern lives are well-known – time is scarce, work is demanding, the economy is depressing, and being a blended family brings its own challenges. When we succumb to the pressure and begin taking it out on each other, we try hard to remember -- not always successfully – that we are fighting not *against* each other but *for* each other. That simple shift in language and energy puts love back at the center, helping us to keep perspective, to be mindful of ourselves and to work together. This is one of our wells.

Take the time to think of what it is that can conjure up your divine well – one from which you can slake your thirst for calm, for self-awareness, for peace.

Finally, it's been said that in Judaism, water is the deepest form of joy.

The classic explanation of the connection between joy and water comes from a statement in the Mishnah about a ceremony known as Simchat Beit Hashoeva. This water libation ceremony used to take place on Sukkot in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem and involved spirited processions with huge torches, water hauled in fancy golden vessels, loud blasts from the shofars, lots of music from the Levites, jubilant dancing, handstands and juggling by leading sages, and finally, an elaborate ritual of pouring water on the altar. It was such a huge celebration that the Mishnah declared: Whoever hasn't observed Simchat Beit Hashoeva has never in their life seen true joy.

Far from being melodramatic, the Mishnah touches on something profound, something we all hope to access today.

Rav Aharon Soloveitchik explains why water was chosen for this sacred rite. It might have made more sense to use wine – a substance that is known to bring joy and gladness -- or fine oil, one of the ingredients used in the offerings made on the altar. Why use something so uninteresting, so simple and ordinary as water to honor the altar?

True, wine is more celebratory, Rav Aharon Soloveitchik admits, but it's a substance that artificially stimulates joy and gladness within us. The happiness it causes is external to us. Oil was indeed more special. It was a highly prized commodity in the ancient world. Its value alone would produce excitement. But again, the source of excitement would be external to us.

Water, by contrast, was neither special nor expensive. It doesn't make us feel happy or giddy. It was common. Mundane. Accessible.

Appreciating its presence in our life, in spite of its unremarkable, most ordinary quality, would represent an inner, authentic expression of joy, says Rav Aharon Soloveitchik.

Cultivating within us the ability to appreciate and celebrate the most basic building blocks of our lives – our families, friends, communities, work, food, nature, neighborhoods – in spite of their everyday presence in our lives -- would represent a dramatic inner joy. These are the things we take most for granted. We know we'll see these people, drive these roads, eat our meals, go to work. But to approach these fundamentals with excitement and enthusiasm; to be able to achieve a state of satisfaction and fulfillment in these fundamentals and feel joy in them – that's a whole different story.

We usually reserve our celebrations in life for moments and people who are out of the ordinary. Imagine how much more excitement we'd feel for the extraordinary if we were able to ramp it up for the ordinary. Our potential for happiness throughout life would increase exponentially.

And if we can't experience joy in the everyday, in the mundane, in that which holds our lives together in its very ordinariness, well then, warns the Mishnah, we will never know true happiness.

Accessing this level of joy does more than enrich our own lives. By learning to be happy, truly happy, we free ourselves to live in peace with those around us. How much of the pain we cause others and they cause

us comes from the unhappiness, insecurity and emptiness too many of us feel?

Learning to feel joy in life is part of our teshuvah: a very real and serious part of healing ourselves and our relationships. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, the prolific Talmudist and mystic of our time, reminds us that joy is not the opposite of sadness. Joy is what we feel when we experience our own truth, the unmitigated, honest acceptance and affirmation of all that fills our lives and our potential to live them with dignity, with possibility and with hope. And it all comes from water.

Today is the day we make a choice: Am I going to wade through the waters of life or am I going to keep treading furiously just to avoid drowning? Am I going to risk diving deep or will I stay safely at the surface? Am I going to immerse and rebirth myself or allow myself to be swept downriver and wait to see which shore I've washed up on in the years to come? When I look at the ocean and its crashing waves, will I see danger and peril, or will I surrender to life's eternal ebbing and flowing, her endless rhythms of brokenness *and* wholeness, of emptiness *and* fullness, of shattering *and* rebuilding?

Let's take a step back for a moment. "The world is burning, Dini," you might be thinking. "There are dangerous and violent anti-American and anti-Israel protests in over 20 countries across the Middle East. There are major issues confronting the world in general and the Jewish people in particular that demand our attention: the ongoing chaos unleashed by terrorism and violence, the social and religious strife Israel, the threat of Iran, the presidential elections, the struggling economy. What aren't we talking about those issues, Dini?"

Those are all critical matters over which we ought to pray and reflect. But my approach is deliberate. Inspired as I am by the mystics and the Hassidim, I believe that the surest path to Tikkun HaOlam, the healing of the world, is through Tikkun Halev, the healing of the heart. None of the issues tearing apart communities and countries right now will be solved until we, until all human beings, learn to be whole in our own souls. You may have more or less confidence in some people's ability to do business with themselves. But my concern today is the business we here are doing with ourselves.

When I was interviewing for Rabbinical School at JTS 25 years ago, the interviews took place in what was called the Green Room – a room with wall-to-wall shaggy lime-green carpet with a glass table around which the interview committee sat, with the candidate at the head.

Word got out my year that the committee was asking each applicant the same opening question after offering him or her a glass of water: "What blessing is made over water? Is any blessing at all made over such an ordinary substance?" The glass table made it impossible to cover up your nervous handwringing wondering if this was a trick question. It wasn't.

A blessing is indeed made over water. The blessing is "*Baruch...shehakol n'hiyeh b'dvaro/ Blessed are you, Source of life, by whose word everything comes to be.*"

As water is the building block of all forms of life, this blessing is the foundation of all blessings. If you forget the right blessing for the food

you're eating, this blessing will always do. Everything edible under the sun can be blessed by it.

In the same way, every moment of life contains within it the seeds of blessing: our accomplishments, our failures, our strengths, our weaknesses, our merits, and our sins. It is we who have the power to bring the blessing to life. What do we make of the moment in which we find ourselves? Can we step up to the plate? Rise to the occasion? Can we own our mistakes, ask forgiveness and do better next time?

As God brought the world into being with words -- "And God said, Let there be light" -- we too create worlds with our words. On this day of so many words, what do we have to say about our lives? What new realities are we prepared to create with the power of our prayers and declarations?

25 years ago I gripped my glass of water and recited the blessing for all to hear. 25 years of living, loving, losing, finding, growing and striving later, I stand humbly before you not only as your rabbi, but as a fellow seeker of forgiveness and healing. With you I shed tears of remorse and gratitude, with you I immerse into the waters of teshuvah, and on all of our behalf I proudly proclaim words for all to hear:

"Baruch ata...shehecheyanu....lazman hazeh

Blessed are You, Source of Life, who has given us life, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this moment."

Shanah Tovah.

