

Not too long ago I attended a meeting of the Montclair Clergy Association. This was our September meeting where the custom is to kind of catch up with each other, a kind of clergy version of “What I did on my Summer Vacation.” The MCA is a good *chevre*, a supportive friendship circle, so it’s not surprising that this “sharing” tends to be pretty personal.

One of the clergy shared how this past year had been a fairly big time in his life. He turned 55. That, in and of itself, is not such a big deal. (Although I could easily relate because I too was born in 1950.) Rather, what made this rite of passage so significant for him, as he shared with us, was that when we was 17 he was (and I know he will forgive me for this) dumb enough to ask a Ouija Board how old he would be when he died and even dumber for actually paying attention to it. The Ouija *prophecy* said he would die when he was 54. You can see why turning 55 was such a happy occasion for him.

But then he went on to share how this birthday had inspired him to reflect, to remember back to that night when he tempted fate. How, with a few of his friends in one of their basements, they all began to share where they hoped they would be in their lives when they got into their fifties. What he shared with us, however, was how he never, in his wildest dreams, could have imagined how happy he would be, how fulfilled and how young and full of life he would feel at this stage of his life.

Of course, I was happy for him. We all were. You could see it on the faces of all the clergy in that room. Indeed, we were mirroring his countenance. He wasn’t just “saying” this for dramatic effect. He was clearly feeling it. The smile, the glow on his face was unmistakable. But as I listened I found myself also feeling a tad envious. Not for his happiness; I too have much for which to be grateful. Rather, it was his *awareness* of his happiness that I admired. Unlike Jacob who wakes up only to exclaim that he failed to recognize his blessing while it was happening, my friend was able to be alive in the moment.

In the Garden of Eden story, after Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit and recognize their own nakedness, they hear God “walking” in the garden and they hide. God then says to Adam, “*Ayeka?* Where are you?” It’s an odd question. Why, after all, would God need to ask for Adam’s location? Does not God know everything? Is not God omniscient? And if so, then to what end does God raise the question? The rabbis say that the question is not for God’s edification but for Adam’s, and what is more, the answer has nothing to do with geography.

God’s question to Adam is existential. It seeks not his location but his place. His *spiritual* place. And it is not God who needs to hear the answer; it is for Adam himself to learn where he is. As it is for us.

In a wonderful innovation introduced by our rabbinic intern Stephanie Kolin, each session of Confirmation Class begins with our own version of “*Ayeka*”, a check-in exercise which allows each of us to articulate where we are that day. And while there is a clear value in sharing with the entire group, it is far more important that the students have the opportunity to listen to themselves. It’s a kind of spiritual version of “Where’s Waldo?” Which is to say, sometimes we need help to affirm how good life really is.

Rabbi Hanokh would tell the story of a man who was so terribly absent-minded, he was always forgetting where he put things. This was especially true in the morning, as he would try to find his clothes to get dressed. So one night, before going to bed, he made a series of notes where he placed each article of clothing. Then, the next day, as he got out of bed, he looked at his note to find his shirt, his pants, his shoes. But at the end of his note he would see his signature, and then just sit in his chair, all dressed, wondering to himself, “Where am I?”

As silly as this tale might seem, it is rooted in a genuinely profound truth: most of us live our lives, day in and day out, completely unaware of where we are, of what our lives mean *at that moment*. The great danger of modernity is that it is so preoccupied with progress, with moving ahead on the road of life, that we often become blind to the place wherein we stand.

Try to imagine what it would be like to drive your car along a roller-coaster. Twists and turns. Ups and downs. Swaying to and fro. (And all at the same time.) Oh, and did I mention the part about the 1000

foot drop? Of course on a roller-coaster you just sit back, hold tight to that bar and close your eyes, but on California Highway 1, the legendary stretch of road that runs north from San Francisco along the Sonoma coast, you must always keep your eyes open. And as King Kong said to Fay Wray, “Don’t look down.”

The 30-mile stretch south of Bodega Bay (where Hitchcock filmed *The Birds*) takes at least two hours to drive (unless that is you have a death wish). The view is breathtaking. The only problem is that if you’re driving *and* looking you run the risk of suffering from *vertigo* (which is maybe where Hitchcock got the idea) and plunging off the road into the sea. You see, there are no guardrails. Indeed, there are places along this fabled road where all you see is sky—in *front* of you. Nor, may I add, does it help to have passengers with you who are either screaming to get off the road or distracting you by saying, “Oh my God, look at that.” It’s a test, I’m sure. Like a reverse “Simon Says,” how well can you *not* pay attention to what everyone says and keep your eyes looking straight ahead?

Now I conclude that this road is a metaphor for life. The view is amazing. The vista of the Pacific Ocean, the hawks and occasional eagle flying overhead, the surf crashing against the rocks below remind you—*Mah gadlu ma’asekha Adonai*—How majestic are Your creations God. The rub, however, is that they are impossible to view *and* appreciate (let alone enjoy) while you are trying to get to your destination. Thank God (not to mention the California Department of Highways) for the “turnouts” every hundred yards or so. Little islands of dirt and gravel laid off to the side for you to pull over and let the faster cars pass. You can even get out and take in the view. “Rest Stops” they are. Places to breathe.

Perhaps by now you might be able to guess where I’m going with this. And even if you don’t buy into the Shabbat “every-100-yards” sell (I confess, most of the cars on that road use the “turnout” only 2 or 3 times along that 30-mile long road), there is just no way you can do the whole trip and not stop *at least* once, get out of the car, look out onto the vista and say, “Oh my God.” And this is why we have the High Holy Days. These days are the “big” Rest Stop, the place where just about everybody pulls off the road, because the view is truly amazing. This is the place where we stop driving, get out of the car, and join with all the other fellow travelers to take in the panorama. (And have lunch, of course—which, regrettably, we can’t do today.) The “Big” picture. Standing together, we each take in a different piece of the sacred, but whether in its particularity or as part of a whole there is a majesty of these *Yamim* or simply “Days” which cannot be ignored. We all have the opportunity to come away a bit smaller unless, that is, we are so “hell-bent” on getting to the end of the road and fail to see that the opportunity to pause and “look” is worth all the twists and turns of the road. Indeed, it even inspires you to get back onto the road just to see what’s around the next corner.

But—continuing the metaphor—the precipices which lay just off the road’s boundaries are no different from the dangers which accompany the *lived* life; staying on the road, never swerving to or fro is beyond anyone’s capabilities. And it is here, in this tension between the danger and the beautiful, between the fear and the awe, where the meaning of life can be found. For in Hebrew, “fear” and “awe” are the same word. *Yirah*. It is the central theme of these High Holy Days. And it is here that we can begin the process of learning *how* to pull off to the side of the road, pause from our goal-oriented journey, join with the crowd, look out (or in), and exclaim (admit) in wonder: “Oh my God.” The view is simply breathtaking (if, that is, you are willing to *really* look). In other words, life *is* good. Or perhaps I should say, “Life *can* be good.”

How come we have so much difficulty seeing that? Why is it that we are so blinded to the wonders of life? Are we to be, like Adam, forever hiding in the bushes from life’s realities? Forever preoccupied with false treasure’s which leave us empty-handed when the day is done? Or is it that life’s bumps and twists and turns capture our attention so much that we see only the “glare” of the sun and not what it illumines?

We all have our reasons. *Tzuris*, we Jews call it. From the Hebrew *tzar* or “narrow”. Being squeezed. We call it “Egypt”. *Mitzrayim*. The place of “narrows”. Everybody lives there. We all go through it. (Better put, we all *endure* it.) But unlike the sequence of the Torah—from Egypt to Wilderness to Promised

Land—life tends not to be sequential. I have learned that life does not follow an orderly time-line. Things do not go simply from bad to good (or the other way around). Rather, they all co-exist. Bad *and* good. Pain *and* joy. In fact, they are so inextricably intertwined, so enmeshed and interwoven like threads in a fabric that one cannot completely separate one from the other. And yet, if given the choice—which we have each day—we will more often than not choose the dark side, blind to the milk and honey that fills life. We see the small and miss the big. We feel the “fear” at the expense of the “awe”. The challenge is to be able to sort them out, to distinguish the bad from the good, to “choose life”, as Torah taught us this morning.

This tension between the two sides is well drawn in the *midrash* and *kabbalah*. Art Green teaches how the soul or *neshamah* is often referred to as a fruit or *pri*. And like many delicate fruits, it needs an exterior shell for protection. This, the *kabbalah* refers to as the *kelipah*. However, sometimes that outer shell, designed for protection, actually becomes a hindrance to the inner self; it gets in the way, it blocks it from blossoming. In kabbalistic lore, it is the *kelippot* or vessels shattered and their fragments are the *tzuris* which fill our lives. How often, indeed, those elements of our lives—designed to protect us—often become roadblocks for our own abilities to emerge. And yet, we still need the shell. Because it is impossible to separate the two.

All of us have broken lives. Physically and emotionally, we all know some measure of this innate sour-stuff of life. But the challenge is not to eradicate it; rather we are commanded to do *tikkun* or repair. Hence the notion of *tikkun olam*: how the original light of creation was stored in vessels which shattered leaving the broken shards, *kelippot*, for us to gather and piece back together. We can't do away with them. At best we can live with them, integrate them, take ownership of them, acknowledging their existence and in the process find ways to reconcile the inner sweetness and the outer bitterness. So *Pirkei Avot* teaches us, “*Eyzeh hu ashir? Who is rich? Ha-samayach b'chelko*. He who is content with what he has.” The one who can find not so much happiness but contentedness amidst all the contradictions is truly rich.

My friend, the one who shared about his sense of satisfaction at being where he is in his life, shared with me the text of the sermon he gave reflecting on his coming-of-age. In it he quoted from George Bernard Shaw:

“This is the true joy in life...being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one...being a force of nature instead of a feverish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy...I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it what I can.

“I want to be thoroughly used up when I die. For the harder I work the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle to me. It's a sort of splendid torch which I've got to hold up for the moment and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to the future generations.”

I've thought a good deal about these words since first reading them, especially now as I enter my 26th year here at Temple Ner Tamid. I confess, I wasn't as far-sighted as my friend when I was a teenager. The truth is, even when I was in college I did not have a clear sense as to where I would go with my life. All I knew was that I wanted to make something of my life. In retrospect, I confess I never could have imagined that more than 30 years later I would merit the privilege of serving the Jewish community as I do now. Like my friend, as I reflect to where I was and where I am now, I too am taken aback. For me the feeling is not so much happiness or joy, not even contentedness but rather humility. And profound gratitude. At the same time I also feel a sense of challenge, because this is hardly the end. (Unless there is something you haven't told me yet.) There is still so much to be done. As a rabbi and as a person. The potential is still there. As long as we breathe it is always there.

Last month my nephew got married. In discussing our family's plan to go to the wedding, Hannah asked

the question: “Is she Jewish?” “No,” I replied. “Is she Christian?” Hannah came back. “No,” I said. “Well what religion is she?” Hannah pressed on. “I don’t think she’s anything,” I answered. “That’s good,” she concluded. “Why do you say that?” I asked. “Because now she can become something,” Hannah deduced.

Ought this not be true for all of us? We all, each and every day, merit the potential for becoming something we are not yet. Each day is a new opportunity. A new birth. Each morning we are granted the privilege of awakening and proclaiming, “*Modeh ani l’fanekha*—I am grateful to You, Source of life in the universe, for renewing in me breath, for restoring my soul.” Or as Marsha Falk renders it, “The breath of my life will bless, the cells of my being sing in gratitude, reawakening.” In other words, it’s good to be alive—not because of the alternative but because it is *good* to be alive.

I recently read a story about a cab driver who was reflecting upon a fare he had taken some twenty years ago. It was very late, maybe 2:30 in the morning. Under most circumstances he would just honk and wait. But that night he chose to go up to the door and knock. From inside he could hear something being dragged across the floor; a voice said, “Just a minute.” After a long pause the door opened. A small woman in her 80s wearing a print dress and a pillbox hat with a veil (like someone out of a 1940s movie) stood before him. The apartment looked as if no had lived there for years. All the furniture was covered with sheets, there were no pictures on the walls, no knickknacks or utensils on the counters. He offered to carry her bag to the car.

When she got in the car she gave him an address and said, “Could you first drive through downtown?” she asked. “Well, I can,” he said, “but it’s not the shortest way.” “Oh, I don’t mind,” she said. “I’m in no hurry. I’m on my way to the hospice. I don’t have any family left. I just want to see where I’ve lived.” The cab driver reached over, shut off the meter and said, “Tell me where to go.” For the next two hours they drove throughout the city, passing the building where she used to work, the neighborhood where she and her husband first lived after they got married. Sometimes she would ask to just stop at a particular corner and then sit silently looking out the window.

Finally they arrived at their destination. Two orderlies came out to help with the luggage. They brought a wheelchair for his passenger. “How much do I owe you,” she asked. “Nothing,” he said. “You have to make a living,” she replied. “There will be other passengers,” he said, and then bent down to give her a hug. “You gave an old woman a little moment of joy,” she said, and then disappeared into the building.

In recalling the story, the cab driver reflected [as told to Rabbi Jory Lang]:

“I don’t think that I have ever done anything more important in my life. We’re conditioned to think that our lives revolve around great moments. But great moments often catch us unaware—beautifully wrapped in what others may consider a small one. People may not remember exactly what you did, or what you said, but they will always remember how you made them feel. Life may not be the party we hoped for, but while we are here we might as well dance. Every morning when I open my eyes, I tell myself that it is special. Every day, every minute, every breath truly is a gift from God.”

*Zeh hayom asa Adonai, nagila v’nismecha vo*—This is the day God has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.