



"SEEING THE FOREST FOR THE TREES"

Rabbi Seymour Rossel and I tell this story based on an ancient Midrash:

On the third day, God created the trees, starting with the mighty cedars. In turn, God created the trees that shade and those that flower and those that produce fruit and nuts. Now, seeing that they were created first, the cedars said to the redwoods, "We will be the greatest trees on earth. We will be considered as valuable as silver and gold. King Solomon will use our wood to build the sacred Temple in Jerusalem." And the cedars shot upward and their branches and leaves spread outward like a crown.

And then there was the bush, small and scraggly, low to the ground not even attempting to reach the heavens. The bush looked at her tall, shapely cousins and moaned, "I can't even get any sunlight down here...Those cedars have so many beautiful leaves and branches...all that shade...and me, down here in the dark? Why, God? Why did you even create me if I'm just going to be so small and scraggly??"

God heard the bush moaning and reassured her as only God can, "Listen Bush, you may not believe it right now, but I have created all things with a purpose. In the time to come, I will set you on fire...but the fire will not harm you at all. And when my prophet Moses walks past you, not paying any attention, that fire burning within you will make him stop and listen and care for a moment so that I can speak to him and he will hear. In that moment, you will be the most important plant in the history of the world." Though she would never be tall like a Cedar, the bush drew herself up just a bit straighter and knew that her life would have meaning and purpose.

Meanwhile, God thought, "I better do something about these arrogant Cedars while I'm at it. I cannot abide that kind of pride, so well I know that in the shadow of pride come other sins like jealousy, hatred and prejudice." So God created iron.

When the great trees saw the mountains of iron appearing, they began to tremble; and some even began to weep. The cedars complained, "We thought we were created to be the tallest of all beings, but now look at those mountains towering over us. And iron? God you created iron??? Iron can be made into heads of axes and axes can be used to cut us down and destroy us."

God answered the cedars saying, "You are right to fear the iron and this will be the way of life on earth. No matter how big or proud a thing grows, there will always be something else that can bring it down." And the tall, proud, beautiful Cedars cried. God continued, "But the largest and even the smallest beings will always be able to protect themselves if they will stay together. If no tree gives wood for the handle of the axe, no axe can be made to cut you down. Do you understand? And the trees said, "Yes, there is strength in unity. We need each other."

The trees were satisfied. If they refused to give up their wood the iron could not harm them. And it was Gan Eden - it was paradise on the earth.

And then human beings were created; and human beings realized what could be done with iron. And they asked the cedars for a couple of branches, but the cedars remembered what God had said about everyone staying together and they stuck together. Then the humans asked the bush and the bush knew that she had a purpose and a meaning in the future, so she refused as well.

But the humans...the humans...they were smart and they whispered to some of smaller trees, "you know, those big cedars are taking up all your sunlight. Doesn't seem fair, does it?" And to the bigger trees, the humans would casually comment that it seemed those scraggly bushes shouldn't really take up as much space as they did. They were just scraggly bushes after all.

To the bushes they said, "Give us just one branch and we will cut down those huge trees that block your sunlight." At first, all the trees refused, but the humans persisted, saying, "Why should some trees get everything they need and some trees not? We can help you, if you will only help us. Just a branch or two is all we need."

In the end, as everyone knows, one tree gave one branch to one human; The human created one axe and cut down one tree; and the wood from that tree made handles for many axes that cut down many trees.

In this ancient story there are three messages that speak to me today - the first is that we need each other. Whether in the wake of devastating hurricanes, one after another, Irma following so closely on the heels of Harvey, or the personal devastations that plague each of our lives, one after another, Cancer following so closely on the heels of job loss or drug abuse following so closely on the heels of mental illness. We can rarely avoid the destruction that walks into our lives but we can stand strong against it with each other in physical presence, in compassion, connection and commitment.

In her beautiful book written with psychologist Adam Grant, Sheryl Sandberg tells a gut-wrenching story about the strength of presence, of connection. Following the sudden death of her young husband Sandberg went to the funeral with her children who were in second and fourth grade. She writes, "When we arrived at the cemetery, my children got out of the car and fell to the ground, unable to take another step. I lay on the grass, holding them as they wailed. Their cousins came and lay down with us, all piled up in a big sobbing heap with adult arms trying in vain to protect them from their sorrow." Sandberg told her kids, "This is the second worst moment of our lives. We lived through the first and we will live through this. It can only get better from here." And then she started singing a song she knew from childhood, "Oseh shalom," a prayer for peace. She says, "I don't remember deciding to sing or how I pick this song. I later learned that it is the last line of the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for mourning, which may explain why it poured out of me. Soon all the adults joined in, the children followed, and the wailing stopped."

In the ancient story of the trees God doesn't promise that there will be no struggles, no pain, no existential threats, but God says that the only way to continue standing is to be a forest, with each other in strength, in unity - across difference and disagreement.

The second lesson, a corollary to the first, is how easy it is for the forest to break down, to be picked off, one by one, to be made afraid of others, to envy them, to begrudge them their share of creation. It feels so good to be together that too often we join together as us against them. We are the tall trees and you have no right to live. Or we are just bushes, how dare you take up all the sunlight; You have no right to live. The energy that comes from the forest then is not an energy that supports life, but an energy that destroys it. When our need for connection means that we are connected by pride, jealousy, and hatred, then we are able to do and feel things we might never have believed we were capable of.

"Randy Borum, writing in Behavioural Sciences and the Law, finds that a key psychological vulnerability of those drawn to extremism is their need to feel they belong. "In radical movements and extremist groups, many prospective terrorists find not only a sense of meaning," he writes, "but also a sense of belonging, connectedness and affiliation." A related idea is that extremist groups and their ideologies help people cope with uncertainty about themselves and the world." The research about violent extremist hate groups is both remarkable and unsurprising because these are ancient truths. We so need to belong, we so need to feel worthy that we are often willing to belong against someone or something else.

Finally, the third lesson that sits at the junction between the first two: Each of us has infinite value just as we are created. Imagine the possibilities if each human being could simply embrace that one fact. The jealousy, the pride, the guarding of mine against you and yours, the fear that my life will not be as good as yours, not as rich, not as full, not as happy and therefore I should do whatever I can to bring you down... on Facebook, in politics, in neighborhoods and congregations...all of that would fade in the light of the firm knowledge that I am enough and I also believe that you are enough. If I know that I matter so much then why do I care what you have or what you are? You are fulfilling your purpose as I am fulfilling mine. Simple, perhaps, and unbelievably difficult to achieve...at least alone.

Tonight, 6000 of us, together as a beautiful forest under stars, among grasses and trees, with different hair, different skin, short and tall, narrow and wide, walking, crawling, running, riding in a wheelchair, why don't we commit to the awesome power that sits in being present to and for one another, power that does not feed itself in the shadows of someone else being less worthy, less important, less necessary than ourselves, power that comes from the source, from the sacred fact of having been created.

In this new year, may we work hard to believe that no matter how unsuccessful, how unattractive, how sad, how lonely, how troubled by mental illness, how challenged by physical disability, how smart, how beautiful, how accomplished, how rich we are, that each of us needs each and every other one of us; that we have to be aware and guard against how easy it is for us to become divided by our differences and that each of us has been created with purpose, meaning, and potential.

L'shana Tova u'metukah - please God may it be a sweet New Year for all of us. Amen.