

One of every parent's favorite aspects of parenthood is the nighttime ritual of reading stories. In our house our kids have all moved, as I know they do for so many of you, from the tactile appeal of stories that allow you to touch the tails of various creatures- the slimy, the bumpy, the slippery and the swingy- to the rhythms of Dr. Seuss and the comfort of Goodnight Moon. Along the way there have been periods of obsession with the Disney version of the Prince and the Pauper, with Mickey as both; there have been princesses and talking animals, there has been Dora and Boots, and there have been Israeli versions of all of the above.

But in the past year or so something new and horrible has happened to my treasured nighttime ritual with my kids. I have been shut out. Probably 8 times out of ten now, Dore and Nili (aged 9 and 7) have been desperate for one story and one story alone. They have insisted on hearing, night after night, on any occasion when it is early enough to still have a nighttime story, they have demanded to hear Harry Potter. Simply no other tale will do.

And you might wonder why I can't read about the young wizard of Hogwarts and his half blood prince or deadly hallows or whatever. Surely I am capable of reading the story too. Well, you would think so but it turns out that I cannot. At least I cannot read it properly. You see after a few too many late night meetings here and a few missed bedtimes there, the voices and sounds of Harry Potter have become, for all intents and purposes, they have become embodied by Leah's impression of Hagrid and Dumbledore. Any other voice would ruin the illusion of returning each night to the world of Quiddich matches between Slythern and Gryffindore; to a world of working wands and magical spells and mirrors that the dead inhabit.

If I sound a little bitter- well, I am. I think I could do a very nice Haggrad, if you please. But I know the power of illusion and story, and I know the impact of sounds and experiences to bring us back to the

world of the imagination. I tolerate the exclusion, and try to use the time wisely. Sometimes Sports Center highlights are on.

As Harry Potter has dominated bedtime of late, I noted that the last of the Potter movies also came out this summer. Its appearance seems to have been the source of endless, and breathless, anticipation by many more than my kids- or Shari Davidson. It shattered all previous records for its global opening weekend take- more than \$475 million in 3 days.

The double phenomenon of the series of 7 books on the one hand, and the 8 movies on the other- have spawned what some of begun to call the Harry Potter generation. In a sense, the past decade has been defined by Harry and his friends, not only the kids who have lived and breathed these stories, but perhaps even for the casual, sometimes excluded reader as well.

The first movie came out in November of 2001, two months after those horrible moments we all shared ten years ago. The final film was released in July of 2011, two months after Osama bin Laden was finally found and killed. And in between, for the entire decade, our world has been defined by seeking the magical formula, the secret code, the spell that could finally vanquish evil.

Not just children, not only in nighttime stories, did we know that evil lurks below the surface of our apparently docile world. In our living nightmares, in the world we inhabit in the full blinding light of day, such monstrous realities present themselves to us with equally incomprehensible clarity. Denying us the world we thought we knew. No wonder kids, like mine, who have grown up knowing only that somewhere out there was a shadowy figure with seemingly unlimited power, could cause a superpower to quake, no wonder they would find a catharsis in J. K. Rowling's characters. No wonder that any one of us would similarly fantasize about the hero within each of us. We would dream about the simple and innocent who can stand up to the greatest dangers and evils the world has to offer, and they- and we- can be victorious. Good shall win out.

But the story and appeal of Harry Potter is likely far beyond the struggle with al Qaida alone. In area after area of our world, there seems to be a constant and recurrent theme of danger lurking beneath tranquil waters. There is a consistency of hobgoblins and demons that threaten our future. And there is a receding sense that we have any power to control these forces. From climate change to financial turmoil to unemployment and federal deficits: we are all the Harry Potter generation. Waiting for the one who will save us. Hoping for the magic to come and whisk us away from our fears. Making them melt away before our very eyes.

We all wish the world worked that way. I have sat in the past year with individuals who are facing divorce, with families that have confronted a new reality as they desperately scramble to deal with unemployment; I have seen loved ones slip away and those who are left behind come to me with questions. Demands for a logic to all of this. How? Why? Some people embrace the idea that everything is in God's plan. Everything works out. But knowing that there are Voldemorts out there, there are evil forces and moments of great injustice and desperation- I must confess that I don't know about such answers. I know that I don't have them.

On Rosh Hashanah we declare that we have a king. God is our absolute, perfect just and loving ruler. God, avinu malkeinu, will ever ensure that we are not left in an unjust world without hope and protection. Perhaps our Jewish tendency to make meaning even of our worst moments, perhaps that is what drew so many- Jews and non-Jews- to Harry Potter. We are all looking for meaning in the struggle. Looking for the light of hope in the darkness. We are all searching for God's plan. And God's mighty hand and outstretched arm bringing us redemption.

But whether it is finding meaning in suffering on a personal, or a national level- such attempts at explaining the inexplicable always have a way of minimizing tragedy and denying the suffering that is right in front of us. The reflections in the Book of Job clearly portray the problem. God's faithful servant

Job has done no wrong, has only been true and honest, and yet he is in anguish. The comforters who approach attempt to find the cause. "Search your past deeds, maybe just your thoughts, and repent for the sins which must lie behind the torment you are enduring." While well intentioned, Job- and we the readers- know better. He has no sin for which to atone. He simply is not in control of the forces around him and as they arise he must do what any human being can to withstand the pain of loss, illness, economic distress and uncertainty. He must find a way to remain true to himself and keep track of his humanity.

After the Shoah there were few voices that arose to explain that which is beyond our imagining. Yet some ultra-Orthodox claimed that they could read the mind of God. It began in Germany, the seat of Jewish reform and intellectualism was therefore clearly a punishment for the sins of the enlightenment. The Satmer Rebbe, Joel Teitelbaum, and the greatest Haredi voice in Israel of the past half century- Rav Schach- both agreed that Israel's abandonment of Torah had led to the gas chambers; and continuing such behavior would lead to more Jewish suffering. (Teitelbaum also believed that Jewish support for "Zionist heretics" would be the fastest way to another Holocaust.) The offensiveness of such an outrageous answer to this problem has resulted in its rejection by nearly all mainstream Jews of all stripes. Some less obviously perverse answers have come in the form of what I would call "God justification." They fall into the "it was terrible, but now we have Israel!" stream of thought. It is not clear to me how to describe such theological grasping at straws, such flailing for God's magic wand. Why should 1.5 million Jewish children die? So others can live in coming generations? Is this the morality of the God of justice?

In the Talmud, a sneaky wonderful text presents several answers to the problem of human suffering. The rabbis start out with the expected pious solutions of Job's comforters. Sin brings on punishment. Faithfulness brings on reward. But then Rav Hisda points out that sometimes no sins can be discovered.

Maybe a lack of proper Torah study, a sin of omission, is the explanation? Yet if even that cannot be the cause, Hisda says it must be a different kind of suffering: one brought on by God's love. Such suffering is the only way to grow, to be rewarded in this world and the next. It is the answer which solves all of the problems. Suffering is all in God's plan, somehow. Next question.

But of course the Talmud, in its secretly subversive style, introduces us to someone who does not know of pain and suffering through intellectual speculation or theory. Rabbi Yochanan is a man who has seen the worst the world can offer. He has buried 10 sons, and he is beyond consolation. When he sees Rabbi Hiya bar Abba suffering from a deeply debilitating disease, he asks him, "do you think of these are sufferings of divine love? Are they worth it to you?" Hiya answers, "neither they nor any alleged reward are worth it." And in response, his friend Rabbi Yochanan seems to exhale. He releases the frustration and anger we can only imagine he felt, and he engages in the deeply moving, simple, transformative act of simply being present. Yochanan reaches out his hand, touches his friend and lifts him up. No theology. No answers. No platitudes. Only a healing, presence. A being together. Soon the tables are turned and Rabbi Yochanan is ill and failing. Rabbi Hiya bar Abba asks him the same question: "Do you think of these are sufferings of divine love? Are they worth it to you?" Yochanan answers, "neither they nor any alleged reward are worth it." And in response, his friend Hiya reaches out his hand, and lifts him up. No theology. No answers. No platitudes. Only a healing, presence. A being together.

On Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur we may still have all the same questions. Some living in mourning, some living with uncertainty, all of us living with the unanswered problems that gnaw at us. We are here, each in our own way, looking for a magical redemption. But perhaps the prayers of this holy day are not intended to provide us with the pat storybook answers we wish were available. Perhaps today the miracle we experience is that of our simply being together. Of being present for and with one

another. Standing in one another's presence and, without platitudes or simplicities- we heal by being as one. And in becoming one, perhaps that alone gives us a glimpse of the ultimate Oneness of God.

In a sense, this is the message the rabbis have taken from this morning's terrifying Torah portion. As Abraham and Yitzchak head up the mountain together, facing impossible choices, facing death and loss and the dreadful uncertainty that is often life's journey- we are told simply: *vayelchu shenihem yachdav*, the two walked together as one. They may have both known God's command for the journey; they may have both been keenly aware of the fact that death would be the result. And they knew that changing the course of life was not in their power alone. They were, like so many I have seen after a diagnosis, facing a crisis; they were unsure and afraid. But one thing they were not- was alone. *Vayelchu sheihem yachdav*. Father and son. Old man and young. In the face of any unfairness, any sorrow they were 2 individuals deriving strength and hope from one another's healing presence. Come what may.

I have witnessed the same journeying together here on so many occasions. In a shiva house. Around a Kiddush table. Simply being among those saying kaddish at our weekday minyan. We are not able to provide the formula, the spell that can change the danger of the journey. But at least we can be together.

Rabbi A. J. Heschel, himself a refugee of the world that was destroyed by the Nazis, used to tell the story of Rabbi Raphael of Bershad. He was a Hasidic rabbi who invited a group of his disciples to come share with him in a ride in his coach. "But there is not enough room!" a disciple cried out, "the rebbe will be crowded." The master replied: "Then we shall have to love each other more. If we love each other more, there will be room for us all." Heschel understood that much as we might cry out for God's redemption, much as wish for the sorcerer's stone, the story of our lives is not simple. The cure for this world's danger and illness, the cure for this world's suffering is love of our fellow human beings. The

choice, he insisted, is a human one, and we who have escaped the terrors of hell are here to help all our fellow humans make that choice.

With so much unsettled in our world, so much danger and so little it seems that we can directly control, perhaps this is the best, clearest message of all. It would be great to have Harry Potter's magic wand or at least the pat answers of reward and punishment, good ultimately triumphing and evil ultimately being vanquished. But that does not seem to be the way that the world works. We are not in a fairy tale. We are not in a simple nighttime story. We inhabit a world God created in which our choices are our own. We must own the good the bad and the grey of our actions not because we know with an absolute certainty what they will bring. We must own them because they are the book of life we write with each act and every choice we make.

Just as young Mr. Potter discovered the power of love, the power of togetherness- that **IS** the power to transcend the overcrowded, conflict ridden, sometimes terrifying journey of life. Such love can change this crowded world from a place of randomness and pain to the very divine chariot of God. When we exclude no one, when everyone is in on the story of our common humanity, even the sealed railway car can be filled with God's eternal and infinite presence.

We may be the Harry Potter generation, still licking our wounds and fearful of so many things. May God give us the strength we need to become the Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Bershad generation. Making room in our world for the needs of others. Standing by them in time of need. And discovering the truly magical power we have to heal, with our presence, our embrace. Look around the room today-right now. We are each other's Rabbi Yochanan. We are together. Yachad. That is as miraculous as any potion. Such magic is the way to get through even the darkest nights. And to bring on the dawn. Together.