

1. intro – mental models/power & powerlessness

When I was 20, I heard someone say, “Whoever dies with the most toys wins.” I loved it! It gave expression to what I sensed was the unspoken truth governing so much of American society. It also introduced me to the powerful concept of the mental model – how unarticulated concepts about ourselves and the world can – **do** -- govern our actions. In hindsight I realize that it also raised a central question: if that wasn’t the mental model I wanted governing my life, what was? And today, in community, I ask us to lean on our glorious holiday to encounter this fundamental set of questions: what are we here for? What does the tradition demand of us? What really matters? .

Rabbi Simcha Bunim, one of the great Hasidic masters, taught that we should keep two scraps of paper on our person, one in each pocket.¹ **Upon one should be written “Bishvili nivra ha’olam” – “The world was created for my sake” (Talmud - Sanhedrin 37a); and on the other should be these words from Genesis (18:27), “V’anochi afar va’ayfehr,” – “I am but dust and ashes.”**

At times it seems that our society is built on the worst interpretation of these texts. That on one hand we live and consume in a way that has lost sight of our interconnectedness with and obligation to all of creation. And that on the other hand when it comes to bringing healing and justice to the world, our actions reveal a mental model that says – we can’t do anything, why bother. Instead, we retreat to the consolations of private life, and do whatever we can to soothe our shattered nervous systems.

But our tradition can point in a different direction, to a way of navigating the deep question of power and powerlessness; the question of what our responsibility is, where our agency lies, and why we’re here. In my experience, leaning into these questions may not only help us do right, but can be more effective in bringing us peace and respite we crave.

2. endangered children

Today’s text is the Akedah, the binding of Isaac. God tells Abraham to take his son Isaac to a mountaintop and sacrifice him. While Isaac is ultimately spared, the text takes us all the way to Abraham binding Isaac to the woodpile and readying the knife.

The Akedah is one part of parasha Vayera, which includes the expulsion by Sarah and Abraham of Hagar and their son Ishmael, and the incident in which Lot offers his daughters for sexual abuse in the hope of appeasing a mob. Isaac, Ishmael, Lot’s

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simcha_Bunim_of_Peshischa

daughters – there is poignancy and horror in the specter of children endangered by their own parents, and not just by acts of omission, but through overt acts of betrayal. You may have noticed -- seeking role models in our sacred text can lead to certain... challenges.

But – against all the odds of my anti-religious secular humanist upbringing-- I've bound myself to this tradition, and have wrestled blessings from it. To open as fully as I can to its demands, and take responsibility for the endangered children of our own day.

Headlines earlier this month documented that one in four California children are poor. In this country children of color are twice as likely to grow up in poverty as whites. Researchers are learning that children growing up in poverty are often intensely and chronically stressed, and that stress is detectable in children as young as 24 months old. This chronic stress is actually toxic to the developing brain – impairing cognitive function and thus the ability to succeed in school – and also leads to diseases later in life, like cancer and high blood pressure.² How is this okay?

A story: Yvette – an 18 year old I met through our community organizing work. The oldest of four children born here in the US, to hard-working parents originally from Mexico. Her father had been deported in a raid, her mother confined to the apartment with a tracking bracelet to prevent her from working. The family was split up, with no means of generating income, and no path to legalization for the parents who've been here twenty years. Yvette was deeply stressed and overwhelmed. Through organizing, this teenager became a public speaker who told her story as part of organizing for change in our broken immigration system.

Another story: As part of our last listening campaign, I talked with one of our high school students attending an exclusive high school. He felt incredible pressure to have a perfect academic record and resume, in order to have a shot at getting into a UC school. The pressures middle and upper-middle-class kids are under, the lack of faith they have in a future that is sustainable for them personally and collectively, are symptomatic of the polarization of our society, where we've returned to levels of inequality not seen since 1929.³

How do we relate to these overwhelming realities? Our sage Abraham Joshua Heschel famously said, "Some are guilty, but all are responsible."

² Gary W. Evans, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, and Pamela Kato Klebanov, "Stressing Out the Poor," *Pathways Magazine*, Winter 2011. www.inequality.com.

³ In the late 1970s, the wealthiest 1 percent of Americans held only 8-9% of the nation's total income. Compare that to 1929 (23.9%) and 2007 (23.5%). Robert Reich, *The Nation*, "Unjust Spoils," July 19, 2010 (viewed online 9/2/10) (<http://www.thenation.com/article/36893/unjust-spoils>).

3. Power & Powerlessness/The Teaching of the 2 Scraps/Living in “the And”

How can we tolerate the demands that a sage like Heschel puts before us? The teaching of the two scraps offers a path for both coping and contributing.

“The whole world was created for me” means – each one of us is infinitely important and precious. We all have immense power to effect good... or do ill, and the responsibility to find that love medicine, to open to it and to our power as widely as we can. On Rosh Hashanah we are reminded to be fully in our power and glory. So imagine with me a world where the facts and stories I just shared with you would be oddities, shocking aberrations, because good education, decent jobs, quality health care, safety, and bonds of caring and community were the norm. Just take a moment and picture that. How does it feel? What happens if for a moment we embrace our own **power** to contribute to this vision, instead of our powerlessness? I think this is what Heschel is asking of us, and what this holiday calls us to do.

Scrap 2 -- “I am but dust and ashes”. On Yom Kippur we face our mortality. Shortly in this machzor, and repeatedly on Yom Kippur we read: “we are like the breeze that blows, the grass that withers, the dream that flies away...” Impromptu translation: We are specks. Mysteriously, this also means that our experience of being distinct BEINGS, separate and contained, is an illusion. Truly, all beings are one, just like the Shema says. The knowledge that our lives are fleeting, that we are but dust and ashes, helps me face how small I am, and also provides a bit of cosmic perspective on my personal struggles. Paradoxically, knowing how small I am helps me feel bigger and overcome feelings of inadequacy and fear.

In the course of our organizing work here at Sha’ar Zahav, I was asked to do something that scared me: co-chair a public action of hundreds of people, in a context that was extremely imperfect. Some of you were there and I was so grateful for your presence. I didn’t want to say yes, but I did. As the event approached, my anxiety increased. I was scared that I couldn’t hold the energy – convey the passion and righteousness that I thought was required. I was scared that the event wouldn’t be a success and I’d look bad. I was afraid of letting people down.

I did it because I learned here at Sha’ar Zahav that this community and this tradition would get me through it, and help me take a small step in the direction of protecting endangered children. That’s why I did it. How I got through it was leaning on people and leaning into ... God. Can’t believe I just said that in public -- It’s been a long journey from my secular childhood, to standing here today.

I don’t believe in a personal God, so by leaning into God, what do I mean? Somehow the awareness of being a speck – a speck that is a part of generations of Jews, a speck that is part of some vast eternal Beingness – somehow provides strength and comfort, and even courage... access to a larger sense of power – and also access to compassion and self-acceptance. I believe this awareness is something that all of us

are being called to understand and use. Today is a day to consider opening more fully to that awareness, alongside all the uncomfortable questions that may raise – as, for example, in today’s text.

4. The Call

This is how I interpret Rabbi Bunam’s two scraps.

You may be overwhelmed, AND you might still decide to stretch yourself, to open to awareness of injustice. You may feel despair, unable to contribute, not sure you’ll have impact, and decide to act anyway. You may find the texts enraging or alienating, and determine yet and still to wrestle a blessing from the tradition. You may feel unsure about or on the margins of this community, and decide to claim it as your own – so you can get asked to do the things that will challenge and open you.

For those of you open to some concrete/tachlis suggestions, here are a few to consider.

- Open to hard questions – remembering – the whole world was created for you!: Ask yourself – what mental models govern my actions today? What inner voice do I need to turn up the volume on? How can I lean into BOTH my smallness and my power?
- Open your wallet or bank account. Calculate how much money you give away, and consider increasing it by 10%.
- Open your eyes and ears. For a day or week, open to information about the endangered children of today. Go to an action in the Bayview by one of our sister congregations in SFOP, or talk to a teenager at CSZ.

“The whole world was created for me”

AND

“I am but dust and ashes.”

I pray that we find our way in responding to the endangered children in our own city, in our own time. May we find the wisdom to embrace both our power and our mortality; vision to imagine a world of justice and wholeness; compassion for our heartbreak; and the courage to act.