

**Redemption is Sweet**  
**Rosh Hashanah 5767**  
**Rabbi Jay M. Stein**

When I was 10 years old I had a wrestling match with my older brother. For years he and my younger brothers tormented me. I was the outsider and I was the one they picked on. Hey, I'm the smartest and I would eventually become the most successful and they knew it. So I was the one they picked on. I was the one not permitted in the clubhouse and I was the one chosen last for everything. No one wanted to sit next to me in the car and no one wanted to sit next to me at the dinner table. When I spoke they either laughed at me or ignored me. It was tough but one day it all changed. My parents were out and my older brother was baby-sitting when we started to wrestle. This time wasn't going to be like the time my older brother locked me in a room and just as I was about to slam into the door as hard as I could, he stepped away and the door flung open landing the doorknob in the wall, making an enormous hole. No, this time would be different. This time I wasn't going to be the one who would be laughed at while I tried to fix whatever it was they made me break. This time I wasn't going to be the one who had to walk off the basketball court because they were pushing me too hard. This time I wasn't going to be the one who dropped the ball in the end zone or struck out on the bottom of the ninth inning. This time was going to be different.

So, with all of my strength I pushed and pulled – but I wasn't strong enough. Then, I don't know what happened but I must have kicked the wall and there was a sound like something had broken. I immediately assessed the room to see that I hadn't knocked anything over, but we both heard the crack. Then I thought maybe it was he. Maybe I had finally broken something on him. Maybe a finger or an arm or even a leg, but nothing. He was still holding on. Then the strange thought crossed my mind, maybe it was I. Maybe something had broken on me but nothing hurt. However, my brother didn't know that so I feigned a broken arm and he released me immediately.

You see, there were two rules in our house while I was growing up. First, you can't break the house – a rule I had already disobeyed with the hole in the wall and second, you can't break each other because with four boys the roughhousing can get pretty fierce. So, early on my parents established a “no breaking each other” rule. It was one of the few times my father would go absolutely berserk. So I made believe he broke my arm. I remember the look on his face as his life passed before him. The first words out of his mouth were, “Please don't tell Abba and Mommy.” He was scared out of his mind and for the first time I was in control. For a brief moment I tasted victory and for the first time I wasn't the victim.

Redemption is sweet.

I can only imagine that this is how Joseph felt when his brothers arrived in Egypt and now Joseph was the viceroy and his brothers must answer to him. He knew this and was going to torture them but suddenly he realizes that this is not about them but about himself – when emotion is transformed from revenge to redemption. *Redemption is about oneself, revenge is about the other.* So, until we are able to recognize our own abilities and own our own talents, we forever find ourselves in the vortex of revenge. *Redemption is about oneself, revenge is about the*

*other*. When we live our lives trying to figure out how we are going to get someone back rather than understanding our unique talent and contribution, we live in a circular system from which there is no exit, no escape. It is the difference between being empowered and being the victim. With redemption we are the master but with revenge we are the slave.

Personal redemption is a motif utilized and played out over and over again in our sacred literature. I dare say it is the fundamental theme of our nation as well. Our own story is often intertwined with the experience of our people. Our narrative is one filled with moments of despair followed by moments of empowerment both as individuals and as a people. A people constantly challenged to survive invariably learns to expect redemption. The person who is constantly challenged and succeeds grows to expect success.

That is why the torah reading for this morning, the story that opens the High Holidays, is of the redemption of Sarah. *Va'adonai Pakad et Sarah* – God redeemed Sarah. It is a story of personal redemption with national implication. When Sarah hears Ishmael, *mitz'ah'ek*, mocking her child she calls on Abraham to come to Isaac's rescue. No longer can the ridicule be permitted. No longer can Sarah sit by and watch her son be the object of disgrace at the hands of a taunting brother. So, Sarah calls for Ishmael and Hagar to be cast out. Sarah tells Abraham they both cannot inherit. In this climactic moment Sara says *lo yirash ben ha'amah ha'zot im beni*. This child of the Hagar cannot inherit with my son. She recognizes it is no longer about her though she can barely endure the cruelty forced upon her. Now it is about her son and here there can be no tolerance.

The Arab world born of Ishmael, has mocked the state of Israel by taunting our brothers and sisters in Israel with missiles, but we tolerated it. The children of Ishmael have grown into a great nation. They are now in Lebanon sneering at us, forcing 1 million of us into bomb shelters and others from their homes in the north of Israel – and still we endure. We remained quiet while nearly 1500 bombs were dropped prior to the war this summer. However, when they kidnapped three Israeli soldiers, three of our children that is when it could no longer be tolerated or endured.

Let us not forget the facts. They began the war and the message is clear. Redemption is coming even if it isn't fully realized yet. Redemption for us will come in the form of peace, not in leveling another country. Redemption will be understood in lives saved not lives lost. Redemption means living safely with our neighbors, not in seeing their demise. As the prophet has taught, "the wolf will live with the lamb." (Isaiah 11:6) Many believe the war is over and I pray it is...but our young soldiers are still held captive and I pray they are alive.

This is our personal story. Abraham's story is our story. Sarah's story is our story. Ours is a story of one family's agony. We identify with them because the story is our story.

Many here today say we must make it ourselves. Many drawing on personal experience will say they have accomplished their achievements by their intellect and determination. Many will say it comes from hard work and innovation. I say it comes from a partnership between the Almighty and us. This is the lesson of our historical and holy story.

Every morning just before the *Amidah* we say the *bracha* "ga'al yisroel." We pray to God for

redemption. We ask God, the originator of redemption – the creator of redemption - to give it to us. We pray to God to give us a redemptive moment so that we know we haven't died in this life already. The *Shulchan Arukh* says we must place redemption next to the *Amidah* – *samukh geulah la tephilah*. Says Yosef Caro – we have to connect redemption to prayer so we understand we are not the source of redemption – God is. If prayer is going to mean anything than we must believe redemption is possible.

Like the woman who must leave her husband when she has nothing – no career or resources but she must leave so she packs up the kids and begins to build a new life *ex nihilo*, from nothing. She builds a new life – because that is what she must do. She moves to a new town, gets an apartment, enrolls her kids in school finds the supermarket, gets a job and starts over. Though she may not realize it yet, she has experienced redemption.

Just like Isaac after his near sacrifice when he walks down the mountain by himself because redemption is deeply personal and sometimes silent – or like the little girl who goes off to camp for the first time and is so scared she will not be able to make it. She is afraid the homesickness will overwhelm her so she writes home after her first night and says, “the first night was really hard but the fan, comfy clothes and my sheets made me feel better. I made it.” Like the boy who leaves to become an actor, a doctor, an entrepreneur or whatever – the moment you left, the moment you made the decision that the life you lead is not the one of your choosing, it is time for change – that is a moment of redemption. It is not something that needs to be announced in the newspaper or preached from the pulpit, but it is redemption.

Every *shabbos* as part of Kiddush, the prayer that makes *shabbos shabbos* we say *zecher liyat mitzrayim*. We recall the exodus from Egypt. Nearly every holiday asks us to remember that event, not because we must answer to God for taking us out, but because it demonstrates how redemption happens. It happens personally and it happens nationally and the dark cloud that now hangs over our beloved *Medinat Yisrael* will give way to the warm sunshine of safety and security. God will deliver us. Even when we don't believe life will ever change – in fact at the moment when we have given up all hope – God appointed a messenger that brings a communication we didn't even understand.

God works in all of us. We must be there for one another individually and as a people. Call it friendship or whatever, sometimes a person must come to share their vision of a better life and show support. One who has experienced redemption is the most potent force for redemption in another's life. Moses drawn from the water by some stranger is imprinted with redemption from a precognitive age and becomes the most qualified to alter the course of a nation.

The theme is clear. When we are placed in captivity our redemption cannot be done solely by ourselves. We need someone else's assistance. When the Jews were living behind the Iron Curtain of Russia they could only be freed through the efforts of a Soviet Jewry movement. *Barukh ata adonai matir assurim*. Thank you God for setting free those who are enslaved.

Dan McAdams, a professor of Psychology at Northwestern University, explains that each of us

has a story to tell. Each of us has a moment on which we can draw and turn from a single event into a pattern of our life. Your story will have a peak experience, a time when you experienced extremely positive emotions. Your story will have an event when you felt despair. You will be able to identify a turning point – a point when your life underwent a major change. You have memories from the earliest age and of childhood, adolescence and adulthood.

Permit me one last story. It is the story of a young man who grows up in our movement. This young man goes to Ramah, attends Muss High School in Israel, makes *aliyah* and joins the Israeli army in an elite paratrooper division. Then he dies in battle. His life must not be given in vain. Michael Levin must serve as an inspiration to us all. Michael Levin's legacy must be of self-determination. The lesson he taught with his life is that one person makes a difference. We must not stand idly by as Iran and Syria and their puppet Hezbollah and Hamas continue to re-arm. So I ask you as Moses asked the tribes of Ruben, Gad and half of Mennashe *ha'acheichem yavo'u l'milchama v'atem tashvu po*, is it possible that your brothers go to war and you sit here and do nothing? (Numbers 32:6) Our answer must be a resounding, "no!" We must continue to support our leaders who support Israel. Organizations like AIPAC must continue to be at the front to engage our leadership in the discussion about the survival and support of Israel. We have much to do outside of Israel to ensure its continued viability. We must continue to send money and we must continue to travel there. Most importantly, we must offer the most sincere, earnest prayers we can gather from the depths of our souls. We must show the world that our Jewish community will not sit silently while in the Diaspora missiles rain down on Israel.

Oxford University Press published an extraordinary book this year by McAdams entitled *The Redemptive Self; Stories Americans Live By*. In this book he describes what we have always known from our sacred library - the common thread behind all success is redemption. National redemption comes from personal redemption and we are saved when we act to bring about our own salvation. Salvation in Judaism is not an act of grace; it is an act of self-determination aided by God. God meets us half way. Let me remind you of the formula:

**First, - *make a change*.** Identify where you are and decide to make a change.

**Second - *seek out a helper*.** Maybe a life coach, a friend, or a teacher, someone who will draw you out of the water.

**Finally, - *remember your successes*** and use that to embolden your future. Memory can stimulate confidence. Just two days ago, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said during a conference call I was privileged to attend. "This is a time of recuperation, a time of rebuilding. Our spirits are high."

*Berosh HaShana nifkida Sara, Rachel v'hana. Berosh Hashana yatza Yosef mi'beit asurim, BeRosh HaShana batla avodah me'avoteinu b'mitzrayim*, the Talmud teaches. On Rosh Hashanah God redeemed Sarah, Rachel and Hanah. On Rosh Hashanah Joseph was freed from jail. On Rosh Hashanah our ancestor's labor in Egypt was abolished. So remember redemption is sweet and it begins today.

*Shana Tova.*