

Exercising Control When So Much Is Beyond Our Control
Rosh HaShanah 5777
Community Synagogue of Rye
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When you are brought into the Emergency Room of a hospital they ask you a ton of questions. So when the religious question was asked I didn't hesitate. I suppose I should have known what would come next. The morning after surgery, I awoke to an old man with a white beard standing over my bed. At first I thought it was an apparition. Maybe it was Elijah the Prophet. I knew wasn't Rabbi Rothman. The suit didn't fit right. But I knew it was a rabbi. He said something in yiddish that I kind of recognized and he asked me what happened. I told him the whole story. How I had dropped my son off at day camp in Pleasantville, how I rode my bike up to Somers and was on my way back. How out of nowhere it felt like a wall bearing down on me as a truck did not give me adequate space. How I ended up facing north when once I was going south. How I was brought to the hospital and operated on for a broken femur. And then, without skipping a beat he said, "you could have died!" Not how I would necessarily approach a pastoral visit but he was right. I could have died.

Over the past weeks, those words have rung in my ears. I could have died. I could have died. I've heard them repeated to me in different forms: "boy, you're lucky," "it could've been so much worse," and from within my very being as I sat sobbing over this trauma, "I could have died." Instead of welcoming the New Year together, Tamara and my children could be saying kaddish for me. And so, on this day, when we are asked to give a *cheshbon HaNefesh*, an accounting of our souls and to listen to the words which ask, "who shall live and who shall die," knowing full well what that answer is, I want to ponder this question - knowing that we are mortal, knowing that we will die, how might we then, choose to live. In fact, maybe that's what I wish the rabbi had said. Not, "you could have died," but, "Now that this has happened, how are you going to live?"

As I lay in the hospital bed, the story of Abraham came to me, not so much what we read this morning with Abraham about to sacrifice Isaac, but what comes later, after Abraham comes off the mountain.

After Abraham's hand is stayed and Isaac is unharmed, Abraham descends alone. First he tends to the burial of his beloved Sarah. Then he sets in motion a plan for Isaac to marry Rebekah. But it is what he does next that is highly instructive. He marries a woman named Keturah, has a whole slew of kids and lives out the rest of his life, ultimately dying, as the Torah says, "in a good old age and full of years." Interestingly, Abraham never speaks again. Perhaps he lives with his trauma. Perhaps he pushes away what we can never understand. Perhaps he pushes away the unimaginable. Regardless of how his psyche processes the trauma, how he lives is instructive. After the Akeida, after the trauma, the days of striking out on his own to form a new religion are gone, of taking up arms to fight foreign kings, of having audiences with Pharaoh are also gone. So too are the the days of creating treaties with local rulers or arguing with God over the future of Sodom and Gomorra. After the Akeida he chooses a different path. He chooses a quieter life; a life that one might call a life of being instead of a life of doing.

A life of being instead of a life of doing. What does this mean? Jon Kabat-Zinn, developer of Mindfulness Based Stressed Reduction teaches: "Often our lives become so driven that we are moving through our moments to get to better ones at some later point. We live to check things off our to-do list, then fall into bed exhausted at the end of the day, only to jump up

the next morning to get on the treadmill once again. This way of living, if you can call it living, is compounded by all the ways in which our lives are now driven by the ever-quickening expectations we place on ourselves and that others place on us and we on them, generated in large measure by our increasing dependence on ubiquitous digital technology and its ever-accelerating effects on our pace of life. If we are not careful, it is all too easy to fall into becoming more of a human doing than a human being, and to forget who is doing all the doing, and why.” (Mindfulness for Beginners, p. 18). Our goal is to turn this around. To shift our roles from being human doings to human beings.

To become more of a human being than a human doing. Does this sound anti-American? Does it sound counter-productive to our way of life, especially in the hard driven NorthEast? Let me ask you, where have all the great insights and brainstormings come from? From someone sitting at their desk from morning to night saying, “think!” or from someone who takes time to dream, to take long walks, to contemplate? Since this trauma, this is my hope: to think more intentionally as to why I am doing what I am doing; to sit more in the stillness, to reflect, to contemplate.

The Nobel prize winning poet, Derek Walcott once wrote:

The time will come
when, with elation
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror
and each will smile at the other's welcome,
and say, sit here. Eat.

You will love again the stranger who was your self.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you
all your life, whom you ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.

Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,
the photographs, the desperate notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.

If this trauma has taught me anything, it is that for too long I have ignored my own reflection. This is a season of stripping away the layers, of confessing our faults. So I have a confession to make. For too long I was driven in the rabbinate to make a name for myself, to cast a shadow. I wanted to be a known rabbi. So I raised my hand to volunteer. I found my way onto this committee and that board. I wanted to be important, to be worthy in the eyes of my parents, my peers, you. My confession is that, perhaps, I offered (my family might say sacrificed) myself for reasons of ego, not for reasons of service and selflessness; for reasons of doing, not reasons of being. If this accident has taught me anything so far, it is that I need to find that stranger who was my self again, to read those love letters, the desperate notes, to peer at the photographs, to sit, to feast on my life. That is the rabbi I yearn to be again, the person I want to be again, the father and husband I need to be again.

Of course, my trauma is not better nor more instructive than anyone else's. It's just my own, a new lens through which to examine life; yet there is a collective truth found within. We *all* have the chance to discover and embody our true purpose – every single day. With each breath, we have the opportunity to be still and present, to experience *this* moment, to understand how brief and unpredictable life is, and to accept our imminent death. When we see this truth of impermanence, we begin to shed the layers of dysfunction and illusion that have burdened our souls, and we begin to live. The traumatic moment is only that. It is a moment. It is a beginning. It's what we do with this new found awareness that allows us to truly transform.

What then helps us to transform, to transition from one state of being to another? The religious answer is ritual and ceremony. The ceremony of *havdallah* transitions us from the holy time of Shabbat to the ordinary time of the workday week. A Bar Mitzvah transforms a child into an adolescent and a wedding transforms two individuals into a unit. We end shiva with a walk around the block, to move us back into the world, back into life. But what of one who has experienced a brush with danger or a life-challenging situation? How do they transition back to a life of being?

Our tradition prescribes something called *Birkat HaGomel* or a Prayer of Thanksgiving but it might be more apt to call it a prayer for forward movement. The word *gomel* shares the word root with the word *gamal* meaning camel. Just as the camel was used for transportation in the Middle East, the word *gomel* denotes forward movement. One who has experienced a life-challenging situation such as an accident, recovery from an illness, completing an arduous journey or experiencing childbirth - any of those, "you could have died," moments, is entitled to say this blessing, simply because they are somehow moving forward from that moment of danger and somehow, a sense of personal transformation is open to them.

The prayer begins with the individual acknowledging God's hand and generosity in overcoming adversity - for as the rabbi said, "you could have died," but the response goes deeper. The response by the community - because *gomel* is always said in community - acknowledges God's role in bringing goodness to the survivor. How might God do this? Through the embrace of community. You see, it is we, the ones made in God's image, who get to be God's agents in welcoming one back into the community and then saying, we will support you on your journey to healing. Let us then do this.

Please turn to p. 233 of your *machzor*. If, over this past year, you have survived a life threatening accident, if you gave birth to a child, if you recovered from an illness or injury, if you came through a major surgery, if you worked to overcome an addiction or escaped an abusive relationship, if you have gone through any traumatic or difficult experience, I invite you to rise to say the first part of this blessing. And if you are seated, I invite you to respond with the line that says in parenthesis, "for both, or for men," acknowledging how we, serving as God's agents, get to bring these people back into community and to support them on the journey that restores them to wholeness and to healing.

In the midst of the congregation we honor those who have come through times of challenge, difficulty or danger. Today, on the birthday of a new year, we celebrate their survival. Together we give thanks: for the resilience of the body, for the strength of the human spirit, for the precious gift of life, experienced with new intensity, when life has been at risk. (say Gomel).

Over the past weeks I have experienced the power of communal support on my journey to healing. And I experienced it, not as a rabbi but as a father and a husband. The Talmudic sage Hillel may have been able to teach Torah standing on one foot but existing for the past 2

and half months with limited use of my left leg placed an extra burden on my family. I know how Tamara felt supported by this congregation with nutritious and delicious meals, prepared and delivered by generous congregants direct to our door as well as making food available on demand from The Rye Country Store due to an amazing number of donations made there on our behalf. These have saved us some precious time and energy when we needed to conserve. But, more than the practical benefits, each meal was a lesson to us and to our children in the power of sacred community. Living far from family, we were buoyed by the embrace of Community Synagogue. This didn't happen because we are a rabbi's family, but because we have volunteers who are extraordinary and know how to provide when people need it. And my children felt supported, with rides when they needed, again, not because they are the rabbi's kids but because they're around, and people know them and care about them. These quiet *mitzvot* speak volumes about the character of our congregation.

And there was something else that gave me strength through this trauma, that bolstered my spirit. As a clergy-person, I have been to the hospital thousands of times as a visitor, but never as a patient. The experience afforded me a vital glimpse into the importance of reaching out. I could never have imagined how much significance I would attach to the flood of emails, text messages, cards, and offers of help that came streaming in, almost from the moment of the accident.

Until now, performing acts of kindness such as these have been a regular part of my professional responsibilities. Yet, I was uncertain of how they were received. Did phone calls, hospital visits, and cards provide any real degree of comfort? The answer is an affirmative "Yes!" The personal experience, the intimate contact with physical pain and emotional stress, enabled me to understand better than ever how much such genuine concern means. So thank you, from the bottom of my heart. And if you can, continue to pay it forward. When you hear of a member of this community who is ill or who has suffered a death in his or her family, reach out, even if you don't know them, especially if you don't know them. It makes such a difference. It helps in the healing. And it gives us a sense of control when so much is out of our hands...

And that, my friends, is, what I believe is the answer for how to live after trauma... exercising a degree of control when so much is out of our hands.

There is an old Buddhist tale about a woman whose only son died. In her grief, she went to the Buddha and said, "What prayers, what magical incantations do you have to bring my son back to life?"

Instead of sending her away or reasoning with her, he said to her, "Fetch me a mustard seed from a home that has never known sorrow. We will use it to drive the sorrow out of your life." The woman went off at once in search of that magical mustard seed.

She came first to a splendid mansion, knocked at the door, and said, "I am looking for a home that has never known sorrow. Is this a place? It is very important to me."

They told her, "You've certainly come to the wrong place," and began to describe all the tragic things that recently had befallen them.

The woman said to herself, "Who is better able to help these poor, unfortunate people than I, who have had misfortune of my own?"

She stayed to comfort them, and then went on in search of a home that had never known sorrow. But wherever she turned, in hovels and in other places, she found one tale after another of sadness and misfortune.

She became so involved in living a life of service, of ministering to other people's grief that ultimately she forgot about her quest for the magical mustard seed, never realizing that it had, in fact, driven the sorrow out of her life.

A life of service, giving back, if that is not exercising an element of control when so much is out of our hands, what is?

A few moments ago Cantor Cooperman chanted the haunting *piyut* known as the *Unetaneh Tokef*... Who by fire and who by water. It is a reminder how so much is beyond our control yet our response is often within our grasp. Far too often we look to the beginning of the poem, cringing at the terrifying ways life can quickly be taken from us. We focus on the three fold actions we can take - *tzedakah*, *teshuva*, *t'fillah* - to help mitigate the severity of the decree, reminding ourselves that while bad things will happen to good people, through choosing a religiously disciplined life, we will be able to get through much of what life throws our way. And then the poem, in beautiful metaphoric language reminds us of a reality principle.

Adam Yissodo, the *machzor* says. You have created us and You know what we are. We are but flesh and blood. Our origin is dust and dust is our end. Each of us is a shattered urn, grass that must wither, a flower that will fade, a shadow moving on, a cloud passing by, a particle of dust floating on the wind, a dream soon forgotten.

The composers and compilers of our *machzor* did not intend to traumatize us. They only wanted to speak the truth as they knew it, so that we might live more fully. So we might read that prayer poem and ask, so okay, I'm mortal. Nu? And the *machzor* says back to us, so what are you going to do about it? Yes, we are only dust, but dust can make for a strong foundation on which we can build a house, or even a synagogue, or hopefully a remodeled synagogue. We may be broken vessels, but those shards can be reassembled and reconfigured to create a beautiful mosaic. And yes, we are withering grass and wilting flowers, but these enrich the soil that is beneath so that life can renew and emerge. And yes, we are but a shadow, but isn't a shadow a reminder that we exist, that we are alive, that we move, that we have a mission? It's like the *machzor* is saying to God, "Yes, you are the Master of the Universe. You choose who lives and who dies; when we live and when we die. You might even be the one choosing how we die but here's the deal God, you don't get to choose how we live or our chosen attitude; you gave us that choice when, on that first Rosh HaShanah, you planted us in the garden and told us what to eat and what not to eat. I get it God. Sometimes you need to shake us up a bit - or a lot - so that we can think a little more intentionally about how we will live; or you *shlepp* us into *shul* once or twice a year to ask ourselves the most important questions in life and hopefully, to allow space and time for the answers to bubble up from within. And when that happens, when we realize that if we plant our feet firmly in the ground to remain spiritually and emotionally centered as winds howl and storms rage, our connection to that which is greater than ourselves will connect us with that which is Eternal.

Since that day in July I've thought more and more about the rabbi who visited me in the hospital room. Maybe he wasn't Elijah the prophet in disguise. Maybe he was really the angel of death coming to mourn his loss. When he said "you could have died," he was really saying "you could have been mine." But I didn't die. I lived. I'm here. I cheated the Angel of death and now I get to say, "ha! You didn't get me. Not this time. Now I get the last laugh. Choosing how to live I defeat you over and over and over again!" That, my friends, is the key to this day, knowing that we are but a hair's breath from death, and, despite everything, choosing to live, exercising a degree of control. How then do we choose to live? By living mindfully in the moment, being still, reflecting, breathing; by acting justly, loving mercy and walking humbly in

this world, or, as Shimon Peres, who we laid to rest just as this year was drawing to a close so beautifully said, “The purpose of life is to find a cause that’s larger than yourself, and then to give your life to it.” That was Shimon Peres. It can be all of us.

We have all known sorrow and pain and moments where we feel broken. Loss and despair are woven into the fabric of life. There is no escaping it. What there is, as our prayers and experiences remind us, is our opportunity to choose how to go on and then, mindful of all that might be, to celebrate and acknowledge the miracle of creation God has set before us.

Each night, before I fall asleep, I whisper the words from Adon Olam, *v’adot af kedruchee*. Into Your hands, O God, I entrust my spirit, and when I sleep and when I wake, and with my spirit and my body too, as long God is with me, I shall not fear. You may crash and you may break, but my love will never leave you, God says. Things fall apart, but God’s presence is steady, and faithful. O God of life, we pray that You will write us into the Book of Life, so that we may live. Strengthen our bodies and our souls so that we are able to fill our days in Your service. And that we might make every day a *Shechheianu*, a life worth living.

Earlier we paused to offer *Birkat HaGomel*, a prayer that allows one to move forward, asking those who needed it to rise. Now I ask everyone to rise, to strengthen the one next to you by taking their hand or putting your arm around them and to join us in the prayer that sanctifies life and each moment, the prayer reminding us to make a life worth living. (Cantor comes to sing)... *Baruch, Atah Adonai, Elohenu Melech Ha olom Sheheheanu, v’keamanu v,hegeanu lazman hazeh*. Amen. Shanah Tovah U’Metukah - To a good and sweet new year!