

Rosh Hashanah Evening 5780:
The Bush Was Not Consumed

Elie Wiesel was rushing up a Jerusalem street when a stranger grabbed him by the arm. “Do you remember me?” whispered the man?

“You must be mistaken, I’m sorry.” said Wiesel. The man held on: “Do you remember me?”

“Your mixing me up with someone else. I’m running late, please.”

The man looked him in the eye and said only one word “Saragossa”.

Instantly Wiesel was brought back years in his memory to the city of Saragossa, in Spain. Wiesel the Holocaust survivor was not yet the conscience of the world, long before his Nobel Prize for Peace.

On that day in Saragossa, Wiesel was touring its famous Cathedral. A man approached him and asked “Would you like a guide?” “No charge” – the man enjoyed showing off his beloved town.

He proved to be a knowledgeable and eloquent guide.

Afterward, Wiesel treated him to lunch, to say thank you. The man asked Wiesel:

“Where are you from? Do you have a family? What is it you do with your life?”

How could someone with a past – or a future - like Wiesel’s even begin to answer?

“Surely you must know many languages?” the man observed.

“Yes, too many.”

“Which?”

“Yiddish, German, Hungarian, French, English, Hebrew.”

The man dropped his fork in surprise: “Hebrew? *Hebreo*? It’s a real language?”

“Yes, it is real.”

“It really exists?”

“Yes it really exists,” said Wiesel.

The man blanched. “Can you read it, it must be difficult?”

“Yes, I can read it. Not so difficult really, if you learn it.”

“Can I ask you a favor?” said the man. “It could be very important to me. Please come with me, I have to show you something. Please!”

Intrigued by the man's insistence, Wiesel goes with him. He's led to a small apartment not far away. The man asks Wiesel to sit. He returns a few moments later. In his hands is a fragment of yellow parchment. Wiesel gently opens it. He's overwhelmed with emotion, his eyes cloud..."Is it in Hebrew?" asks the man.

"Yes, it is Hebrew."

"Read it." Wiesel cannot bring himself to speak. He knows what he is holding.

The man insists: "Read it!"

Wiesel offers to buy it: This is a valuable religious and historical artifact. A five-hundred year-old Hebrew letter. The man grows angry.

"It is not for sale! Guarding this parchment is a family tradition, the man says, an amulet passed from parent to child. Its loss would bring a curse upon the family."

He wants to understand it...

So Wiesel reads the parchment: *"I - Moses, son of Abraham - forced to break all ties with my People and my faith, leave these lines to the children of my children and to theirs, in order that on the day when Israel will be able to walk again its head high under the sun, without fear and without remorse, they will know where their roots lie. Written at Saragossa, in this year of punishment and exile."*

The man who gave tours of the Cathedral in Saragossa still did not understand, and Wiesel had to explain to him: You are the child of the children's children's children of Moses son of Abraham in the letter, victim of the Inquisition 500 years before. The man asked more questions, still trying to understand. He demanded the whole story, from Spain and beyond - to someone like Wiesel, to Auschwitz, and modern Israel; and from Spain and before - and before that back to Masada, the Temple, Judea, the Kings and prophets, Sinai, Egypt, the ancestors...

So there on a Jerusalem street, years later, Wiesel says: "Yes, I remember you."

The man spoke the halting and accented Hebrew of a new immigrant to Israel. I never told you my name said the man: "My name is Moses, son of Abraham."

The reason I share this story tonight is because of the prelude that Wiesel adds to this story. In the prelude he says we can never really know what appointment with destiny we will have, what we'll be called upon to say or do that somehow helps tikkun olam – to redeem the world, to restore some balance to the universe, to help

guide someone's soul the way it needs to go. As travelers in life, he says, we have no way to know why our steps lead us the way they do.

Exactly 20 years ago on this very night, the eve of Rosh haShana, Tamar and I were on our honeymoon. We'd been in Spain for a week already, and as passionate lovers of Jewish history, we had gone earlier that morning to Saragossa to look for the Cathedral in the story. We'd both told the story many times to our students as we guided them through Israel and the story of the Jewish People, through the millenia and into the Jewish present.

For RH we'd been invited to a small, progressive congregation in Barcelona. Services were held in a hard-to-find basement used as a synagogue. We wondered if they felt the need to be underground and hidden, or if it was the only place they could afford.

It was profound to greet the new year with a Jewish community in Spain, still alive 500 years after the Inquisition. Clearly, many of the people at that service were like the man from Saragossa, people who had rediscovered their Jewish roots, hidden underground for centuries yet still alive through them, and now vibrant once again.

Like many synagogues, they had a quotation from Torah printed on the wall beside their Ark:



This one was unusual. It was a quote from the story of Moses, the quote about the crucial turning point of Moses' life: the moment that creates his destiny:

Here was a bush aflame in fire, yet the bush was not consumed

וְהָיָה הַסִּנֵּה בְעֵר בְּאֵשׁ וְהַסִּנֵּה אֵינּוּ אֵכָל

But those words were more than a quotation on the wall. At the end of the service, the community stood up, embraced arms, and sang those words aloud. This was their anthem, how they ended all of their services throughout the year. They sang loudly, defiantly – I'm sure the Hebrew words echoed from the basement and up onto the streets of Barcelona – They sang these words as if to declare how they chose to live their lives, what being a community of Jews means to them:

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Here was a bush aflame in fire, yet the bush was not consumed

I think these words are speaking to us and to our community here tonight as we greet this New Year in Malibu.

No, we did not have to battle the fire of an Inquisition during this year that just ended, thank God. But we did experience ourselves as a community aflame.

I know it's difficult to imagine – with so much destruction here - a burning that does not consume. But I want to suggest that this verse about Moses' life-transforming moment can guide us as we transform from the year of a bad fire, a year of bitter ashes, into what we hope and pray will be a Good and Sweet New Year for 5780.

This quotation is especially poignant...

In daily routine as a shepherd, Moses passes many bushes every day. He would never have notice that particular bush if it wasn't burning.

He would have missed its message.

It is human nature to take routine life as a given. We usually take for granted all the crucial details that make our daily life go smoothly, and too often we also take for granted the big-picture important things in life – the people in our lives mainly –...until they're threatened. Only when we sense we might lose them – or we actually lose them - do we really fully notice them, give them the attention they deserve, sense their full value...

This is a question we can only answer for ourselves, each of us differently: What did the flames this year in Malibu focus your attention on?

I'll share that for me – our family became painfully aware and conscious of reality: That everything is transient, fragile, and vulnerable. This awareness has changed how our family live our lives, ways large and small:

A trite but also profound example of how this plays out: From necessity, our family uses the Library more now since we lost our books in the fire. The experience of going to the library is different than before. Now it is more consistent with a different, more blended outlook on where 'mine' ends and 'ours' begins.

This sharpened awareness of transiency and fragility has added value to things and experiences. They've become more precious. As appreciation grows, value deepens.

The flames also called our attention to the interdependency we all have with other people, with our community and institutions, and with the earth itself. None of us could get through this past year alone.

I know there's not a single person here who did not give a call from someone worried about you or give a call to someone that you worried about them, and how important that care and concern felt, to give and to receive – and it goes without saying the same for all the material and spiritual contributions that it took and is taking to recover and stabilize and begin to return....

Moses noticed the bush because of the flame. He never returned to his routine life after that. Our noticing that gratitude and appreciation has deepened is a conscious, and constant, gift.

I think it is also crucial to note: After Moses notices the bush because of the flame, he really looks at it - its real leaves and branches - and only then he can see beyond the flames to what is NOT consumed.

When we look beyond the awful destruction, we can see what the fire did not consume:

The flames did not consume the spirit of friends, neighbors, strangers, and all Malibu to help.

The flames did not consume our ability to hear other people's cries, sense their needs, be attentive...Just think of the many people who fought fires, gave clothes, food, toys, opened their homes; who wrote badly needed checks, gave so much volunteer time, energy, professional expertise – the list almost endless.

The flames did not consume the experience of the beauty and amazing power of community coming together in time of need and help; the sheer coordination and ability to work together, to organize - with good will - and to do so much.

The flames did not consume the ability to cope with something larger than any of us, but - for all of us together – not at all hopeless.

Although the flames are extinguished and we pray there will be no more extraordinary reasons to notice such details, as the New Year starts let's not wait for another emergency to move us into being our best and most giving and caring selves. Moses never returned to his routine life after seeing those flames: Let's us also keep what the fire did not consume at the center of our daily lives:

- We need to keep our deep sense of appreciation, not taking anything or anyone in our lives for granted

- Let's continue to cultivate and practice the ability we demonstrated we have to respond with our fullest selves to those in need ...
- Let's continue to volunteer our time, energy, resources, and love, even now, ongoing day to day.
- We must continue to invest in our community, our relationships, our ability to give and receive care, compassion, and kindness.

On that Saturday night last November, one week after the fire, Ellen Wolf and Isaac Blumberg warmly opened home to the MJCS community for *havdala*. Many of us there had no house to return to, or could not yet return to their houses or know when they would be able to return.

Havdala is the short ceremony for making a distinction - drawing a line - between the end of the week that was and the start of a new week.

On that night I asked beloved Cantor Marcelo create a melody like the one I had heard in Barcelona, who sang the words of that verse almost as a protest against fate, as a declaration of how we live our lives, not letting flames consume us and what it means to be part of Jewish community...

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The Cantor's melody perfectly captured the moment, channeled the spirit of the verse from Torah and the amazing experience of community at an awful time.

Just as we sang those words to distinguish between that awful week and the new week going forward, I ask you join me and the Cantor now: Let's distinguish between the year that was and this New Year to come: May it be a Shana Tova u'Mituka, a Good and Sweet New Year.