

From the Rabbi's Desk @ Hillcrest Jewish Center

Rabbi Manes Kogan

D'var Torah for the Second Morning of Rosh Hashanah

5771

Joseph was his father's favorite
and was thrown into a pit;
while Isaac, who was Abraham's beloved,
was bound on the altar.
And I, whom my mother loves above my brother,
go restless from one nursing home to the other,
from one hospital to the next.

Abel, whose gift was pleasant to the Lord,
was killed by his brother
and his blood spilled over bushes and stones.
In the meantime Ishmael and Esau run wild under the sun
and celebrate the day they were dispossessed.

Zebulun and Naftali,
did not get colorful robes
or golden necklaces.
Instead they got some peace of mind.
And while their brother Joseph visits their sick father
and talks to social workers, nurses and clerks,
they enjoy a good time with their wives and children
in Memphis or in Alexandria,
by the sea.

I haven't written poetry since I was in my early twenties. However, the emotional turmoil related to the challenges involved in dealing with my parents' health and social issues during this past year, brought me back to a forgotten pastime, which I hope to resume, hopefully under better circumstances.

Poetry is a great tool to reflect a particular moment in your life, what I call a soul moment. Writing essays is more of an intellectual exercise; your feelings are there, but they are heavily filtered by the brain.

The truth is that my parents are doing better, Baruch Hashem. Although things may never be as they were in the past, they are not as bad as they were four months ago. My mother is out of the hospital, is in less pain, and is adapting slowly to her new life.

I, on the other hand, can now look back at the last week in June and the first one in July, in which I ran restlessly as described in my poem, not only with sadness but also with a sense of accomplishment. I was able to help my parents; I did make a difference and my tears and pain were not in vain.

However, when you are in the midst of an emotional maelstrom, it is difficult to imagine that things will get better tomorrow. And all you can think is, "Why me? Why not my brother?"

I had the opportunity to talk at length with my brother when he visited for 27 days, 14 hours and 12 minutes with his wife and three children. I had just returned from Israel and I needed to talk and to be heard. My brother was willing to listen but he also had something to say. "You are much better talking to people and you have more patience," he said. "In addition, you were always the favorite of Mommy and Daddy," he added.

Being a rabbi, I guess I am good at talking to people and I do have patience, but I never thought that being the beloved son could be a liability more than a blessing. After all, and granted that my brother is right (by the way, my wife and sister-in-law think he is), what did I do to deserve such an honor? And what if I wanted to renounce it?

I guess it is not so simple; being the favorite, the beloved one, is not up to us. At least, most times it isn't. Not only that, being the chosen one can be, contrary to popular belief, a big liability. Just look at our biblical ancestors...

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While Joseph, who was his father's favorite,
was thrown into a pit.

Indeed it is not always fun to be chosen. See what happened to our beloved patriarch Isaac: In one chapter we read, "*... for in Isaac will be called your seed*" (Genesis 21: 12), and in the next: "*Please take your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac, and go away to the land of Moriah and bring him up there for a burnt offering*" (Genesis 22:2).

As we know, Isaac finally survives the ordeal (by the way, the rabbis agree that he was never the same after the test), and a ram comes in his stead. Now let's look for a moment at the ram.

The rabbis describe the "replacement" ram as a "chosen" animal, almost mythical. God created the ram on the sixth day of creation at twilight and made him wait in the Garden of Eden for the highest of purposes. The rabbis tell us (Berachot 3b) that "every part of the ram that Avraham sacrificed was to serve a divine purpose. Its ashes remained and formed the foundation of the Great Altar that was in the Holy Temple [built by King Shlomo]. Its ten sinews were made into the ten strings of King David's harp. Its skin became Elijah's belt. Its two horns were made into trumpets. The left horn was the trumpet that sounded at Mount Sinai when the Torah was given. The right horn, the larger of the two, was put aside to be sounded when the time comes for the final redemption."

Now, it is all fine and dandy, but the ram doesn't have a say. Rams don't talk but if they did, I bet the ram that Avraham was about to sacrifice would say, "Let someone else be special; let someone else be the chosen."

The truth is that we all are the product of choices. Many of these choices are our own, both our accomplishments and our mistakes. However we are also product of the choices of others: our parents, our teachers, and God. We are the product of how we see ourselves and how others see us; we are the result of what we expect from life and of what life expects from us.

While we all can relate to the fact that human beings are "choosers" by nature (after all, throughout an average day we make countless choices), we should also understand that we are being chosen as well.

Challenges in life, our own, those of people around us, and those of our biblical ancestors, should make us realize that we don't always have the last word.

The ram didn't choose to get entangled in a bush, nor Isaac to be bound on the altar, nor Abraham to be tested. Joseph didn't ask for a coat of many colors, and he certainly didn't choose to be thrown into a pit. And I myself, I didn't want to choose a nursing home for mother or to help my father empty an apartment of 50 years of memories.

I heard from my teacher, Rabbi Shmuel Avigdor Hachohen, of blessed memory that, according to a legend, Abraham, upon seeing the ram entangled by its horns, raised his eyes to heaven and said, "Master of the Universe, why did you give horns to the ram? Don't you see that they are the cause of its doom?" A divine voice replied, "You are right, but a ram without horns is a pitiable creature."

Many times our own choices can lead us to greatness, to new heights. However, so do, many times, the choices of others, the challenges of life, and the difficult tests imposed on us.

Indeed, most times we don't have the last word. However, while God forces His will, it is still up to us how to respond. We can run away or reply *hineni*, here I am, as Abraham and Isaac did. We can lament our lot or we can face adversity and grow from it.

I learned the hard way that this is easier said than done. Nevertheless, it is possible.

Abraham was forced to face his test all by himself, but many of us, thank God, can rely on family and friends, on professionals and on our Hillcrest community. Maybe a shul is nothing more – and nothing less – than a sacred space where we help each other to struggle and to grow while facing the challenges that life presents us. As we reflect on the blessings of family, friends and community, however, we need to be aware that these blessings shouldn't be taken for granted. There are many among us who are not blessed with family and friends and who, although formal members of our shul, haven't yet found in Hillcrest a community in the true sense of the word. To them, we need to reach out, striving to become their family, their friends, and their community.

May this year ahead bring us many choices, may we choose wisely, and may we prosper from our choices. May we find the courage and strength, the faith and the community, to face the challenges that life inevitably brings, and may we grow from them.

May the Almighty bless all of us and our families with a good, meaningful, sweet, and healthy year!