

**Go Down, Moses**  
**Letting Go, and Reaching Out**  
**Yom Kippur Morning 5774**  
**September 14, 2013**

There's no way around it: Yom Kippur is about uncomfortable stuff, and, indeed, about personal discomfort. I believe... I believe that by coming down from where we would rather be, by connecting with our discomfort, we are better able to grasp the needs, to soothe the pain, even to help heal the wounds of others.

We begin with ourselves. But we will not end there. Think for a moment, if you will, about the bumps, the jarring parts of our journey, the sore points in our lives. This is a day, after all, of uncovering, and not hiding. Traditionally it is a day on which we do not use makeup, or perfume, on which we abjure adornment, on which we do not pursue pleasure.

But the sore points I mean are psychic, not physical. Everyone has something, or at least I assume we all do – some seemingly mundane situations which take us to where we feel vulnerable, or exposed.

Let's begin with something relatively mild, settings which put us off, but are not life-altering, or life—threatening. For some people it is public speaking; a significant number of people simply do not like standing up in front of others and talking. (I'm not one of those.)

My own minor phobia, that which makes me feel out-of-sorts...is big hardware stores. Basically I am afraid of Home Depot. Maybe it is the feeling that people expect me to know what I want, to know my way around, to have some sense of what I am doing, and I do not. I am just... out of my element. Not myself.

Well, that's mine. It's not that serious, but it gives me a window onto a world where things are just not...right. Your turn. For a moment, if you will, think about what bothers you, what gets under your skin.

We spend so much time trying to bring order out of chaos, make meaning out of madness. But if we stop fighting for a moment, embrace that which we usually suppress, step out of our comfort zone and into anxiety or uncertainty...if we stop struggling so much to control everything then life flows in us and through us in a new way. The less we resist, the more we can respond. **I believe we get a lot from letting go.**

**This letting go... is also about getting over ourselves. And when we do, we can truly, honestly, fully... finally really be there for others.**

A scene, at Sinai. Moses, alone with God, one man on a mountaintop, forty days of spiritual intimacy. What could be a greater religious experience? Indeed, our tradition teaches that this time is the closest any human being has yet or ever will come to God while still in this world.

But is it too much of a good thing? And too much about him? As Moses communes, the community collapses. In the midst of rebellion, revelation cannot proceed. The connection between heaven and earth is interrupted. The Torah is put on hold. He was gone so long; the people were afraid – and at the peak of pain, the one who is suffering... cannot truly hear, cannot fully listen. It would have been, it should have been.. up to Moses.. to reassure them. But he was not there. So that... is not what happened.

“And the Eternal said to Moses: *Lech, Red, ki shicheit am’cha, asher he’elita Me’Eretz Mitzrayim*; Go, descend, for your people whom you have brought out of Egypt have rebelled!” (What a line! Everywhere else in the Torah it is God who brings us out of Egypt, but, here, when the people sin, like one parent saying to another “look what *your* child has done!” all of a sudden it is Moses who brought us out?) But these words, this “*lech, red,*” this “Go Down, Moses,” is not a return to Egypt to stand up to Pharaoh. This is a coming home, to confront an internal discomfort.

And the Talmud makes a great deal out of these words, “*Lech, Red.*” In a passage from Masechet Berakhot we read: “*Ma’i ‘Lech, Red?’ Lech m’g’delut’cha! K’lum natati lecha gedula eleh bishvil Yisrael, v’achsov Yisrael chatu – atta, lama li?*” What is the meaning of “go, get thee down?” God said to Moses: “go down.. from your *gedulah*, your greatness! I only gave you greatness for the sake of Israel, the Jewish people. And now, now that Israel has sinned, what are you to Me?”

It was... it had become... all about one man. **You, Moses, you are with Me now. You are having this intense but isolated, this spiritual but solitary experience! You are with God! But if the people are sinning, then all this is for is just your own glory! And what good is that? Who needs that? This Torah, this vision, these values... get over yourself! It ain't about you!** [based on a teaching of Rabbi Donniel Hartman, speaking about lessons he learned from his father.]

**Go down! Descend from your own sense of self... to be where the pain is! To be with others. Words of God that will not work are worthless; a Torah that is not connected to the Jewish people is no Torah at all.** And, indeed, in the very next scene we see... that the Torah is broken, the tablets themselves shattered.

**I would extend, I interpret the lesson this way: Go down, from your own individual comfort, from a focus on yourself, your own palace of personal fulfillment. Go down, and reach out. And in leaving your comfort zone, there is great good you can do.**

Recent research has shown something startling about giving. It is this: that the poor, the lower class in this country... give a higher percentage of their income, and a larger amount of their time, to others, than do those who are better off. There are many, many individual exceptions. I know some of these exceptions. So do you.

But by and large, lower income Americans give an average of 4.2% of their income to charity; wealthier ones give 2.7%. The higher we climb, the more firmly we cling. The more we have, the tighter the grasp.

Part of this, perhaps, is about shared circumstances, and a greater understanding of need, among those with less. But it is also about a tipping point on a pendulum of connectivity – do you see yourself essentially on your own, independent and an individual? Or are we social beings, connected to each other, and to something beyond ourselves? Not for everyone, of course, but for many, it is as if, as one scientist said, “autonomy” and “freedom” take the place of “responsibility” and “obligation.”

**Should we, can we, return to a circle of connectivity in the communities of our lives? Even as we are comfortable, can we step into the discomfort of real need around us? What will it do, to come down from our own “greatness,” to let go, and be there. To open up a clenched and grasping hand... and hold it out instead?**

**For many years our synagogue has offered a powerful way to do just this. But it is better known mostly to longer time members of the congregation... and it needs renewal, some additional attention, to return it – to return us -- to full potential. This morning I would like to speak with you about the revitalization of our Temple Shalom Mitzvah Corps.**

What is Mitzvah Corps, and why is it so important? In short, it is an effort to ensure that in a spiritual community, we do not merely pray or learn together; we care for and are there for one another as well.

The history of this great innovation in congregational life is now on our website, and I will only briefly summarize it here: In the fall of 1985, Temple Shalom's then Senior Rabbi Bruce Kahn, heard a presentation about a program which trained congregants to assist clergy in visiting the sick and caring for bereaved members of their communities. This vehicle was a catalyst for a vision he had been trying, for six years, to bring to life. Offered such a chance to connect, a number of congregants overcame whatever discomfort they might have had about deliberately putting themselves into difficult situations, and took the training course.

These early efforts struck a chord. It seems that people wanted to be part of a community that was about more than just themselves. The value of being there for one another resonated deeply. Anne Goldberg came up with the term Mitzvah Corps, a name I love, for a reason I will return to later, with one reservation – which I will also mention later. By the High Holy Days of 1986, Rabbi Kahn unveiled a carefully calibrated and beta-tested outreach effort to the congregation.

The Mitzvah Corps mission quickly expanded. Beyond visits to hospitals there were members driven to dialysis, social workers brought in to help navigate senior care issues, nursing home coverage and meals... meals for

those back from the hospital, meals for those who could no longer cook at home, meals – to a limited degree – for the bereaved. There was an educational component: workshops on life-transitions, grief, loss, adoption, infertility, living wills and ethical wills, and the sandwich generation. There have been healing services and hospice sessions, blood banks and awareness campaigns. Training of volunteers has dealt with suicide prevention, the needs of the elderly, patient's with special needs, Alzheimer's, AIDS and cancer-related issues, and more. From time to time and with some limitations we have helped with transportation to services – and with grocery shopping and doctor's visits. There were congregational projects, such as our role in the resettlement of Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union, and Operation Yedidut, which means Friendship, in which over 40 congregants committed to calling every other member family three times a year, not to ask something *from* them, but to ask what Temple Shalom could do *for* them. To this day there are trays for bereaved families, and, now, something relatively recent: onesies for newborn babies which say "I'm a Temple Shalom Tot!"

Rabbi Kahn always viewed Mitzvah Corps as, in his words, "an extension of his ministry." Indeed, the pastoral needs of a community are so vast, what we *could* do for each other is so extensive that it could fill every day. Every moment of text study, every bit of preparation for teaching, every other thing the clergy do professionally or even personally takes away from what is essentially an infinite need. Which means that every act of any congregant to help each other... extends the loving reach of a sacred community.

Much of the work of Mitzvah Corps in individual cases was and remains too confidential to share. But there are many individual examples in the history of Mitzvah Corps on the website, and there are some stories that can be told. There was a young girl who lost her mother to cancer, and a Temple Shalom team mobilized, swung into action, counseled her for over a year, planned and put together her entire Bat Mitzvah. And, in recent years, there was an enthusiastic collection of helping hands – very literally hands in this case -- working with triplets so they could all be fed and held at the same time. (Since we have only one set of triplets in the congregation and therefore anyone who knows them can guess who I am talking about, I want to let you know that I share this particular example with the family's permission.)

There have been times, it is true, when we – and when I – have dropped the ball, or not lived up to our potential or the expectations members had of us. Some cases were just beyond what volunteers in a congregational setting could handle; other times there have been communications issues, which we continue to work on. And much of our work has narrowed, in recent years, to shivah leaders, some meals, and a more limited range of responses.

But the unsung heroes of these efforts have been the numerous chairs of Mitzvah Corps, and the many volunteers. There was Irene Rosenfeld, and Elaine Storms, Carolyn Shargel, Beryl Tretter and Wilma Braun.

Now, as Wilma wishes to transition to other ways of helping, while retaining the role of coordinating our shiva minyan leaders, it is a good time to take stock, and dream once again of what this element of congregational life can and should be.

Perhaps we can set up a meal of condolence for *every* occasion of loss, and not just when a family asks for it specifically. Perhaps we can form networks of first responders, neighborhood or grade-based care teams which will be there in case of an unexpected need. So many of our families come from somewhere else; we have a lower percentage of those with relatives in the area than do congregations in many other parts of the country, and there are ways we can be there as a communal family for one another, that are potentially very important. Aren't you tired of filling out those emergency contact school forms at the beginning of every year – and not knowing whom to list?

We think of Mitzvah Corps in terms of seniors, but there are needs that younger families have as well. In theory we could use our space in creative ways. Imagine child-care coops on certain occasions – I have always wanted to see a parent cooperative so those with young children could attend an actual adult service together on a Shabbat morning, and not have every Jewish experience new parents participate in always feature tot-level story-time. You know, those stories for young kids are amazingly important – but something profoundly disturbing happens to the Jewish identity of *adults* when the grand ideas of 4000 years are *only* experienced at the developmental level of toddlers.

And in terms of elder care: imagine a shared role, a communal one, where caregivers can have time off as they know loved ones are watched over in a loving and safe environment. There are places in the community that do this, but not enough, and the need is great. I know of one synagogue that offered such a program in conjunction with two local churches, and built interreligious ties that were profoundly important, even while providing a real service.

Certainly there are needs that are real, things we can do for one another that we have not even thought of yet. Lori Barth Weinstein, one of the original participants in Mitzvah Corps is taking up the mantle of this work now, but we want this to once again become a truly communal effort.

At a recent Board retreat, the leadership of our congregation identified this aspect of what we do, and Mitzvah Corps in particular, as one of the central pillars of our communal life. This leadership is going to be present, with energy and commitment, to cement and recast this pillar.

And, as Rabbi Kahn pointed out in fairly chilling words: any one of us, God forbid but we know it happens, any one of us can go from benefactor, to beneficiary... in an instant.

Mitzvah Corps. In one way the name is almost perfect.

A story. We are outside a house of mourning, and a long-time member of our congregation has just emerged from the home, having brought the family a home-made meal. I asked her if she knew the Temple members she was

helping, and what she said that night has stayed with me ever since. “No,” she said, and she made it very clear – although I don’t remember the exact words, but she was very deliberate about the point that it actually meant more to her to help out, in this way, someone she did not (yet) know. It is precisely because... this *wasn’t* done for a friend. Someone she was bound up with, as part of a larger community, yes, but not a close friend.

Because a close friend, well, of course you’d help. Obviously. Anyone would. But to feel an obligation to someone who is part of your community, but you do not actually know, or don’t know well? There are words for that in religious life. The words are “duty,” and “obligation.” Or: “commandment.” Basically, this act is the literal meaning of the word “mitzvah.”

To be a part of a community is to know that there are times when you *have to* do something. It is more than what you *want* to do, or *choose* to do. It’s a real need. It’s about... more than you. Even if it is... uncomfortable. So in this way, Mitzvah Corps is... the perfect name.

My only reservation, actually, comes from the second word, if “corps” implies a particular, or limited group. My hope, and the vision of Rabbi Kahn from years ago, is that while some will step forward, everyone will be available. Indeed, just as we are asking every member of this congregation to reach out to unaffiliated families to tell them about the Gift of Membership, so, too, do we want to build a community in which every member reaches in... and is available to help one another in a time of need.

**My friends, let us all come down, from a focus on ourselves. Let us come down from our own glory, silos of satisfaction full but far apart. Our President, Allison Druin, mentioned the volunteer form. Pick it up, and take it home. Think about how you can help, what you might be willing to do, even for those you do not yet know.** E-mail a response, or share more detailed feedback in the follow up notice we will send, and we will dream together, what kind of climate we can create, with a caring and connected community.

Remember that it is the roughest patches, the toughest moments that reveal who we truly are. To visit the sick, to care for the infirm, to cook for someone you do not know is not easy. It takes us all out of our routine, and beyond what we would rather be doing.

Bumps and bruises, injury and loss need not define us. Character comes in how we handle what we face, and how we help one another. Spirituality may start on a mountaintop. But if you can bring it with you, into the work of the world, then does God live among us, and then have you heard the call of the Torah.

And the voice of the Torah, that, too, can come from many sources. Years ago a man I know received a tiny slip of paper in the middle of a fortune cookie, in a Chinese restaurant. He kept the paper with him in his wallet, and ever after, he lived by those words. The fortune read: "If you continually give, you will continually receive."

Yom Kippur, by the way... the Day of Atonement comes to a close with the setting of the sun tonight. Our tradition teaches that our first act should be... to put the initial nail in a plank... of the Sukkah we are about to build. God help me, it is a life lesson, a comeuppance, or, perhaps, for me, a coming down, from the spiritual high of Ne'ilah most years here, with so many of us staying together all the way through the conclusion of the day. For my first stop, after Break Fast... is Home Depot.

*L'shanah Tovah.*