

“Here All Along” - What Rosenzweig, Sarah Hurwitz and Outward Bound can teach us
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Last January, I participated in a week long Outward Bound program.

I was completely out of my comfort zone.

Everything, from paddling through rapids

to tying knots was new.

For six days we canoed down the Rio Grande and on the seventh...

we rock climbed.

Overlooking Mexico,

I rappelled down an 85 foot rock wall to the river bank.

Then the climb began. It was easy at first.

The handholds and footholds were clear and present.

But as I got within 10 feet of the top I froze.

“What’s wrong?” asked my instructor..

“There aren’t any holds. I can’t see a way forward.”

And in my mind I was thinking,

“maybe he could just pull me to the top?”

“What are you going to do about it?” he asked

I realized there were only two options.

Figure out a way up or rappel back down

and live with the guilt and shame of not having made it.

I heard myself say, “I don’t know what to do.

I’m scared. I’m stuck. And I don’t see a way forward.”

Instead of trying to soothe me or comfort me or fix it for me,

this is what he said, “I want you to try something.

Close your eyes.”

“What!?”

“Listen. I’ve got you. You’re not going to fall. Trust yourself.

Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths.”

So I did.

75 feet above the Rio Grande,

holding onto a rock wall I closed my eyes.

I took a few slow, deep breaths,

centered myself, and then opened my eyes.

“What do you see?” he asked

“I see a way!”

And I climbed those last 10 feet to the summit.

Those hand holds didn't suddenly appear in the rock.

They were there all along.

What changed was my ability to see.

In my impatience - to get to the summit as fast as I could;

in my arrogance - thinking that I knew how to conquer that wall, I

failed to see what was always in front of me.

But the wall humbled me,

it asked me to slow down, to look at it differently.

And only by admitting my inadequacy,

only by becoming vulnerable was I able to find a way.

To find my way to the top

I had to find something that was there all along.

And to find it, I had to be willing to see things differently

I didn't think of it then but as we approached this holiday,
I realized how this story reflected the story of Franz Rosenzweig
who too found something that was there all along.

Who you may ask?

Rosenzweig. He's one of my heroes.

Born in Germany in 1886, Rosenzweig was raised,
as were many Jews of his day,
in a Jewishly committed albeit non-observant family.

It was also fashionable for Jews at that time in Germany to
consider conversion to Christianity.

For most, the reasons were primarily economic and social.

As a Christian, one would be more accepted
and would have more opportunities for financial success
than as a Jew.

For Rosenzweig, his reasons were different.

Like many of his friends and relatives

who had already made the leap,

Rosenzweig saw the Christian conception of revelation

as the purest and, in his opinion,

had made the modern world possible

Since Rosenzweig viewed Judaism as anachronistic –

a faith not in touch with the contemporary world -

the decision for him to convert was even easier.

He established for himself only one provision:

he wished to enter Christianity as did its founders,

as a Jew, not as a “pagan.”

On this night in 1913,

Franz Rosenzweig entered a small Orthodox synagogue in Berlin

for what he expected to be the last time.

His intent was not to break off from Judaism,
but rather,
to deliberately “go through” Judaism into Christianity.
And so, he decided
that he would attend Yom Kippur services
to say farewell to his Jewish identity and the Jewish people.

Yet something entirely unexpected happened to Rosenzweig that night.
We don't know exactly what,
for he never wrote about it but for Rosenzweig,
in that small orthodox synagogue
he experienced what could be called
a preemptive counter-conversion,
as he wrote a friend:
"After prolonged, and I believe, thorough self-examination,
I have reversed my decision ... I will remain a Jew."

What he thought he could find only in the church,
a faith that gives one a particular orientation of the world,
he found on that day in the synagogue.

For the rest of his life,

Rosenzweig devoted himself to Jewish study and teaching.

He became

one of the outstanding Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century.

Like me on that rock wall,

it seems that on that Kol Nidre Eve,

Rosenzweig found something that had been there all along.

Rosenzweig's desire to find religious meaning elsewhere

and spiritual awakening in Judaism,

while powerful is not unique.

All the way back in the Torah,

Moses foresaw this possibility.

In words we will chant tomorrow morning,
words that are inscribed on the back of this ark,
words that ring like prophecy,
Moses sensed that in the future
Jews would say that to find inspiration we have to look elsewhere -
up in the heavens or across the sea -
anywhere but here.

We look everywhere we can for meaning but far too often,
like so many things in life,
we fail to look at what is right in front of us.

We don't take the time to explore
our own mystics and meditators,
our own poets and philosophers,
our own holy men and women,
our own visionaries and prophets.

It has often seemed
as if the longing we have for spiritual enlightenment
is in direct proportion to its distance, its foreignness, its unfamiliarity.
We prefer the far to the near, the East to the West,
the Ashram to the Synagogue;
yet, we don't need to go farther than our own home.

Responses to the deepest and most existential questions of life
are right here and are available and accessible to us.

In fact, they've been here all along.

Perhaps that was a little of what Franz Rosenzweig encountered
that Kol Nidre eve some 106 years ago.

I doubt that any of us have come tonight
contemplating the same crossroads Rosenzweig faced.

Yet, I wonder how many of us are filled with doubt and questions,
wondering whether Judaism still has truth or meaning for us.

Each of us in this sanctuary has a story to tell,
a powerful one of why we feel connected to
or in some way estranged from Judaism.
Some of us have come here tonight eagerly,
some reluctantly and probably most of us routinely.
Yet, is not each of us seeking, like Rosenzweig,
for a deeper sense of meaning,
of connection, of purpose,
and hoping that maybe, just maybe
we will find some of that
in this ancient and modern tradition of ours?
Are we not yearning for Judaism
to somehow speak to us, in our own unique situation?
Are we not hoping to find in Judaism
an anchor of meaning in the turbulent waters of modern life?

And here we all are,
to hear the ancient and powerful melody of the Kol Nidre,
to examine our shortcomings,
to seek forgiveness and to stand
both within community yet alone with God and our own conscience,
looking for a way that we too might leave here tonight
feeling more connected –
feeling that “something” to be awakened in us.

Like Rozensweig,
Sarah Hurwitz grew up in a fairly secular Jewish family.
Her only points of contact with Judaism each year
were two High Holiday services
that she reluctantly attended and didn't really understand,
a seder or two, and a Hanukkah party.

As she says in her new book Here all along,

“I don’t think I’m the only Jew who has viewed Judaism

as if it were a distant relative

whom I loved in a vague familial way

and was required to see a few times a year

but had no desire to get to know further.”

After graduating high school,

Sarah went to Harvard college and then Harvard Law.

From 2008 until 2016,

she served as a speechwriter for President Barack Obama

and later as head speechwriter for First Lady Michelle Obama.

She certainly lacked no intelligence

when it came to understanding what Judaism might offer.

What she lacked was exposure.

Unemployed after the 2016 election,
single after a tough breakup
and looking for ways to fill her evenings,
Hurwitz happened upon an Introduction to Judaism class
at her local JCC.

She wasn't like Rosenzweig having a deep existential yearning.

She admits she was mostly just looking for something to do.

But the outcome for her was much like Rosenzweig's.

What she studied in that Intro to Judaism class blew her away.

It made her realize

that Judaism is a radical, inspiring, moving,

and highly relevant tradition.

She found things she had never learned in Hebrew school

(or had not paid attention to):

beautiful rituals,

helpful guidance on living an ethical life,

Hasidic conceptions of God that imagines God as all that is

instead of the judgy bearded man in the sky.

Hungry for more, Sarah visited rabbis,
attended Jewish meditation retreats,
sat at Shabbat tables,
and read hundreds of books about Judaism —
all in dogged pursuit of answers to her biggest questions.
What she found transformed her life,
and she wondered:
how could there be such a gap
between the richness of what Judaism offers
and the way so many Jews understand and experience it?
So she wrote a book to close this gap,
hopefully to inspire many of us
to take a bit of a climb up that wall,
to be a little like Rosenzweig,
to dig in and to find the grit and determination
to do the learning, questioning, and debating
required to make this tradition our own.

What Sarah Hurwitz, what Rosenzweig was searching for -
is not dissimilar from our own yearnings.

Throughout my years as a rabbi,
I have met with many, many people
who reveal to me their emptiness
and their desire to fill that emptiness
but are often too embarrassed to ask.

We come here tonight, I hope,
not to pass a few hours in official duty for institutional religion,
but to have an experience, to be cracked open,
to allow us to feel closer to God,
to experience a little of what I believe Rosenzweig experienced
that Kol Nidre night that transformed him,
that allowed him to recognize
the awe and wonder and beauty in this world,
to say to himself that there must be a better path
and how this tradition of ours
can serve as a road map for how to get there.

If this is the case, what then gets in our way?

It's not that we don't have time

because we seem to make time for the things that matter most -

the theatre, the exercise, the TV shows, the travel

and for many here tonight, this community.

It's not that we don't care about Judaism

because we do care deeply, otherwise we wouldn't be here.

I think there are three things that do get in our way,

three reasons why we don't look at what has been here all along:

One: As educated people, we don't want to appear ignorant.

Second: In an era of quick fixes and instant gratification,

this thing called Judaism can feel overwhelming.

And 3, as they did to Rosenzweig,

too many of our customs seem irrelevant, old and out of touch.

First, we don't want to appear ignorant.

We are the most successful

and most highly educated generation of Jews, ever!

We are leaders in our fields, in our occupations. We are experts.

Yet when it comes to Judaism -

something that is our heritage, our birthright -

we aren't, let's admit it, as accomplished.

We may feel inadequate, embarrassed, self-conscious.

Finding ourselves in settings where we are expected to know -

whether among Jews or non-Jews,

in synagogues or in our homes -

we worry that we are going to commit some act of sacrilege

that will reveal our ignorance

and deepen our shame for not knowing.

Like the person who never learned how to swim,

it's easier to stay out of the pool.

It takes humility to admit our shortcomings,

to admit what we don't know

and it takes courage to dive into a pool of learning and living

something we were supposed to have ingested with mother's milk.

Yet here's the thing,

Judaism is all about the questions

and since each question we ask truly comes from a place of curiosity,

there is no such thing as a stupid question.

What is one of the first things

we want our children to learn in religious school?

The four questions.

How does the Talmud begin? With a question.

We are taught that after we die,

we are asked six questions,

none of which have to do with matzah or bitter herbs.

Socrates, who spent his life teaching people to ask questions,

was condemned by the citizens of Athens for corrupting the young.

In Judaism the opposite is the case.

Just as it is a religious duty to teach our children to ask questions,

it is our obligation to ask for ourselves.

That is how we grow.

That is where learning begins.

Second, we tend not to look to Judaism for answers because,
let's face it, it can be overwhelming.

4000 years!

Torah, Talmud, Commentaries, History, Ritual, Prayer.

Where do you even begin to look?

It can be paralyzing.

Just as we have our children go to guidance counselors
to help choose which colleges to apply to,

we can seek out guides -

rabbis, cantors, educators -

who can point us in the direction of what we might want to learn.

And it is never too late to begin.

We are told that Akiva was an illiterate shepherd

until the age of 40,

yet he knew there had to be more to life.

One day, while sitting by a brook,
he noticed a steady trickle of water hitting a rock.
It was only a drip,
but it was constant – drop after drop after drop.
And below?
A hole had been carved out by that steady drip of water.
Making the connection to his own life, Akiva concluded:
If something as soft as water can carve a hole in solid rock,
how much more so can Torah,
ingested word after word after word,
make an indelible impression on my heart.
That marked a turning point in Akiva's life.
He committed himself to Torah study,
and went on to become the greatest sage of his generation.

On one level, Akiva's story shows how it's never too late to start.
On a deeper level, this teaches that every drop of Torah,
even if undetectable, makes an impact.

Like the repetition of water over a rock,
every blessing we say,
every mitzvah we do, every act of tzedakah we make
has unparalleled power to effect change.

Sometimes we do not perceive it,
and the results are not apparent until years later.

But if one keeps at it, like practicing an instrument,
lifting a weight or perfecting a dish,
the majesty of of this tradition will penetrate.

Drop after drop after drop,
it will carve into your *neshama* and transform you.

Finally, we wonder if Judaism remains relevant in this modern age.

When Siri or Alexa can give you the answer to most questions,
what role can Judaism, let alone religion play?

When each person is a sovereign self,
working to improve his or her our soul,
it's hard to make a case for a Judaism
based on communal obligations
that may not speak to the modern age -
at least not in their original form.

But our tradition with all its treasures
reminds us how to be in right relationship.

It teaches us that each person, made in the image of God
is worthy of being treated with dignity and respect.

The Jewish calendar inspires us to sanctify time and space
and our system of blessings -
reminding us to say oops, thanks and wow -
intentionally makes us more grateful and compassionate.

Our texts from the opening words of Genesis
to some of the last in Deuteronomy
inform us that our task on this earth is to be shomrei adamah -
guardians of this fragile planet we call home.

The wisdom of our sages point out
that we have teachings upon teachings
that lead to the building of strong character traits
and that our ceremonies and rituals help to affirm those values.

And surrounding all that,
our concept of God is one that is able to evolve and grow along with us
to speak to us in every age and in every land -
allowing us to tap into the divine
wherever and whenever we are... here.... now..

If you can begin to see that,
if you can begin to see what was here all along,
perhaps you can then see our tradition for what it was intended to be,
not a series of laws to constrict us
but a spiritual discipline that allows us to lead a life of blessing,
a life that is holy, a life that is filled with meaning and with purpose.

I began with a story of something that happened this past January,
of how I learned that by slowing things down,
by seeing things a little differently,

I could see what was there all along.

I end with a story that is set much farther back in time

but whose message remains the same;

for as Moses taught thousands of years ago

and will teach again tomorrow,

the answers are not in heaven.

They are not across the sea.

The answers are right here,

just as they have been here all along.

All we have to do is to dig a little.

Once upon a time there was a poor Jewish man
named Isaac the son of Yekel
living in an impoverished village outside Crakow.

One night Isaac had a dream.

He dreamed that he was digging at the foot of a bridge
leading to the king's castle in Prague.

In the dream, as he dug, treasures came pouring out -
gold coins, jewels, silver chains, priceless gems.

The next night he had the same dream.

And the next, and the night after that.

So Isaac set off to journey to Prague.

It took him days and nights;

days where the sun beat down on him

and freezing nights in which he shivered and shook.

He got to that grand city

and as night fell he began to dig under the main bridge.

Suddenly he felt a presence looming over him.

Above him stood a guard.

The guard asked, “What are you doing?”,

and Isaac explained his dream.

The guard burst out laughing.

“Hah!” he chuckled, “Who believes in dreams?

I, myself, would have been on a long quest if I believed in dreams.

Once I was told to wander to Cracow

and to find the house of a Jew named Isaac, son of Yekel.

If I dug under his stove, I would find a treasure.

Isaac, son of Yekel, indeed!

I can only imagine myself pulling every house apart,

since half the Jews in Cracow are named Isaac

and the other half are named Yekel!

Do you see me making that journey?!

You are a fool...”

And Isaac understood.

He picked up his shovel,
got himself home as fast as he could,
and began digging under the stove in his kitchen.
And of course, there was the treasure he had dreamed of.
It was there all along,
right in the place where he was,
in his very home.

We may not be Rosenzweig, motivated by a spiritual quest.

We may not be Sarah Hurwitz,

driven to fill all the gaps

missing from the Jewish Education

she didn't receive as a child.

We may never get the opportunity

or have the desire

to scale a rock wall above the Rio Grande

but we are all capable of digging a little into our own tradition,

to explore the facets of it

that speak to our own spiritual yearnings

and perhaps to find - just waiting for us -

what was here all along.