The Mountain and the Cliff

Over the years of my rabbinate, I’ve always been pleasantly surprised to learn that all over the county, at Rosh Hashanah lunch with friends from different congregations, there is always this discussion: “What did your rabbi speak about today?” Apparently, it often it turns out that in any given year many speak on the same topic, which has led folks to wonder who is really writing these sermons. “Is there a central office that sends out sermons every High Holydays, a few rabbinic ghost writers toiling somewhere in anonymity. The answer is “No, there isn’t.” There are only a limited number of topics most appropriate for the Holydays, or there is some news event that cannot be ignored, so really, truly, there is no central office; it’s just coincidence.

However, what we do have is Google. Most rabbis post their Holyday sermons to their synagogue website, and it’s easy to find them. Each year I go looking not for sermons, but for sermon illustrations. Stories, anecdotes, something to illustrate what I’m trying to say. I had planned to speak tonight about mountains, and why holy things happen on them; why heaven is up, not down; why these are called the High Holydays; and why it’s difficult to recreate the experiences we’ve had up there in everyday life. It’s a really good sermon – for next year. Because in doing an online search for sermons which mention mountains, something odd happened: I found a story, a particular story, a really good story. And I remembered that I used to tell stories rather than give sermons on YK evening. So that’s what I want to do tonight. But first I want to tell you about finding it.

My google search led me to a sermon by Rabbi Arthur Lavinsky, whom I do not know. Here’s how he began his Rosh Hashanah sermon four years ago:

“Shana Tova everyone. Tonight I’m going to tell you a story I heard this summer during my travels in Albany, New York. The rabbi, Dan Ornstein, shared the following story which touched my heart – and I hope that it will touch yours too. It’s called “The Mountain and the Cliff” – by Rabbi David Holtz. (I told you, it’s a really good story).

So how did Rabbi Dan Ornstein, whom I also don’t know, find the story that Rabbi Arthur Lavinsky told and attributes to me? That’s also a story.

Throughout rabbinical school, I spent summers at the Reform movement’s Joseph and Betty Harlam Camp in the Poconos. Rabbis from congregations in the camp’s catchment area would come for two weeks, and often give the d’var Torah at services on Shabbat morning. The smart ones chose to tell a story. That’s how I first learned the story I call “The Mountain and the Cliff.” I didn’t create it. But I used to tell it all the time.

In my next to last year of school, I had the good fortune to study storytelling with Peninnah Schramm, one of the greatest Jewish storytellers of the generation. I used this story as the one I worked on during the class. A few years later, she invited a number of rabbis, cantors and educators to submit stories for a book she was compiling, and she asked me to write up this particular story. It was selected, and published as part of the collection called “Chosen Tales: Stories Told by Jewish Storytellers.” I have no doubt that this is how Rabbi Ornstein and then Rabbi Lavinsky found it. Especially since he tells it word for word as I wrote it.

This is something Peninnah insisted upon. She said, “if you’re telling someone else’s story and it’s written down, you must use their words.” She also said that a storyteller should never, ever, tell the audience what the story was about. “Stories resonate differently for everyone who hears them. Don’t insult your listeners by telling them what the story means. They’ll tell you.” I pointed out to her that rabbis generally use stories as illustrations for specific ideas; the whole point of using one in a sermon is to tell them what the story is about. She and I never came to agreement on this. But tonight, I am just going to tell you the story, and resist the urge to give my interpretation. In part, it’s because Rabbi Lavinsky used it to illustrate a completely different point than I had in mind. And in part it’s because sometimes when I’ve told it just as a story, five year-olds come up with brand new angles I have never thought of. So tonight, I’d like to tell you the story, and ask you to tell me what it means to you, and particularly what it means to you in relation to the High Holydays. Don’t tell me tonight. Send me an e-mail tomorrow night. I would really love to know if you find it as meaningful as Rabbi Lavinsky apparently did.

“The Mountain and the Cliff,” as told by Rabbi David Holtz.

Once upon a time, in the Old Country (where all the best stories took place), there lived a man and his young son. The man was a merchant, someone who sold a little of this and a little of that just to keep food on his family’s table. Usually, he sold his merchandise to his neighbors in the town in which he lived. But once each month he would bring out his sturdy wagon, load it up with a little of this and a little of that, hitch his horse to the wagon, and head off on a trip to sell his goods to the people living in other towns. And when he went on these trips, his son always went along.

Now generally nothing very exciting happened on these trips, but to the boy they were always great adventures. That was because the town in which he and his family lived was nestled in a beautiful valley, surrounded by tall mountains. And to get to any other town, you had to cross the mountains. And that was the adventure! For the only road out of the valley wound up and around the tallest of the mountains, and it was just barely wide enough for the horse and the sturdy wagon. And as the man and his young son rode up and around, they always had the mountain on one side of the road and a steep cliff on the other.

On this particular day, their trip started out like any other. Early in the morning, the father loaded his wagon with a little of this and a little of that. Then he hitched up the horse, he and his son climbed onto the wagon, and with a soft cluck of his tongue and a gentle shake of the reins, they were on their way.

All morning long they followed the only road out of the valley, as it wound up and around, and always they had the mountain on one side of the wagon and the cliff on the other.

It was almost noon when they came to the top of the mountain, where the road turned to begin winding back down the other side. The sun stood high overhead as they came around the last bend. And there, at the very highest point, the horse suddenly stopped! The father and son looked ahead and saw in front of them a tremendous pile of rocks, which had rolled off the top of the mountain, right into the middle of the road. Rocks of all sizes! The horse had stopped because it didn’t know what to do. If they had been on a road in the valley, it would have been a simple matter to pull off into a field and go around the pile of rocks. But here, on this road, they couldn’t go around, because they had the mountain on one side and the cliff on the other! It seemed as though they would have to go back.

But the boy turned and said quickly, “Don’t worry father, I’ll get rid of all those rocks, and then we’ll be on our way.” And with that he jumped down from the wagon and began to work. He pushed rocks, he pulled rocks, he rolled rocks over the cliff. He worked for two hours, and when he was done all of the rocks were gone – except one. After all the boy’s hard work, the biggest rock, the one that had been at the bottom of the pile, was still sitting in the middle of the road. No matter how much he tried, he could not move it. And even though he had been at it for two hours, and even though he had removed every other rock, they were still stuck. For with the large rock in the center of the road, and the mountain on one side and the cliff on the other, the horse and wagon still couldn’t get past.

The boy walked wearily back to the wagon, wiping his arm across his forehead. He looked up and said, “I’m sorry father, but I can’t move that last rock, and we can’t get around it. I’m afraid we’ll have to go back.”

His father looked down and asked, “Have you really done everything you could?”

Surprised by the question, the boy thought for a moment. Then his face lit up with inspiration, and he ran to the back of the wagon and got out a long piece of cloth, for they sold fabric. He went to the rock, wrapped the cloth around it, took a deep breath, and began to pull. He pulled until his muscles bulged, but the rock didn’t budge.

Disappointed, he walked back, slumped against the wagon, and said, “I’m sorry father, it’s no use. We’ll have to go back.”

His father tilted his head to one side as he looked at his son and asked again, “Have you really done everything you could?”

Though he was very tired, the boy thought for a moment. Suddenly, his shoulders straightened as an idea came to him. He ran to the back of the wagon and took out a long piece of wood, for they sold lumber. He went to the rock, placed one end of the board underneath it, and began to lean on the other end. He pushed down with all his weight, he pushed until his eyes bulged, but the rock didn’t budge.

He stared at the rock for a moment more, then turned slowly and trudged back to the wagon. Once more he said: “I’m sorry father, I just can’t move that rock. We’ll have to go back.”

And once again his father looked at him and asked, “Have you really done everything you could?”

This time the boy got angry. “Yes! Yes I have! I have been pushing and pulling and rolling and throwing rocks for two hours. I’ve used the cloth. I’ve used the lumber. I really have done everything I could!”

His father shook his head, and said quietly, “No, you haven’t, because you haven’t asked me to help you.” With that he climbed down from the wagon, and then he and his son walked to the rock. Together, they rolled it off the road and over the cliff. Then they climbed onto the wagon, and with a soft cluck of the father’s tongue and a gentle shake of the reins, they were on their way.