Rosh HaShanah Day 2 5779
September 11, 2018

Olam Hesed Yibaneh

Rabbi Sam Pollak

I have an exciting opportunity for you: a magical elixir that, when drunk, will transform you into a vampire. The vampiric transformation will be instantaneous and painless, and you'll hurt no others in the process. Drinking the elixir *will* mean permanently relinquishing your existence as a human being, but you will gain immeasurable powers in exchange. All your friends have become vampires already, and they are loving it.

What do you think? Will you take the leap, become a vampire?

Here's the thing: It is *impossible* to make an informed choice! That's the catch of this little thought experiment, which comes from Yale philosopher L.A. Paul.[1] If there's no way to know what it's like to be a vampire without becoming one, we can't compare that hypothetical experience with what it is like to be ourselves as mere humans at this very moment. The choice is one between a known reality—being human—and an unknowable reality—being a vampire. We might think to take our vampire friends' testimony into account…but how could we trust them? They're vampires!

It's not often that we have the opportunity to become a vampire; most of us will never face *that* particular choice. But we do confront decisions, large and small, every day—ones that will bring us into experiences we've never had before. Decisions like attending a new school, beginning a career, getting married, having a child, ending a relationship. The experience will change us, but we can't know what that's like without actually *having* that new, transformative experience. Others try to tell us, but they have already been changed by the experience and are no longer in a position to know what it's like *not* to have made that choice. We're stuck in a paradox.

At the very moment when knowing our futures would be most useful, we're struck by the reality of just how little we know.

During the Days of Awe, particularly in the recitation of *Unetaneh Tokef*, we consider the unpredictability of even our own mortality; exactly who will live and who will die is concealed. Deep down, we never can be sure what the future will hold. Being human means making our way in a

[1] Popova, Maria. "The Vampire Problem: A Brilliant Thought Experiment Illustrating the Paradox of Transformative Experience." *Brain Pickings*, 15 Sept. 2017, www.brainpickings.org/2017/09/13/transformative-experience-vampire-problem/.

world that is, ultimately, unknowable and unpredictable. Everything can change, for better or for worse, in an instant.

When we really stop, when we take a true pause to consider the weight of all that not-knowing, all that uncertainty, the result can be terrifying.

This, according to one midrash, is precisely the terror our matriarch Sarah felt in the aftermath of the *Akedah*, when her son was nearly killed at the hands of her husband. However, contained within Sarah's terror is the very key to our own ability to keep going, despite the future's unknowability. It all hinges on *ḥesed*—generous, committed, lovingkindness.

As the story goes, Abraham took Isaac, and led him up to the top of a mountain. There he built an altar, and at the command of the Holy One, took the knife to slaughter Isaac. "Were it not that the angel called out from heaven," says the midrash, "he would already have been slaughtered. Know that it is so."

The midrash imagines the scene in which Isaac then returns to his mother Sarah. She asks, "Where have you been, my son?" He tells her what happened. Sarah is shocked: "Woe upon [you, my] son! Were it not for the angel, you would already be slaughtered?" "Yes," he replies. At that, says the midrash, Sarah screams six times, corresponding to the six *Teki'ah* blasts of the *shofar*, and dies.[2]

We would expect Sarah to rejoice at her son's safe return, at his narrow escape from death. Instead, it is the realization of just how very narrow his escape was that causes her soul to depart: Were it not for the angel, Isaac would already be slaughtered. Know that it is so.

Ostensibly, it is the Holy One's *ḥesed*, the divine generosity, that halts the command for Abraham to slaughter Isaac as a sacrifice; commitment to the covenant overrides the test of faith. We even invoke that very *ḥesed* in today's *shofar* blessings, praying we receive the same grace. But, as modern commentator Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg points out, it is of little comfort to Sarah. So much depended on that single act of *ḥesed*, that moment when the divine messenger interrupts the sacrifice. Sarah loses all sense of stability.[3]

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[2] *Vayikra Rabbah* 20:2

[3] Zornberg, Avivah Gottlieb. *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire*. Jewish Publication Society, 2010, pp. 126-127.

Sarah and Isaac's reunion is her moment of pause. It is her moment to consider the weight of the world's capriciousness, the burden of its uncertainty and unknowability. For Sarah's soul, that weight was simply too much to bear.

On some level, we are all Sarah. We are struck by existential vertigo when we truly consider the unpredictability of life, the unknowability of our decisions' consequences. So, we need ways to keep walking forward, sources of faith that, though we may not know what is coming, will help us make it through.

Everything depends on a single act of *hesed*, a single act of lovingly kind commitment. We can let that terrify us. Or, we can let it inspire us. That's the irony of depending on goodwill to move forward: the only way to guarantee goodwill is to build more of it. As the Psalmist says, "*Olam hesed yibaneh*. The world is built of *hesed*."[4]

In January, my husband Ari and I adopted a kitten. It was something we talked about doing together for a long time, and finally the time was right. We picked a day to go to the shelter, walked into the kitten room, and fell in love. We called her Cocoa, after our love of chocolate. She was playful and friendly. She sat on our laps, slept on our feet, watched TV with us—and once even ate our lasagna.

Then, in the early summer, her behavior changed. She was slowing down and eating less—unusual for an eight-month-old cat. We were stunned when the vet told us Cocoa likely had FIP, feline infectious peritonitis, a rare, untreatable, fatal disease. It wouldn't be long. We were heartbroken.

The day we had Cocoa euthanized was awful. I knew what the procedure would be like—over the years I'd been present for two of my family's cats—but making the decision myself was agonizing. Should we do it today? Tomorrow? What if one of us is at work? We were sad and angry. We thought we'd have Cocoa for 15 years; we never predicted it would be only six months.

Finally, on a Sunday, just days after diagnosis, Ari turned to me and said, "I think we should do it today." I was relieved, but I broke down. Somehow, Ari mustered the strength to call the vet while I wept. He was calm for me when I felt so weak. It was a gift he gave me. It was terrible, but we got through it. And later, in our grief, I could be there for him, too.

That day, my world was sustained by Ari's *hesed*.

[4] Psalm 89:2

Jewish tradition looks to Abraham as the paradigmatic model of *hesed*—which is ironic, given that an act of *hesed* from another is what stops Abraham from sacrificing Isaac. Nonetheless, while Sarah's experience shows how depending on *hesed* leaves us feeling unstable, Abraham teaches how *hesed* can inspire. In the Talmud, the rabbis of a later time look back on their spiritual ancestor and say, "Our brothers act lovingly to one another and are the children of those who acted lovingly to one another, those who maintain the covenant of Abraham, our patriarch."[5] Turning *hesed* into action is integral to being Jewish.

That is one lesson of Abraham's confrontation with his deity prior to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The Sovereign of the Universe plots to wipe out the cities because of some citizens' depravity, and Abraham argues in response: "Will you sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? *HaShofet kol ha-aretz lo ya'aseh mishpat*? Shall the Judge of all the earth not deal justly?"[6]

Midrash reads Abraham's accusation not as a rhetorical question, but as a declaration: "The judge of the whole earth shall *not* do justice—if it is a world You want, then strict justice is impossible. And if it is strict justice You want, then a world is impossible."[7]

We desire so intensely for the world to function with true *mishpat*, a mathematically exact scale, by which only the wicked suffer while the good prosper. But we know that is not how things work. The world in which we live is too random, too capricious, too full of chance. As Avivah Zornberg interprets, "For weal or woe, *mishpat*, absolute standards of justice, cannot be realized in this world as God has created it. To adhere to such standards is to destroy the world; in order to build the world *hesed*, the generous perception of alternative possibilities, is necessary."[8]

That is L.A. Paul's advice in response to her vampire problem, too: to walk forward from a place of curiosity about who we will become. It is up to us to build our world from *hesed*.

Our Sages teach that *g'milut hasadim* is a pillar on which the world stands.[9] The phrase is a tricky one. We often translate it as "acts of lovingkindess," but that glosses over the *g'milut* for the *hasadim*. The word *g'milut*, from the word *gamal*, connotes repayment. Performing an act of *hesed*, a

[5] B. Talmud *Ketubot* 8b
[6] Genesis 18:23, 25
[7] *Bereishit Rabbah* 49:20
[8] Zornberg, p. 110
[9] *M. Avot* 1:2

kind deed, is a way we compensate for something someone else has done for us. It is a way to "pay it forward."

Last year, as Hurricane Irma bore down on Florida, Jennifer and Shawn Newman and their two young children prepared for the coming storm. Like the others in their neighborhood, they gathered a supply of food, batteries, flashlights, and sandbags. The national coverage of the hurricane made them nervous, but their 2-year-old, Willow, was oblivious. She was focused on her upcoming birthday; she'd been asking about it for months.

Then, Jennifer noticed something strange about Willow. She looked unusually pale, and had been napping longer and longer. She took Willow to a doctor two days before the hurricane was forecast to make landfall, and the doctor noticed a bruise on Willow's leg. Then came a nerve-racking ambulance ride to the hospital. Then intensive care. Then the terrifying diagnosis: leukemia.

It's hard to imagine a situation filled with more uncertainty than the Newmans'. Jennifer had just received a diagnosis of leukemia for her 2-year-old child. She did not even know what leukemia was. And a hurricane was headed at her family.

"I was trying to give direction on how to prepare a house and I had to meet with our oncologist," she recounted on *Kind World*, a program of Boston's NPR affiliate station. "I didn't know how much more I could take at that point."

Meanwhile, Hurricane Irma was coming—and so was Willow's birthday. When the hospital staff found out, they scrounged around for birthday gifts and made a banner. Kelly Boyd, a child life specialist at the hospital, remembers that day: "You can't stop a hurricane. Hey, why not throw a party with a big bang, right?"

Willow loved it. As she stuck one hand into a birthday cake and tore open presents with the other, she lit up and shouted "Oooh, I always wanted this!" for every one.

Recalling that moment, Boyd said it was powerful to be "able to just celebrate something good and something fun, in a time that was just unknown for everyone."[10]

Willow's diagnosis didn't vanish. Hurricane Irma hit the area. What lay ahead for the Newmans was still uncertain, but the hospital's act of *hesed* made it bearable. For a little while, a young child got her wish, and the family got strength to keep going forward. Their world is built of *hesed*.

[10] Lantz, Erika. "The Storm." *Kind World*, WBUR, 26 Sept. 2017.

When we extend *hesed* toward others, when we offer of ourselves in ways great or small, we add another stitch in the social fabric of which our lives are woven. We nurture the goodwill on which our survival depends. We commit to one another, right in the face of the world's unknowability and unpredictability, saying, "We can make it through, together." It's why we visit the sick, bring food to the bereaved, welcome the stranger. Life's pain and uncertainty don't go away, but they become bearable.

The only way to guarantee goodwill is to build more of it. A single act of decency is small, but it is everything.

At the end of her essay called "Believing in Literature," novelist Dorothy Allison offers these thoughts: "There is a place where we are always alone with our mortality, where we must simply have something greater than ourselves to hold onto—God or history or politics or literature or a belief in the healing power of life, or even righteous anger. Sometimes I think they are all the same. A reason to believe, a way to take the world by the throat and insist that there is more to this life than we have ever imagined."[11]

Hesed is stubborn. *Hesed* is resilient. *Hesed* is fickle, but *hesed* is all we have. With it, we take the world by the throat and insist that there is more to this life than we have ever imagined.

Olam hesed yibaneh. I will build this world from love. You will build this world from love. And if we build this world from love, then God will build this world from love.

May we be inscribed in the book of life for good, for *hesed*. And may it be a *shanah tovah*, a good year, for all of us.

[11] Allison, Dorothy. "Believing in Literature." In Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and Social Hope*. Penguin Books, 2000, p. 161.