

ROSH HASHANAH 5777: DAY 1

Drash by Rabbi Eric Weiss

We all love a story. Neuro-scientists tell us what our ancients also knew, that we are wired for stories. So here we are, with our new year, marking a core narrative of our very peoplehood, our very theological structure, at our very Communal being: Creation itself. I want to share with you two thoughts I have had about our common narrative and its impact, one using the text itself, and one about story altogether.

We read in *B'resheet*, the story of creation, "*Ruach Elohim Mirachefet al Pnai Hamayim*": A wind from God hovered or swept across the face of the water." The word that is translated as swept or hovered is *Mirachefet*. I don't like that translation because it is not quite as precise as to what I believe is its spiritual intent in the story-form, because in English, helicopters hover and floors are swept. The word *Mirachefet* is a word of ancient Hebrew poetry and occurs in very few other places in the Torah but it does appear in Deuteronomy where it refers to a mother eagle, beating her wings in place, over the nest of her young, to feed them. And so I like to translate *Mirachefet* as "fluttering", so that the sentence: *Ruach Elohim Mirachefet al Pnai Ha-mayim*, can be translated to: A wind from God fluttered across the face of the water.

Most of us may think of the sound of Creation as God's voice saying "Let there be light" —but this sentence: *Ruach Elohim Mirachefet al Pnai Ha-mayim*, appears first. For this reason, I'd like to suggest that the first sound of creation is fluttering. And, because each of us is created in God's image, that we all have this deep internal *Mirachefet*, this deep internal spiritual fluttering. Whatever language we speak, we mirror the text — fluttering first, then language. English, Spanish, Mandarin or Hebrew, all languages try to ultimately express our deep spiritual fluttering. *Mirachefet*. Born with this natural spiritual hunger, that I believe is as natural as the need for food, for shelter, for intimacy, we will do anything to satisfy it.

First, the fluttering, then the language. Some stories can't wholly be told in words. In my workshops on spirituality, I often ask participants to take the time to think and to talk about something that is spiritual for themselves. So, take a breath and reflect on this for a moment. There's a good chance that what comes up for you is something that you experienced in nature. The color of the Mediterranean at dawn. A hike. Half Dome. Or you may even remember a piece of music or a transcendent moment in the theater. It may be this, here, our Cantor's voice. It may be a moment of intimacy with your beloved. We have a variety of ways in which personally we experience something spiritual but at the core of any of these encounters is something about experiencing Awe, that sense that we are not alone in the world, that something more than ourselves is at work beyond us. For me, personally, my greatest spiritual attraction is to water, the ocean in particular. And I love to swim, and my doctor is pleased, but actually I love being in the water because it is the place I have spiritual alignment, even comfort. The same can be said for someone who settles into their favorite performance of their 2

favorite aria, settles into a favorite food; like maybe chocolate, cares for a pet, or breathes into someone else's arms.

It's *Mirachefet*: the story that can't wholly be told in words.

Flash to your ocean, to your aria, or the like, and think about this. We move through life chasing this Awe, striving to live in a place in which there is something more at work in the world than just our individual selves. Our internal *Mirachefet* moves us to deepen our capacity as a person, as a people, so that we can do good, so that we can offer the world new ways of being, and understand how we can make our world here, better, more whole.

I remember from my earliest recollections feeling that my own male-male attraction was how I was knit; that God wanted me this way. Today, I would say I am Gay by Divine intent. This is just one example of how I think our *Mirachefet* moves in each of us. This kind of deeper spiritual fluttering has bolstered me when other theological and societal messaging might have otherwise diminished me—indeed us.

And so, I think our natural spiritual hunger, our spiritual flutterings, our *Mirachefet*, has brought us to a moment in the arc of Jewish life, to a place of massive transition into new stories, into new paradigms of assumption, guided by our core need to satisfy our natural spiritual hunger.

I think the crux of Jewish identity development into this and the next century is going to be marked by this spiritual journey and then by the ways we link the personal and communal. A core spiritual activity will be caring. That is to say that we will become a part of something communal based on the ways we are able to care for others and others care for us. This will move the ways that organizations understand their rationale for philanthropy, for the ways we raise our Jewish children, for the ways we start to talk about our textual life; Bible, Talmud, *Midrash*, and all the ways we already engage in that grand rabbinic process of re-thinking, re-writing and re-formulating a Jewish life that will give us resilience by its very nourishment in day to day life, the celebratory, the routine, and the devastating.

And so this brings me to my second thought. Story. Bible story. Where really did it all come from, these words we read, re-read, re-write, contemplate continually? We like to say that they come from men. There is some female narrative woven in, there is a fascinating combination of fertility cult perspectives, ancient eastern notions, and of course what we call The Rabbinic Mind; as opposed to The Greek Mind. All of these elements, they are part of the arc of our human communal effort to live with, into, and build community. A community of belonging, a community of care.

But, this is what I want to offer. These communal stories, from the Bible to Modern *Midrash*, they have great sway over our own individual story. There are elements that subtly yet potently weave themselves into the fabric of our souls, individually and communally. But here is the rub, if the people who wrote the story did

not include you, 3 then what is the story really. The literal story of Adam and Eve? Many of us just can't relate. It doesn't align to our lived experience. We just don't belong in this story. What's your, one's, our, response? You weave yourself into the story out of insistence that you do belong, you push your way in, you prove where the male-heterocentric hegemony has missed the mark. And we even use language—like miss the mark—that is internally consistent to our very identity as Jews. But, what is that pushing to get in all about?

I don't like to talk about myself very often, but my husband, Dan and my beloved colleague, Rabbi Eliot Kukla both told me that I have to give personal examples to help make this stick—after all the importance of story, and story that we recall, and insight we share, is partly in personal narrative, it is how we are wired, so here goes.

I came out in my application process for rabbinic school. I was admitted, and then, six years later, became the first openly Gay rabbinical student to be ordained. At the end of this road, I just wanted a job. I just wanted to be a rabbi. There is no amount of public acknowledgement that will keep you warm at night, no place in history that will give you love. That takes basic human capacity no matter who you are. I was and remain resistant to talking about myself in this way because here is the thing, when you push against and ultimately break a glass ceiling, purple or otherwise, you really have to be careful of the shards.

But, I always felt I was as well created by divine intent. And so what may appear a push was really just trying my best to satisfy my own *mirachefet*, my own natural spiritual hunger. I just wanted to be a rabbi as part of my continuing spiritual journey. And for me, whenever we publicize that we are the “first” of something we take a bow to what I think of as the heterosexual hegemony of hierarchy. But here is the thing, there is after the first — the second, the third, the fourth, and so on—until it becomes normative. This is not only true for individuals but true for organizations as well, like a synagogue.

I think the point is this: We are in this all together, communally, not just individually, trying to chase Awe, pay attention to our *Mirachefet* individually and communally, so that we bring good, become more whole. And so I want to do my best to bring frames of Awe to regular human experience, like illness, our last breath, grief. And by this, how we take our place inherently in the theological life of our people.

In our push to belong, we may, for example, stumble upon ancient text that the rabbis wrote that reveal a sophisticated understanding of physical gender expression. And we celebrate it, as we should, for the insight we can use now, for the affirmation, the Divine Seal of Approval, that even the Rabbis discovered ways that the story is not completely accurate. But still, we push. We push because we know, in the core story, we are not really there. Something else won out, we were subservient, not seen, dismissed, somehow a different ideal got portrayed.

And one consequence of this is that now, we rightly spend a lot of time pushing to escape the margins, to get in; into a career, into a field of study, into a higher rung of 4 the corporate ladder. And then, once we really do get in, into that career, into that job, or into that synagogue , we sometimes don't know how to stop pushing, how to stop

fighting, how to instead, just care, care for the wounds of everything from coming out to historic loss such as the AIDS pandemic. And rather, to just care for the new life that comes into our communal life with new children, new members, new ideas, new leaders, a new rabbi.

I realize we can all conjugate this out into so many conversations, so many ways of fundamentally changing the core text with which we fit the story to our very soul. But just in this short time together, I want to suggest this. Over these High Holy Days, when we think about the ways we want to do better, the ways we want to apologize, receive forgiveness from others — all the ways we arrive to *Kol Nidre*, ask yourself: are there ways you can more expansively understand the theological stories, their assumptions and how they might influence our personal stories? What really are the theological assumptions about forgiveness altogether that may not even fit our deeper spiritual needs?

B'resheet, it is also a story that holds we are not fully spiritually worthy. After all, there it is with Adam and Eve. The story itself though is the wrong story. Story, especially the story of a people, forms assumptions altogether. And so if we want to change assumptions, then we must fundamentally change stories. We must use our *Mirachefet* to formulate a new vocabulary, a new language, a new vision, so that what becomes common-place is a different frame in our chase of Awe, in our spiritual journey, both individually and as a people. If we have been harmed by a dominant assumption, then whose story are we even agreeing to use as we reflect upon issues of spiritual import, like being better, more whole, affirming Divine Intent?

Let's push where it really matters, push at the theology, the language, and say bluntly : The story is wrong. All theology is inherently clumsy. It is not declarative, rather it is just the best we have, so far. It is our task to use metaphor, to use Hebrew primarily, to mold a relationship of caring, a relationship in which our natural spiritual hunger guides the ways in which we form values of care, like *tikkun olam*, words of care, like *tzedaka*, or frameworks of care, like *mitzvot*.

But even as we use some familiar frames, we must say the story is off. God did not create only Adam and Eve. No serpent. No fallen, contrite woman. What if we just say that our *mirachefet* leads us differently?

Rather we Jews acknowledge at *Rosh Hashana*, that we are in the midst of a great and awe filled spiritual journey, fueled by our *Mirachefet*, our natural spiritual hunger, to care for the inherent worth of every one of us regardless of the language we have invented to describe ourselves. So, let's push differently, let's declare a different story, a different normative—that God is crying at the ways we twisted Divine Intent, with the limitations of our language, with our poor metaphors. And, perhaps God is crying at our very adherence to hierarchy altogether. Let's care for the ways each of us express our spiritual lives, in nature, in the arts, in our bodies, and let our ancient attempt with 5 prayer, liturgy, *Torah*, be the foundation that launches us, that brings a new story, yet to be written, but one that assumes Divine Intent among us all. We have *Talmud*

Bavli and *Talmud Yerushalmi*. How about *Talmud Mirachefet*, a *Talmud* of Care. We all love story. Let's have at it.

Thank you deeply for this lovely opportunity. *Shana Tova*.