



“I Could Never Forget You”
9/22/07
Rabbi Tara’s Yom Kippur 2007 Sermon

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Six o’clock on a Wednesday night, and I am making dinner. It’s been a long day. “Please, honey, stop bouncing that ball in the kitchen,” “Will you stop with the ball? It’ll bounce onto the stove, and someone will get burned.” “Stop bouncing that ball in the kitchen. You can play in the family room.” “GAVI! STOP!” With fiery eyes and a pointed finger, I turn on my son, “If you bounce that ball one more time...” I don’t remember what I said, but it wasn’t exactly even-handed. Not one of my higher Mothering Moments.

I had just been studying the book of Deuteronomy, one of those painful fire and brimstone passages: “If you forget the Lord your God, follow other gods and bow down to them, I warn you this day that you shall certainly perish!” *Deuteronomy 8:19* In my mind’s eye, a God Who speaks like that is an angry King, white beard and thunderbolt in hand. But it suddenly strikes me— That angry, punishing God is no Mighty Celestial Ruler. No, that God is *me*, an exhausted parent, *a mother*, pushed to her limit.

When we were choosing pronouns for God, we made a mistake. We should have picked “She.” For 3,000 years, how could we have missed this?! I know I am projecting, but I see a woman, a Mother, in so much of what God is and does, and I see in God the essence of what mothering *can* be in its highest moments. So let’s just try that pronoun on for size, “She.”

Now, God’s warnings from the Torah resonate differently. “Beware! If you turn off the path, if you choose not to obey my rules... you will soon perish from the good life that I am giving you.” *Deuteronomy 11:16-17*

“My children can push me to the limit,” says God “can push me to the point of making threats, precisely because I love them so much, because they are closer to me than breathing.” Scratch the surface of all that thunderbolt-wielding rage and you get compassion, infinite compassion.

Adonai Adonai El rachum v’chanun... Dear God, merciful and gracious, endlessly patient, loving and true, showing mercy to thousands and forgiving them. (High Holiday *Mahzor*)

We recite this prayer over and over again during the High Holidays. It describes a loving, immanent God, merciful and tender. Why then is the God I picture as I sit here in Temple, always a Man, a King, a Judge? So, this year, will I get lucky? This year will He inscribe *me* in the book of life? Will *I* be able to squeeze through those gates, those heavy iron gates, before the sun sets tonight, hugh? Hey You, God on High! Quite honestly, I don’t need You up there on Your mountain to remind me of my faults. I am already my own worst critic. I know all the ways I fall short. So, will you stop judging me God? Can’t You see, I am doing my best?



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But if I could sense God as a Feminine Being, what would it do to my understanding of this day, Yom Kippur, of the world around me and of myself? It could turn my prayers upside down, inside out. Might be a good thing...

Yet, if I dare even *try* to speak about God as “Woman,” “Mother,” I’m on shaky ground. Metaphors for the Divine are all imperfect. I’m not speaking of a goddESS, a nature deity, and I’m not imagining God as a *human* mother, who might betray, abuse or neglect her child. Even those us mothers with the *best* intentions don’t always give our kids the kind of love they need. Motherhood itself shouldn’t be idealized. Moreover, not all women are mothers, and “mothering” is not limited to women alone. Clearly, God is not a woman. God forbid!

Still, it is so challenging real and rich to unpack this idea of a maternal God. All theology is autobiography, and being a mother is who and where I am right now (in this stage of my life). Also, I only have about another two years when I can still talk about my kids from the pulpit. Pretty soon they’ll be mortified.

But please understand. I use the metaphor of Mother, for God in order to point us to something deeper than human, physical motherhood—Whatever we might call it, I’m speaking of the nurturing love, free of vengeance, that heals us, that we long for, whether it comes from a mother, a father, a friend, a stranger or from God Herself. Not the God on high, but She Who dwells within.

So, tossing this King God off His Throne (pardon me), how *does* a Mother God see us? How does She see our mistakes?

Some days my two year old daughter gets so dirty-- cereal in her hair, soles of her feet black, sticky fingers, covered with God knows what. But Adina is always pure in my eyes. Gorgeous. Infinitely loveable. I never mistake my daughter with mess she has made of herself. So too, God never loses track of us, of our inherent purity, our goodness, no matter what kind of mess we may have made of our lives. That’s not what God sees. God must be a Mother.

Want to know what is the best seat in the house at a bar or bat mitzvah? Mine, back there, and it’s not because the seats are so plush or because I get to sit next to Rabbi Greenstein. It’s because from where I sit, I can look directly into the first row (right about there, where you are) and see the face of the mother of the bar or bat mitzvah. The way she looks at her child is as close as I may come to looking into the face of God.

Adonai Adonai El rachum v’chanun... Mother Love is endless.



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On a day of Cosmic Self-Assessment, a day like Yom Kippur, we take our own personal spiritual inventory. How did we fall short? What can we check off the list? It’s easy to focus on our failures. How can we account for all those hours misspent? Maybe we don’t have to.

Years ago, I overheard the mother of a bat mitzvah girl saying to her daughter, “I just feel happier when you are in the room.” Maybe *that’s* what this day, Yom Kippur, is all about for God. Maybe all She wants is just for us to be here in the room with Her. That’s all I really want from my kids. I just want to watch how my son eats that cracker. I just want to touch my daughter’s cheek, to smell her hair. I mean, what else is there? It’s not about being on our best behavior, responsive readings and fancy clothes. After all, the most meaningful aspects of mothering unfold, not at the dance recital, not at the college graduation, but in the mundane moments of life— over breakfast, driving in the car. So too, our relationship with God evolves slowly deeply through the daily-ness of our lives, through all our changes.

As Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes, “Far too frequently we see ourselves as **doers**... we feel we must endlessly work and achieve... we have not always learned just to be receptive, to be (quiet) in the presence of God.” God loves us as a mother does, not for the *doing* just for the *being*.

Adonai, Adonai, El rachum v’chanun... Mother Love takes us as we are.

Almost every morning, Adina struggles to dress herself, but more often than not, her clothes end up backwards, upside down and inside out. I try to direct her tiny hands, to free her from the tangle, but she pushes me away, indignant. “I do yee! I do yee!” (I’ll do it.) So I step back.

It usually takes about 5 minutes, and then she approaches me holding out her shorts. “Help you?” she asks. “Of course,” I answer. “I’d be glad to help you.” And we do it together.

Maternal powers of help in the universe abound.

When the sages of old needed God’s guidance, when they needed to hear directly from God, She “spoke to them in a *bat kol*, (which means in Hebrew, “the daughter of a voice”). The *bat kol* is the voice of God in its gentle, enveloping, feminine expression, a heavenly echo. (Wayne Dosick,

Dancing with God, 31)

Adonai, Adonai, El rachum v’chanun... This is the gentle, knowing Voice, the extended hand of Mother Love.



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“When a mother attaches to her children, her love encircles them like a web of filaments that reach across physical separateness and link her feelings- her very nerve endings, to their safety and well being.” (Jana Malamud Smith, *A Potent Spell*, 13)

Mother love is tenacious, fiercely protective.

In the first years after my parents split up, I think we were actually poor, my mom, brother and I, but I didn’t know it. My mother moved us to a neighborhood with good public schools, somehow making sure that I had music and dance lessons like all the other kids. But one winter, she just didn’t quite have enough to pay the heating bill. It was snowing outside the day that our home began to get cold. I heard my mother call the gas company. She was furious, “How dare you not come by and service our home?! Have I *ever* not paid my bill? The check must have been lost in the mail. I want a truck here in the next hour or else!” And they came. It wasn’t until years later that I realized my honest mother was lying through her teeth. She hadn’t sent the check, but *her* children would *not* be cold.

That is Sacred Mother Love.

I am reminded of the movie *Dead Man Walking*. The mother of a convicted criminal, weeps as she visits him on death row. She knows that her son is a brutal killer, but that knowledge pales in the face of her overwhelming love for him. She weeps because she knows his potential for good. She weeps for the sweet little boy who will always be hers.

Adonai, Adonai, El rachum v’chanun... Like a mother, God never gives up on us.

I spent an afternoon this past summer, with a member of Temple, a woman who grew up in Germany and who was a child when the Nazis came to power. Looking through a box of old photographs and memorabilia, we came upon a small, leather-bound journal which she had received in 1930 when she was ten years old. It was signed by friends, a teacher and by her mother who, with impeccable penmanship had written to her daughter—a poem of sorts about childhood, about what it means to leave home. My friend translated it for me:

“Dearest daughter, you are still in the circle of your loved ones... but soon you will have to set sail to a strange life far away from here... It will hurt to look one last time upon your dear old home, the home you shared with sweet friends... The month of May will never again greet you so softly as it did in your childhood. Nothing is as sweet as the love of a mother.” (Loosely translated and adapted from the journal of Lieselott Esser, Memphis TN)

The note was prophetic. More than ten years later, after *Kristalnacht*, this mother would send her daughter (my friend) away from home, across the ocean to safety. She, however, this mother with beautiful handwriting, would not make it out of Germany in time.



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Ultimately, the *best* mothers do what is hardest; they let their children go.

Great distances can come between parents and children. I think about my own journeys away from home. Almost 20 years ago after graduating from college, I did what any responsible young adult with an expensive education *should* do-- I lived in a cargo van with my best friend and drove across country . Our goal was to hike and bike through as many national parks as we could. One crisp autumn day in California, I was peddling up a dirt road when I happened to pass a pay phone. (Those were the days when we actually used pay phones, remember?) I realized, at that moment, that it was Yom Kippur and decided to call home. My mother answered the phone. While I had traveled far away, she was still there, standing in the kitchen. “Happy New year!” I said. So many questions must have been in her mind, “Will Tara *ever* be interested in being Jewish?” “What’s she going to *do* with her life?” “Does she lock those van doors at night?”

From the moment she drops us off at preschool, a mother begins the life-long process of letting go, freeing us to cross through the sea, as God did when we left Egypt and letting us face the wilderness on our own two feet.

And the leaving just reenacts itself, over and over. After driving seventeen hours each way to drop his daughter off at college, a father recently reported to me (tongue in cheek) that he had cleared the university and all the surrounding towns of boys and beer... If only we parents *could* protect our children, but we cannot, and neither can God.

Adonai Adonai el rachum v’chanun... Adonai, Adonai, endlessly patient, loving and true. Mother Love knows the pain of goodbye.

Living in exile, after the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, we were sure that God had abandoned us, for Her Presence could no longer be overtly *seen*, but She was not gone.

According to Jewish mystics, after the Temple’s destruction, God descended into the world, following her children into exile and became *sheckhina*, the Presence that secretly dwells

everywhere. Following us, covertly—the way Mothers do. (Wayne Dosick, *Dancing with God* 30-1 & Martin Buber, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, 101)

In his book, *Invisible Lines of Connection*, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner describes a time, sitting at his desk at work, when he notices a woman in the hallway outside his office. Repeatedly, she peeks around the corner and then quickly straightens up again, trying not to be seen. Kushner wonders what she is doing, but it all becomes clear when he hears the voices of preschool students down the hall. It’s the first week of school. This mother is trying to spy on her child without being caught. “Espionage” Kushner calls it and goes on to explain, “It only gets worse when they get older. Then you have to employ much more sophisticated means of surveillance, and if you’re caught, children in their twenties and thirties have been known to go underground



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for years. Sometimes the only information a parent can get comes from a traveler who happened to see your kid in some far away city or country or- may God grant them eternal happiness- actually took them out for a meal, pumped them full of questions and secretly tape recorded their answers.” “It occurs to me,” Rabbi Kushner concludes, “that hide-and-seek is more than a game. It may be a rehearsal for living in family.” (Lawrence Kushner, *Invisible Lines of Connection*, p. 56)

Or perhaps, I might add, hide-and-seek is a rehearsal for living with God. Who is watching us even when we think we are all alone.

Who by fire? Who by water? Who will be inscribed for a good year? Who will not? We think it’s *us* asking those questions, but maybe it’s God, wondering what this year will bring to Her children.

It is said that a mother is only as happy as her most *unhappy* child.

Once a woman becomes a mother, she knows that her child will, inevitably, experience pain. She knows that, God forbid, she could lose that child and “instantly be made bereft to the... core of her being.” (Jana Malamud Smith, *A Potent Spell*, 38) To truly and deeply love another, be it a friend, parent, lover or child, is to become infinitely vulnerable. When God decided to create human beings and then, ultimately, to set us free in a dangerous world, She signed up for an eternity of WORRY. (Anne Lamott, *Operating Instructions*, 11)

A mother, here in Memphis, shared this story with me about the birth of her son. One night, after they had returned from the hospital, she awoke to hear him crying, groped her way over to his bassinet and there in the dark held his little face close to her own. Just by accident, one of his tears ran into her mouth. At the moment that she tasted that salty tear, she knew that her child was real. He was here.

“I love them,” writes poet Adrienne Rich of her sons, “But it is in the enormity... of this love that suffering lies.” (Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 22) God feels our pain. As theologian Dorothee Soelle puts it, “God is no executioner and no almighty spectator. God is not the mighty tyrant... God is *inside* the victim, is *inside* the sufferer...” (Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering* 148-9) Like that mother who embraced her son in the dark. God tastes our tears, every drop.

We cry out as we did in days of old. Has God forsaken us? Has God forgotten us? And through the words of the prophet Isaiah, God calls back,

“Can a woman forget her baby or disown the child of her womb? Though she might forget, I could never forget you. See I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.” *Isaiah*

49:14-16



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No matter the distance that may come between them, a mother and child cannot be separated, they are engraved upon each other.

Adonai Adonai el rachum v'chanun... Mother Love is vulnerable. Mother Love feels all.

Hebrew-speaking children call their mothers *eema*. Yet, *eema* is not, in fact, a Hebrew word, it's Aramaic. The Hebrew for mother is *eim* and this word, spelled *aleph mem* forms the root of the Hebrew word for faith *emunah*. (Maurice Lamm, *Consolation*, 300) It is a huge act of *emunah* to become an *eim*, a mother, to bring a child into this frightening world.

It was a beautiful fall morning in Brooklyn, when I got on the subway, headed to Manhattan, wondering if anyone would stand up and give me a seat. I was pregnant with Gavi and just starting to show. It was September 11th, 2001. As far as I can tell, my subway car was just below the towers when the first plane hit. We on the train had no idea. After getting safely off, it took me a while to piece together what was happening. The chaos seemed to unfold in slow motion. Later that day, people kept asking me, "Do you have any kids? Do you know where they are?" "Yes," I answered. "I have a son, and I know just where he is." Was I a fool to bring a child into this broken world?

Deciding to create humanity must have been a huge act of faith on God's part.

We become parents, we enter into relationships of *all* kinds in order to discover love, to become more whole (Polly Berrien Berends, *Whole Parent Whole Child* xvi) —So too, God becomes more whole through Her relationship with us. She is not some vengeful Judge on high doling out sentences and fines... No, we are God's prayer, Her last hope. She needs us. "Don't make me lose my faith," She says.

As a rabbi, my hospital rounds usually include Baptist, St Francis and unfortunately, every once in a great while, St. Jude's. During one visit there, I stood in the hallway, talking with the mother of a patient. "My faith is gone," she said. "How can there be a God presiding over *this*?" I responded, mostly, with silence. If it was *my* child in that hospital bed, I do not know how I would feel, what I would believe.

But, strange as it may sound, simply being in this mother's presence, *my* own faith was strengthened. Not because I accept the suffering of the innocent, but because I saw God in *her*—in her endless hours of attention to her son, in her perseverance, her fierce methodical love, her unwavering patience, and yes even in her anger. Her love is such a pure expression of Who God *can* be in this world.

"Can a woman forget her baby or disown the child of her womb? Though she might forget," says God, "I could never forget you." *Isaiah 49:14-16*



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Adonai, this Yom Kippur, as we try to catch a glimpse of You, to trace the fleeting shadow of Your Being, open our minds and hearts.

This year, dear God, may we learn the meaning of Mother Love—
from fathers and mothers, from strangers and friends, from those who are parents
and those who are not, from those who challenge us and those who offer support.

May we nourish the Mother Love within ourselves—
merciful and fierce, unseen and endless.

And may we, like You, have the courage to let go.

Eemeinu M'koreinu, our Mother, our Source,
Avinu Malkeinu, our Father our King,
You Who dwells on high, You Who dwells within...

This year, bless us with life and peace,
And reach for us, as we reach for You.

Aveenu malkeinu, Eemeinu M'koreinu, Aveenu Malkeinu, Eemeinu M'koreinu... ali Herz
Imber, 1886