

“The Blessing of Coming and the Blessing of Going”

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The Blessing of Coming and the Blessing of Going

Forward ~ May 10, 2012

The subject of this thesis could easily have grown out of my five years of saying hello and goodbye to my family as I travelled between Cantorial School in New York, and my student pulpit in Florida. It could have easily identified what I hold to be a phenomenon of nature—pregnancy and childbirth. And yet, Adrienne Rich, whose poem sits so quietly on page 25 of Mishkan Tefillah says it best:

Either you will

go through this door
or you will not go through.

If you go through
there is always the risk
of remembering your name.

Things look doubly
And you must look back
And let them happen.

If you do not go through
It is possible
To live worthily
To maintain your attitudes
To hold your position
To die bravely

But much will blind you,
Much will evade you,
At what cost who knows?

The door itself
makes no promises.
It is only a door.

This poem eloquently recognizes the pain and possibility inherent in transitions, moments in time that allow for transformation, the entry and exit points of significance in our lives. Part of our role as Jewish leaders is to frame those moments in time, to identify them and mark them; and though we can't stop time, we understand that we can stop people in time, to cherish, to treasure, to honor the doorways that people bravely walk through during their lifetime.

I became a doula because I wanted to walk through the terror and thrill of labor with mothers, as they tried to negotiate what they were feeling in their bodies and what they were thinking in their minds. I wanted to walk through the hall and go through the door with them—yet looking back at my doula brochures, the very literature and philosophy that I espoused confirms that this doorway was for one person only. Doorways so often must be walked through alone. A doula's role is that of support—through information, a tender and knowing touch, the right massage, the soothing words, experience, compassion...but the work of the mother ultimately happens alone. Her experience, though she may be surrounded by loving friends and caregivers, is ultimately alone—which meant that all I could do from the outside of her circle was watch her, love her, and hold the space for her while she was transformed.

I remember feeling that same unique and holy solitude as I circled my husband seven times underneath the chuppah. I felt this as I labored with my own children. I

watch the exile in a new widow seeing the world turn around her while she remains alone in her grief. Occasionally I feel it while I hide behind my hands as I light Shabbat

candles, or watch someone say Kaddish Yatom.

The first time I heard the word liminal was in Jerusalem, in my first year at HUC. As our interns smiled at us, recognizing that we were about to enter the doorway of transition—they thought it was charming, though they also understood, that truthfully you can't really prepare someone for their transition. You can only tell them that change will come, that they can expect to feel happy, isolated, elated, sad, scared, mystical, etc.... This is where Eliyahu visits us, in a place of promise--where transformation occurs, where we expose ourselves in vulnerability, where we struggle, pray, rebel, exult, process, grow, grapple, yearn, and re-imagine. We were Americans, and then we were liminal, standing in the doorway, betwixt and between.

I felt it as I packed my suitcases waiting to move to Israel. On July 2nd, I had never heard the word before, but on July 3rd, I knew that it described me. I had never heard the word doula before 2000, the year my son was born, but when my Childbirth Educator warmly chided that I thought like a doula, I also knew it described me.

Perhaps one can never be fully prepared for it, but certainly, you know it when you're in it.

I am caught and interested in people going through transitions. Something unspeakable and indescribable happens to them—they go in one way, and come out another. If you are a teenager it is minimized and called a phase, but when you are grown,

the chance of retreat into isolation during transition intensifies. I am interested in what happens to people when they go into this isolation. Do they need to be isolated, do they isolate themselves, is isolation necessary at all? Do they come out of isolation when they are ready or do we need to go get them, to save them. Does this isolation change them and how? Does Judaism have a mechanism to answer to its people when they go into this fragrant and mystical place of change and metamorphosis?

I want to ritualize it. I want to escort them in to the doorway, and meet them when they pass through.

The Blessing of Coming and the Blessing of Going

“Transformation, transformation, transformation” ~

Manny, the praying mantis, A Bug's Life, Pixar, 1998.

“It takes care, it takes patience and fear and despair to change. Though you swear to change, who can tell if you do? It takes two”~

The Baker, Into the Woods, Stephen Sondheim, 1988.

A mother of an eight-day old son blinks through tears, trying to swallow a lump back down into her throat, her hand held by her sister and back soothed by her mother—as a mohel says a blessing. A 12 year old girl stands nervously in front of an open Torah

scroll, not sure if her voice is shaking from nerves or excitement, because it all feels the same as she wobbles on her new high heels. A banquet hall is filled with people whose breath stops time in anticipation as they watch a Groom's foot smash a glass wrapped inside a white napkin. The above-mentioned rituals are familiar to most Jewish adults as a Bris, a Bat Mitzvah, and a Wedding. They have become significant to us because as a society we understand what they represent in our Jewish culture, and how they mark changes in our lives, weaving together our shared history, symbolism, and community.

Social scientists have argued that religious ritual reflects the *Zeitgeist* of society.¹ Religious rituals, like those mentioned above, mirror the spiritual, intellectual, and cultural climate of society, and provide an avenue in which human beings create and maintain meaningful connections with the surrounding world. It is an affirmation of knowing one's place in society, and having a sense of belonging. Yet life contains within it natural points of separation, periods of disconnection where a member of society is drawn away, by choice or by force, from his or her community. What is important to us

1 Simcha Fishbane. "Jewish Mourning Rites-a Process of Resocialization." *Anthropologica* 31,

no. 1 (1989): p. 65-84.

and to our communities is how Jewish ritual practice addresses ways in which people separate themselves from the pulse of their communities, and the ways people reach out to try to get reconnected.

Rites of passage mark the natural periods of transition in our lives, such as birth (Brit Milah), coming of age (Bar Mitzvah), marriage and family (Chuppah), and death (Shivah), and many beautiful Jewish rituals have been constructed to highlight the important transformations that they mark. Yet, woven through our experiences are the unusual occurrences that also cause us to be transformed. At times events may be unexpected and unplanned, and leave individuals feeling surprisingly isolated and alone. These unexpected moments do not always have appropriate rituals to mark their significance, and leave members of our community feeling frightened and alone. What will be addressed in the coming chapters is how Jewish life reaches individuals who are marginalized by circumstance—and how the Jewish community helps them to feel whole again.

To do so I will be examining three biblical women, Hagar, Miriam, and Hannah-and how their experiences of separation and marginalization have changed them and the community to which they returned. I chose to draw examples from our ancient texts because these women have significant and often overlooked stories that occur within our Jewish tradition. This is the same Jewish tradition to which we turn for comfort and guidance during periods of uncertainty. Furthermore, my examples are women because women often represent those whose voices are not heard, and so we examine them through a contemporary lens to find their lost voices and stories.

I will look at Hagar who was banished by Sarah to the desert and discovered her own spirituality there. We may learn from her how to create and bridge the divide to sacred space. Miriam was sent out of her camp when she was stricken with leprosy, and received healing and compassion. Through her we explore the experiences of those who are ill, those who take care of the ill, and those who grieve. Hannah, who was lost in the solitude and depression of barrenness found strength in God, and inspires us to cultivate behaviors that hold those who come to us in need. Each of these women not only teaches us something about our own contemporary experiences with these issues, but they

emphasize the importance of ritual in completing a transformational process.

In other words, these women were chosen specifically because they enable us to explore issues that are relevant today. Hagar, Miriam, and Hannah are marginalized for different reasons, however they all share characteristics of marginalization that enable them to undergo the phenomena of transition while their society matures. Judaism must speak to those who suffer with these issues, and heal their sense of isolation by welcoming them back to community so they may return with 'blessing'. It is through these women, that we can find guidance and counsel in these areas. As marginalized women, whose future is not guaranteed, they struggle in solitude, left alone with the challenges of their bodies and spirit.

Separation from a community in order for transformation to occur is a natural and necessary process that was first identified and introduced in the field of anthropology in 1909 by Arnold Van Gennep, in *Les rites de passage*. According to Van Gennep, all rites of passage are typically marked by three phases: separation, liminality, and aggregation. Anthropologist Victor Turner calls this ritual process liminality and *communitas*, and

signifies the movement of an individual from a comfortable and structured state of being, into an amorphous 'state', where the individual undergoes a kind of transformation, before reentering society. "State refers to any type of stable or recurrent condition that is culturally recognized. In contrast, transition is a process, a becoming, a transformation, and it has different cultural properties from those of a state."² The liminal period is the period in between, it is a 'becoming'. These theories on separation from community help to explain the transformation that the three models of this thesis experience. The processes of their 'separation, liminality, and aggregation' assists us in shaping rituals that more fully understand and mark the meaningful transitions that our congregants experience.

People in the process of 'becoming', have been stripped of the social status they possessed before, as their separation marks the detachment from their previous structured life. Turner has identified similar processes across cultures and ethnicities. Each culture marks it with its own poetry, art, and clever phrases. An Irish proverb refers to it this way: "Reality is that place between the sea and the foam." Peter Jackson's Frodo, from *Fellowship of the Ring* says: "I will carry the Ring to Mordor...though I do not know the way." Others refer to it as "a place of dying and rebirth, even of metamorphosis, the place where the caterpillar spins its cocoon and disappears from view. Liminality is Israel in the desert, Jesus in the tomb."³

2 Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ Pr, 1977), p. 96.3 Leonard Hjalmarson, "Forty Years in a Narrow Space," *NextReformation, Leadership, Formation, Transformation*, <http://nextreformation.com/wp-admin/resources/liminal.pdf> (accessed April 19, 2012), p. 1

The word liminality is difficult to find in most dictionaries. However, there are entries for 'liminal', the adjective form of the word—derived from the Latin word *limen*, meaning threshold, quite literally the threshold of a doorway. Architecturally speaking, the threshold is the part of a doorway that must be crossed when entering a building or a room. But *limen* also relates to a beginning stage of a process, or alternatively, being in an intermediate state, phase, or condition.⁴ So the *limen* is the momentary division between two spaces that are stepped over when crossing from one room to another, from one state to another. Individuals in 'liminality' embody the state of being on a threshold,

they are 'betwixt and between'.⁵

Turner defines liminal individuals as "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony."⁶ Characters in liminality are marked by their ambiguous status—individuals somehow traverse a realm that contains very little of what is recognizable from their past or future state. Liminal people are represented throughout literature as women, foreigners, slaves and jesters, to name a few. They somehow possess nothing, and subsequently float culturally and socially over boundaries. This ambiguous state endows them with an ability to be in places they shouldn't be and say things they shouldn't say with impunity; they are not 'regular' role models.⁷ The uncertainty of the liminal plain has taken on various metaphors; it is likened to death, being in the womb, invisibility, darkness, and the wilderness. These places have in common that certainty vanishes and change occurs.

⁴ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/liminal>

⁵ The adverb betwixt, originally meaning "by two," is seldom heard except in this expression, first recorded in 1832, and first used in Middle English, circa 1789.

Dictionary.reference.com, merriam-webster.com

⁶ Turner, P. 957 Ibid, p. 96

This work will focus on liminal individuals who find themselves in frightened solitude in the desert, in illness and grief, and in the frustration of infertility. What makes them liminal is that various circumstances put each of them into an experience of the components of separation, transformation, and return. They change location, status, appearance, and behavior. Oftentimes 'threshold people' are considered polluted and dangerous, because organized society is unable to categorize and identify them, finding them threatening. However liminality also presents possibility, it is a time of vulnerability, and within that state lies the potential for mystical thinking, great hope, and deep change.

In fact, Turner describes *communitas* that develops out of liminality as inevitable. As readily as a 'liminar' will undergo a transformation, he or she will always yearn for inclusion, acceptance, and reintegration. The transformation is always considered a holy and sacred 'space' because after dissolving the norms and structure that govern relationships, powerful new structures and relationships are forged with 'unprecedented potency'.⁸

In his book *The Ritual Process*, Turner calls the rite of passage 'structure' and 'anti-structure', rather than liminality and *communitas*. "In spite of the pejorative ring to the term, Turner sees anti-structure in a very positive and creative light. From one point of view anti-structure would imply chaos and would result in anomie, angst, and the fragmentation of society into a mass of anxious and disoriented individuals..."⁹ But instead, *communitas*, or anti-structure, represents the possibility of spontaneity and

⁸ Ibid, p. 128.

⁹ Charles H. Hambrick, "A Study in Liminality and *Communitas*," *Religious Studies* 15, no. 4 (Dec., 1979): p. 540.

creativity—so as painful, unpredictable, and uncomfortable the structure/anti-structure

continuum may be, it is a necessary condition for a society that wants to remain dynamic and responsive.

We don't choose between liminality and *communitas*, but flow from one to the other as personal and societal growth occurs. It is a containment of the organic flow from order to chaos to order again, allowing for a society to break from rigidity, to become unmoored, than be embraced in the comfort and security of a new structure that supports it. "Such dialectical interplay between structure and anti-structure is evidence of creative vitality, not divisive inertia....liminality and *communitas* often provide the creative thrust of a culture as embodied in myths, rituals, symbols, philosophical systems, and works of art." 10 Just as order grows out of chaos, the unusual blurry threshold of liminality represents the potential to articulate and shape new visions for social structure.

'Liminals' are considered 'set apart', very often the charismatic artists, prophets, or leaders; but also, without doubt, marginal people, initiates, and passengers who seek to change their status. In liminality, they shed expectations formerly placed upon them, and become free to grow into something else. The structured walls within society temporarily dissipate as the liminar transforms, and becomes reincorporated into society. Ambiguity disappears, and structure returns.

By ritualizing the return to community, a liminar's journey can be completed, but ritual also facilitates the unification of a group. Because of the communal potential of ritual, it can provide purpose and galvanize a community, revitalizing the larger society. This is where Jewish ritual and practice have traditionally played such a crucial role.

10 Ibid, p. 540.

Harold Schulweis says: "Through rites of passage, the I draws closer to the We, to the members of the family, and to the community present and past. These singular intersections present unique circumstances in which to find one another in Judaism. Laughter and tears crave community". 11 Jewish ritual life should address the variety and breadth of need that our community presents. But even more so, to reach our congregants at these specific moments and mark their transitions with ritual, takes an ordinary moment between clergy and congregant from pastoral care provider and problem solver into a truly transformative experience. We offer them dignity, status, and 'presence' right where they are.¹²

Some of our most important biblical stories turn on the notorious actions of courageous women. Likewise they also begin with God endowing the weak, lowly, or marginalized with conviction to overcome the strong. When we see women like Hagar, Miriam, and Hannah, who defy oppression and act with courage in the face of danger, they are affirming life with their resourcefulness and creativity. These women, the first women to name God, to be called a prophet, and to defy a priest, offer us insight into transformative experiences that create *communitas*.¹³

Hagar, Miriam, and Hannah uniquely travel into the wilderness of solitude and exile, in their separation from the rest of society. It is during these times that God reaches out to forge a meaningful connection with these women, changing them, and leading to a

11 Harold M. Schulweis, *Finding Each Other in Judaism: Meditations On the Rites of Passage from Birth to Immortality* (New York: UAHC Press, 2001), p. 2.

12 Driver, Tom F. *Liberating Rites: Understanding the Transformative Power of Ritual*. 2 vols. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1998, p. 96.

13 Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), p. 101.

new realization of self and identity.¹⁴ They are liminars, and we follow them through their transformational experiences because of what they can teach us about ourselves, and our own potential for growth and wholeness. Thus our tradition offers us these stories of people who enter liminal transitions. We may learn from their experiences of isolation, by engaging in close literary readings of the text; and adapting what we learn from their experiences to form new modern rituals.

Martin Buber echoes this sentiment: “community is the being no longer side by side, but with one another of a multitude of persons. And this multitude, though it moves towards one goal, yet experiences everywhere a turning to, a dynamic facing of, the others, a flowing from I to Thou. Community is where community happens.”¹⁵ Van Genneep and Turner beckon to us to extend a hand to one another, while Schulweis, and Buber demand that we link arms together through the embrace of Judaism. We can connect to one another ‘Jewishly’ by framing unique and fragile moments of passage with Jewish ritual.

Our Jewish tradition serves our communities during the most sacred moments of our lives, but as clergy are we meeting them in the suffering and pain of spiritual loss, sickness, and infertility? In liminal moments, people emotionally and physically separate from those they love and the places where they feel at home. Because this pain often reminds us of our own vulnerability, it also brings discomfort to those who have not fallen to the margins. We feel threatened and powerless to help, and often do not do nearly enough to seek them out. We are only beginning to scratch the surface of positive

14 Kaltner, John, “Book reviews,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (1997): p. 752.

15 Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1961), p. 51.

ways to reintegrate our liminars back into the community. When examining Hagar, Miriam, and Hannah, we will simultaneously consider how to update our rituals for our modern world so that our communities stand together strong through the process of change. The final section of each chapter will conclude with an offering of modern prayer and ritual. These were intentionally created to address the specific needs of those individuals and communities whose challenges are explored in this work. May our biblical ancestors go with blessing, and return with blessing. And so may we.

To begin, a prayer offering for the reader:

For Those Who Identify as Between and Beyond¹⁶

Written by Brandon Bernstein

Blessed are you who does not fit into any box,
You who turn any dichotomy into a trichotomy,
Who transform either/or into both/and.

Blessed are you simply for being who you are,
For the boundaries you push,
For the trails you blaze.

You live your life bein hashmashot,
Beyond the borders,
Somewhere in the threshold.

Not every journey can be plotted on a map.
May the Eternal One bless your comings and your goings and your stayings.
May the Eternal One watch over you where you are...

16 Offered to the HUC-JIR community by Rabbinical student Brandon Bernstein, HUC-Kallah, August 2012, originally entitled: For Those Who Identify Between Or Beyond Gender.

Chapter 2 ~ Hagar ~ Between Holiness and Hardness

“Hagar, slave of Sarah: where have you come from and where will you go?” (Gen 16:8)

Hagar is a woman of firsts, she is an outstanding pioneer in many ways. As she is introduced to us in the Torah, however, her status is the lowest of the low; she is a woman, a slave, and an Egyptian. By definition, she owns no property, and is not entitled to control any aspect of her own body or life. She will pass from owner, to mistress, to husband.

Her story unfolds over a substantial 28 verses (Gen 16:1-15 and 21:9-21), and is quite powerful. She is the first woman in the bible to hold a direct conversation with God. As she enters a liminal state, a freefall from status, she is among the first to have an encounter with spirituality and theology—she prays, thereby giving God a name. She proves to be the first to flee oppression, and to receive divine promise of having descendants; the first to weep, and to be a surrogate mother; and the first woman in the Abrahamic ancestor stories to give birth.¹⁷ Her spiritual interaction in the wilderness also allows us to consider what liminality is all about—it provides an opportunity to deconstruct a previous pattern of attitude and action that leads her to find God as her true source of security and life.¹⁸

In dodging between the boundaries of slavery and freedom, encampment and wilderness, she did what few Biblical mothers were able to do: overcome her marginalization and assure her own status and role in society. Why is overcoming

17 Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell, eds., *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), p.61.

18 Anne Franks and John Meteyard, "Liminality: The Transforming Grace of In-Between Places," *The Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling* 61, no. 3 (Fall 2007): p. 219.

adversity so significant? “The pattern of Hagar and Abram and of later Israel shows that

the way to God's reward is through the margins of society and the depths of degradation. Only then, it seems, does God redeem."¹⁹ Hagar's liminal journey assures her survival. She is further blessed to be able to choose a wife for her son, signifying the establishment of her line, and the memory of her name.

She appears in parashat Lech Lecha. We follow Abraham as God leads him to lands that are as yet unknown to him: Ur to Canaan to Egypt to Sodom to Canaan, leaving a footprint that will later be retraced repeatedly by Abraham's ancestors. In Genesis 16 we are first introduced to Sarah's complicated relationship with her maidservant, Hagar:

Now Sarai Abram's wife bore him no children; and she had a maid servant, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Abram, Behold now, YHWH has 'stopped me up' from bearing; Please, go in to my maid; perhaps I may be built from her. And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. And Sarai Abram's wife took Hagar her maid the Egyptian, at the end of ten years that Abram dwelled in the land of Canaan, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife. And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was lowered in her eyes. And Sarai said to Abram, My wrong be upon you; I have given my maid to your bosom; and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes; let YHWH judge between me and you. But Abram said to Sarai, Behold, your maid is in your hand; do to her as it pleases you in your eyes. And when Sarai dealt harshly with her, she fled from her face. (Genesis 16:1-6)

Hagar intrigues us because she is on the fringe of society, yet despite her powerlessness, she manages to assert great control over her life. Sarah, her mistress, represents structure and has status. Hagar is her opposite, unmarried, poor, and a slave; yet also young and fertile, exactly what Sarah is not.

19 Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), p. 232-233.

The Bible tells us Hagar is a marginal individual by the ethnic, class, and gender properties that define her. Her shift into liminality begins when the existing structure around her starts to crumble. Genesis 16:4 initiates a deterioration of status with a role reversal between the mistress and the servant: "And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was lowered in her eyes." As the metaphor of sight, implying understanding, dots these passages, "hierarchical blinders drop. The exalted mistress decreases; the lowly slave increases."²⁰ And so, as traditional roles begin to fall away, Hagar sees herself differently, the relationship reorders itself, and in so doing, Hagar moves into a new state, where she is no longer a slave without status, but a pregnant 'wife'. Quite literally, this shift in status triggers the ambiguity that defines liminality and attracts transformation.

Alicia Ostriker offers a midrashic vision of Sarah who recognizes that indeed, they are both of questionable status. Her portrait of Sarah tells Hagar "We should be allies/ we are both exiles, all women are exiles..."²¹, yet they are not allies, and Hagar alone is exiled, fleeing to the desert when her abuse becomes too much. While in exile, however, her transformation begins. Because Hagar has what her mistress envies, she 'threatens to upset' the Abrahamic line of blessing and the promise of his great nation. As Sara expels her from the camp, Hagar is in a position to create change for herself as well as Abraham's family, in other words—"to stir things up".

Liminars, as we shall see, exhibit common characteristics: they fall in the interstices—the in-between places of social structure, they are on its margins, and occupy

20 Tribble, p. 3921 Alicia Ostriker, *The Nakedness of the Fathers: Biblical Visions and Revisions* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), p. 68.

its lowest rungs. As an unmarried maid servant and a foreigner, Hagar (translated as ‘the stranger’) embodies these qualities, and because she does so, is able to create a unique space of transformation, a holy space, in which a conversation with God is possible. “...at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority--is almost everywhere held to be sacred or holy, possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency.”²² Hagar is free to initiate her own liberation as she flees into the wilderness. The blurring of boundaries, says Chana Kronfeld in her book: *On the Margins of Modernism*²³, is always a mark of liminal moments.

Her liminal position is exemplified by her being lost in the desert, the liminal site par excellence, uncharted, wild, and between established human settlements. When addressed directly by name for the first time, the messenger of God asks: “Where have you come from and where will you go?” (Genesis 16:8). She has fled the safety of Abraham’s tent but does not yet know where she is headed, and admits her destination is unknown. She is betwixt and between.

And the angel of YHWH found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, Hagar, Sarai’s maid, where did you come from? And where will you go? And she said, I flee from the face of my mistress Sarai. And the angel of YHWH said to her, Return to your mistress, and submit yourself under her hands. And the angel of YHWH said to her, I will multiply your seed exceedingly, that it shall not be counted for multitude. And the angel of YHWH said to her, Behold, you are with child, and shall bear a son, and shall call his name Ishmael; because YHWH has heard your affliction. And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man’s hand against him; and he shall live in the presence of all his brothers. And she called the name of YHWH who spoke to her, You, “God sees me”; for she said, Have I not gone on seeing after He saw me? Therefore the well was called Beerlahairoi; behold, it is

²² Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 128.

²³ Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism, Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1996).

between Kadesh and Bered. And Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram called his son’s name, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. And Abram was eighty-six years old, when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram. (Genesis 16:7-16)²⁴

As Genesis 16 closes, the text is rich with Hagar’s physical and spiritual relationship with God, changed and sensitized by her liminal experience. She has identified her personal God: El Roi, God who sees me; and a name for her son, Ishmael, God has heard. Hagar gives birth comforted by a God that sees and hears her, a God that responds to her senses. Hagar’s sojourn into the wilderness illustrates that women can connect directly with God through their personal prayers.

But why does God send Hagar back to Sarah? Is this to affirm her new role? In returning, she does so with the knowledge that her baby will be born safely, that she will be protected by God, and that she is fulfilling a significant role in history. Her return reflects a phase of her transformation that initiated the divine relationship she now has with God. Additionally, by returning to Abraham's house, her journey is linked to Abraham's story: "God is the god of those deserted in the wilderness, of those on the fringes, who are usually in the Hebrew Scriptures not Ishmaelites but Israelites."²⁵ By returning to Abraham's tent, Ishmael's birth is protected and Hagar's story remains part of the Israelite story. ²⁶ When God's messenger instructs her to return, she embraces her new role as mother as a blessing, not as a curse. Also note the location at which this

²⁴ All biblical translations mine with the aid of JPS translation and Dr. Adriane Leveen.

²⁵ Niditch, Susan. "Genesis." *The Women's Bible Commentary*, edited by Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe. Louisville, KY.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992. p.

18.

²⁶ Wilma Ann Bailey "Black and Jewish Women Consider Hagar," *Encounter* (2002): p. 40.

unusual interaction takes place: Beerlahairoi; between Kadesh and Bered. She is literally and liminally between holiness and hardness—and survives a surer person.

"The story of Hagar continues in Genesis 21 after Sarah has given birth to Isaac. Sarah notices Ishmael doing something with Isaac that commentators debate—perhaps playing, perhaps mocking, but it enrages Sarah to the point that she demands that Abraham drive Hagar away, whom Sarah now calls a slave rather than a handmaid, along with Ishmael so that Ishmael will not share Isaac's inheritance." ²⁷ Sarah did not want Isaac and Ishmael to be equals in Abraham's eyes, nor did she want her own status to be equal with Hagar's. When Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael out of the camp into the wilderness, the inevitable happens; an ambiguous situation, an encounter with God, which concludes with blessing:

And the water was spent in the bottle, and she cast the child under one of the shrubs. And she went, and sat down opposite him a good way off, as it were a bowshot; for she said, Let me not see the death of the child. And she sat opposite him, and lifted up her voice, and wept. And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, what ails you, Hagar? Fear not; for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in your hand; for I will make him a great nation. (Genesis 21:15-18)

Hagar walked back into the wilderness, where she removed herself from her role as mother—seemingly to avoid seeing Ishmael die—she cried, but Ishmael's voice was the voice heard by God. Hagar's first experience in the desert ended with such triumph, yet her return to the desert doesn't carry any of the faith and comfort afforded her 5 chapters earlier. Doubt and fear for Ishmael's life plague her so that this second sojourn seems to be even worse for her than the first. She almost disappears from the scene while hiding from Ishmael, and unheard, as her cries go unanswered; for it is Ishmael whose cries

²⁷ Additional Summary of text/translation: Bellis, (Gen 21:9-10) p 75.

garner God's compassion. We observe that doubt is part of the process. Certainly we see

that Hagar's second escape into the desert promoted a loss of status similar to that of chapter 16. The faith she acquired in her first desert experience didn't seem to sustain her when she returned with Ishmael, yet God spoke to her and reassured her with positive news of her future.

The story of Hagar is the story of a servant and her mistress. It is the story of surrogate motherhood. It is the story of struggle for status. It is sadly also the story of abuse and exile.²⁸ Susan Niditch notes that Israelites portrayed themselves as succeeding in unusual and roundabout ways—and therefore identified with those characters that behaved in unusual ways. They imagined themselves as underdogs who worked outside of the establishment, maneuvering through history from the margins. “One of the ways marginals confront those in power and achieve their goals is through deception or trickery... to be a trickster is to be of unstable status, to be involved in transformation and change. In Genesis, tricksters are found among Israelites sojourning in foreign lands, among younger sons who would inherit, and among women.”²⁹ Niditch's lens focuses on Hagar as an individual who was able to confront power in an unusual yet effective way—she attempted to run away and was sent back, she came back and was expelled again. Yet her story continues. Niditch asks us to wonder if we too can identify with Hagar—the outsider—and by exploring her story, imagine her perseverance and sustainability in ourselves. We may imagine our own transformation when faced with adversity and challenge in our own lives, and Hagar's model as a liminar can give us comfort and hope.

²⁸ Bellis, p. 75.²⁹ Niditch, p. 18.

Richard Rohr suggests “that the only way out of a person's entrapment in normalcy, the way things are, is to be drawn into sacred space, often called liminality, where [he believes] all genuine transformation occurs.”³⁰ This happened to Hagar, who unknowingly, entered a sacred space as she fled into the wilderness a second time. Today, one seeks the same spiritual or sacred space through Jewish life, ritual, and prayer. A spiritual journey, then, is also a journey in and out of liminality.

We pray in song, we pray aloud, we talk, cry, shout and confront God in the monologue-style of Reb Nachman's Hitbodedut, and still very often feel that God does not ‘answer back’. Perhaps we haven't yet found our spiritual ‘wilderness’; the liminal moments reflected in the bible don't often happen on noisy, crowded city streets. Our patriarchal figures have not heard the call of God while shopping, eating, or even dancing. They happen in solitude, in despair, uncertainty, sadness, and fear—deep and silent places where thoughtfulness and reflection flower. This happens in the desert and alone on mountain peaks. In the wilderness, liminars are given the opportunity to understand and experience the work of God in a different way.

Hagar's story demonstrates that it is in the place of liminality, when stripped of security and structure, that she and God were able to freely encounter each other in unique ways—to find each other, which itself is sacred. Our liturgy acknowledges the challenge of this task and articulates the sense that we relate to God from perspectives of seeking God out and unveiling God's hiddenness. We want God to be available to us, El roi, to see us. As Hagar has shown, liminality opens a window of yearning to relate to God. But unlike Hagar, contemporary worshippers in a synagogue setting may not hear

³⁰ Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer* (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1999), p. 132.

God's voice so clearly, and question God's closeness, and prayer's usefulness. We can be reassured by Hagar's story that even the outsiders, even the forgotten ones deserve to have an audience with God. Furthermore, if sacred interactions don't occur without prompting, we can help set this to happen by creating personal rituals prior to entering our worship spaces. We can engage ourselves in ritual that will open the door to break down our usual habits and allow us to become betwixt and between. Like Hagar, the experience of liminality in any sacred space encourages one to understand God as the ultimate source of security and life.³¹

Where have you come from, and where will you go, asks God's messenger. (Gen 16:8) In *Days Without Answers in a Narrow Space*, Richard Rohr would welcome the uncertainty of Hagar's answer, and echoes the potential that liminality presents: "Nothing good or creative emerges from business as usual. This is why much of the work of God is to get people into liminal spaces, and to keep them there long enough so they can learn something essential. It is the ultimate teaching space..."³² In this context, being on the margins of society can be considered a gift for theological discovery, not to be bemoaned but celebrated—celebrated for its clarity and authenticity. "Emphasis on spontaneity, immediacy, and existence throws into relief one of the senses in which *communitas* contrasts with structure. *Communitas* is of the new; structure is rooted in the past and extends into the future through language, law, and custom."³³ Marginality is all about

31 Demetrius Dumm, *Flowers in the Desert: A Spirituality of the bible* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1987), p. 59-62.

32 Richard Rohr. "Days Without Answers in a Narrow Space." *National Catholic Reporter* (Feb 2002).

33 Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 113.

potential for change, and Turner would consider Hagar fortunate to be afforded a position of ambiguity. With ambiguity comes the key to true transformation and vibrancy. We know this is particularly difficult and a great stretch for those in the midst of painful choices and experiences--perhaps Hagar doesn't promise answers and peaceful solutions, but she may offer a new perspective on difficult times; a new way to frame the story.

God's voice speaks most clearly in our biblical writings during periods of transition and times of trouble. Perhaps today God is communicating with us constantly, but we are only capable of hearing and understanding God's voice when certain conditions are present. Perhaps those conditions are present for us while we are spiritually vulnerable. It is during periods of uncertainty and separation from the rest of society that God reaches out to "establish a connection with humanity that leads to a new identity or self-understanding of the human community."³⁴ Hagar discovered God when she was free to experience God in a non-traditional way. The wilderness offered her the solace and sacred space that was not available to her within the camp. Likewise we can learn from her experience that when we allow for liminal space, we are free to communicate openly with God. We may feel we don't know how, but this is a model that will allow us to create such an environment, and give us the strength to return and face the challenges and lives we may have temporarily fled.

I cannot say whether our biblical characters hear God's voice precisely because they are already liminal, and susceptible to a different way of thinking—or whether they become liminal as a result of God addressing them first. "It was in the wilderness that [the people of Israel] faced a time when physical comfort and familiarity were suspended

and the need and opportunity to more deeply trust God to meet all needs for security and provision were greatly heightened.”³⁵ The journey into wilderness, an allegorical resting place for transformation, is marked by the intersection of the unfamiliar and the companionship of God. The unfamiliar serves to awaken us from the usual routine of our day, and the companionship of God is the sense that the divine ‘hears’ and ‘sees’ us. Can we seek this in prayer?

Looking at our modern liturgical constructs as we reach into our own prayer traditions, we are similarly seeking a spiritual encounter during prayer. How much might our own spiritual experiences during worship be enhanced by intentionally creating liminal conditions for ourselves that would open our hearts and consciousness to transformation? Our prayer choreography and language already attempts to do this—it assists in the deconstruction of normative status, by changing our position when we bow low, stand tall, sit quietly, or sing joyously. We also continue to restate our relationship to God in the language that we use in positioning our lowness in relation to God’s ‘high’ness. The dynamics through our prayer encourage a liminal—a transformative—experience in worship.

But can religious leaders be more effective in preparing us to become mindful of our prayer choreography and language? What would happen if we ‘ritualized’ the entrance to prayer to allow for liminal, transformative, spiritual encounters like Hagar’s? We can create a controlled ‘spiritual wilderness’ to encourage privacy in a public space. “Journeying through the wilderness offers the idea of finding god in new ways in the

35 Anne Franks and John Meteyard, "Liminality: The Transforming Grace of In-Between Places," *The Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling* 61, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 215-22. p.

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emptiness and dryness that is present after leaving the old, before the new is reached.”³⁶ . We can be like Hagar, and enter the ‘wilderness’ by temporarily uprooting and separating ourselves from the outside world. Hagar, living on the fringe of her community, unloved and unappreciated in her house, is sent alone into the wilderness. Yet she hears God speak and understands that even she is seen by God. It is ironic, that through this outsider we can learn of the profound opportunity for transformation that our Biblical wilderness holds.

This is a story of blessing in which God’s welcome is discovered in the wilderness. Hagar lives out the remainder of her life in a community that she knows and understands “He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took him a wife from the land of Egypt.” (21:21) Hagar, fortified by God’s words, redirected her future, finding an Egyptian wife for Ishmael, and peacefully withdraws from our text. She has discovered she is not alone on her journey, as her story closes, her role is certain, as she is touchingly called ‘mother’ for the very first time. A poor, broken down, non-Jewish woman is the first human being to give God a name in our tradition. How very much we can learn from ‘others’.

Hagar shows us the value of liminality in overcoming adversity, and she finds God. This leads us directly into chapters 3 and 4, where we look through the lens of liminality to examine Miriam and Hannah. In the next two chapters we will see liminal spaces transform the Israelites through Miriam’s illness and death, and Hannah’s

barrenness and isolation.

36 Anne Franks and John Meteyard, "Liminality: The Transforming Grace of In-Between Places," *The Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling* 61, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 215-22. p.

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RITUAL FOR COMING 'CLOSER' IN A SACRED SPACE

Ritual and Prayer for those standing on the threshold:

The following may be utilized as a springboard for those entering sacred space because it illuminates thresholds, both of the physical and spiritual plain. A variation on this would be a project to guide a group in a text study on the passages relating to Hagar and her experience—writing and compiling our own prayers of 'entry' to sacred space. An important synagogue project would be to create and provide a small book of optional prayers and meditations to be incorporated into the ritual of entry when standing on the threshold. These rituals are designed to assist the worshipper in preparing themselves for a prayer space by transforming the actual threshold and entry into a special experience.

Ritual:

1.

As one enters the 'space' (lobby) before entering the sacred space, a small table to the side holds many small candles, and a member of the clergy team, who holds this special area with a soft niggun.

2.

Worshipper approaches the table—a safe place for transition—and is able to read the quote from Genesis which asks Hagar "where have you come from and where will you go?", closing their eyes, the worshipper can take a moment to understand some of the significant associations between themselves and this text.

3.

Lights three candles. One represents what is left behind and outside, the second represents who you are presently at this moment, the third represents where you will find yourself ahead in your sacred space. Where you imagine you want to be.

4.

Says one of the two prayers* below before entering sanctuary:

Prayer for those standing on the threshold: (based on Gen 18:1-2)

Blessed are you Adonai, who seeks out your children.

We pray to you, that just as Abraham sat in the entrance to his tent,

We too may recognize the divine and sanctity of this space.

As we stand in moments of threshold, we invite you into our realm.

May you aspire to enter into our space, just as we seek to engage with you.

We are each on a journey, surrounded by material things yet know you are near.

May your messengers come quickly,

to find us in the doorway, so that we may enter in.

Blessed are you, Adonai, who seeks out your children.³⁷

37 Rituals inspired by 'prayer for those standing upon the threshold', based on Gen 18:120, and 'prayer for those who experience God outside the tent' composed by Rabbi Evan Schultz. May, 2012.

Prayer for those who experience God 'outside of the tent' (based on Ex 33:7-11)

Blessed are you God, who is found in all four corners of the earth.
Just as Moses encountered you face to face,
We are grateful for this profound moment of experiencing holiness.
Every space has the potential to be sacred.
Just as you descended in a cloud upon Moses and the Tent of Meeting,
We too stand in the doors of our tent, our hearts open to you.
We open ourselves to be surprised by your creations,
To be enveloped by your presence in all of our journeys.
Blessed are you God, who encounters your people in all times and places.

PREPARATION FOR COMING 'CLOSER'

Before entry to a sacred space, briefly pause, to reflect that you are crossing a threshold. A phrase that may be familiar is written above many Aron Kodesh: "Da lifne mi atah omeid"—know before whom you stand. But even more effective, remember the words of God as he spoke to Hagar in the wilderness: "where have you come from and where will you go?" Allow this moment of pause to arouse a sense of awe and love, and remember you are choosing to leave something outside, in order to make space for something new. Think of yourself as entering someone's home, God's home, allow yourself to be released of the obligations of everyday life for a short time. Don't run across the threshold, but dwell in it for a time.

Story: A Hassidic Rabbi compared the entrance to a synagogue to a border between two countries, where you must have your luggage checked and any contraband must be thrown away before crossing. As you enter the synagogue or briefly pause at the doorway, whisper or pray mentally a short prayer, such as "God, let me feel awe and love for You within the synagogue. Let me pray earnestly once inside and feel your presence." (Real Davvening, Yitzhak Buxbaum, p. 13)

Or

"God, help to pray in a way to bring me closer to you, to hear your voice, and feel your love"

As we learn from Hagar, there is enormous power in expressing intention and articulating what you would like to fulfill.

Chapter 3- Miriam ~ Between Illness and Death

"Figures, representing the poor and deformed, appear to symbolize the moral values of communitas...."38 ~ Victor Turner

Our tradition loves Miriam. She is a symbol of life and freedom, of spiritual connection to the divine, and a feminine voice in God's ongoing conversation with the Jewish people. She is a woman chosen by God to communicate divine will. However, she enters our story without any special prophetic identification; nameless to us as she watches over her infant brother Moses, she then lives out her life in defiance of authority. The text wrestles with itself as the Biblical narrator lauds her, and then punishes her for her outspokenness; elevates her as prophet, then reduces her to silence. While she is the very first woman in the Bible who is called a prophet, she continues to be identified secondarily as the sister of Aaron. Miriam transgresses the lines of both physical and

emotional suffering; and through her liminal position, is able to evoke a sense of compassion in the Israelites. Like Hagar, Miriam is a woman of firsts and of shifting status.

Miriam's experiences throughout the book of Numbers will illustrate a different sort of situation where liminality occurs. This chapter will focus on the possibility for healing from the trauma of illness, and how liminality works in the context of death and mourning. Liminal situations are frightening, and we are challenged to remember that they also offer an opportunity for acceptance.

38 Turner, p. 110

Miriam's role as a leader is understood, but not clearly defined, and thus she moves through many roles as prophet, percussionist, theologian, and healer. She moves fluidly between the margins and the center of society. She is a liminar.³⁹

In Numbers 12, we are introduced to Miriam, the liminar. Miriam and Aaron challenge Moses because of his foreign-born wife, and go on to question Moses' unique relationship with God: "Has God spoken only through Moses? Has God not spoken through us as well?" (Num 12: 2). Miriam is the primary voice challenging Moses' prophetic authority, and thus in questioning God's judgment. As God angrily rebukes both Miriam and Aaron, Miriam's skin is "stricken with snow-white scales" (Num 12:10). This terrible punishment strikes Miriam alone, and she is sent outside the camp for seven days to heal before being readmitted. In a show of great solidarity and loyalty, the Israelites do not set out again on their march through the wilderness until she returns. Her community does not desert her, but waits for her before moving on in the wilderness.

As Miriam's appearance changes, and she is instantly covered in white scales, she is neither touchable nor truly visible beneath her scaly appearance. Her liminality manifests itself outwardly as she is unrecognizable to those who know her, and suffers her affliction in solitude as an outcast. "The subject of passage [in] ritual is, in the liminal period, structurally, if not physically, 'invisible'⁴⁰. Furthermore, in the ancient Near East, lepers were stigmatized and forced to live outside the city gates, outside society—and so were put outside the law, occupying a structure-less plain...existing in the sphere without rules allowed them to freely traverse the space between chaos and order, law and

39 Bellis, P. 103.

40 Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975). p. 95

lawlessness."⁴¹ Jean Jackson, writing on liminality, stigma and chronic pain, considers how those who suffer, especially chronically, are often stigmatized and set apart, as though invisible. Though all people experience pain, somehow those who suffer chronically threaten the 'prevailing definitions of social order' and become ambiguous beings whose pain becomes invisible to others. Those in pain are pushed to the margins where they remain 'betwixt and between'⁴² .

Alienating Miriam by isolating her among her siblings, further deconstructs her status as sister or daughter, so it is interesting to note the familial language God, Aaron and Moses use in Num 12:12-14 as they confer together regarding Miriam's health:

‘Let her not be as a stillbirth which emerges from its mother’s womb with half its flesh eaten away’. So Moses cried out to God, saying, O God, pray heal her! But God said to Moses, If her father spat in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut out of camp for seven days and then let her be readmitted.”(Num 12:12-14)

We witness a family negotiating a punishment for a sister and a daughter, with compassion and great care for her safe return. In our text, God does not always heed the cries of prophets who wish to protect the disobedient, but here he does so. Thus for a conversation such as this to have occurred at all exemplifies how Miriam triggered a shift in consciousness for her family as well as the Israelites .

We can identify how frequently Miriam’s status shifts, elevating or lowering her with each shuffling of the order of names. This contributes to her marginalization by the instability and inconsistency of her authority. When “suddenly God called to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, Come out, you three, to the Tent of Meeting” (Num 12:4), Miriam’s

Journal of Biblical(leviticus 16:21)," .

...

..Meir Malul, "A Marginal Person:41

Literature 128, no. 3 (2009): p. 440.

42 Jean E. Jackson, Stigma, liminality, and chronic pain: Mind-Body borderlands. American Ethnologist, Vol 32, issue 3, 8/2005. Pp 332-353.

name is last, suggesting diminution, yet Miriam’s name appears first when reprimanded for speaking out against Moses’ wife, assigning her the majority of the blame. Even as Aaron turns to Moses, begging him to ask God for mercy on Miriam, the hierarchy is left intact: Miriam is beneath Aaron, who is beneath Moses, who speaks directly with God. Miriam is strong and outspoken, then weakened by her public punishment.

The question remains: why was Miriam alone punished for an offense that both she and Aaron committed? “The lineage of Miriam is a lineage of generations of women who have been rejected or humiliated for doing exactly the same thing as their male counterparts....”⁴³ The unfairness of one sibling being held accountable for the actions of both ring true for modern readers. In a patriarchal society, this inequity was common. But Katherine Sakenfeld offers an additional explanation as to why Miriam was punished. She believes God uses Miriam to show God’s own compassion to the Israelites. By God’s identification with Miriam, standing on the side of those who are put aside, we are able to consider what it means to reach out to those whom society rejects. Miriam is theologian as well as healer; teaching compassion by being the receiver of compassion. Through her disease and subsequent banishment from the community, God models both punishing and identifying with her, for he too has experienced rejection by his people. The process of shutting Miriam out and welcoming her back into camp, than serves as a model for the return to community with God’s blessing. The process of exclusion cultivates the yearning for inclusion. This is a healing of Miriam’s body, and a healing of the Israelite

43 Katharine Sakenfeld, “Numbers”. Alice Ogden Bellis, Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women’s Stories in the Hebrew Bible (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), p.105.

soul. Thus, Miriam's task as a liminar in the bible has been fulfilled. She galvanizes the community, heals their spirit, and allows for their own transformation.

In part, what we learn from Miriam during her short exile outside the camp, is her experience of being a 'stranger in a strange land'; belonging neither within the Israelite encampment, nor in the wilderness surrounding them. This is a consistent trait in marginal figures. Like Miriam, we can become accepting of the needs of others who are outsiders, and experience a place that is not home. Like God, we can cultivate divine compassion for those on the margins. And so Miriam's experience of exile leads us back towards God. The experience of marginalization causes us to shudder as we understand that tragedy and illness can and will touch us all. But our tradition teaches us that strengthened with resolve, we learn that we are capable of proceeding to the next destination in our wilderness journey.

How does this inform our ability to be present with people when they are ill?

Parents of very sick infants experience distance and separation while their children are isolated in NICU, not having the experience of physical and psychological closeness that is necessary for developing secure attachments. And so we learn that to care 'about' those who are ill, not just care 'for' them, we need to relate to them while they are separate. Loved ones of those who are ill, universally experience powerlessness, uncertainty, and a sense of danger. When they themselves feel isolated while providing care, they describe their liminality as "much worse than a rollercoaster. It can actually be likened to snakes and ladders, you get up a ladder but then you just fall down the snake".⁴⁴ Their sense of

44 Gill Watson, "Parental Liminality: A Way of Understanding the Early Experiences of Parents Who Have a Very Preterm Infant," *Journal of Clinical Nursing* 20 (2010): P. 1466.

powerlessness and uncertainty leads to detachment from normal life. Liminal experiences of parents who fear the death of their children before their own understand they walk along a fissure that ruptures the natural order of society.

Some look at this time as particularly creative, like the father of a disabled boy who invents the Jacuzzi to soothe his son's joints, it is the "so-called losers who shoot us forward."⁴⁵ They understand that they are liminal beings, and that they unwillingly serve a function, perhaps even a higher calling for the rest of society. A woman who suffers from rheumatoid arthritis recalls "...why not me? Why should I be spared a joint disease" (Margolis, p. 253). These are special people who somehow have a perspective that though a disease touches their body, it is not their entire identity or being. Their role and status shifts with their body's condition, but they are able to deeply know that a piece of them is not touched by disease. It may infect them, but not own them. They use their disease to understand that life is not defined by science, but by mystery. The mystery is the touch of divine that strengthens their will to survive, and connect with others.

While Miriam serves as a symbol of one who is sent away in her suffering, she slips silently into the abyss of solitude. Through her return afterwards we can identify with her when considering the emotional life and treatment of individuals who themselves suffer alone. We meet them in the margins; we also meet them in hospital rooms, the back row of the sanctuary, and through quiet breaths on the other side of the

45 Judith Margolis, "Resident Artist Three Creative Women Dance with Death: Choose Life," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues* no. 12 (Fall, 2006): P. 252.

telephone; and assist them in their return to community and health through Jewish ritual.⁴⁶

Death and Detachment

“For those who seek to understand it, death is a highly creative force. The highest spiritual values of life can originate from the thought and study of death.” Elizabeth Kubler-Ross

Loss is a normal and expected aspect of life. The mystique of Miriam is that of life-giver: a well filled with healing and nourishing waters travelled with her and the Israelites as they made their way through the wilderness.⁴⁷ Upon Miriam’s death however, the well dried up, and we understand the empty well to be a metaphor for the despair over the loss of Miriam’s life. No more healing, no more nourishing.

There is deeper symbolism, however, in the loss of water that goes beyond representing the loss of her life. The inability to mourn Miriam’s death itself may have contributed to the loss of water. Death and how we mourn loss affects the social consciousness. R. Hertz hypothesizes that ‘mourning rites are concerned with the resocialization (whether psychological or sociological) of the individual survivor as well as the body and soul of the deceased.’⁴⁸ Rituals that have developed over time help to deal with the emotions that have the potential to disrupt and unravel a community.

⁴⁶ SEE APPENDIX: Healing Rituals: Hospital room ritual.

⁴⁷ The well, according to the Rabbis, was one of the things created on the eve of the Sabbath at twilight (M Avot 5:6); they depict it as a wondrous well that flowed from itself, like a rock full of holes (T Sukkah 3:11). The well is portrayed in a mural that survived, even though the Dura Europus synagogue was destroyed in the third century CE, in which we see Miriam’s Well, with streams of water issuing forth to each of the tents of the twelve tribes of Israel. Source: Jewish Women’s Archive.

⁴⁸ Simcha Fishbane, "Jewish Mourning Rites-a Process of Resocialization," *Anthropologica* 31, no. 1 (1989): P. 67.

Though our rituals address the individual, they also serve the group as a whole. In the context of the importance of the liminal process in allowing for a crucial transformation to occur, water symbolizes more than Miriam’s healing powers. It symbolizes the soul of the Israelites and their cohesion as a community. Absent a more fitting ritual to honor Miriam’s life and mourn her death, the Israelite soul itself becomes parched.

Our tradition cries for Miriam when she dies, even though our text does not. Or does it? “The Israelites arrived in a body at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon, and the people stayed at Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there.” (Num 20:1) The fact that Miriam’s death is noted at all, specifically her burial time and place, is quite significant in biblical narrative. In her book “Memory and Tradition in the Book of Numbers”, Adriane Leveen discusses the uniqueness of how many details in fact, are shared with the reader regarding Miriam’s death, and though it may seem to be skeletal, in the Biblical world, the simple and dignified recording of the details of her death signify the esteem in which she was held.

Unlike other ambiguously drawn biblical figures whose death is either ignored, or

marked by gruesome punishment, the details of Miriam's death tell us quite a lot: where, Kadesh, when, the first new moon in Nissan, and with whom, that the Israelite community accompanied her to her last breath, arriving as a 'body'. This one simple sentence honors her and assures that her body will not be left to the wilderness and her story forgotten. A death record that is absent, is similarly a punishment, as one is dismissed by history; Miriam however, will be remembered forever.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Adriane Leveen, *Memory and Tradition in the Book of Numbers* (New York, NY.: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.154.

Kaddish

Adriane Leveen goes on to remind the reader that death reports and how we document and remember the dead are powerful messages from the living to the living. They emphasize power and social presence of the group. Miriam's death is not a punishment. It was natural, quiet, and filled with love. As we have seen previously, Miriam has been instrumental in transforming a tented encampment of individuals, into a single 'body'—a community. "The fact that Miriam, a woman, was chosen by God to communicate divine will automatically tells us that she is meant to lead the Israelites in and out of liminality—in and out of transition. Her relationship with them will be transformative."⁵⁰ However, since the implications of her loss for the community were not acknowledged, I will now explore the liminal aspects and consequences of her death.

Immediately following Miriam's death, the "community was without water, and they joined against Moses and Aaron" (Num 20:2) The text omits any mention of the sense of loss experienced by Miriam's brothers over her death. Since the text doesn't name her successor, it emphasizes the significance of Miriam's work in the community by leaving a palpable void—they felt her death and their loss. This allows her to be recognized uniquely as Miriam the prophet, yet in failing to eulogize her as 'sister of...' or 'daughter of...', she is disconnected from her ancestral line. Eulogies are a continuation of the public statement of singling out the mourner, slowly moving the focus from the deceased to the mourner. A eulogizer, as Mary Douglas says, informs the survivor of his standing at the threshold of his new role and its duties, "rituals of warm support for the bereaved are consistent with their status being ruthlessly exploited for the

⁵⁰ Denise Lardner Carmody, *Biblical Woman: Contemporary Reflections On Scriptural Texts* (New York: Crossroad Pub Co, 1988), p. 12.

group purposes in funerary rhetoric"⁵¹. Douglas understands that the funeral ritual integrates a mourner to their new status, as well as the community to their understanding of the new status.

Once a leadership role has been vacated, society must identify someone new to fill the role, whether a parent, as leader of a family, or leader of a community—otherwise the social structure becomes unstable and insecure. Failing to fill the vacant role, or to allow the leadership to naturally evolve, leaves the Israelite society uncertain and unstable.⁵² Again Miriam's role shifts as the text prepares us to respond to her death. But the text is silent and there is no water.

Several verses later, God instructs Moses to "take the rod and assemble the community, and before their very eyes order the rock to yield its water"(Num 20:8) In what is the only violent and emotional response following Miriam's death, Moses raises

the rod as he admonishes the Israelites, saying: “listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?” (Num 20:11) The word used here for rebels, *hamorim*, appears only once in the Torah, and an inescapable connection exists between *hamorim* and

..-.- .
the root *Miriam*—

53 Is this Moses’ single outlet for expressing his grief over his

sisters’ death? What can we draw from this emotional outcry and grammatical oddity?

Moses needed to grieve, and so did the Israelites. Loss and grief take their toll on affected individuals and communities. In this case, water, as a symbol of life, also served as the conduit for their mourning. Water is the channel by which the Israelites enter the

51 Mary Douglas, "Cultural Bias," Royal Anthropological Institute, London (1979).

52 Simcha Fishbane, "Jewish Mourning Rites-a Process of Resocialization," *Anthropologica* 31, no. 1 (1989): p. 70.

53 Ora Horn Prouser, Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss, eds., *The Torah: a Women's Commentary* (New York: URJ Press, 2008), p. 931.

liminal process of grief. In a way, Kadesh, the site of Miriam’s death, becomes the Kaddish they never said. The recitation of Kaddish by a surviving child at burial is a declaration of their acceptance of a parents’ death and the new leadership role they wear within their family. The importance of mourning rituals and the process by which we grieve, make it clear that the avoidance of this crucial transitional ritual can have devastating consequences.

Angela Kelly, in researching HIV patients and families living in liminality, considers that family members live their loss not only as an emotional but also as a corporeal experience that is always changing. Because of this ever-shifting dynamic, and the uncertain length of time within liminality, she refers to coping with this experience as ‘living loss’ as opposed to living ‘with’ loss. 54 One inhabits the space of liminality without attempting to escape. The Israelites’ loss of water following Miriam’s death could be interpreted as ‘living loss’. There was no outlet for their grief, just violence, alienation, and uncertainty.

While Moses, Aaron, and the Israelites were not permitted time to grieve for their sister and leader, this passage offers us insight into how evading a necessary and powerful ritual, leaves the community without spirit—and without water. Richard Rohr, in *Everything Belongs*, suggests that the aspects of dwelling in liminality, and the feeling of brokenness that it might bring, can be beneficial. Perhaps staying with the pain, he writes, and going through the process will lead to a far more profound sense of

54 Angela Kelly, *Living Loss: an exploration of the internal space of liminality*. *Mortality*, Vol. 13, No. 4, November 2008.

transformation. 55 This recapitulates the metaphor that death offers us a chance to renew life by remembering and appreciating those we have lost.

But it hurts and it is painful. Christian Riegel, in “Writing Grief”, reflects the

importance of dealing with grief. It acknowledges a process of loss and evaluation of the past, memories and relationships. There is no way around this. These characters can be considered to be in a liminal state where they cannot effectively move on with their lives without revisiting the past and working through the grief that plagues them.”⁵⁶ The absence of mourning Miriam’s death throws into relief how death affects a whole community—ritual becomes a means for us to work through the emotions of loss and the cultural shifting of rules and roles that accompany grief. The memory of the deceased, Miriam, would have served to symbolize the transition to a new chapter of life, and the recitation of Kaddish would have served to formalize the transition.

Unearthing the past and confronting loss, is an essential part of our modern Jewish mourning process. In recalling the dead, it reminds us of our ancestry, and inspires hope for the future. Like the Israelites, it reassures us that history will not dismiss us. Moses and Aaron however, do not experience this process. Though Moses eventually succeeds in ‘restarting’ the flow of water in Numbers 21, the “stuck” imagery of a dried Wadi persists as the Edomites forbid the Israelites to pass through their land: “You shall not pass through us...We will keep to the beaten track.... We ask only for passage on foot...But they replied, you shall not pass through” (Num 20:18-20) The language

⁵⁵ Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer* (New York, NY.: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1999), p. 132.

⁵⁶ Christian Riegel, *Writing Grief: Margaret Laurence and the Work of Mourning* (Winnipeg, Canada: University of Manitoba Press, 2003), p. 12.

metaphorically emphasizes the lack of ease of their passage during the time of drought. The water that quenches their thirst and provides direction to their journey through the desert is a physical symbol of the spiritual drought brought on by Miriam’s death.

Numbers 20 is framed by death--beginning with Miriam’s death, it concludes with Aaron’s death: “the whole community knew that Aaron had breathed his last. All the house of Israel bewailed Aaron thirty days.” (Num 20:29) Again, the text offers us a window into the evaluation of the Israelites. The parasha within which this lies, parashat chukat, presents an interesting nest for Miriam and Aaron’s death. Chukat, the law, outlines the purification rituals surrounding contact with death. This implies that Miriam’s death has the potential to stir new life, new attitude and perspective for the Israelites. Dr. Norman Cohen suggests that as a liminal, Miriam’s death in a space of holiness (kadesh) has the potential to inspire the Israelites toward closer relationship with the divine, and as we saw the enactment of the ritual marking Aaron’s death and successor, it did.⁵⁷

Parashat chukat, as well as both stories following Miriam, emphasize the distinction of boundaries. In chapter 12, Miriam was in the camp, than once stricken with leprosy, was put outside of the camp. The laws of the red heifer distinguish between those who are ritually pure and those who are not, and where they go to purify themselves. There is a good deal of coming and going, existing inside and outside, inclusion and rejection—which speaks to identity. A liminal experience is brought to completion with a sense of wholeness and acceptance back into the community. In chapter 20, we see what

⁵⁷ Norman J. Cohen, *Moses and the Journey to Leadership: Timeless Lessons of Effective Management from the Bible and Today's Leaders* (Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2007), p. 144.

is perhaps the most significant and amorphous boundary, that of a grave marker, which serves as a boundary between the living and the dead. The emphasis in all three cases of boundaries offer us differing degrees of demarcation of what happens on the 'other side', in spaces that have liminal potential. "For a thing to transgress its borders and to get mixed up with other things not of its kind meant to the ancient man a blurring of the order and an injury to the world, bringing chaos again to rule the world. Marginals find their natural place within the lawless sphere outside of structured society"⁵⁸

It is apparent that the Israelites mourned for Aaron, in spite of not doing so for Miriam—after all, in a patriarchal society, Aaron the High Priest would have a significant community-wide ritual marking his death and the naming of his successor. Looking through the lens of liminality, however, one might interpret the development of an elaborate mourning ritual for Aaron as an indicator that once again, triggered by a liminar, the community conscience evolved, and learned that traumatic transitions need to be completed with ritual for a healthy return to *communitas*. Morality is expressed through ritual: subsequently, the future of Israel, referred to now as a 'house' of Israel, improved following Aaron's death. And in a public display of their unity and maturity, in his book, *Moses and the Journey to Leadership*, Norman Cohen points out that they sing in solidarity: "Oz yashir Yisrael et ha-shirah hazot" (Num 21:17), echoing their liberating song of the sea from Exodus 15:1; independent of Moses, and independent of Miriam's leadership and that of Aaron, they have reached their own *communitas* and can

Journal of Biblical(leviticus 16," .

... .

.Meir Malul, "A Marginal Person21):58

Literature 128, no. 3 (2009): 437-42.

sing their own song. Miriam's story not only teaches about death, but about life and community.⁵⁹

Death and Liminality for us.

The "13th century commentary of Rabbi Menachem ben Solomon Meiri stated that it is not the act of the righteous dying that atones for sins; rather, these deaths often move the living toward introspection and private acknowledgement of wrongdoing, which then results in personal prayer for repentance."⁶⁰ Meiri suggests that appropriately dealing with death is a necessary and profound process of dealing with life. It brings honor and memory to the deceased, and honors the relationships that are strengthened by those that mourn together. Simcha Fishbane expands upon community building and cohesion found through group mourning: "Without the foundation of the daily minyan, the wider synagogue activities might not have a legitimate base from which to function. It is the Kaddish sayers who in essence maintain this ongoing service. Rabbinism encourages the psychological need to recite Kaddish; as people continue to die, the continuation of the synagogue through the collectivity of the survivors is guaranteed....The Kaddish period is for them a liminal period after which they are incorporated as active participants in the synagogue community"⁶¹

Liminal moments all share transitional characteristics that serve as points of connection between God and his people. The moments are not uniformly positive, as they are often fraught with ambiguities and the threat of instability, drought, famine, and

59 Cohen, p. 152.

60 Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss, eds., *The Torah: a Women's Commentary* (New York: URJ Press, 2008), p. 932.

61 Fishbane, p. 81.

enemies⁶². But nestled within chukat, law is possibly the ultimate form of divine communication. Through Biblical legal discourse we experience a dialogue with God about life and death and through Rabbinic tradition we receive guidance on how to navigate the unstructured wilderness following death. Law offers stability in the unstable and chaotic wilderness of grief, and ritual provides a map back to community. Dr. Eugene Borowitz shares his insight on the profound nature of Jewish mourning following his personal observance of shiva and yartzeit: "Saying Kaddish meaningfully instructs us to let God be God and brings on the slow healing of God's intimate relationship with us. And staying with community while we say this reminds us that the world is not centered around us alone, we cultivate gratitude for our gifts, and for the relationships we have with others around us."⁶³

Our priestly texts are consistently protective of the boundaries that Jewish law creates. Within this border, Jewish ritual life invites ritual transformation, and so demands responsible methods of return. Just like a physical marker of the divisions between life and death, illness and health, purity and impurity, the liminal phase is also a division marking a change in human development, it is the emotional manifestation of the physical markers. With death, Moses, Aaron, and Miriam demonstrate to us that one can only move through this period by undergoing a mourning ritual. Death forces us to dissolve and rebuild the deepest human bonds that form us. In contemporary Judaism, these are formed during the period of mourning and shiva.

62 Nanette Stahl, *Law and Liminality in the Bible* (Sheffield, England.: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd., 1995), p. 13.

63 Eugene B. Borowitz, "Musings On Mourning," *CCAR Journal: A Reform Jewish Quarterly* (Summer 2006): p. 3-9.

Our traditional Shiva ritual is developed to mark the disintegration of the normal structure and roles that a survivor knows, and to re-integrate him into the community in his new role as a mourner. Burial, shiva, shloshim, and yartzeit all systematically embrace mourners as they mark significant dates in the calendar year. It reestablishes the mourner as well as the community in their new roles. Judaism's mourning rituals hold within them both history and purpose. History has built ritual over time, which connects history with social structure...Without group ritual, the group loses the thing that binds it together.⁶⁴ To ignore the application this ritual plays in transitioning a mourner through liminality and mourning back to community, ignores the blessing that it holds.

After shiva following the death of his wife, Borowitz writes: "Mourning is substantially an act of psychic self-defense, even of a certain healthy narcissism, so this formula now comes to remind us we are not alone."⁶⁵ With keen awareness, Dr. Borowitz utilized and welcomed the daily recitation of Kaddish, knowing how it enabled him to maintain the closeness of his relationship with his wife through our liturgy. Yet he also resented that his tradition was diminishing the particularity of his sorrow over the loss of his wife, by grouping him with others who were filled with sorrow. He struggled in the space of mourning, as he acknowledged that he was now one of many mourners, who had

a category—widower; and his beloved wife belonged to the collective of those whom we mourn and remember through Kaddish.

Jews are fed by a tradition that constructs a system of how to face loss, while still affirming the continuity of life by saying Kaddish and observing our shiva practice. Perhaps this is the beauty of our tradition that should be articulated and emphasized.

64 Fishbane, p. 68.65 Borowitz, p. 9.

Though a mourner slips into the exile of his or her loss while grieving, the practice of connecting to others through Kaddish comforts us. Saying Kaddish keeps a mourner connected to their loved ones, but it serves to help them stay connected to their community as well. As we learned from Miriam's story, to bypass ritualized mourning bypasses connection.

Jewish tradition is rich with spiritual material and resources for comfort, yet Dr. Borowitz remembers so many of his colleagues' condolences were noticeably secular. He was searching for the rituals that our tradition provides for us after loss, in order to affirm his own life's devotion to Jewish practice and study. He noticed how few people felt comfortable speaking in the Jewish 'language of loss'. Yet he yearned, as do many others, for a touch of the sacred, and was grateful for those who in spite of their discomfort, did it anyway.⁶⁶

The isolation and disorientation of grief is described as a black hole that destroys identities and erases achievements and history—"to suffer is to be shut in, to be locked up by grief in a world without life."⁶⁷ Our mourning rituals assist us in focusing on the restoration of life, leaving behind the dark hole. The liminality of grief enables one to transition out of the rawness of pain and indicates a healing process and finding new ways of living in and with loss. Finding ways to live loss provides strength and community to others who need to find a new 'normal' while in a liminal state. Coming back to community, reentering society out of liminality is to adjust and accept the

66 Borowitz, p. 4.67 Kelly, p. 346.

feelings of confusion, fear, grief, anger as a new part of your life, and a new part of *communitas*.⁶⁸

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, whose pioneering work is in the field of patient advocacy and understanding regarding the process of dying, described the traumatic and individualized state of the dying, as well as the needs of those who are left to mourn. It is merely a pattern of adjustment, not a set process, but a framework for what she observed. The Elizabeth Kubler-Ross foundation understands her work to embody the whirlwind of emotions that occur. "The stages are not linear, people do not necessarily go through all of them or even some of them...let's move on from the Five Stages [which were drawn from interviews with the dying in her book *On Death and Dying*], please move forward...there is SO much more to life and living"⁶⁹ She urged family members and care providers to be present with, and listen to those who were dying, this expresses a love and compassion that is immeasurable and irreplaceable.⁷⁰

In the final stage of incorporation, the ritual subject returns to society anew as a stable cultural subject and the rite de passage is consummated.⁷¹ What if there is no hope of incorporation, that because of illness there is no ability to leave the liminal phase—this

is both a medical and psychological space—this is living loss. What can we learn from Miriam’s experiences in serving members of our own community who are suffering in liminality of illness or grief? How then, can we guarantee that we honor those

68 Ibid. p. 348.

69 Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, “www.ekrfoundation.org,”.

70 Based on the Five Stages of Grief, or the Grief Cycle Model, published in *On Death and Dying*, 1969. The Five stages are: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, Acceptance.

71 Ibid. p. 336.

marginalized within our community, and see that they somehow become incorporated, even as they live loss?72 Kubler-Ross recommends that care providers and family members help facilitate ritual that will bring about acceptance of death to the patient and to their loved ones? Clergy understand this as well, as shiva is constructed as a remarkably sophisticated religious-social ritual that understood psychology long before psychologists did. Grief and reactions to trauma are as individualized as fingerprints, says Kubler-Ross.

Consistent with the laws of liminality, and a public proclamation of this change of status, there is likewise a change of appearance—the *kriyah*, tearing of a survivor’s outer garment, a “purposeful scar”73. Prior to burial, during the period of *aninut*, survivors are forbidden to shave, cut hair, or bathe; and are not expected to work or participate in the study of Torah or fulfill a *minyan*. They don’t ‘count’ as they ordinarily would. In this state, they are noticeably absent from their normal routines—they are singled out for change by what they do, where they are, and how they look.

The transition is physically marked during the recession from the grave, as society’s concerns center on care for the mourner. Forming two parallel lines, a guarded pathway, mourners exit the burial area by walking away from the grave between the two lines. A mourner is now able to turn in a new direction, held straight by the support of their community, symbolically passing through a hall to their new position. Again, appearances change as a mourner takes their shoes off, and is confined to the house of

72 SEE APPENDIX: visiting the sick.

73 Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning* (New York, NY.: Jonathan David Publishers, 1969), page nr. 42.

mourning, as the community is forced to enter their space. Outsiders come in. Outsiders bring food to nourish those inside.

During shiva, there is a reshuffling of status to allow for aggregation, as mourners are introduced and acclimated to their new roles. The practice of sitting on low stools or on the floor is a sign of humility and serves to differentiate mourners and visitors, and allow for an expected status shift in the liminal plane. What was high is now low, what was low is even lower. For seven days, a house of mourning maintains this dynamic, and very often by the end of shiva, a mourner yearns for this ritual to end, and wants to move out of the confines of the house. Shiva has served its function, by preparing the mourner to return anew. A final ritual to end shiva physicalizes the reintegration into the world within a new status: a walk around the block. This ‘exit ritual’ was developed in Eastern

European Jewish communities as a way to mark the end of shiva as a formal demonstration of a mourner rejoining their community.⁷⁴

Reading Fishbane, I learned the bounds of liminality are framed by the walk at the grave and the walk around the block. Though the new status was set through the ritual of the funeral's conclusion at the cemetery, this additional exit ritual following shiva truly marks a return to 'status', as all that took place inside a shiva house becomes normal again. Shoes are worn as confinement ends, the mourner comes out of the house with support, and with new perspective, gazes at the community anew.

These rites are all noticeably public in nature and do not address the internal life of a mourner. However the outward nature of these markers serve to distinguish a mourner who is learning to identify themselves within their new roles and assists them in

⁷⁴ Fishbane, p. 77.

doing so. They must be public, like standing for the pronouncement of the Kaddish Yatom, so all of the community can respect and acknowledge the new role. The design of the public rite allows the mourner to receive support from the community as they change, and to rejoin and return to it with blessing.

Miriam, our beloved prophetess has offered herself to us as a beautiful example of the maturity and compassion required to serve someone who suffers, as well as how best to support those in mourning. Kubler-Ross expresses the release of the marginalized as she speaks in the poetic style of a modern day Victor Turner: "The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassions, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen."⁷⁵

Psalm 49 is traditionally recited in completion of the minyan in a house of mourning. Miriam might find that this psalm applies to her and to other liminal people as well, finding assurance in the limits and limitlessness of their pain: "both low and high, rich and poor together. My mouth shall speak of wisdom; and the meditation of my heart shall be understanding... but God will redeem my soul from the power of Sheol, for he shall receive me. Selah..." (Psalm 49, verses 3,4,16) This liturgy, like Kaddish, reminds us that death transforms one if not all elements in our life, yet Torah, law, and Jewish life continue.

⁷⁵ Kubler-Ross.

RITUAL FOR FINDING GOD IN THE DARKNESS

We yearn to understand pain and suffering in the world, and to find God and comfort in the darkness.

RITUAL FOR A HOSPITAL ROOM

Prayer ritual for those who are ill, and those who hold those who are ill.
Option to wrap patient in a tallit, or to have it held above them by friends/family.

Liminal Entities:

.
Close eyes to see differently.

.
Change appearance and atmosphere of room through opening/closing blinds, turning lights on or off.

.
The use of water in any circumstance is about cleansing and purification. Water in the hand is impossible to hold still, it moves. We experience handwashing here to close and release, to hold and to let go.

.
Permission to be angry, powerless, and frustrated, living loss.
Ritual

1.
Cantor sings niggun and a blessing with music

2.
Goal is to encourage a moment of peace—even during living loss.

3.
Turn off lights and open blinds, to let in something new from the outside, and that the world is still attached to us, even though we feel isolated.

4.
Conjure emotions—prayer/story of a baby, whose fists coming into the world are closed and tight, to grab and to hold everything—yet as we go out of the world our hands are open. There is fullness and an awareness that there is nothing to hold onto, nothing to bring with us...We take and we give. Our hands close and open.

5.
Last 2/3 of Psalm 23: still waters....cup runs over...

6.
In an exercise of this release of certain things. For those who are able to wash at sink, for those who can't, to have another person wash their hands and cool them with a wet cloth. Water makes things move, it washes away.

7.
Prayer: Al N'tilat Yadaim-for ritual purity.

8.
Recite prayer below:

9.
Elul-psalm 27, psalm 121 to love, and.....

10. Sing: Musical selection/ see below.

11. If they choose—to return blinds/lighting to previous state.

Offer of prayer:

God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel, and Leah,
God who was with Job during his deepest and most painful moments of suffering,
We summon you here to this place, in this moment.
We cannot go out and seek you, we need you to come to us.
God who created the world and the universe,

We know that we are one small entity within the world.
Yet you love your creatures and your creations,

You birthed us into being, and we now seek your comfort more than ever.
Just as you were with Moses in his darkest hour,
We call to you to provide a small light in this time of darkness,
To give us the power to love and harness the pain.
To know that when difficulty arises, that you will be with us.
Blessed are you God, who loves and comforts all of your creations.⁷⁶

“When we have done all the work we were sent to Earth to do, we are allowed to shed our body, which imprisons our soul like a cocoon encloses the future butterfly. And when the time is right, we can let go of it and we will be free of pain, free of fears and worries-free as a very beautiful butterfly, returning home to God.” Elizabeth Kubler-Ross

Musical selections where appropriate⁷⁷:

1.
Nachamu Nachamu Ami (Isaiah 40:1), comfort, comfort my people.
To offer comfort when all hope seems lost, looking toward a better day and that good will triumph.
 2.
Gesher Tzar Meod, Reb Nachman of Bratzlav. All the world is narrow bridge.
 3.
B’yado afkid ruchi, Craig Taubman, In my maker’s hands, I lay my soul.
 4.
Mi Shebeirach, Friedman, Aloni, Taubman, Levine
 5.
Hallelu-ya/Psalm 150, Praise God. For the ability to rejoice with the whole body and soul.
 6.
Elohai N’shama, About the purity of our soul, God’s presence inside us.
 7.
M’kor nefesh, Taubman, Source of the soul. Towards the appreciation of the beauty of our life, and the source of our strength.
 8.
Oseh Shalom, Maker of peace.
- ⁷⁶ Contribution by Rabbi Evan Schultz.
⁷⁷ Accompanying CD with Ritual Music

STORY OF BROKENNESS AND WHOLENESS TO BE SHARED:

How did the world begin?

For Jewish mystics the world began with an act of withdrawal. God did tzimtzum. God contracted to leave space for the world to exist. After this tzimtzum, “withdrawal,” some divine energy entered the emerging world, but this divine light, this divine energy was too strong, overpowering the worlds that tried to contain it, and the universe exploded with a cosmic bang. Shards of divine light, of holiness, were scattered everywhere in the universe. The sparks of holiness are often buried deep in the cosmic muck of the universe, they are difficult to behold and yet they are everywhere, in everyone, in every

situation. They are the life and meaning of the universe.

We live in this world of shattering. We feel in our bodies and in our souls the brokenness of the world, and we feel at times the resonance in ourselves of that initial cosmic shattering. Our bodies, like that primordial world, try not to contain, but rather to hold on to the divine light and energy flowing around us and in us. But as in the world's origin, our bodies are too frail, made only frailer with the passage of time, and so we begin to leak our divine image/energy. Perhaps, then, illness is really the leaking of our souls. In this world of shattered hopes and expectations, we search for wholeness.

Moses shattered the first set of tablets, the first set of the ten commandments. And then he got a second set that he helped to write. When the ark was constructed for the sanctuary, the rabbis tell us not only the whole second set of tablets was put into the Holy Ark, but the pieces from the first set as well.

Wholeness comes not from ignoring the broken pieces, or hoping to magically glue them back together. The shattered coexists with the whole; the divine is to be found amid the darkest depths and the heaviest muck of the universe. Every moment has the potential for redemption and wholeness. Our brokenness gives us that vision and the potential to return some of the divine sparks scattered in the world. – Rabbi Michael Strassfeld, Ritualwell.org

Meditation for peace—for Sh'lemut:

See yourself standing at your bedroom window looking out at the night sky. See the light of the moon and stars. Now see yourself settling into your bed as you prepare to sleep. As you close your eyes, you feel a warm blanket of angel wings covering you. You hear the sound of an angel lullaby – soft, soothing, gentle. You feel the presence of a beautiful cloud of light floating like a canopy above you.

This is the Light of Shekinah. Feel this light slowly descend over you. Feel this light wrap around you like a beautiful quilt – surrounding you, embracing you, protecting you

– when you are most vulnerable – keeping you safe throughout the night. No matter how dark the night is, Shekinah is always there for you, whispering "nakhamu, nakhamu, comfort, comfort" as She wraps you in Her quilt of sparkling light – as She holds you in Her arms of infinite kindness, absolute, safety, security, peace. – Ariel Neshama Lee, Ritualwell.org

Chapter 4 ~ Hannah ~ Between Peace and Wholeness

“Then go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of Him.”

Our final example of a woman who inhabits a liminal state is Hannah. Hannah is on the fringe, working alone in opposition to those around her. She is the honored, beloved wife to a passive husband who neither understands nor identifies with her pain. But Hannah finds strength in God to find a solution for her barrenness. A victim of Peninnah's cruel taunting, she is kind and generous. Misunderstood by a spiritual guide while in prayer and accused of impropriety, her piousness is rewarded when the object of her prayer comes to be. Hannah becomes a model of spiritual connection, as she proves that women can connect with God through their own prayers, and not rely exclusively on their husbands to be their intermediary.

Hannah's story is presented to the reader in two distinct moments in her life—a before and an after. At first she is unhappy, childless, and mocked; afterwards, she is happy, a mother, and confidently joyful. In the second snapshot of her, we see the expansiveness of her spirit, as she marvels at the wonders of God, and understands that miracles work on a very personal as well as a universal level.

We initially meet her, however, as she suffers, wanting a child and unable to conceive. Though her husband Elkanah admits he loves her more than Peninnah, it offers no comfort against the mocking and belittling of Peninnah, who seems to conceive so easily: "...Hannah was his favorite—for the Lord had closed her womb. Moreover, her rival, to make her miserable, would taunt her that the Lord had closed her womb. This happened year after year: Every time she went up to the House of the Lord, the other would taunt her, so that she wept and would not eat." (I Samuel 1:5-7) Hannah was

beyond despair, and Elkanah does not understand her depression in spite of his devotion to her. "In her wretchedness, she prayed to the Lord, weeping all the while. And she made this vow: O Lord of hosts, if you will look upon the suffering of your maidservant and will remember me and not forget Your maidservant, and if you will grant your maidservant a male child, I will dedicate him to the Lord for all the days of his life; and no razor shall ever touch his head." (I Samuel 1:10-11)

In a fascinating moment of role reversal, Eli, the Priest, observes her praying silently. Her lips move, yet he seems unable to hear or recognize her prayers. The Priest is unable to recognize a sincere worshipper in devotion—it seems that Hannah is the spiritually astute one, and the priest confused and lost. "Now Hannah was praying in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice could not be heard. So Eli thought she was drunk. Eli said to her, How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Sober up!" (I Samuel 1: 13-14) The scene of Eli's misunderstanding of Hannah's silent prayer pictures Hannah as victim of unjust harassment and disconnection from both her home and the cultic site—her prayerful sanctuary at Shiloh.

After the author establishes Hannah's piety, she is even more sympathetic to the reader. She is able to articulate in simple words that she is not drunk, but is speaking from the depths of her heart and distress. Eli understands he has judged in error, and blesses her: "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of Him" (1:17). Hannah conceives and fulfills her promise to dedicate her son to God. Let us now more closely read her story.

Hannah/Peninnah v. Sarah/Hagar: Hannah suffers from barrenness. Unlike Sarah and Hagar, Hannah's longing for a son, and the pain this causes her is emphasized

much more intensely than with Sarah. She is painted alone in her pain, crying out in misery as she is mocked and belittled by her rival Peninnah. The dynamics between Hannah and Peninnah, however, are the opposite of Sarah and Hagar. Here, the 'beloved' barren wife, Hannah, is the victim of mockery—whereas the 'beloved' barren Sarah is the tormentor of Hagar, who becomes the object of our sympathy.⁷⁸ As she sits alone in silent prayer, an uncommon practice at the time, Eli does not quite recognize that she is praying, yet in spite of her appearance as a powerless victim, she transforms herself in front of our eyes and those of Eli, into an empowered maker of destiny. She takes no devious action against Elkanah or Peninnah, unlike Sarah who banishes Hagar, but simply appeals to God. Mary Calloway, in *Sing, O Barren One*, emphasizes that in this narrative, the emphasis on Hannah's tormented prayer points us not to Samuel's birth, but

to the nature of divine reward and rescue for the pious and faithful.⁷⁹ If barrenness is a sign of divine disfavor, fertility is a gift signifying God's approval.

The animosity between Hannah and Peninnah functions to diminish Hannah's status not only as a barren woman, but also as a victim, marginalizing her further. Praying to God, as a humiliated woman without children, she is a liminal figure. Hannah is confined to a situation that painfully prevents her from healing. The responses: "year after year—when she would go up to the house of the Lord, the other would torment her and she would weep and would not eat" (I Samuel 1:7), of those with whom she shares her household are what makes her situation even worse. She is continually mocked by the 'blessed' wife because of her barrenness while others appear to be so easily fertile,

78 Mary Callaway, Sing, o Barren One: a Study in Comparative Midrash (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Pr, 1986), P. 41.

79 Calloway, p. 57.

feeling isolated and depressed—yet determined, powerless and without status. Her childlessness pushes her in between the forgotten cracks of society.

Yet Hannah does not succumb to her lot, she asserts herself to Eli and to God, expressing her longings. For her vulnerability, and what follows in the second part of her story, she continues to serve as a symbol of hope for women who yearn to conceive and are reminded daily of the sense of betrayal by their bodies—and by the communities that cannot understand their pain.

"And Hannah prayed: My heart exults in the Lord; I have triumphed through the Lord. I gloat over my enemies; I rejoice in Your deliverance. There is no holy one like the Lord; Truly, there is none beside You; there is no rock like our God...Men once sated must hire out for break; men once hungry hunger no more. While the barren woman bears seven, the mother of many is forlorn. The Lord deals death and gives life..." (I Samuel 2:1-6)

Hannah's second prayer, one of triumph and joyous poetry, celebrates a God that is willing to walk into exile, takes the most 'wretched' and poor into an embrace, and lead them safely to a new and wondrous place of fulfillment. The verses that 'sing' of her joy express her complete transformation, recounting creation with the might of God.

This prayer spends several verses giving examples of the many ways God reverses any decree, for Hannah has seen it first hand. She continues almost in warning as to the powers that God also holds to lift human beings up high, and bring them down low. By example, just a few verses later, Eli's two sons, proven unfaithful and unworthy, are destined for slaughter: "If one man sins against another, the judge shall judge him; but if a man sins against the Lord, who shall entreat for him? However they listened not to the voice of their father, because the Lord intended to slay them." (I Samuel 2:25) They are disregarded within our narrative, driven from the story without inheritance or priestly succession.

The stages of liminality through Hannah's prayers.

"Folk literature abounds in symbolic figures, such as holy beggars, third sons, little tailors...who strip off the pretensions of holders of high rank and office and reduce

them to the level of common humanity and mortality.... who restores ethical equilibrium to a local set of political power relations by eliminating the unjust secular “bosses” who are oppressing the smallholders.”⁸⁰ Hannah is arguably one of the less controversial of our female Biblical role models, yet is admired for her ability to defy convention and defend herself to Eli the Priest. Through her actions she restores balance and equilibrium in the manner Turner previously mentions. She is sympathetically embraced as she is recalled on Rosh Hashanah with sweetness and hope, and is a marvel as she asks for and receives access to God’s compassion and blessing. But this is our perception, not hers. As a barren woman in ancient Israel, her experience was solitary, that of a personal exile.

Infertility destabilizes relationships and roles that ordinarily are fixed, so Hannah’s determined presence as a woman who could not conceive, upset the order in Elkanah’s household and in their spiritual community. In Biblical writing, infertility, whose stigma has continued till today, is considered a tragic flaw. “It robs a woman of her labor and her status. It undercuts patriarchy, upsets family values, and negates life...it endangers all that genealogy promotes.”⁸¹ As much as children and generations imply a

⁸⁰ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 110
⁸¹ Tribble, p. 34.

presence for all eternity, the lack thereof implies death and disappearance, the end of the story.

Barrenness came to be interpreted as a powerful sign of divine disfavor, and those who suffered the ‘affliction’ of barrenness were pitied, looked down upon and perceived as empty. Proverbs 30:16 pictures Sheol as a barren womb.⁸² This too is a type of banishment from Israelite society, the society that is reaping the fruitful rewards of obedience to God. The barren woman experiences a unique exile from what is normal, predictable and acceptable.

“The married woman who does not bear children is in an especially marginalized position, for she is no longer a virgin in her father’s home yet does not fully function in her husband’s.”⁸³ The barren wife is also a biblical motif that indicates a significant relationship to God. The child that is eventually born expresses God’s unique ability to grant favor to, or take note of, a special woman in our history. Hannah found herself fulfilling neither role as wife or daughter, nor functioning as a figure of God’s favor. She was simply depressed and suffering. Her loss of status, like other liminars, places her outside the norm of society. She wanders alone into the prayer space where the high priest dwells, an established sacred space. From the depths of despair in her loneliness she cries out for what would comfort her. Mocked by Peninnah, and pacified by Elkanah, she is as alone in her barrenness as she is in her prayers. Unlike other biblical women whose husbands played a large role in their efforts to conceive, Hannah alone takes the

⁸² Calloway, p. 91.

⁸³ Susan Niditch. “Portrayals of Women in the Hebrew Bible.” In *Jewish women in Historical Perspective*, Second Edition, ed. Judith R. Baskin, 25-45. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998. P. 30.

initiative. She has forsaken her previous role as an anguished and powerless wife. Hannah’s anguish is now not only heard by Eli, but by God.

In liminality, one’s ‘previous’ self may be rendered unrecognizable as one sheds a

prior status and begins the process of transformation: “She vowed a vow, and said, O Lord of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your maidservant, and remember me, and not forget your maidservant, but will give to your maidservant a male child, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and there shall no razor come upon his head.” (I Samuel 1:11) In a move away from the status and title of wife, Hannah now refers to herself as “maidservant” of God. Her grief moves her quickly into the threshold of indeterminate space where her former self becomes invisible: “only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought that she was drunk.” (1:13-14) Eli, the priest, doesn’t address her by name, and doesn’t recognize her in prayer. Within the sacred space of transformation, Hannah’s former self is invisible. Under the guise of invisibility she demands “if you really will look” (1:11)...she yearns to be sincerely understood, and has the courage and conviction to call out from her dark place.

While on the threshold between what Hannah was, and what we know she will become, she continues to exist in the realm of the margins of society, unable to fulfill regular obligations: she would not eat, could not conceive, nor could she defend herself against the abuse of Peninnah. Hannah also experiences a symbolic reversion to an infancy-like state: to the outside eye, she wasn’t able to speak or communicate, was emotional, and uncontained. Her prayer poured out her grief—a true *kavanah* that was not tidy and proper but visceral and real. Biblical prayer is expressed as very emotional

and raw, with a high quotient of emotion.⁸⁴ The very same behaviors, if acted out in her home, would not have elicited the same type of transformation. In her everyday life, bound by her usual duties, and the role that she played for others around her, she would not have been able to break free from those confining roles. In Shiloh she was free to cry out to God.

Hannah’s transformation expressed itself in her powerful second prayer—it is one not for herself, but for her community and the world. She celebrates with enormous depth, that God is a God who hears prayers of the poor and those in need, and can right the wrongs of injustice. Hannah has dwelt betwixt and between, invisible and marginalized. Now her transformation motivates her to speak out for all who experience injustice, motivating us to do the same.

Denise Carmody, who picks up on the evolution of Hannah’s sensibility expressed through her two prayers sees her role symbolically expand in the world. “The most mature religious feminists mirror this pattern of development. As they work and pray, they find their personal pains and their own hopes for liberation echoed from a thousand other witnessing posts. So their feminism, their championing of women’s full humanity, helps them sense that people of color and people on the margins of society for whatever reason represent claims upon God similar to their own.”⁸⁵ Hannah makes this point in her second prayer:

“And Hanna prayed, and said, My heart rejoices in the Lord, my horn is exalted in the Lord; my mouth is enlarged over my enemies; because I rejoice in your salvation. There is none holy as the Lord; for there is none beside you; nor is there

⁸⁴ Denise Lardner Carmody, *Biblical Women: Contemporary Reflections on Scriptural Texts*. New York: Crossroad, 1988, p. 40.⁸⁵ Carmody, p. 42

any rock like our God. Talk no more so very proudly; let not arrogance come out

of your mouth; for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are

weighed.” (I Samuel 2:1-3)

Carmody sees Hannah’s second prayer as a call to expand our striving toward justice beyond our own personal interests to what is universal. It is our call to attend to those who are marginalized in society, and find those who are betwixt and between, helping them rejoin society.

Examined from this perspective, Hannah teaches us that transformation through liminality can, and should lead us to something greater than ourselves. Reentering the community is powerful, and if you are truly changed, the benefits now belong to the world. Walter Brueggemann, in *Old Testament Theology*, reiterates the paradox of the weak rising to the aid of the many. He rhetorically asks where did such a leader as Samuel come from, in that he would become a fulcrum of priests, Kings and men: “The answer is that behind Samuel stands Hannah, frail, distressed, weeping, not eating. It is Hannah who finally dares to pray and to vow, to receive, to yield, to worship. Israel’s monarchy, we are told begins with this voiceless voice of hopeless hope. Hannah embodies the voicelessness and hopelessness of Israel’s historical beginnings.”⁸⁶ In Hannah’s liminality, and the two powerful prayers through which we understand her, we also understand I Samuel’s message: ultimately it is God who stands behind Hannah—the God that answers prayers, that can hear and see his children, who can grant them peace and satisfaction.

The language of Hannah’s prayer represents the two themes of exile and restoration. Calling to God to ‘not forget’ is characteristic of the poor and slighted in

⁸⁶ Walter Brueggemann, “1 Samuel 1: A Sense of Beginning,” *Old Testament Theology, Essays on Structure Theme and Text*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992. p. 233-34.

society—her prayer may even have been influenced by other community prayers of the disenfranchised. This strengthens identification of Hannah with those who see themselves as outcasts and exiled, and also with Israel in general during unfavorable times.⁸⁷

What do we learn about infertility through Hannah’s liminality?

Jewish tradition places children and family as the focus of religious life, it is the center of community, so those without children are not always able to see themselves reflected in Jewish communal life. They already feel alone, and Hannah’s story might further increase their sense of alienation. A family without children represents an inability to complete the very first and frequently repeated commandment, “Be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28) This is such a priority that a Rabbi cannot sit on the Sanhedrin if he doesn’t have children; without children, his abilities as a leader would be in question.⁸⁸

The obligation of the mitzvah of procreation fell to the man, not his wife. Therefore, if a couple were not able to conceive, the husband was permitted to obtain a second wife. In a polygamous society where a man could take several wives, he was able to fulfill his obligation to have children with just one of his wives, while others might remain childless. Rabbi Gershom, however, in his 11th century ruling against polygamy, made a revolutionary advance in the emotional shouldering of responsibility of fertility.⁸⁹ If a man was unable to have children with even his second wife, his inability to perform

⁸⁷ Callaway, P. 50.

88 Michael Gold, *And Hannah Wept: Infertility Adoption and the Jewish Couple* (Jewish Publication Society of America, 1994), p. 9

89 Gold, p. 6.

and fulfill his mitzvah became not just the woman's problem, but the couple's problem. While holding a husband responsible to his family regardless of children, Gershom unwittingly addressed the solitude that a barren woman feels, exposing this not as a women's issue, but as a family issue.

Michael Gold, in "And Hannah Wept" points out that although the obligation is on the male to procreate, when "20% of young Jewish couples are having difficulty conceiving, that becomes a community problem, and the community must allocate some of its resources to finding solutions."⁹⁰ Gold points a finger back to our Jewish communities and leaders. Judaism places great value in community involvement and responsibility, as well as in children and family. If this is true, Gold sees this as a Jewish problem, and that the Jewish community must rise to help Jewish couples become parents. He describes Hannah's exile in reflecting "great pain and sadness felt by a woman unable to conceive but also the feeling of envy toward more fertile friends and neighbors and the gnawing sense of injustice."⁹¹ I will propose a more nuanced response to Jewish infertility further on in this chapter.

We see an example of 'community healing' in the story of Abraham, Abimelech, and Sarah—when the women in Abimelech's kingdom become sterile because of Abraham's pretense of being Sarah's brother. Abraham intercedes, confesses his lie, and is able to cure the women. Abraham prays and resolves their problem, as he should since he triggered the crisis. His action is later associated with God's hearing his prayers and remembering Sarah to make her a mother. The rabbis take this teaching and turn it into a beautiful lesson on compassion: "Anybody who prays for mercy for his fellow when he

⁹⁰ Ibid. P. 14.

⁹¹ Gold, p. 5-Berakhot 31b.

himself needs mercy, he will be answered first."⁹² We learn that when Abraham shows kindness and takes 'action' on behalf of others, divine kindness is shown to him. Though this powerful act of generosity alone could not possibly be a solution for infertility, perhaps the greater lesson drawn from Abraham is that like Hannah's second prayer, through the direction of action outside of yourself, you play a powerful role in your own relief from exile and isolation.

"Hannah initially was concerned mainly about her own misfortunes. When the priest Eli came upon her she was close to neurosis from self-concern. By the time of her canticle of praise to the God who gives salvation, her horizon had expanded. She had learned that her sufferings were far from unusual, that God's care had to be spread far and wide."⁹³ Carmody points out that Hannah's burden was ultimately her blessing. Her transformation dissolved the role she held, and allowed her to recreate herself. She had been consumed in her own torment, and her song to God expresses her newly expanded worldview to generously include others. Her song serves as a blessing for others to experience divine love just as she has.

In the Tanach, 'fruitfulness' is a blessing given at creation and awarded anew

generation after generation to our patriarchs. The Covenant Code “concludes with the promise that none will be barren in Israel” (Ex 23:26, Deut 7:14)⁹⁴ The narrative is clear, fertility is a blessing, and barrenness is a curse. In the genealogies, fertility and children indicate an assurance of stability and order, as well as continuity. It guarantees a forward

92 Gold, P. 29-bava kama 92a.

93 Carmody, P. 42.

94 Callaway, p. 15

moving timeline, contrasted with a sense of childlessness as an ending, painfully

punctuated in Jewish tradition as divine disfavor.

This private reflection excerpted from a blog in 2011 echoes Hannah’s experience:

“I [think] about the feeling of being stuck or trapped in-between the ‘normal’ stages of life. In the last couple of days I have been reflecting some more on the nature of this liminal space or in other words; being in limbo. It’s painful, yes, but what I didn’t realize at first is that it’s also something else. It’s a transformational space—a process of becoming. In fact, there is no pause button in life. Only, I do not know where the becoming is going, so to speak. But I know that the liminal phase will end at some point, one way or another. Either I will become a mother and enter that life stage with the identity and role of parenthood. Or alternatively I will not ... and learn to accept, and live with, childlessness. This experience is changing me forever either way and I realize that I have to embrace that. Inwardly I’m being transformed. I don’t know exactly how and what it will mean for the next life stage and what that stage will even look like. But I do not want to be a mere passenger or passive observer of this process of becoming. Liminality is a space characterized by uncertainty, ambiguity, disorientation and isolation...one’s sense of identity dissolves to some extent, which is painful, but it also entails possibilities for new perspectives to emerge. A time to reflect and grow.”⁹⁵

This contemporary journal entry, documenting a woman’s emotional journey during

infertility, articulates the lonely and difficult process that this was. Fortunately, like

Hannah, she understands that this hazy and mystical liminal period can also deliver new perspective and insight.

Hannah’s suffering is not a punishment for wrongdoing or the wrongdoings of her family. Her barrenness is unexplained and innocent. But perhaps the injustice and the senselessness of her affliction shape her as a role model to those who are barren today. In spite of her positive results, couples that struggle with infertility and its senseless

torment, find both comfort as well as terrible frustration in Hannah as the recipient of

95 Private journal. ‘Embracing the liminal space’,
<http://closeencounterswithfertilitytreatment.wordpress.com/2011/09/01/embracing-theliminal->

space/

pious reward. Hannah's exile reflects the pain and disbelief felt by women unable to conceive, but also the terrible unfairness, and a sense that deep injustice has been arbitrarily assigned.

If our theology teaches us to pray to the God who is the cause of everything, barrenness is then seen as a punishment that can be cured by prayer. It is a punishment that extends into eternity, since children are the part of us that lives on after we die, our "Kaddish". It is a loss that is not completely understood by others—a grief, mourning, anger akin to Elizabeth Kubler Ross' 5 Stages of Death, and Judaism, unlike for a shiva period, has no community support or tradition to ease their suffering. They are isolated and alone. This is a loss of a dream. One thing Judaism does allow for, however, is permission to avoid simchas that would cause pain in this regard. Rachel is the first to intimate that her barrenness is like death, which she preferred to childlessness: "And when Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said to Jacob, Give me children, or else I die (Gen 30:1). Yet Jacob and the Rabbis disallow such a fatalistic attitude, for it denies all the other important parts of Rachel, and all the other reasons we have to enjoy life and our partnerships.

Mary Callaway, in "Sing, O Barren One" believes that Hannah is a symbol of community. Whereas the Biblical matriarchs were significant in the context of their stories, Hannah speaks not only for herself, but to all who are poor, lowly, mistreated—marginalized.⁹⁶ The power in her story is that she provides hope for all sufferers, be it the metaphor of Israel, alone and 'barren' in her exile, those embarrassed and saddened by infertility, or one who is sent out or chooses to flee from her community. Hannah offers

⁹⁶ Callaway, p. 57.

hope that God hears and God saves. God is the one truly capable of steering a liminar through their shifting status, 'raising the lowly' and 'giving strength to his King'. (I Samuel 2:10) Not only does Hannah receive blessing, but she sings of her blessing, she calls to the community with her song of spiritual triumph.

Does Hannah return with blessing?

Human compassion. Understanding. As God transformed Hannah into a mother, Hannah transformed Eli into a true religious leader. A moment earlier, Eli could not distinguish between prayer and rambling, and we can assume by the uncaring behavior of his two sons, that this was perhaps not the first time that he misread the faces of others. As much as Hannah shook him out of his complacency, he was able to see her for who she was, and bless her with peace. "Then go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of Him." (I Sam 1:17) As if the knowledge of conception has occurred in that very powerful moment, she has stepped through the wilderness, returning to community as one truly understood. She once again becomes recognizable, she eats and is no longer unhappy. Eli, too, has had his heart penetrated by Hannah's honesty. Now he hears, and directs a sincere wish for her future.

Biblical barrenness is particularly alarming because it poses a threat to the generational storyline, there is a risk that a needed son or leader may not appear---but then it offers an opportunity for God to intervene. This offers a teaching: problems offer leaders an opportunity to be human. It also offers them an opportunity to lead. Just as

Hannah transforms Eli “the priest from one who rebukes to one who blesses”,⁹⁷ our clergy today have an opportunity to lift those among our congregational family who suffer to a less isolated place. If we as Jewish leaders can’t bring Judaism to the darkest corners of life, than Judaism becomes irrelevant and serves no purpose for us.

In looking at Israeli women, where there is the highest concentration of practicing Jews, and where Jewish life is more public than in any other part of the world, we can examine the explicit cultural messages of fertility and motherhood. In Jewish life the overall message is that motherhood is a superior value. Hilla Haelyon, in interviews with 25 contemporary Israeli women who were trying various technologies to become pregnant, conveyed that society seems to reflect that the ‘non-impregnated female body has no rights of its own and constitutes a threat to the social order’.⁹⁸ In Israel’s infancy, David BenGurion encouraged the rapid development of his country by stimulating grants for “heroine mothers”, who delivered 10 or more babies. With the building of the state, the need to populate it with Jewish boys and girls became a strong ideological and political message. Jewish families, through biological motherhood in particular, maintained a strong sense of continuity and expansion within the tribe. Therefore infertility excluded them from being part of the collective of fertile women—in early modern Israel, this was made worse by feeling either included or excluded from the general collective mission to build the state.⁹⁹ Infertility, then as now, throws women into a state of questioning—the liminal space holds their very identity as ambiguous. Her

97 Adriane Leveen, class lecture notes on story of Hannah (1 Samuel), Spring 2010.

98 Hilla Haelyon, “Longing for a Child”: Perceptions of motherhood among Israeli-Jewish women undergoing in vitro fertilization treatments.” *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies & Gender Issues*, No 12, Fall 2006. Indiana University Press.

99 Haelyon.

gender identity, sexual identity, femininity and maturity is called into question; as one woman said: “What differentiates me from my husband is my uterus, the fact that I can bear a child. Today this difference is nonexistent, as I am not pregnant...which is why I find it difficult to define myself as feminine”¹⁰⁰

The feeling of exile and the longing to become a mother in order to fit in with normative culture is perhaps best expressed by the women who are barred from the collective motherhood. The perspective of the infertile, who understand their marginality in a different way than sympathetic ‘insiders’, painfully express the disembodiment of their solitude, for they have no access to the feminine world as they know it, there is a sisterhood to which they are excluded: “all my experiences are filed in a closed drawer, including my sexuality. I feel that my experiences and identities are separated from each other, and in the center there is pregnancy” (Amit, 38), “ I don’t understand the meaning of femininity. I hardly feel like a human being. Femininity is a privilege...I’ll feel feminine when I achieve motherhood.”

To these women, their entire identity fell out of place. It was more than yearning for a baby, or envy at others’ fertility, it called into question who they were as human beings. So the importance of being guided through this painful place is even more important—they are invisible even to themselves. It is “...against something that the self can emerge...our sense of being a person can come from being drawn into a wider social unit; our sense of selfhood can arise through the little ways in which we resist the pull”¹⁰¹

Hannah in her boldness allows the messiness of her liminal situation to flow beyond the walls of 'structure' so Eli can come in contact with her and grow. This story

100 Haelyon, p. 183.

101 Haelyon, p. 195.

can teach us as much about Eli as about Hannah: the compassionate hand of friendship that is willing to see and hear, to feed and to bless, to bring the invisible back into the light. Perhaps the real exile then, is not just being barren, but being invisible as well. It is a universal need to be seen. Hannah came back and reentered. Hannah returns with blessing.

THREE RITUALS FOR WOMEN SURROUNDING PREGNANCY AND BIRTH

1. A BLESSING FOR THOSE WHO YEARN LIKE HANNAH SPIRITUAL PREPARATION FOR PREGNANCY

To be read prior to immersion in mikveh, or in alternate place just at the beginning of monthly cycle:

zeh dodi v'zeh re'i

This is my beloved and this is my friend

ki ahzeh chamavet ahavah

For love is as strong as death

(Song of Songs)

Mekor Rakhamim I thank you for the blessing that is contained in my body's abilities and functions, which are mysterious and wondrous. But I also cry out to you in my pain, anxiety, and wants. I do not expect an answer, and yet I hope for one. (Rakhamim has the same root as rechem, meaning womb. Source of compassion is the source of the womb)

Help me and my beloved stay strong through the coming month, and remember the strength we share together. We pray that this will be stronger than my monthly remembrance of death, contained within which is a reminder of the hope for life. Help us to continue to look forward, and to accept those blessings we do have.

May I find comfort in the merit of my mothers, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Hannah, who called out to you in their childlessness, and were comforted.

Blessed are You Eternal, who creates each of us whole, we are each whole in your eyes.

Inspired by Rabbi Debbie Young-Somers

Sing: Rachaman, or m'kor nefesh.

2. A RITUAL OF SWEETNESS AND FRIENDSHIP FOR THOSE

NEARING THEIR BABY'S BIRTH¹⁰² TO PRESERVE THE MOMENT 'BEFORE' THE MOMENT

A belly 'cast', a paper mache shape of the pregnant woman's belly becomes a moment frozen in time, a time of anticipation, hope, anxiety, happiness, even sadness. Such that after the arrival of the baby, one can revisit that moment when time is suspended awaiting the birth of a baby. On Rosh Chodesh of the month preceding the anticipated delivery date of baby, expectant mother gathers with special women and girls in her life.

Materials:

- Belly-cast kit (paper mache kit with bandage strips coated in cast powder)
 - Wine glass
 - Wine
 - Comfortable armless chair for mom-to-be to sit in while cast is drying
 - Nourishing and comforting food
- Symbolism within psalm 23:
Table: All the food and sense of plenty surrounding the mother
Oil: Prior to wrapping belly, spread oil on belly—to prevent cast from sticking, but conjuring up the anointing of royalty and specialness of baby
Cup: The cup that we pass, holding every blessing we bestow on mother
Goodness and loving kindness: The friends, family that surround mother

LEADER:

- The new moon is a time that women have gathered for thousands of years. As the head of the coming month, it holds our hopes and dreams as potential waiting to be realized; and so we meet together here, on Rosh Chodesh _____. Speak on the significance of the particular month and its role in the safe passage and expectations for a new life within this time.
 - We use this time of heaven's openness to pour our blessings on our friend: _____, as we help to prepare her and her family for their new baby.
 - Sing a song of blessing over that month, beginning with a niggun.
 - Hold up the empty wine glass and say: This is the cup of hope and blessing. In this cup we pour our hopes for this baby, this mother, and the courageous and mystical transformation that will happen for the two of them. Pass the cup around with the bottle of wine, as each person holds the cup, they share a wish or a thought for the mother, pouring a small bit of wine into the glass. A very special
- 102 Developed for Ayala Kapitulnik and her son Yonatan on Rosh Chodesh Elul, 5772.

idea is to have an older sibling be the 'pourer' of wine as it passes around the circle.

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When the cup comes back to the leader, leader shares her own blessing, and as she pours wine into the cup, so that it overflows into a saucer, recites Psalm 23:56: “You arrange a table before me to rival anyone who wishes me harm; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and loving-kindness shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of God forever.

•

Sing Psalm 23 in Hebrew

•

Create belly-cast for mom-to-be.

3. A RITUAL OF WHOLENESS AND FLOW FOR THOSE WHO FEEL INCOMPLETE (AFTER PREGNANCY LOSS) 103

Whether the nourishing waters that provided Hagar and Ishmael with sustenance or the healing waters that followed Miriam through the desert, water and women have an ongoing relationship. The following ritual is an offering to women following a pregnancy loss developed out of the Jewish tradition of the Mikveh. By flowing into emotional spaces that the eye doesn’t see, water touches, water purifies, and water can help to begin healing.

*The significance of open water is a powerful agent, this ritual can take place at a lake, ocean, or river as well as at a mikveh.

a. Immersion:

Water is a tool and a conduit for flow and continuity. Prayer of entry into a sacred space of flow.

b. Wholeness

Shema-in a landscape where there is fracture, wholeness is possible. Oneness is possible.

c. Yearning

We learn from Hannah, her deepest yearnings expressed privately, yet in front of others. We say a prayer of well-being for the mother* and hold the tender space for her as she says a prayer for herself with a soft niggun.

*Include Hannah text in a prayer for mother

WELCOMING TO THE MIKVEH

Read (aloud or silently):

One day I knew what I finally knew.
What I had to do, and so I began.
It was already late enough;
Life felt like wild night,

with roads full of branches and stones.
But little by little, as I left those voices behind,
The stars began to burn
Through the sheets of clouds;
And there was a new voice which I slowly recognized as my own,

That kept me company
As I strode deeper and deeper into the world,
Determined to do the only thing I could do,
Determined create the new life I ached to create.

-Rewritten, based on Mary Oliver's poem, The Journey

BEFORE THE IMMERSION:

103 Developed by Cantor Nancy Bach, SSM 2013, Spring of 2012.

LEADER: The Mikvah is a gathering not only of waters, but also of time. In the Mikvah, past and future swirl together with the waters of the present, to create a sense of ONENESS.

This ONENESS is a kind of coming together, and what you'll do in just a minute is to immerse yourself three times – once for the richness of your past that you bring to today, then once for all you have created in your wonderful present life – and then once for the life you will be blessed with in the future. By immersing 3 times, you are synthesizing the past, the present and future.

LEADER--BLESSING: [you can enter the mikveh] As you enter the waters of the Mikveh, I pray that the presence of Creation and God hovers over you, and I hope and pray that like the women who are our Jewish ancestors, that you will be blessed with the life of the children that I know you so badly crave.

IMMERSION 1

As you immerse, I'll recite a blessing and you can repeat it. Baruch atah Adonai, eloheinu melech ha'olam, asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzeivanu al ha'tavilah.

Blessed are You, Source of Life, Who has made us holy with mitzvot, and commanded us to enter the living, changing waters of the Mikvah.

IMMERSION 2

As you immerse a second time, focus on each individual part of yourself – toes, feet, legs, torso, hands, arms, shoulders, neck, mouth, nose, ears, forehead, hair. Feel each as separate, still part of the whole body. And now listen to what each part needs from the waters. And let the waters surround and reach each separate section.

Sing the Sh'ma – which is about ONENESS and unity, either to yourself or out loud.

Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad

IMMERSION 3

And as you immerse a third time, continue to be aware of your complete healthy body as you open your eyes and become aware of yourself as a body, still part of the waters, but unique and strong. By staying centered on your oneness and individuality, you are allowing challenges and conflict to melt away and evaporate. And as you reach this new point in time, let's recite the Sh'hechyanu together.

Baruch atah Adonai, eloheinu melech ha'olam, sh'he cheyanu, v'key'yemanu,
v'hegee'anu, lazman hazeh.

Blessed is the Source of Life, Eternal Spirit of the universe, who has kept me alive,
sustained me, and permitted me to mark this holy moment.

Feel free to continue to recite either of these prayers. And you can immerse

FINAL IMMERSION

Here's a bonus....Submerge a fourth time knowing that the number four is the number of
building and strengthening. Build your holy body, so that it becomes a true vessel of
Wholeness and Oneness. You can immerse.

WOMAN:

My God, Creator and Sustainer of all life, may I step forth now into a life filled with
continued growth. May I step into a life filled with continued wisdom and deeds of
kindness. May I step forward into a life filled with the blessing of new beginnings. May
I prove to be a loving friend, daughter, aunt and one day, mother. Be with me as I enter
this new phase in my wanting a child. May you, God, who has blessed my coming forth
into this day, bless my going out into the next day, for a life of fertility, fulfillment, health
and peace. Amen.

Chapter 5 ~ Conclusion ~ The Blessing of Coming and the Blessing of Going

Our Jewish narrative is filled with stories of coming and going, expulsion and
homecoming¹⁰⁴, rejection followed by acceptance, and lessons of a God who sees and
hears us, and never abandons us. It is within the space between coming and going that our
biblical characters find themselves transformed. In liminality, where they are suspended
between worlds, Hagar, Miriam, and Hannah find that they are not alone. Their
temporary exile leads them to experiences with God that leave them altered forever;
deepening their faith, their sense of self, and their awareness of God's love and justice. It
is through them that we may better understand the powerful role we as clergy play in the
lives of our congregants as they experience feelings of 'exile'.

The women portrayed here, and those living women and men outside the text,
may look back at their life and persona 'before' a change occurs, before liminality, when
they were surrounded by predictable routines and relationships. These women left a
secure place where they knew the rules and knew who they were. By entering
'unchartered waters', they were launched into emotional and spiritual journeys they did
not expect. Elizabeth O'Connor, founder of the Church of the Savior in Washington DC
agrees, "our chance to be healed comes when the waters of our life are disturbed."¹⁰⁵ One
of the possibilities available to us in liminality is that we let go of old answers and begin
to ask new questions—returning to our ancient text and traditions with freshness and new
perspective.

¹⁰⁴ "Principal, Story, and Myth in the Liturgical Search for Identity", Dr. Lawrence
Hoffman. P. 242.

¹⁰⁵ Hjalmarson, p. 3.

We can address our communities with creativity that is only possible because liminality takes a special form when shaped by a ritual. Harold Schulweis presents the challenge to clergy to overcome the 'riteless passage', and design rituals to mark the stages of life that otherwise go without marking or religious meaning. "Riteless passages deny us that opportunity to discover the profound spiritual implications of life-altering events."¹⁰⁶ Schulweis implores us to carve opportunity out of the formless and malleable space of liminality, constructing a rite that will give significance to moments of vulnerability and change.

As we explored the bounds of liminality with Hagar, we were able to experience the ambiguous space of liminality, when roles fall away and great change is possible. Hagar's two confrontations with God in the desert wilderness expose us to the doubt and danger that she undergoes, and the transformation she makes from a maidservant into a mother. We watch her embody God's promise as she grows into the woman she is meant to be. We are intrigued by Hagar as we study her today because as a slave, she is not above the law, but seemingly outside of it—she teaches us something about prayer, survival, and the human spirit.

Miriam's liminal period allows us to see the transformation of the Israelites, as they band together, forming a new method of coping with illness and death. Miriam, beloved prophetess, falls to the fringe of society when stricken with illness, yet through her we better understand our own experience of isolation when sickness or death touches our own lives. In exploring the dynamic of the Israelites as a group, in their response to Miriam, we are able to observe the formation of group memory and how that builds a

106 Schulweis, page 3.

sense of community and harmony. Group memory is always solidified with relationship and ritual.

Through the story of Hannah, we re-experience a recurring theme in Biblical literature, that of the barren woman. Her communication in prayer expresses her innermost yearnings and exemplifies some of the most profound moments where God speaks directly to women, but only after women seek God out. ¹⁰⁷ This closeness can be seen as a powerful connection to God's will, the uncertainty and desperation they feel while liminal seems to be what prompts such an intimacy with the divine. Through Hannah, we understand the deep isolation of barrenness, and subsequently are better equipped to reach into the lives of those we care about with loving support. Hannah, in the privacy and pain of barrenness, represents all families who are trapped and isolated in their unfulfilled desire to have a child.

Spiritual leaders are often asked why God doesn't show himself to people as he used to in the biblical stories. But Hagar, Miriam, and Hannah have encountered a God, the same God, that is available to us—and can hear us if we open ourselves, no matter what the shape of our life and circumstance. Carl Jung, in *Man and His Symbols* has verbalized what many may already feel intuitively, that God speaks to us through dreams and visions, the non-rational piece of ourselves that is often overlooked and under-listened to.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Niditch, p. 32.

¹⁰⁸ Carl Jung, *Man and His Symbols*: (Dell, 1968), p. 92.

Few of us choose to be in situations that create the kind of pain and uncertainty in liminality that Hagar, Miriam and Hannah experienced. It seems instead that God usually sets them on their journey.¹⁰⁹ Likewise, very often, the same happens today when a trusted friend disappoints us, a loved one dies, or we are betrayed by our bodies; we are lost. And so spiritual directors and counselors are often sought during these liminal times of transition. We seek to hear the voice and acknowledge the wisdom that comes from the dream state, and that has created a balance in the three women we have studied. We carry their stories with us, with the hope that they will create balance for us as well.

We commit ourselves to provide outward support and encouragement to those who must endure a liminal space, so that they don't slip backwards toward the past, but seize the opportunity and blessing to be guided forward to the future.

¹⁰⁹ Leonard Hjalmarson, p. 2

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