

# Arc of our Lives

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My son Idan was born at 6:44am, Friday, July 28<sup>th</sup> – at 7lbs, 7 ounces he was miracle incarnate. I witnessed his first breath. My voice was the first he heard in this world. In my emotional and sleep deprived delirium I was convinced that life beyond the delivery room doors had paused. An international day of celebration had been declared. People on the streets would be smiling and waving at each other. Drivers would signal before turning; no horn would be honked in anger. There would be no anger. An international day of peace would be declared. Not because my son had been born but because a child was born. A new life. A pure miracle.

Later that same day a couple miles away a gunman would walk into the office of the Jewish Federation of Seattle and start shooting. Our hospital room looked west to where the chaos and confusion was unfolding. My little fantasy evaporated like a soap bubble against gravity – smiles and waves distorting into screams and shock.

Two polarizing events of seismic proportions stretching my soul thin. Two events saved from banality by geographic and emotional proximity. People are shot every day. Babies are born every day. And we rarely take notice. The world continues it's rhythm of creation and destruction. Joy and sorrow. Life and death. Cutting my son's umbilical cord I recall thinking how could anyone doubt the existence of God? Watching the tragedy at the Federation unfold that same afternoon I found myself doubting the existence of that very same God. And so it goes.

Every day we read in the blessing before the Shema, “Baruch atah adoni eloheinu melech ha’olam yotzer or uvorey hosheh oseh shalom uvorey et hakol. Blessed are you, our God, sovereign of the world, creator of light and darkness, maker of peace and creator of

everything.” Uvorey et hakol. Creator of every thing. Blessed are you, our God, sovereign of the world Creator of everything?” The rabbis are hedging here. The verse they chose comes from the Isaiah, but that is not what the prophet actually says. The rabbis changed a very essential word. What we should say every morning, and what the verse actually says is, “I form the light and create darkness: I make peace and create evil: I, God do all these things.” Isaiah is quoting God in purest honesty. I make peace and create evil: I, God do all these things.”

Now this is either theologically very problematic or theologically very liberating depending on who you are and what you believe or don't believe. For me it is quite liberating. I prefer the honesty of a God who acknowledges creating good and evil. I certainly do not understand what it means or why. But I don't believe in a sanitized world of absolutes – Binary, black and white. Good, bad. And neither did our ancestors. They understood that the world is a complex, dirty place filled with incredible beauty and horrible darkness. Our biblical ancestors are not portrayed as perfect people. Our tradition is one that leaves the warts in tact.

It is not that there was a terrible shooting so there is no God, or that my son Idan was born and there must be a God. Rather there was a terrible shooting and my son Idan was born and there is a God. The glass is both half full and half empty. Every moment is filled with the possibility of witnessing creation. Every moment is filled with the possibility of revelation and redemption. And every moment is filled with its opposite. I make peace and create evil: I, God do all these things.”

If this is true for God how much more so for us humans who were made in the image of God? Our ancestors understood that within each of us are the yetzer hara and the yetzer tov – the aspect within us that creates light in the world and the aspect that creates darkness. The aspect that creates peace and the aspect that creates evil. We are all these things.

There is a legend that tells there are actually three books opened in heaven during these days, one for the completely wicked, one for the

completely righteous and one for those in-between. The completely righteous are immediately inscribed in the book of life. The completely wicked are immediately inscribed in the book of death...But for the vast majority of us we are looking at the third book the one for the in-between. In many ways this is the hardest place to be. We don't have great saintly acts to reflect upon, although many of us may think we do, and our transgressions are not in the realm of absolute evil. And therein rests the problem. This is how we make it easy to let ourselves off the hook.

Life may be easiest in black and white but we need to learn to be uncomfortable in the grays of our lives. We need to not look for a neatly ordered world but have an honest encounter with the complex paradox – the nest of hooks that is our humanity. We are not perfect people. We make mistakes. We screw up. We need to look into our shadow side. To drag our yetzer hara, our darkness into the light and own it rather than trying to smear it all over the people around us and hold ourselves blameless. What would happen if we stopped our applause, praise, condemnation and scorn of ourselves and we just looked at ourselves?

Martin Buber writes, “We can not be redeemed until we recognize the flaws in our souls and try to mend them. We can be redeemed only to the extent to which we recognize our true selves.” We need to acknowledge our flaws. And we need to figure out what we are going to do with them. We are both saints and sinners. We are the In-Betweens. We are the authors of the Third Book.

A story is told of a coachman in Eastern Europe who was driving a great *tzaddik*—*a righteous person*. Enroute, they passed a beautiful orchard. The poor coachman's appetite swelled and he said to his passenger, "I will go down and pick some fruit for myself, and you sit here and be on the lookout for me." As he was about to pick an apple from the tree, he heard the rabbi scream, "*Men zet, men zet*" — "They see, they see." Immediately he ran back to the coach, and after looking around, the frightened coachman said, "Who is looking? I do not see, anyone?!" The rabbi said with a soft smile, "All is seen."

All is seen. Our darkness and our light. Our beauty and our shame. It is seen by God. And in the quiet moments of our lives. When we are alone with our thoughts it is seen by our own souls. Many of us may not believe that we are going to answer to God, but we are accountable to ourselves. And we usually judge ourselves very harshly.

And yet. And yet we also create light. We also create peace. We do all these things as well. Yes on Yom Kippur we need to own our darkness, but we need to own our light as well. Yes we have sinned – created conflict in our relationships, but that is not the end of the story. Over the next 24 hours let us also consider all the ways we bring light into this troubled world. All the ways we bring a bit of peace to people who feel none. All of the common everyday things. Let us look at the widest ark of our humanity and own it all.

And as we see this darkness and light in ourselves perhaps we can begin to see it in others. Not just the people we forgive easily, but those people we try to push into the shadows of our lives. The ones we wish we could ignore. Those people who despite our best attempt to exile into the margins of our memory, always end up in the center of our orbit -- inevitably throwing off our equilibrium. Whose slightest comment or silence hits bone and nerve. Those towards whom we hurl our deepest contempt -- our most aggressive disdain. The best of our defenses.

By owning our darkness can we begin to see their light? As we forgive our shortcomings can we strive to forgive theirs? The ones we struggle most deeply to forgive. For the vast majority of the people we resist hardest are just like us. They are both saints and sinners. Their names are surrounding ours in the Third Book. The people we find the hardest to forgive are also in-between.

Abraham Joshua Heschel describes sin as a disturbance in the relationship between humans and God. I want to extend that to any disturbance in any of our relationships. How often do we knowingly create conflict in our relationships? These are our real sins. These are

the ways we truly miss the mark. And this is what we have to own about ourselves and come to forgive. That like God in the quote from Isaiah, “We create light in our world and we create darkness. We make peace and we create evil. We do all these things.” We crawl into our cave and snarl when the light is shined upon us. We guard and defend our sins with tooth and claw. Rationalizing and justifying. Blaming and condemning. But is this what we want? Will this get us anywhere? How much of the past year have we wasted holding on to unnecessary anger, sitting in silent frustration and clinging to worthless annoyance? Has it added any light to the world? To our lives?

There is an idea in the Jewish mystical tradition called the *sitra acraha* – The Other Side. And it is the force of evil in the world. According to the kabbalists the power of the *Sitra Achra* is created from our sins. The Jewish mystics believe when we create disturbances in our relationships we add to the evil in the world. We literally create darkness. We build walls. We corrode our souls. And what do these disturbances look like? They can be very common, everyday things. Things that are very hard to let go of. Holding on to our anger because it gives us power. Righteous indignation as we pass judgment on our friends, family and colleagues. These are the ways we create the disturbance. These are the ways we increase the darkness in the world. And these are the ways we build corrosive walls around our souls.

The Hebrew word *Shalom* means more than peace. It actually means wholeness or completeness. To be at peace means to accept the fullness of our humanity and to forgive ourselves of our failings and shortcomings. To strive to do better, but to also be more compassionate toward ourselves. More forgiving. Over the next 24 hours as we review the cartography of our lives. As we evaluate the widest ark of our humanity – owning our darkness and our light perhaps we will in turn be able to be more companionate, more forgiving to those we love and those we can not find the compassion to love. This may be why we say in the *Shema* of Yom Kippur Let there be lights from the darkness. Let us see our light amid our darkness. And let us see their light amid their darkness. And let us forgive.