

THE BARRIERS IN OUR PATH

A story:

“Once there was a king with magical powers. Using his magic, he surrounded his palace with the illusion of many walls. The walls were arranged in concentric circles, one inside the other, and they grew increasingly larger-- higher and thicker-- as one approached the center. They appeared to have fortified battlements and to be manned by fierce soldiers who guarded from above; wild animals-- lions and bears—seemed to run loose below.

“The king then had a proclamation sent throughout the kingdom saying that whoever came to see him in his palace would be richly rewarded and given a rank second to none in the king’s service. Who would not desire this? His subjects came in droves. But when they arrived at the palace and saw no gate they were puzzled, and when they saw the awesome size of the walls and the terrifying soldiers and animals, many were afraid and turned back. Some, still hoping to get in and not wanting to go back, set up camp in front of the palace and settled down to wait and see what might happen. A few wandered from camp to camp complaining loudly about how unfair it was for the king to do this to them.

“One subject, the king’s son, came and saw the walls, soldiers, and wild animals, and was astonished. He did not understand the obstacles, but he knew his father’s invitation had been sincere. He walked forward to the wall to see how he might get in. Finding nothing obvious, he decided to climb. He reached up for a handhold, and no sooner had he touched the brick than the walls, the soldiers and the animals disappeared. His father, the king, was standing right before him.” [RDH’s adaptation of a story by the Baal Shem Tov, from retellings by Yitzhak Buxbaum and Jory Lang]

This story is an adaptation of a parable from the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chasidism. It uses symbolism found throughout Jewish literature in which the King is God, the King’s subjects are all of humanity and the beloved son is the Jewish people.

So too, here, the King is God. The subjects are all of us yearning to draw close to God, to live holy lives infused with God’s spirit and guided by

God's will, lives that enable us to feel God's presence, to find comfort and inspiration, guidance and strength, a sense of purpose and of peace and harmony with God, with ourselves and with our world. But like the King's subjects in the story, we often face obstacles in our path, barriers that seem to block our way to God, and like the subjects, we turn back. Or we stay where we are, but stop trying. Or we complain to ourselves and to others how unfair it all is. We retreat, rather than continuing to strive toward who we could become. We allow those obstacles to block our way to God. (Jory Lang)

The Baal Shem Tov was trying to explain to his disciples that reaching God would not be easy – but it was both possible and, more importantly, worth the effort. I appreciate his message; I spend a lot of time trying to teach the same thing. But I also think that there is a broader way to understand the story, a way to understand it that is applicable even to those for whom reaching God is not the main focus of the journey.

If you have ever been at a funeral at which I officiated, you have likely heard a poem by Alvin Fine which opens: Birth is a beginning, and death a destination, but life is a journey, a going, a growing from stage to stage.

I read that at funerals because it beautifully conveys the Jewish outlook on life. We all take many journeys during our life. On some – vacations for example - the goal is reaching the destination. The trip itself – the car ride, the plane flight – is endured as a necessary evil to get where we really want to be. Some religions see the journey of life the same way. The promise of a wonderful eternity, a heavenly afterlife, is what everything is leading toward. The years we spend here on earth are really all about getting there, and that goal guides our steps here in this world. In these religions, the journey of life is largely about the destination, and the theology is designed to help you keep from doing anything **here** which will jeopardize getting **there**.

Judaism also teaches of an afterlife, and it is our ultimate destination as well. But Jewish theology focuses much more on this world, on what happens during the journey itself. We're expected to do the right things, to follow the *mitzvot*, not simply to get into Heaven – though I'm sure it doesn't hurt – but to make this life the best it can be and in so doing to help make this world the best **it** can be. That in turn will hasten the day when

there will no longer be an afterlife, because this world will be perfected. We won't need Heaven, because it will be heaven on earth. For Jews then, life is not about the destination – which we will all reach one way or another – but rather, in the poet's words, “in making the journey, stage by stage, a sacred pilgrimage.”

We come here each Yom Kippur to spend time reflecting on the steps, the stages, the portion of life's journey which we have traveled in this past year. If we were able to actually plot that journey on a map, we would most likely see that each of us took a few detours along the way this year. We might have taken those detours intentionally, consciously choosing to take the scenic route, accepting the fact that it might make the trip a little more complicated but hoping that it might also be more pleasant or more interesting. More likely though is that the detours were unintentional, that we wandered from our planned route without noticing. That wandering, the straying from the correct path is a good description of the Jewish definition of sin. We begin the year with the best of intentions, but then we do the wrong thing, we are hurtful or selfish or unloving or xenophobic – we make bad choices and suddenly find ourselves off the path. Sometimes it's just a matter of a few steps to return, and everything is quickly back to normal. But sometimes we have strayed so far that we feel hopelessly lost, unsure even of which direction to take to get us back. It's an interesting thing: with modern technology it is almost impossible to be physically lost; a push of a button tells you where you are and how to get where you want to go. But behaviorally it's still pretty easy to lose our way. I wish that my conscience would behave like my GPS; then every time I stray from the path I would hear a little voice in my head saying, “Recalculating.”

Our conscience –my conscience at least - does not have modern voice technology, but it is actually can do for our personal behavior what a GPS does for our driving. Our conscience is our moral compass, keeping us on the straight and narrow, as long as we remember to pay attention. And when we inevitably stray, as we all do, our moral compass generally does get us back on the right path.

A compass is much simpler technology than a GPS, but even so it requires periodic maintenance. And that's really why we're here tonight, isn't it? To reset our moral compass by touching it to the lodestone of our

traditions and our values, and to reaffirm that we are heading in the right direction. Yom Kippur helps us put things in perspective in light of the journey's final destination, and therefore forces us to think about the coming years' steps. What is really important along the way? What should I bring, and what is really best left behind? Where do I hope to be next Yom Kippur? What do I hope to accomplish in the weeks and months ahead? What will I do each day to keep me on the path I have chosen? This is the reason we come here each year.

Of course, this entire metaphor of life as a journey assumes that we are in fact moving forward. It assumes that we see obstacles in our path not as impassable walls, but as problems to be solved; that we understand that on the path of our life barriers may require detours, but they never mean that the road is completely closed. And this is where I think the story of the King and his palace applies.

The message is that those obstacles, those barriers are not insurmountable. The Baal Shem Tov suggests that we need to look beyond them, to move past them, to see - as the King's son saw - that although it may look impossible, and it may feel impossible, it is not impossible. That does not mean it will be easy. For some of us, every time we seek to return it feels as if we run up against those palace walls, barriers that prevent us from doing what we know we should do, being who we truly are or becoming what we want to be. And yet I think the Baal Shem Tov is right - difficult it may be - impossible it is not.

But in one way I think he is wrong. I think he is wrong to suggest that the barriers we face on the journey of life are just illusions. Many of them are quite real - physical limitations; monetary difficulties; relationship struggles; all the curves in the road we did not see coming. They are not illusions, they are quite real. And even when the obstacles are self-imposed, even if they are barriers which exist only in our heads or our hearts, in the way we look at things or think about things, or feel about things - still, even these are not illusions. They may not be physical but they are real none the less. And some of them can be very daunting. The grudge we have held for years. The fear of change that paralyzes us. The negative image of ourselves some have carried from childhood as incapable of achieving

greatness, or being unworthy of love. These are not illusions – they are real obstacles to change and to finding peace, major barriers to reaching God.

But I'll tell you what is an illusion: The idea that any of these barriers is impossible to overcome. That is an illusion. In the story, the people look at the palace, see no obvious way in, and turn away. Or they camp where they are, no longer moving forward – no longer moving anywhere. They believe that if it is not easy or obvious, it is not possible – or perhaps not worth the effort. And yet, they have received an invitation from the King. So they knew – or should have known – that there was a way forward. Not necessarily easy or obvious, but possible.

You and I have all received the very same invitation. We are all on the same road. We come into this world with only one obligation – to take the journey. About that there is no choice. Everything else is up to us. How we make the journey - that it is entirely up to us. There are lots of choices: we can make it happily; grudgingly; eagerly; reluctantly; wide-eyed or downcast; maybe some of each. But I think the only way to do it well is to fill the journey of life with experiences and meaning, and to share the journey with others. Some companions we choose, and some fall in next to us through their choice. Some will be part of large groups and some will be individuals. Some will walk with us only a short distance, some will be on paths that will weave in and out of ours only occasionally, and some, if we follow our compass and are also very lucky, some who will be with us most of the way.

I can tell you this: When we fill our journey with meaning, in whatever way we choose to do that, we cannot help but find contentment, satisfaction and peace, and we will draw closer to God.

The journey of life leaves none of us unscathed. There are problems, difficulties, tragedies in every life – though some paths are undeniably rougher than others. But where would we be - what would we be – if we reached one of those difficult moments, one of those barriers and simply stopped? This one is too big, too wide, too steep; I've gone far enough; I'll just stay here. When we do that, we stop growing, stop achieving. We all know people who have done just that – reached a difficult point in their life's journey and just stopped, while life went on without them.

You are probably all familiar with the book “The Last Lecture.” At the age of 45, Dr. Randy Pausch was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Just after his diagnosis, he agreed to speak in a lecture series at Carnegie Mellon University entitled “the Last Lecture,” in which professors try to sum up their personal and professional wisdom as if it truly was their last lecture they would ever give. Randy’s entitled his lecture, “Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams.”

He had many interesting things to say, and the lecture and the book which followed are worth seeking out. One of the most important points he made throughout his talk was this: In life we encounter many brick walls that seem to come between us and our goals. However, he said, brick walls don't exist to prevent people from attaining something, but to give them a chance to show how badly they want it, to make the quest more challenging and to make us value the goal more highly. I'm not sure I agree that this is the reason obstacles exist, but I do agree that when we overcome them it does make the result that much sweeter.

Carnegie Mellon built a footbridge in Randy’s memory, incorporating images from his Last Lecture. At the end of the bridge, those crossing see a brick wall ahead of them that seems to block their way. As they approach they realize that it flanks one of the entrances to the building and that they can walk right by it and enter. The wall is, in effect, part of a gateway.

Tomorrow, in the late afternoon, as the sun begins to set, the *neilah* liturgy will also speak of gates. We will imagine that, after a day of prayer, the Gates of repentance will begin to close. We will call out to God, “open the gates, open them wide, let us come in. Let us enter the gates.”

Our tradition has great faith that God will in fact keep the gates open, and will permit us to return, to repent, and that we will begin the next stage of our journey with our conscience lighter and our compass reset. The way forward beckons. The obstacles we see are not walls. They are gates to the next part of our journey. The question tonight - the question every night of our lives - is will we stay where we are, or will we step through the gate?

Amen.