

Dvar Torah - 10-2-2021- 1st Shabbat of Minyan Ma'Or

Shabbat shalom. My name is Judy Remz. I am going to tell you a story which sounds like a fairy tale but every word is true! I need to give credit to my brother Jim who wrote down this family story and I am reading his words with a few of my own tweaks.

My grandmother, who we called Gram, had an Aunt named Sadie. When Gram immigrated to America, Aunt Sadie became her best friend and surrogate mother.

In 1929, Sadie's husband died in a plane crash. He went for a ride in a barnstormer. With my grandfather watching below, the plane smashed into a grove of trees and burst into flames. Aunt Sadie became a widow with three young children just a few months before the start of the Depression.

Gram rarely talked about the period of time that followed for Aunt Sadie. If she did, she spoke in a matter of fact way.

"It wasn't easy," she would say. "People do what they had to do."

In 1935, Aunt Sadie died. Preparing to put Sadie's house up for sale, my grandmother cleaned the kitchen from top to bottom. She found an unopened jar of honey in Aunt Sadie's cupboard, which she took home.

Gram tried to open that jar of honey but the lid wouldn't budge. Tears came easily to my grandmother. Did she cry thinking of Aunt Sadie when she held the jar?

Gram was an efficient housekeeper, well schooled in all the techniques of opening recalcitrant jars. Did she try banging the lid hard with the side of a knife? Did she hold it under the tap, steaming it with hot water? All I know for sure is that the years passed and the jar remained sealed.

I can imagine my grandmother dusting off the jar when she cleaned out her cupboard each spring. Did tears come to her eyes then or did she dust off the jar in her matter-of-fact way thinking: "Life isn't easy. People do what they have to do."

In 1951, 17 years after Aunt Sadie died, something wonderful happened to my grandmother. She became a grandparent for the first time when my oldest brother was born. Gram immediately started baking for the *bris*. Was she paying attention, when she reached into the cupboard? Did

she know which jar she held when she gave it a vigorous twist? When did she realize that she had opened Sadie's jar to make a honey cake?

And as sure as I knew and loved my grandmother, I know that she shed tears of joy and tears of pain the day of my brother *bris*, the day that delicious honey cake was eaten, the day my family celebrated the start of a new generation.

My mother always ended this story by saying "And it was the best honey cake we ever had!"

I have been struggling with how hold to opposite feelings in balance. Gratitude for being so lucky in my life; exhaustion for enduring the past 19 months and for whatever lies ahead. Joy for our son's wedding next week; anxiety that all will go well. Sadness that the Newton Centre minyan is no more; excitement about our future here at Minyan Ma'or.

In reading today's parashah, I was really struck by the confluence of opposites and how, as we say in the software support world, this confluence of opposites is not a bug, it's a feature. This is how God designed the world -we live with paradox and contradictions.

So let me explain further. Many commentators note that the 1st chapter of Genesis is a reaction to the prevailing creation stories in the Near East and our ancestors were well aware of their neighbors' ideas. Many cultures near ancient Israel emphasized that creation grew out of the violent uprising of gods or battles with sea monsters. But the Torah's creation story is understated, calm. God creates the world through a process of separation, making order from chaos. God separates light from darkness, fish in the sea and birds of the sky. Reading the English from Everett Fox's translation, chapter 1 verses 6-8 go like this:

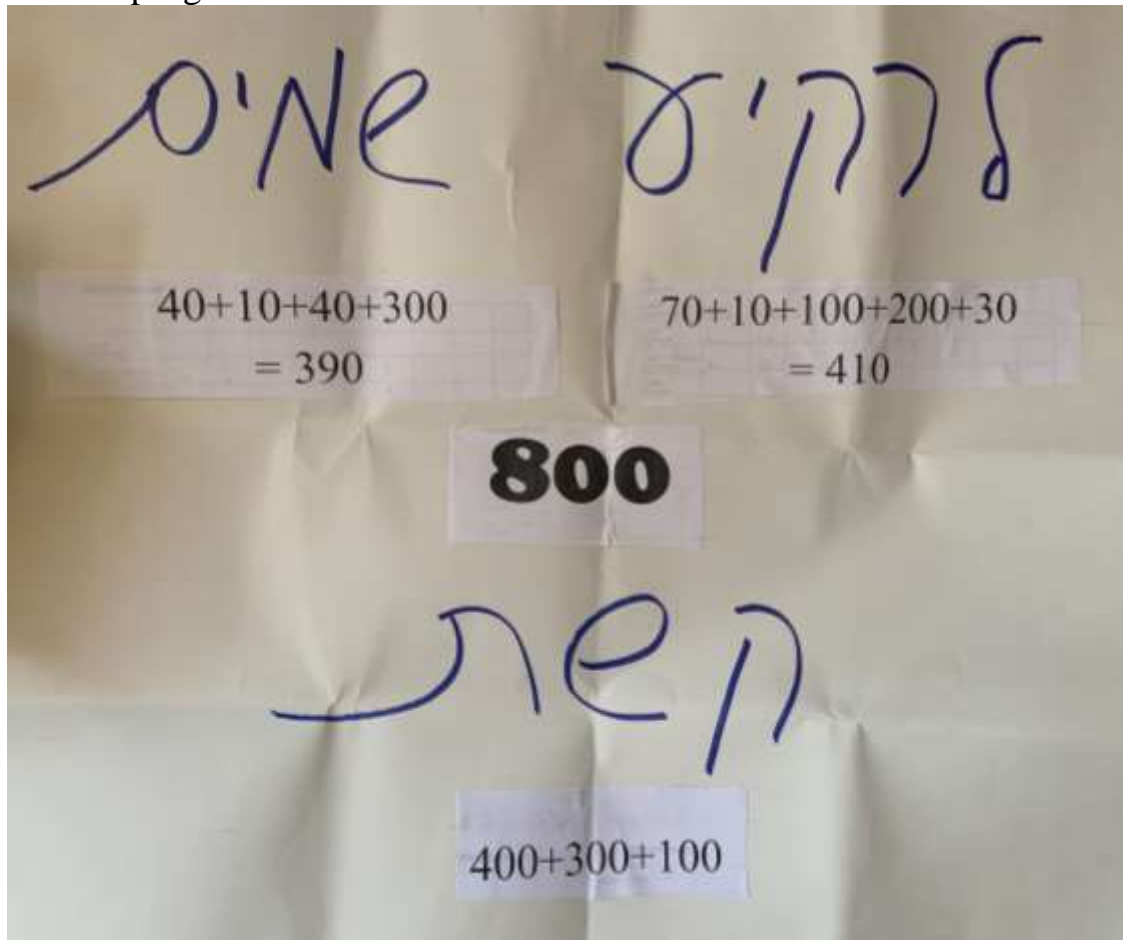
God said: Let there be amid the waters, and let it separate waters from waters! God made the dome and separated the waters that were below the dome from the waters that were above the dome. It was so. God called the dome: Heaven! *Shamayim*. There was setting, there was dawning: second day.

I want to focus in on the word *Shamayim*. There is a midrash that *Shamayim* comes from the combination of the words "aish" (fire) and its opposite, *mayim*, water. A paradox - heaven brings together both fire and

water. So, perhaps we can think of Heaven as where opposites co-exist in peace.

Let's further explore this with some gematria. For those unfamiliar with gematria, the way it works is that in Hebrew, each letter is associated with a number. The idea is that if you add up the numeric value of the letters of the word and two words have the same number, then there must be a relationship between them.

<Hold up sign with visual aid>



If we take larakiya shamayim -- it adds up to 800.

What do we see when fire and water interact in the sky? Well it something we read about next week.

Keshet - also equals 800

We see a rainbow when the rain has ended but the air is still filled with moisture and the sun shines through. The rainbow is a combination of water from the rain and fire from the sun, creating beauty through opposites. And in next week's parashah, we learn about the rainbow as a promise from God to never destroy the world again as happened with the flood. Reading the English from the Everett Fox translation, God says (9:16 - 17) "When the bow is the clouds, I will look at it, to call to mind the age-old covenant between God and all living beings -- all flesh that is upon the earth."

Our lives challenge us to synthesize opposites -- crying bittersweet tears at a wedding or laughing about fond memories during a shivah visit. And when we do, perhaps we are feeling a little bit of what shamayim is like.

Why did Aunt Sadie's jar of honey open after 17 years? The jar was a reminder of so much loss and sadness. But my grandmother was baking for a wonderful celebration. Clearly, the time was right for that jar to open, just like the moment when the rainbow appears.