

A Door Closes, A Door Opens: Exits into the New Year

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I wonder, sometimes, why these stories of Abraham and his family were chosen as the Rosh Hashanah Torah reading—instead of reading, say, about the Creation of the world—which we add as an alternative maftir reading. One answer, perhaps, is the theme of birth and new beginnings that we find in today's portion. Sarah is 90 years old, Avraham is 99, and after waiting for decades to have a child, they finally have a son. This story is a testament to the power of hope and perseverance, and a celebration of new life that echoes our celebration of the creation of the world.

Yet there is another, quite different theme in what we just chanted that I'd like to focus on today. That is the theme of exits, of leave-taking and saying goodbye. I want to thank Karen Arnold for sending me an article over a year ago which sparked my thinking about this.

In our Torah portion today, Genesis Chapter 21, verses 9-14, we read about the painful moment when Abraham, at the urging of Sarah, sends away his second wife, Hagar, and their child Ishmael. We're told that the "matter was difficult and painful in Abraham's eyes"; he clearly does not want to comply. Yet ultimately he does as he is told.

Verse 14 describes Abraham getting up early, giving Hagar some bread and water for the journey, and then sending her on her way. We do not know what happens with Abraham after Hagar and Ishmael have left—if he weeps, if he's angry, if he simply feels resigned. We are told, later in the story, that God's promise to Hagar and to Abraham is fulfilled, that Ishmael becomes - like his brother Isaac - the patriarch of a great nation, with twelve tribes descending from him. However painful, there is something in this goodbye that sets the stage for all that happens next.

In an article adapted from her book *Exits: The Endings That Set us Free*, the sociologist Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot writes:

"I have always been fascinated by exits, endings, leave-takings—by the ways in which we say goodbye to one another, to the lives we've led, to the families we've been part of, to the children we've nurtured, to the organizations we've worked for, to the communities where we've belonged, to the identities that have defined us, to the roles that have given us purpose and status.

"My curiosity includes exits big and small, those goodbyes that are embroidered into the habits of our everyday encounters as well as those that are forever memorable and rock our worlds. Those that go unnoticed and underappreciated and those that are accompanied by elaborate rituals and splendid ceremony..." She continues:

"I am interested in the ways in which people leave one thing and move on to the next; the ways in which they anticipate, define, and reflect on their departure; the factors and feelings that motivate their leave-taking; the ways in which the exit both opens up

and closes paths forward, offers new opportunities and unanticipated casualties, and feels like victory or defeat, or both." (<http://chronicle.com/article/Endings-That-Set-Us-Free/132383/>)

A common theme of the High Holydays is beginnings: celebrating the new year, the creation of the world, our own opportunities for a fresh start. Yet the flip side of everything new is something left behind, something we've said goodbye to, an exit we've taken. As Lawrence-Lightfoot notes, leave-taking is an aspect of our lives that we might gain from exploring more deeply. .

There seem to me to be two basic kinds of exits that we experience in our lives: those that we choose, and those that happen to us. In this category of involuntary exits we can put experiences like losing a job; the death of a loved one; a partner leaving us; miscarriage; illnesses that force us to leave behind aspects of ourselves or the life we once knew. It might be saying goodbye to a dream that we once had for ourselves. There are also the exits that come upon us as we move from one life stage to the next, at each new stage saying goodbye to our former selves and our previous lives.

And while every exit might contain some feeling of inevitability, there are certainly those which we do choose - whether moving on from a job or career, moving from one city or country to another, deciding to end a relationship, leaving behind an addiction or destructive behavior.

Each of these types of exits demands something different of us. I'd like to begin by examining those which we do not choose. Every life is filled with endings that we experience as happening to us, goodbyes which we did not ask for and cannot control. But while we may not be able to keep them from happening, and while we might not particularly enjoy them, we can learn to navigate these endings, and hopefully learn from them. As Lawrence-Lightfoot asks, "Are there steps to take, routines to be practiced, discerning questions to be posed to make our departures more bearable, revelatory, and generative?"

The first and perhaps most important response to experiencing an involuntary goodbye is grief. This is obvious when the goodbye is the ultimate finality, when someone close to us has died. Here we have a rich tradition that gives us structures and instructions for how to handle the departure of important people from our lives. We have funerals, the practice of sitting shivah, the yearly marking of yartzheit. We know that we need to grieve, and if we're willing to enter into the process, we have the tools to help us do so.

But what happens when we lose a job, or our marriage ends, or a dream is gone? Do we allow ourselves to grieve, or do we even realize that we need to? Perhaps our grief takes the form of anger--at ourselves, at those that we feel did this to us, at the universe, at God. The anger that arises might be very natural, but it's useful to look beneath the anger, to see and experience the sadness that lies within. It's helpful just to acknowledge the need to grieve, and to give ourselves the space to do that - whether for a day, a week, a month. Not every second of every day, but some acknowledged time to just sit with the sadness, to

know it's okay to feel it. Allowing ourselves to grieve a loss is one crucial step in marking that loss and taking the first steps on a path towards whatever might come next.

Lawrence-Lightfoot emphasizes the importance of marking our exits, of engaging in rituals that can help us pay attention to them. Perhaps during Yizkor on Yom Kippur this year, in addition to remembering loved ones that have passed away, you might take a little time to mourn any other significant ending from this past year, to honor that which you've lost, and acknowledge your grief. Or perhaps you might set aside some other time during the holidays, on your own, to mark in some way a significant ending. Without over-dramatizing our exits or wallowing in self-pity, it can be a healthy and helpful thing just to acknowledge that which we've had to let go of.

The involuntary exit is also an opportunity for forgiveness. Someone or something usually needs to be forgiven whenever an ending is thrust upon us—and often the one who most needs forgiving is ourselves. Someone I love has died—did I see it coming? Did I do all I could do to keep it from happening? Did I fail to tell them I loved them, to make amends before that final day? Something significant in my life has come to an end—a career, a relationship—and I may feel a sense of failure, a sense of shame. Perhaps I didn't try hard enough, I did something wrong, I failed to do what was necessary. We can torment ourselves with all the what-ifs, the doubt, the self-flagellation.

And yes, perhaps mistakes were made, perhaps different choices would have led to different outcomes—but ultimately, the ending has come, and once we have asked forgiveness of others, if need be, we are left to forgive ourselves. To know that whatever mistakes I've made, I was doing the best that I could. To know that endings are natural, even when they're not chosen, and perhaps nothing could have been done to keep this one from happening. Endings call for a good dose of compassion toward ourselves, to choose to forgive rather than live the rest of our lives with regret.

Un-chosen endings often call for forgiveness for others, as well. A little over a year after my father died, I was on a mindfulness retreat, and I was struggling mightily with my approach to the meditation practice. I was expecting an enormous amount from myself, trying to do it "just right," and my efforts were strangling any joy I might have taken from the practice. At some point on the retreat I realized that this trait of mine, this sense of obligation to do everything "right," was one piece of my father's legacy to me. It was fallout of a sort from his love of me and the high regard he had of me. Whatever its origins, it had become a burden on me, and I needed to realize this, really see it, and then forgive my father for this particular legacy. That moment of forgiveness was enormously liberating.

Whatever the ending we may have experienced, it's worth it, during these days of *teshuvah*, to think about whether or not there's any forgiveness we need to be granting to another—ideally if they've asked for it, but even if they are unable to ask. We do this in order to liberate ourselves from the suffering that so often accompanies an exit that has unresolved pieces hanging around. Who, or what, needs to be forgiven, for you to be able to move forward into this new year a little lighter, a bit more free?

We will have many opportunities over the course of these holidays--and during Yom Kippur, in particular—to think about forgiveness, for ourselves and others. We can acknowledge the mistakes we've made as part of moving on from whatever is being left in the past, and we can extend some compassion both to ourselves and to others as part of making peace with whatever we have bid goodbye.

Another realm of exits and endings are those that come up in the natural flow of our lives, as we move from one phase of life to another.

For those of you in the early stages of your adult life—getting ready to leave home, or finishing college, or beginning to set up our own household—I hope you can be tender with all the exits you find ourselves taking. I hope you can have patience with parents who perhaps are having a bit of a hard time saying goodbye to who you were. I hope you can have patience with yourselves, acknowledging the challenge of saying goodbye to so many familiar things inside you and around you, and have faith that each exit holds within it the seeds of something new, even if that something is still unknown and therefore a bit terrifying. Wisely navigating this time of life means striking a balance between mindlessly fleeing everything that ever defined who you were, and clinging to the past out of a fear of the unknown. It is possible to enact loving goodbyes, productive exits, mindful leave-takings that will enhance your journey and that still leave room for occasional confusion and doubt, without allowing those things to overwhelm you.

There is a similar task facing those of us who are either entering—or are well into—that phase of life that Lawrence-Lightfoot calls the "third chapter," those years between the ages of 50 to 75 when, she says, "we are neither young nor old," when we begin to lose the familiar patterns of our lives. We may be leaving behind work that has defined our sense of who we are, or losing our parents and becoming the "older generation" ourselves, or saying goodbye to children who are setting off on their own journeys. For those of us in this stage, we are invited to take stock of all the exits, large and small, that are giving new shape to our lives. We are invited to notice them, honor them, to grieve what needs to be grieved and to celebrate the opportunities that are opening before us.

I remember very clearly a moment in my early 20s when I was with my father and we were walking somewhere in Washington DC; he must have been around the age that I am now. He reached out to take my hand as we began crossing the street, and I looked at him as if he had lost his mind. Today, from a different vantage point, I have a little more compassion—I can see his reaching out as his way of not letting go, of still wanting to have his daughter need him. Maybe that moment was, for him, a little bit of a goodbye, once I made it clear that I was a grown-up and didn't need anyone's hand to cross a street. I can only wish now to have the same compassion on myself as I begin to navigate some of the goodbyes I will have to say as I get older.

Along with the inevitable endings, this is also an opportunity to contemplate the chosen exit, the leave-taking that we can initiate for our own good. This is truly the meaning of *teshuvah*: making the wise "turn" in our path, finding the appropriate "response" to the circumstances of our lives. Sometimes *teshuvah* involves saying goodbye--to an attitude or

a behavior that is holding us back, or perhaps to some aspect of our life that is no longer serving us or the greater good.

In tractate Rosh Hashanah of the Talmud, there is a teaching about different actions that we can undertake in order to “change the decree”—that is, that can change our fate for the better. Three of these actions—giving *tzedakah*; “crying out” in prayer, *tefillah*; and changing our actions through *teshuvah*—made it into the Unetaneh Tokef prayer. But there are two others that the Talmud mentions, and they resonate in interesting ways with this theme of endings.

The first is *shinui hashem*, changing our name. The example given relates to our Torah portion today. The Talmud says that it was only after Sarah had her name changed from Sarai that she was able to give birth to Isaac.

In ancient times, a name connoted a person's essential nature. So changing our name means something akin to changing our nature, taking on a new sense of self. In the language of exits, this might mean leaving behind outdated assumptions about who I need to be. It might be saying goodbye to an old story that I have about myself—a story that, whatever the kernel of truth within it, is now holding me back, reinforcing old patterns and limiting my potential to write a new story. Taking on a new name means a willingness to let go of something that has defined me in the past—something that once felt essential, but is no longer so.

The other action that the Talmud mentions is *shinui makom*, literally, “changing place,” changing location. The proof-text here is the story of Abraham, who is instructed to leave his homeland and his father's house, and only then is granted the blessing of becoming a great nation.

It is not a coincidence that in the Torah, many stories about spiritual growth begin with a character's exit from one place to another. Abraham's call to leave his homeland and set off for the land of Canaan is one. Hagar first encounters God, and learns of her destiny as the foremother of a great nation, when she first runs away from Sarah into the wilderness. Jacob also has his first encounter with God as he is on his way from his home, running from the brother whom he has angered. Moses must leave Egypt and his identity as the grandson of Pharaoh in order to become the liberator of the Israelite nation. All of these stories play with the notion of *shinui makom*, changing one's physical location, as the first step in a much more complex process of personal transformation.

In thinking about the value of “changing our place,” it is important to distinguish between running away from unpleasant circumstances and making a more mindful exit. It can be tempting to believe that just changing the outward circumstances of our lives can effect more lasting change. Packing up and moving to a new town might mean a real fresh start, or it might just mean relocating our confusion and misery to a different zip code. Yet there are times in our lives when we really do need to make a concrete change of place. We may need to extricate ourselves from an unhealthy relationship, or get up the courage to leave a place of work, even if we don't yet know what will take its place. The spiritual challenge in

these situations is to discern what is a courageous and necessary move as opposed to an easy exit.

Another way to read *shinui makom* is as a more symbolic kind of change: an exit from one set of expectations and assumptions to a new "place" where we consciously decide to live our lives in a different way. To "change my place" might mean beginning to act in ways that confound the expectations that others have of me. It mean mean deciding to take up more space in the world, or a little less. It might mean getting out into nature more, or creating a corner of the house for quiet meditation or yoga or reading a good book. It might mean a physical clearing out of our office or our home to accompany the more psychological clearing out that we want to effect in the new year.

Jewish tradition in many ways invites us to take concrete actions that reinforce the internal changes that we hope to make. It is not enough just to think about *teshuvah*, or just to wish for change. There are real conversations to be had, real actions to be taken, if we wish to "change our fate." There is also value in small, symbolic acts that can build our capacity for transformation.

As we contemplate the goodbyes that we need to say over these holidays, our tradition offers us a variety of rituals that can help in the process. One of the most powerful is Tashlikh, which is traditionally done on the afternoon of the first day of Rosh Hashanah, but can be done any time through the end of Sukkot. The tradition of tashlikh is to cast off our transgressions by emptying our pockets of any crumbs that might reside there and dumping them into a moving body of water.

I like the image of turning our pockets inside out, looking for those crumbs that have been lurking in there for God knows how long. We can do a similar search on a more psychological or spiritual level—what is the old stuff, the crumbs of our past selves, that we no longer need to be carrying around? The defensive habit, the addictive behavior, the unhelpful self-image—can I let it go, knowing that it's no longer useful? Instead of endlessly rehearsing our own stories about ourselves, tashlikh encourages us to just let go—to reach into the pocket and throw it away, into the water, to be washed out to sea.

Saying goodbye to some aspect of ourselves can sometimes feel a little like a death; there can be a background fear that if I let go of this particular story about myself, I will no longer exist. Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi has suggested that we can recite Kaddish during the High Holydays for a bad habit or a behavior that we want to leave behind. I would add that we might want to say Kaddish for an old version of ourselves that we're ready to let go of. This might be an interesting practice to try out: to take the opportunity of a Mourners Kaddish to signal your readiness to really let go of something in your life that needs to be released. Or if Mourners Kaddish doesn't feel appropriate, to recite any of the other numerous kaddishes—those markers during the service of transitions from one part to the next—to take those as opportunities to mark your own transition.

Exits are inevitable. The teaching I take both from Lawrence-Lightfoot and from Jewish tradition is that while we can't avoid them, we often shape them in ways that can help

sustain us, that can change us for the better. Lawrence-Lightfoot writes: "I think that there must be some relationship between our developing the habit of small goodbyes and our ability to master and mark the larger farewells, a connection between the micro and the macro that somehow makes the latter smoother and more bearable because one has successfully accomplished the former. I certainly believe that the art of attending to, practicing, ritualizing, and developing a language for leave-taking in the most ordinary moments and settings augurs well for taking on the more extraordinary exits that life is sure to serve up."

When Gina and I finally sold our house in Lexington this past spring, we did a little ritual of goodbye on the day that we were handing over the house to its new owners. We had spent 11 years in that house, created a family together in that house, and even though we were happy to finally have sold it, we also wanted to acknowledge its role in our lives for the past decade. So we went from empty room to empty room, and each of us shared a favorite memory from that room. It was a very sweet kind of leave-taking; acknowledging not just a physical place but a stage of our life that we were leaving behind.

Over these holidays, I invite all of us to think about the actions we might take, large or small, to help us move on from that which needs to be left behind. May we be gentle with ourselves in these exits, and may we honor those rooms of our lives which have nurtured us, even as we move on.

I'd like to end with a poem by the great Sufi teacher, Rūmī:

Your grief for what you've lost lifts a mirror
up to where you are bravely working.
Expecting the worst, you look, and instead,
here's the joyful face you've been wanting to see.
Your hand opens and closes and opens and closes.
If it were always a fist or always stretched open,
you would be paralyzed.
Your deepest presence is in every small contracting and expanding,
the two as beautifully balanced and coordinated
as birdwings.

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