

Rosh HaShanah Day 1 - 5776
Racism and Pain

Each month was full of anticipation, and ultimately heartbreak. After every attempt to get pregnant, I would wonder if every pain I felt in my abdomen was the beginning of life or the end of life's potential. I would Google obsessively -- is this sensation, or feeling, or phenomenon a sign of pregnancy? And of the 8 out of 9 times that I went through the anticipation, there was sadness and disappointment. With each failed attempt, I grew more despondent, more resentful, and more hopeless. Is this ever going to work? Am I ever going to have what it seems everyone else has? Am I the only woman who isn't worthy of this gift? How come when I look at Facebook, all I see are my friends surrounded by kids? Has God forgotten me? I knew things were quite bad, at least on a spiritual level, when I couldn't bring myself to attend the *bris* of a friend's son. I couldn't -- or at least I wouldn't -- share in her joy. I wish that I were better than the person I was, but I wasn't. When I was in pain, I could not share in the joy of others. It was also difficult for me to accept, respect, and heal others who were in their own pain. Everyone else's struggles seemed trivial compared to my own, and it felt offensive to listen, confront, and share in someone else's sorrow. In many ways, the story of Hannah, Penina, and Elkana in the Rosh HaShanah haftarah, is a story not only of

miraculous birth and unparalleled devotion to God; it is also a story about how we deal with the pain of others, and what happens to us all when we fail to hear the cries of others who are in pain.

We read in: **I Samuel 1:1 - 2:10**

⁴ One such day, Elkanah offered a sacrifice. He used to give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; ⁵ but to Hannah he would give one portion only — though Hannah was his favorite — for the Lord had closed her womb. ⁶ Moreover, her rival, to make her miserable, would taunt her that the Lord had closed her womb. ⁷ This happened year after year: Every time she went up to the House of the Lord, the other would taunt her, so that she wept and would not eat. ⁸ Her husband Elkanah said to her, "Hannah, why are you crying and why aren't you eating? Why are you so sad? Am I not more devoted to you than ten sons?"

There is a lot of pain in this story, and few people who deal with it well. First, we have the example of Penina -- the sister wife who is loved less by her husband, Elkana. How does she deal with her pain? By taunting Hannah, the more loved

wife who is barren for years. It isn't Hannah's fault that Elkana favors her over Penina, but Penina won't lash out at Elkana, the one with the power, the power to provide and the power to love. Rather, she lashes out at her sister wife. If Penina cannot be happy, she will not let anyone else live in peace or happiness. She cannot change the entrenched, patriarchal system that has made her miserable, so she needs to ensure that no one, especially the person most like her in her life, can enjoy a modicum of peace. Elkana has one of the most classic responses in the Tanakh -- "Hey babe, who needs a baby -- aren't I better than 12 of the boy kind?" Or, if I am a bit kinder, and change the tone, "Babe, what's wrong? Please eat. Please stop crying. I am so devoted to you. Can't that be enough?" Hannah simply doesn't respond. She goes to the Temple to pray, and famously, is mistaken for a drunkard by Eli the Priest. She chooses not to respond to Penina or to Elkana, suffering in silence, and assuming that the relationships have no potential for healing or support. Taunting others out of jealousy, envy, and anguish; dismissing the pain of those whose pain we cannot bear to see; and holding our pain to ourselves -- all formulas for a family, a community, and a nation in disarray.

The topic of pain is one that has been in the forefront of my mind, especially a few weeks after the one-year anniversary of Michael Brown's death in Ferguson. So many sectors of our population are in deep and profound pain.

Most obviously and visibly, we saw communities of color around the nation who experienced Michael Brown's death as the straw that broke the camel's back - a single event that brought various layers of systemic, widespread, and historical oppression to the surface. Protesters and allies came from around the country to confront a justice and law enforcement system that the US Department of Justice [claimed](#) was deeply unjust. The authors of the report wrote, "African Americans experience disparate impact in nearly every aspect of Ferguson's law enforcement system," and continued, "Our [investigation](#) indicates that this disproportionate burden on African Americans cannot be explained by any difference in the rate at which people of different races violate the law. Rather, our investigation has revealed that these disparities occur, at least in part, because of unlawful bias against and stereotypes about African Americans. We have found substantial evidence of racial bias among police and court staff in Ferguson." The report was a real call for *teshuvah*, repentance, on the part of the local community and all Americans. The report showed clear evidence for deep and widespread wrongdoing and bias in Ferguson and surrounding communities, and in certain

respects, represented larger trends of bias and violence against people of color in our country. But, just like in our haftarah, the story does not end with just one narrative of pain.

Law enforcement around the country felt that they, too, were unfairly maligned in the aftermath of the Michael Brown's attack and the protests that have followed. This feeling extended on a nationwide scale with even local police officers feeling affected. On December 23rd, the Waterville Police department wrote a post on social media that I'll quote in part, "I've got to tell you - it's been a little tough lately. Seems like there are some high profile people on the national stage who are bent on weakening the bond between police and the communities they serve...The result is that right now, at least in the national news, in some of the "halls of power" and social media, law enforcement officers are being painted in a bad light..." I don't know who this officer is, but I know that his feelings represent much of law enforcement and their families -- individuals who work long hours, sacrifice a great deal for the families in their communities, and don't make a lot of money. Most of police officers are not "the face of privilege," in the same way that, for example, many students and faculty at an elite college are. When you serve in an occupation that requires sacrifice and risk for relatively low remuneration, it is painful when you feel as though your whole occupation is being

sullied by the actions of a few. It is difficult to hear criticism from individuals who do not experience or know first hand about the risks you take and sacrifices you make, and probably cannot fully fathom those risks and sacrifices.

In our polarized society, chances are one of the two narratives I just presented was more resonant for most of you than the other. Most of the people here today are Jewish, but we are a diverse community -- in terms of age, race, class, occupation, and political beliefs. We live in a country currently **defined** by extreme political self-sorting, and we **define ourselves** according to vicious dichotomies of the good and the evil, the educated and the uneducated, the patriotic and treasonous, the clear-eyed and the deluded. We leave little room to see multiple sides of a narrative, to sympathize and feel the pain of many parties at once. We all want see ourselves and the ones we love as Hannah, but what about Elkana and Penina? They may have said and done cruel and insensitive things, but as the omniscient readers of this ancient yet always relevant story, we know that they too were pain. Elkana was suffering from see his wife slowly starve herself to death, and having to stand by, helpless, as she could not conceive. Penina, Hannah's rival, was rich with children, but poor in love. Their suffering was different, but they were all in pain.

All of this isn't to say that the pain of one community is not worse than that of another. Not all suffering is equal, not all of our struggles are the same or can be compared. On the most basic, physical level, we know after countless studies that the poor and people of color, on the whole, will live lives with greater physical pain than those who are white and wealthy. According to a University of Rochester Medical [study](#), when people of color and white people come into the ER with the same level of pain and an identical injury, blacks and Hispanics are far less likely to be prescribed sufficient amounts of painkillers. Jason Silverstein at Harvard's W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African-American Research [found](#) that when individuals, both black and white, watched videos of white people and black people being injured, the respondents reacted far more dramatically to the pain expressed by white people.

When he was asked why both blacks *and* whites react so much more strongly to images of white suffering, he provided a fascinating response, “[we looked] at nurses and nursing students 'cause this is a big problem that we have with black people not getting pain medicine when they need it the most. And what these researchers found was that all of the participants, white, black, nurses, nursing students, all assumed that black people felt less pain than white people. And what they said was, well, it doesn't really make sense to say that racial

prejudice or animosity is entirely to blame here. It may be something else. And when they pressed on this, they started to see that it had a lot to do with whether or not participants assumed that black people in the study had faced more hardship or more adversity. And basically, what they ended up seeing was that they felt that black people could just sort of take more pain. And we can see how this - it just creates this cycle of pain, then. Right?”

All of us, black and white, liberals and conservatives, police officers, nurses, and doctors, students and professors, we all underestimate the multifaceted suffering of people of color, and cause great pain as a result. That is a fact backed up by countless studies and buttressed by a multitude of testimonials that most of us do not hear or want to hear. We as Jews have the responsibility to listen, affirm, and act for the sake of our Common Creator.

What I will say, though, is that comparing spiritual pain for the sake of *discounting completely the pain of another*, rarely brings healing. Rather, when we assert that the spiritual pain of a group we identify with or sympathize with is worse than that of another group, we are rarely serving as purveyors of some great objective Truth. Only God can evaluate the pain of a human heart, its intensity, and effects. When we discount the pain of others, when we claim that the complainant is lying, or exaggerating, or deserves to suffer, or should stay silent in

the face of a greater grievance faced by others, we are only purveyors of greater pain. We deepen the dangerous chasms that exist in our society -- a body politic paralyzed by the inability to respect the struggles of those with whom we do not identify or do not really understand.

It is always an open question as to whether there is a specifically Jewish response to the hot political topics of the day. I usually err on the side of caution -- my training as a rabbi does not make me uniquely qualified to rewrite civil law, police procedure, or comment on the history of race relations. That said, Jewish law says a great deal about how we interact with those who are telling us they are in pain, cannot stand, cannot breathe, and feel humiliated by others. According to the Shulchan Aruch, the primary code of Jewish law, even if 100 doctors tell a Jew that she is *capable* of fasting on Yom Kippur, if *she* feels that she cannot fast, and that she will be ill as a result, she **must not fast**. We must respect each individual's report of their own pain, even when it is most difficult for us to accept their testimony. According Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg (arguably the greatest Jewish legal thinker of the past century) an individual with physical disabilities may break the laws of Shabbat in order to use assistive technologies, "...for the sake of *kevod ha-beriyot* (ensuring the dignity of everything living thing), so that a person **will not in any way be demeaned in his own eyes or the eyes of others**

on account of being unable to carry [an object on Shabbat].” We must do all we can to ensure that others are not humiliated in their eyes or the eyes of others.

When a community tells us they feel humiliated or slighted, we must accept their report, and do what we can to affirm their human dignity.

When I think about what our community, our country, and our world need in this new year, it isn't more doubt and derision at other's testimonies of pain. Yes, I am sure that there are those who lie and exaggerate -- such is human nature, and we are all guilty of both of those sins. But when we today face our Creator, asking for our lives to be continued in this next year, let us ask ourselves, would we rather say we cared too much or too little, that we healed too much or too little, that we did all we could to ensure the dignity of every human being or too little? When we stand before God, may we all of the privilege one day of saying to our Creator, “My greatest sin Almighty, was caring too much, being too sensitive, hearing too well, and doing too much to ensure that everyone around me lived lives of respect, dignity and honor.” None of us are there yet, but let us hope that one day, that is the most we have to atone for.

L'Shanah Tovah u'mitukah. May this year be sweetened through repentance and joy.

