

**DOWN INTO THE ROOTS**  
**Rosh Hashanah I 5777/2016**  
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In searching for a metaphor which expresses the manifold challenges we face today as a community, as a Jewish people, as a country, and as a species, the best I've come up with is that what we're dealing with might be best described as a massive toothache.

I don't know about you, but when it comes to toothaches my first inclination always is to ignore it for a few days and expect that it will just go away. When that doesn't happen, I pop a few Advil. When *that* doesn't work, I try eating on the other side of my mouth. Then I ignore the situation a little longer. Eventually, after a week or so, I make an appointment with my dentist and pray he says he can't see anything wrong, it's nothing to worry about—and by the way, no charge. Professional courtesy.

OK, it's a nice fantasy. As we all know, where there's pain, there's a problem, one that can be fixed if and when we make our way through denial and schedule the dentist appointment. But sometimes, even the dentist can't fix the problem with a filling or a new crown; sometimes, the problem is deeper and hidden from view. Sometimes, the only solution is root canal.

I speak from experience here, with apologies in advance to any of you for whom this subject may be terrifying. In a time of particular turmoil in my life, I learned that I did, in fact, need root canal, for which I was referred to an endodontist, a specialist in treating the interior of the tooth. As he peered through a microscope deep into the recesses of the problematic tooth, he explained there's no way to know in advance the source of the pain. X rays won't do it. The only way is to explore the roots, gently probing to see what's inflamed in there.

When root canal is called for, the only option is to go beneath the surface, to the deepest sources of our pain. And that's precisely the reason for these Yamim Nora'im: spiritual and ethical root canal. Today, the pain in ourselves and our world has grown so great we can't avoid or wish it away. We can't medicate with short-term pain killers. As individuals, as a people, as a nation, our only alternative is to open wide, drill down, and, explore the inflammation in the very roots of ourselves and our society.

But then there's another problem. As we look into that spiritual and ethical microscope, we have to factor in that our vision is very limited. Here, too, I speak from personal experience. Late last fall, I began to notice a blurriness in my right eye. I assumed my glasses were dirty and kept cleaning them, to no avail. For months I ignored the growing blurriness in my right eye, assuming my good eye would compensate. For a while, I just got used to living with visual limitations. Finally, in August I had a cataract procedure which gave me a new, clear lens and a fresh outlook.

Consciously and unconsciously, we all avoid pain. Consciously and unconsciously, we avoid recognizing our visual limitations. Our view of the world and ourselves becomes obscured

by time, by our habitual patterns of thought, by biases which become more deeply ingrained, day by day.

Biased views are on full display in today's Torah reading. Sarah witnesses an interaction between her son Isaac and Hagar's son Ishmael and demands that Abraham expel Hagar and Ishmael: "*va-tere Sarah et ben Hagar ha-Mitzrit asher yalda l'Avraham metzachek*; Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had born to Abraham, playing or laughing."

What, exactly, did Sarah "see?" How did she form the judgement which led her to demand Abraham to expel Hagar and Ishmael, condemning them to likely death in the wilderness? The text itself says nothing explicitly problematic about Ishmael's behavior. But various classic rabbinic commentators justify Sarah, suggesting that Ishmael must have been serving idols, or engaged in inappropriate sexual play, or mocking the feast to celebrate Isaac's birth, or even trying to kill Isaac with his bow and arrow.

These midrashim elaborate on Sarah's instinctive, negative judgment of Ishmael's behavior. But what if Sarah had suspended judgment long enough to investigate exactly what Ishmael was doing, before deciding on a consequence? Maybe she would have discovered that in fact, Ishmael hadn't committed a terrible crime. Maybe she would have realized that her judgment and the consequence were way out of proportion to any wrongdoing.

Maybe Sarah would have realized that because of deep, underlying fear and shame, she was quickly and harshly condemning in Ishmael behavior she may not have even noticed had Isaac been the culprit. Maybe Sarah would have noticed her own internal cataracts, the underlying biases clouding her judgment. Maybe Sarah would have woken up, before her unacknowledged blind spot in her view of Ishmael and Hagar led to potentially disastrous consequences.

No doubt, each of us can recall a time when, like Sarah, our "cataracts" -- our preconceptions and blind spots—dictated a narrative that seemed obvious to us at the time, but which turned out to be based on a distorted view. It reminds us that we, as human beings, have significant blind spots—unconscious attitudes and biases which inevitably cloud our perceptions of ourselves and our world.

Today, on this Yom HaDin, this judgment day, we drop our defenses. We look deeply and as honestly as we can into the roots of our own soul. As we do, we wake up to our own usually invisible but real biases. We realize and confess how thoroughly our "inner judge," our assessment of ourselves and others, is clouded by self-interest, by a range of assumptions, by favoritism, by stereotypes.

It calls to mind a song from the musical Avenue Q: "Everyone's a little bit racist/Sometimes/Doesn't mean we go/Around committing hate crimes/Look around and you will find/No one's really color blind/Maybe it's a fact/We all should face/Everyone makes judgments/Based on race."

Well, yes: if I look honestly at myself, if I'm truthful, I *am* a little bit racist. I'm a little bit sexist. I'm a little bit Islamophobic. I'm a little bit ageist. I'm a little bit homophobic. In fact, if I

am absolutely transparent, I'm sometimes quite a bit biased against anyone unlike myself, anyone who is not white, straight, married, upper middle class, Ashkenazic Jewish, Upper West Side liberal. I'm biased against anyone who seems "other," because "otherness" tends to trigger deep in me a sense of fear and vulnerability deep in my emotional roots. So I have double standards: I quickly criticize behavior in others which I'd never even notice in myself. And I imagine you may not be so different from me.

The paradox is that sometimes I'm also biased *against* myself and my own kind. Awareness of being me, awareness of being Jewish, presses down on some inflammation in my roots, some degree of shame I carry deep within me. Perhaps that Jewish shame, my own internalized anti-Semitism, stems from carrying in my DNA many centuries of Jewish trauma, my ancestors being hated, degraded and rendered invisible by the world. Perhaps my "shame nerve" becomes inflamed and triggered by awareness of my own unearned privilege and social status in this society. Whatever the sources, inflammation of my "shame root" sometimes leads me to condemn myself and my people for transgressions I may excuse, justify, or not even see in others.

Sometimes, I'm far harder on myself or those whom I love than I ever would be on anyone else. Sometimes, I give everyone else the benefit of the doubt, and apply a harsher standard to my own people. Sometimes even I, a rabbi, might be a little bit anti-Semitic. And again, I imagine that you may not be so different.

Our biases run deep in the shadows of our subconscious. But as we see in today's Torah reading, as well as in America, Israel, and the world, blindness to our prejudices can be disastrous and deadly. We see it in the racism, anti-Semitism, misogyny, and nativism which has crawled out of the dark corners of our collective soul to roam freely and unapologetically. We see it in the obscenely disparate system of justice in this country based upon race. We see it in the world's disproportionate focus on Israel's shortcomings. We see it in the blatant double standard based upon gender applied to our political candidates. We see it in the wholesale condemnation of entire groups based upon their faith or skin color. We see it in antipathy towards the millions of refugees because of their religion and national origin.

These prejudices are our "cataracts," clouding and blurring our perceptions. The large and ugly bigotries of this world, and the lesser daily prejudices that blind us and cause us to stumble, all percolate up from shared, deep wells of pain, fear, shame, and despair -- each of which we carry in some measure.

Each morning in *birchot hashachar*, it's traditional to praise God as *pokeach ivrim*, the One who "opens the eyes of the blind." When one is struggling with vision problems, it's a particularly powerful piece of liturgy. But the blindness to which the blessing refers applies not only to physical vision; it applies as well to moral vision. To root out the toxic and deadly bigotry in this world, to open the eyes of all who are blind to the innate infinite worth of every human life, our only hope is to begin today by opening our own eyes and hearts to that truth.

A few weeks ago, in parshat Shoftim, Moses prescribed a procedure which recognizes and corrects for our moral cataracts:

Appoint for yourself judges and officers in all your gates which the Holy One gives you, for each of your tribes; they shall judge the people with *mishpat tzedek*, with righteous

judgment. Don't be biased, don't play favorites, don't be bribed, for bribes blind the eyes of the wise and distort the words of the righteous. *Tzedek, tzedek tirdof*, justice, justice you shall pursue, that you may live and inherit the Land.

Jewish tradition teaches that each one of us sits as judges "in the gates" of our mind and imagination. Each one of us must recognize and correct for our distorted viewpoint. Each of us must seek *mishpat tzedek*, described by Rabbi Miles Krassen as judgment informed by the "Wisdom Eye," a deep, inner quality by which we can see beyond our own narrow view, from a truly impartial, infinitely broader perspective -- from what we might call a "God's eye view."

How do we cultivate such a "Wisdom Eye?" Step one, according to a student of the Ba'al Shem Tov,<sup>1</sup> is to notice our inclination to judge others before ourselves. Focus on yourself before judging others. Second, we must measure others just as we measure ourselves. Avoid double standards. And third, follow Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachia's teaching in Pirkei Avot<sup>2</sup>: "*dan et kol adam l'kaf zechut*, judge every person as having merit." Give everyone the benefit of the doubt; first, look for the good in others, then in yourself.<sup>3</sup>

Many of us are familiar with the quote attributed to Gandhi, "Be the change you wish to see in the world." It's an inspiring quote, but Gandhi apparently never actually said those words. His actual words are much more powerful: "if we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As [we] change [our] own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards [us]. ... We need not wait to see what others do."

Rosh Hashanah does not ask us to change our nature; it demands that we remember our nature, and correct our attitudes, our inherently limited view of ourselves and the world. The raw bigotry and hatred erupting everywhere in this world desecrate the single, sacred primary message our people have carried from our inception, and upon which our entire tradition is built: the belief that every human life is of infinite and therefore equal value.

In our history, in addition to periods in which we've thrived, we've been excluded, enslaved, and killed for being ourselves. Our Jewish history carries with it the obligation to assert our right to exist in this world, and the responsibility to stand up for any others whose full humanity and infinite value are denied. It carries with it our obligation to root out from within ourselves and our people any tendency we may have to see others as less or more than ourselves.

Rosh Hashanah doesn't celebrate the birthday of the Jewish people; it commemorates the creation of our species. Our tradition embraces particularism as the path to universalism. To be fully human, we must protect and embrace our unique Jewish perspective. To be Jews, we must protect and embrace our universalism.

*Hayom*, today we remember the sacred dimension of human life on this planet. *Hayom*, today we remember that the uniqueness of each individual, each race, each culture, each faith,

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<sup>1</sup> R. Ya'akov Yosef of Polnoye, *Toldot Yaakov Yosef*, in Torah Gems, p. 252

<sup>2</sup> Mishnah *Avot* 1:6

<sup>3</sup> In *Likkutey Moharan* 6:52, Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlov teaches us to spend our lives "adorning the crown" of every human being: "[B]e very careful in judgment. Even if another shames you, be still, and judge that person favorably."

each civilization reflects a precious and irreplaceable facet of the Divine. *Hayom*, today, we look deep into the roots of our souls, to a place deeper than the pain, fear and shame which obscure our ability to see the world as it is. We journey to a place, as the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore describes it in his poem "Where the Mind is Without Fear,"

Where the heart is without fear,  
and the head is held high  
Where knowledge is free  
Where the world has not  
been broken up into fragments  
By narrow, domestic walls  
Where words come out  
from the depth of truth  
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection  
Where the clear stream of reason  
has not lost its way  
Into the dreary desert sands of dead habit  
Where the mind is led forward by thee  
Into ever widening thought and action  
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father,  
let our country awake.

*Hayom*, today may we, our people, our country, our world awake. May we wake up to our personal and collective blindness. May the sounds of the shofar blast away the clouds which blur and obscure our vision, and enable each of us to see ourselves and the world anew and fresh, through the lens of *mishpat tzedek*, sharing God's view of each of us as precious beings of infinite and equal worth.