

**Slip and See;
To Fall, and Open Your Eyes
Kol Nidrei 5769;
October 8, 2008**

A few glitches, it seems, are getting in the way. Billions of dollars at stake, unprecedented pressure at work, a chill in the air, everything going in circles, anxious eyes upon them, the whole world wondering where the United States is in all this, and things aren't quite going as planned.

But I am not talking about the economic bailout package. I am speaking about the LHC, the Large Hadron Collider, the world's largest particle accelerator, the biggest machine ever built, miles of tunnels deep underground, somewhere below the border of France and Switzerland.

"The idea," according to one article I read, "is to set two beams of protons traveling in opposite directions around the tunnel, redlining at the speed of light, generating wicked energy that will mimic the cataclysmic conditions at the beginning of time, then smashing into each other in a furious re-creation of the Big Bang -- this time recorded by giant digital cameras."

What is going to happen? The protons will collide at high speed under super-cool conditions. Some of them will hold together, and some of them will break apart in the process. And scientists will be watching the whole time, to see what new and interesting particles are created, to see what happens to all the energy. They will peer into the tiniest of

places, to see if they can perceive... literally... new dimensions of existence, which they only suspect are really there.

The LHC has the potential to be one of the most powerful tools scientists have ever made, one of the greatest creations of our species.

There were protests, of course, and the inevitable lawsuits. A court case in Hawaii against the accelerator pondered the possibility that a by-product of the experiments might be some kind of anti-matter, with unforeseeable and unintended consequences such as, well, destroying the universe. Or maybe it would be a live, local black hole, expanding to swallow up the earth. But the lawsuits were dismissed, and construction continued. The chances of actually destroying the planet are rated as rather remote. Way less than fifty-fifty.

What interests me about the accelerator at the moment, though, is not some doomsday scenario conjured up by its critics, but the metaphor of what it means... when the LHC actually comes on line, and does its job.

Think about it. **“Smashing into each other” is a way of gaining insight. Breaking down, even falling apart, leads to a new understanding of the universe. Stress, pressure, tension, the bumps and bruises of life, the wounds and collisions which tear us apart... these are the things... that teach us what we are made of.**

This past July, on our congregational trip to Israel, we attended Shabbat morning services at the Jerusalem campus of the Hebrew Union College, the seminary of our Reform movement. The rabbi leading the service was my classmate, now Dean of the College, Michael Marmur. That morning he chose a verse from the Torah portion to comment upon, and gave it a... spin... I had never thought of before.

The portion was about the pagan prophet Balaam, a kind of... mouth for hire, a professional cursor, kind of the ancient equivalent of certain radio-talk show hosts I can think of. Balaam had lent out his services to the king of Moab, in order to stymie the Israelites with his words. But Balaam, moved by God, actually blessed the Israelites instead. In his final oracle, leading up to the famous phrase “*Mah Tovv Ohalecha Ya’akov...* How goodly are your tents, O Jacob...” Balaam invokes the following self-description:

*Ne’um Bil’am, b’no Be’or
U’ne’um haGever, Sh’tum ha’ayim
Ne’um shomeya imrei Eil,
Asher machazeh Shadai yechezeh,
Nofeil, u’galui eiynayim...*

Word of Balaam, son of Beor,
Word of the man whose eye is true,
Word of him who hears God’s speech,
Who beholds visions from the Almighty...
Prostrate, but with eyes unveiled.

“Prostrate, but with eyes unveiled.” Fallen, but with open eyes. Rabbi Marmur spoke of these words in the context of cycles, changes in fortune, boom and bust. We are up, and then we are down; what do we learn along the way?

This night I want to take this verse... one step further than he did.
For in these words, I believe, lies a great truth.

The original context might have meant something specific, a physical image lost to us today. Characters in the Torah are falling down like this all the time. Petitioners bring a hard question before Moses, or restless followers a challenge, “*vayipol al panov...*and he fell on his face.” Clearly, in the ancient Near East, a leader lying low, getting grounded, face in the earth...was a recognized method of consultation with the divine.

But on this night of repentance, let us open ourselves up, to words which might work for us as well.

***Nofeil, u’galui eiyayim...* Prostrate, but with eyes unveiled.**

Or, perhaps: “fall, and our eyes are uncovered.” Shattered, smashed, broken apart. Flat on the ground, enlightenment comes.

***Nofeil, u'galui eynayim.* Is this not true for us all? That we stare more intently, when we stumble and slip. That enlightenment flows from our failures and flaws. It is at the darkest of times, when we most seek the light. It is when we are down, that we are ready to look up.**

Kol Nidrei, a whisper of wings, as promises are remembered.

My friends, this is a night about failure. It is a time when we look back, and dig deep, and give voice to what we have not been able to do. Broken promises, unfulfilled oaths, the scattered debris and shattered hopes of unmet goals and set aside plans.

But this is also a night about hope, a beam of light in the darkest corner, refocusing our lives, the chance to move forward with our own experiment of the human experience almost, as it were, over again.

For every one of us have stumbled. Each of us has been shaken and shattered, examined and exposed, tested and tried over the course of time.

In many cases the falling is our own fault. It is what we have done or not done, said or not said.

For a moment, my own confession: for those of you I have hurt over the past year, I am sorry. For the times when my intent was not clear, when an email was too brusque, I am sorry. In the midst of

dispute or disagreement – well, there is nothing wrong with strongly held views, and a constant consensus is beyond our reach. But, especially during the difficult days of the past year at our congregation, for the times when our visions diverged and I did not hold our dispute in my hands with sufficient softness, for moments when I may not have been present for you in the way you needed, I am sorry. I am sorry, and I ask your forgiveness. May I learn from my own stumbles, may my eyes be open to firmer footing, and a better path ahead.

And so, yes, many of the times we fall, it is because we have tripped on our own two feet. May we always be able to learn from such an experience.

But then there are the times...

Then there are the times we are brought low by life. By loss and by pain, by circumstances utterly outside our control.

***Nofeil, u'galui eiynayim.* The question is not where we go, but how we grow.**

It is an insight I fight, a truth against which I constantly struggle. Because for all the growth that has come from sadness in my life, well, frankly, much of the time I'd rather not have gone through the process at all. There are days when I'd happily trade hard-won truths for not having had to put up with the pain in the first place. There are times when I wonder if the price we pay for a wounded awareness of our present circumstance... is not simply too high.

But a pain free life is not an option. To walk, and never fall...To move at all involves danger and risk. We learn this with the first steps we take as infants. And staying still for fear of falling... that is no life at all.

Even when we look around in petty jealousy, even when we think the grass is greener, yearn to walk in another's shoes... the infertile couple who stare at an expectant mother, the woman struggling to pay rent who hears a man complain about his vacation home, the man who had no feet who meets the man who has no shoes... even when we see someone who seems to live a charmed life, gifted and graced... we never know what demons lurk, what ambition drives them on, what hidden hurts they cover up for fear of exposure to the world. Just under the skin, of the brightest of stars...with the Israeli poet Adna Amir Pinkerfeld:

Ahavuni me'od, ha'maz'hira, hakorenet

They loved me greatly, the brilliant one, the shining one...

Ach lo yad'u t'homotai, sheimotai

But they did not know the deep places in me, my desolations...

They did not know the cry of the earth within me.

And when they do see me, they will be terrified...

Vayaz'vuni... and they will leave me...

So we never see, perhaps, the deepest darkness in others, the shadow side, the innermost agonies of those with whom we would so quickly trade places.

And yet still we yearn, look around and want something different. We can wish for easier hurdles, perhaps, but not... not for a life with no hurdles at all.

So think, now, of a time in your life, when you were excluded, or rejected. Not in the right crowd, not in the right club. Think of a time of loss, or challenge. Think of the ways you have been wounded. How have you dealt with your sorrow? Did being lonely teach you to curl up, or reach out? Are you bitter, or better, or both? Weary, or wise? Have you lost, and not learned – even to cherish the preciousness, the precariousness of life? And if you fell a dozen times...is that not also a testimony... to the eleven times you have gotten back up?

If our eyes are opened, if we are able to look up from the experience of being down, how do we get... to the next step? How, then, do we heal?

Consider with me a new view on a strange verse, from that most inscrutable of texts, the chapters in the Torah which deal with skin disease and fungus, the Bar or Bat Mitzvah student's least loved portion of Leviticus: Tazria-Metzorah.

“Nega tzar’a’at ki tihyeh b’adam, v’huva el haKohein; when a person has a scaly infection, he shall be brought to the priest.” Or: “it shall be shown, it shall be reported to the priest.”

Hardly a likely source, you might think, for deep spiritual insight.

Any yet, listen to this teaching, from the Eastern European world of the Chasidic masters:

Rabbi Asher of Stulin would complain about the other Chasidim. When they came to their rebbe, they would accentuate their good points, and conceal the bad. Whereas I, said Rabbi Asher, when I would study in the presence of my teacher Shlomo of Karlin – and here, he would kiss the tips of his fingers at the mention of his teacher – I, I would conceal from him the good. I would show him the evil in me, for the teacher is like a priest who heals... and thus the priest must see the affectation, the eruption, the outbreak. “V’huva el haKohein, it must be shown to the priest.”

And so I say: wholeness comes, from the courage of conviction, the bearing of the breast, the opening of the heart. Shade the truth, and cheat yourself. Hide your flaws, and only half of you will be present in the moment that follows. Pad a résumé, and land a position you cannot handle. Puff yourself up, and the air will come out at the most importune time. But show the hurt, share the wound, open yourself to the vulnerable... and feel the power, when you are embraced and held tight and loved nonetheless, for who you are... for all of you.

And remember: the energy that comes from this release... it is unmatched by anything else. There is purity here, unequalled power... It is taught in the Talmud: *“makom sheba’alei teshuvah ‘omdim sham –*

tzadikim einan 'omdim... in a place where a repentant sinner stands... even a *tzadik gamur*, even a perfectly righteous person cannot abide.”

What might it mean, for a synagogue, for a spiritual community, to bear in mind the insight of openness, the lesson that enlightenment arises... precisely out of the mistakes we make?

That we can be here for each other, to share our pain, to comfort and hold one another. That we can learn, and grow, and change, and be better. That caring comes not from some immutable expectation of perfection, nor finger-wagging judgment in falling short, but rather from a core commitment, a place of promise: that you can be who you truly are, here. That we can stumble, and show fault, and feel pain, and be hurt, and be human, for good and for bad... and that we will help each other up. Again, and again, and again.

Nofeil, u'galui einayim; understanding emerges...out of mistake and misfortune.

V'huva el haKohein; healing comes... out of openness and trust.

Makom she'ba'alei teshuvah 'omdim; the opening of the eyes, the power of healing... *teshuvah* takes us to a space we never could, we never would have reached... had we not fallen in the first place.

The shards of our former selves... are the font of faith and hope. Being broken is but a first step... to freedom, and rebirth, and wholeness once again.

May we be, for one another, the hand that wipes away the tears, the shoulder that lends its strength, the light at the end of darkness. May we find, in the truth and the power of healing... shelter from every storm.

L'shanah tovah.