



## **SERMON ROSH HASHANAH MORNING: LYING DOWN**

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Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

- 1 The Mishnah lists<sup>1</sup> five ways in which one is considered to be ‘using’ a chair or bench – five things we can do which allow us to benefit from the support the bench offers. Last night, we looked at leaning. This morning, Rosh Hashanah morning, is about lying down.
- 2 Back in January, I lay my baby son down for his bris. The lovely mohel, Dr Josh Plaut, brought a special baby-mat with him, rather chillingly called a “circumstraint”. It was specially designed with velcro straps to restrain infants during circumcision. So Omri was held down, unable to move away – he had no choice but to trust in the adults around him.
- 3 Will I ever tell him the story of the circumstraint? I don’t know. But I expect not.
- 4 In this morning’s parashah, we read about how both of Abraham’s sons were laid down by a parent: Isaac was laid down by Abraham for a circumcision,<sup>2</sup> and, a few verses later, Ishmael was laid down under a bush by Hagar when she despaired of being able to look after him.<sup>3</sup>
- 5 Sometimes we lie down; sometimes we are lain down. Either way, there’s trust involved. Of necessity. Either lying down is involuntary – children,



the sick, the exhausted – or it's a choice that we all make at night. But it renders us vulnerable.

- 6 Omri is unlikely to want to hear stories about the circumstraint when he gets older. And no doubt the recounting of the story of Ishmael being abandoned under the bush would be traumatic for him, and indeed for Hagar.
- 7 The stories we tell – choose to tell – speak something about us. The fact that we tell the tale of Hagar at her lowest ebb, at a festival of celebrating a new year, must have a reason.
- 8 I say that it's a festival of celebration, but of course, it might not be. Nobody can order joy. Nobody can prescribe happiness. For many people, Rosh Hashanah can be a time of uncertainty, of loneliness, of disconnect. A time of being involuntarily laid down under a bush, waiting for we know not what.
- 9 Indeed, in even-numbered years, when we read the other Rosh Hashanah Torah portion, the binding of Isaac, the same applies: Isaac, too, was laid down involuntarily, at the altar, awaiting Divine providence.
- 10 We all, at one time or another, experience the trauma of a complicated relationship with God or with Judaism, in much the same way that Isaac and Ishmael had a trauma around their relationship with their parents.
- 11 Next week, we'll mark Yom Kippur, when a big theme will be our attempts to defuse God's anger against us. But at Rosh Hashanah, reading these stories of trauma transmitted from provider to dependent, we can accept



that many of us have a complex, traumatic relationship with the Divine – and with Judaism.

- 12 We might be angry about the lost years of lockdown. We might be angry about illness, bereavement, job loss. We might just be unable to connect with services. The High Holy Days may bring back bad memories, or make us feel inadequate, or daunted, or bored.
- 13 In his book *Facing the Abusing God*, David R Blumenthal recognises the tension inherent in loving God, our Creator, our Parent, while also recognising that it sometimes, when things go wrong, feels very much like an abusive relationship. “The sentence, ‘I am abused by my Father-God,’” he writes, “lies quietly next to the sentence, ‘be confident in God.’ I do not think my taking this position is lack of courage: I am not sure we can do better, psychologically or theologically. Coping means living with contradictions. It means alternating between moral outrage and piety.”<sup>4</sup>
- 14 Blumenthal proposes some additional lines for the Avinu Malkeinu prayer:<sup>5</sup> “Our Creator, our Sovereign, we have sinned before You; our Creator, our Sovereign, You have sinned before us. Our Creator, our Sovereign, forgive all our sins; our Creator, our Sovereign, ask forgiveness for all Your sins. Our Creator, our Sovereign, write us into the book of forgiveness; our Creator, our Sovereign, write Yourself into the book of forgiveness.”
- 15 ‘I am abused by God’ lies side-by-side with ‘be confident in God’. And we all lie together, entering the new year lying down: mutely needing to trust in a mercurial God. But not everyone does trust. Not everyone can trust. And, like Ishmael and Isaac, who will both have felt doubts and trauma as



they were laid down by those they should have been able to trust, we can reassure ourselves that these feelings are natural. These feelings are human. Even if we can't celebrate Rosh Hashanah as a festival, we can celebrate the humanity that we all share.

## **GKW 07.09.21**

<sup>1</sup> m.Zavim 2:4

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 21:4

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 21:15

<sup>4</sup> David R Blumenthal. Facing the Abusing God: a theology of protest (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1993): 225.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid: 290-295, adapted for gender-neutral language.