

A Place Called Hope
Kol Nidrei 5770
September 27, 2009

It is 1964. I am three years old. One of my earliest memories is of a long drive on a hot day, to a crowded and exciting place far away.

I only remember a few things from the 1964 World's Fair, but what I can recall is as clear as if it happened yesterday. Some unseen mechanism allowed my parents to place me behind the wheel of our rusty Rambler station wagon, let me drive the car, get a feel for being "in control." "It's A Small World" made such an impression that years later I burst into tears of nostalgic delight on seeing it again, and hearing that insipid song, on visiting Disney Land.

And I remember one big red balloon my parents gave me. I loved that balloon. It was beautiful. It was the best balloon in the world.

But then, on the ride home, as my mother was asleep in the front seat, with the window open, my balloon was whipped in the wind.. and bobbed and bounced right on out that open window.

I was inconsolable. I cried the whole ride home. For years, when I was angry with my mother, I would bring up the balloon I loved, that she let get away.

Since my mother is gone, now, and my father is here with us tonight, it's probably appropriate to mention that I got over the balloon incident. But I remember the feeling. It was hope and wonder and delight... followed by a crushing sense of loss and disappointment.

What I could not have known as a toddler was that on that trip, my parents, and others, were remembering the Flushing Meadow of their own past. For them, in that place, just over the edge of time, still stood the fair of *their* youth.

The 1939 World's Fair. I'm told that it is very hard for anyone who was not there to appreciate just how wondrous it really was. We take for granted, now, we actually expect the ongoing, ever-changing marvels of technology, the cathedrals of capitalism where products are enshrined and the future worshiped with a fervor once reserved for the past. Epcott and MGM, Universal and Disney are there whenever we want. So one of the first of such fairs, the one *Time* magazine called "the greatest show of all time" is hard to imagine.

But a book by David Gelertner, called *1939*, paints us a picture. The Fair's theme was "Building the World of Tomorrow." The scent of hot dogs and auto exhaust mingled in the air; the Trylon and Perisphere were the focus of every eye as people waited in line for the Futurama, built of floating chairs inside the General Motors building. An ingenious sound system delivered a confidence-filled narration of a tour of the envisioned America... of 1960. So many things were there... television -- big future expected for that one! Exotic opportunities -- the chance to make a long distance call! Color photos. A robot at the Westinghouse building. A fax machine transmitted data... at 18 minutes a page. Florescent lighting. FM radio. And cars. Cars and highways, the superhighways and supersonic jets of the future, envisioned much as they did develop, the cloverleafs

and multi-lanes and rapid roads that were to criss-cross and connect all of America. At the end, the narrator again: "All eyes to the future."

It was a future bright with promise, brimming with excitement: the Depression over; gathering clouds across the sea portents of a storm too far away to feel. The vision was purely utopian: transportation and communication would wrap the world in a web of connection, prosperity would return; the future was simply, plainly good.

In that brief and narrow gap of time, the fair filled those who saw it with luminous optimism, with a sense of power and potential and rightness in the world. With the psalmist, "*hayinnu k'cholmim*, we were like ones in a dream."

And then the dream shattered, the spell was broken. We awoke to discover that nightmares walked in the light of day. And the world was changed forever.

The Fair and the War are long past, now. Seventy years ago. But the pattern repeats itself anew. Indeed, all our lives are like this: flashes of wonder, of child-like delight, of connection and concentration and focus in which everything seems to flow together, and everything is right with the world. And then it is gone. Over. We are alone and in pain. Down from the mountain. Disappointed. Crushed by the weight of the world.

Because we know what that first feeling is like, we yearn for the mountain again. Because we know what we are missing, we feel broken and want to be healed.

We move in a cycle of satisfaction and shattering, and struggle to string the pieces back together, to recapture the feelings we once had. Much of the time... maybe even most of the time... we spend wondering how to get there from here?

To return to our dreams, to deal with disappointment, to rekindle that life-flame we once knew. How do we get there from here? First: by being open to hope.

Personally, I am glad to be here with you on this Yom Kippur eve. At some level, I am always happy... to get past Rosh Hashanah.

For us, it was fifteen years ago, on the day before Rosh Hashanah, when Julie had her first miscarriage. The second came the following summer. We are so very lucky, then, with the children who came a few years after that. So blessed. They are miracles still, a wonder beyond words.

Those particular pains and struggles are so far behind us now it is often hard to remember. We forget, in the midst of juggling schedules, and trying to deal with Washington traffic. And I know, of course, that the yearning, the wanting, the incompleteness we felt is minor compared to what others go through. Still, I recall: infertility is a mourning that knows no name, has no outlet. It is a

sadness given no sanction in our tradition--we don't say Kaddish, there are no ceremonies, no rituals, no ways to mark the loss.

These memories are triggered for me not just by the timing... but by the content of the holiday itself. It's that Haftarah portion from last week. Do you remember? Hannah's poignant plea for children, the sheer power of her pain? "As she was praying before the Eternal, Eli watched her mouth. Now Hannah was praying in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice could not be heard. So Eli thought she was drunk. And Hannah wept..."

Hannah's tears tear at my heart, and it all comes back. All the anxiety, the wanting and waiting, the wondering what would go right in the world.

And yet, and yet... there is more in these portions than just pain. There is a happy ending, eventually. There is hope here as well.

Hope. I am aware that if we were not living now, at this time, in this era, we might not have been able to have children of our own. New technology, treatments, surgical techniques open up new possibilities. Not everyone even needs the *most* advanced technology. But so many *have* benefitted from the very cutting edge of this field. And friends of ours, and certainly friends of yours, have received a blessing beyond description, through the gift of adoption.

For us, in the early 90's, the struggle was for children. For others, it was for life itself. I think of those who are here today... only because of the insights and breakthroughs of modern medicine: every infection cured by antibiotics, every child on insulin, every airport security gate that beeps from a pacemaker. Every AIDS patient who greets a new dawn because of a cocktail of treatments unavailable just a couple of years ago. With them, I know a hint of hope. With you, I know what it is like to be both optimistic and sad.

Why sad? This kind of hope is real. But it is result-oriented. It is external. It is an accident of time. The sadness is for others, for those who did not live now, and did not live. Mozart, we just learned, apparently passed away... from strep throat. [I heard this on NPR, I think, so it must be true.] All of us know people who died of something totally treatable today. They did not deserve their fate. I can't believe that it's part of some Master Plan. No, it is an accident that that was then, and this is now.

But there is a deeper kind of hope as well. It is, as my friend and colleague Rabbi Don Rossoff puts it, not the hope that is *for* us, but the hope that is *in* us. It is the kind of hope that leads us to ask, not "why me?" but "what now?"

The healing we seek will not always mean a cure. Sometimes, yes, and we wish for that, of course. But in English, the word "heal" is related to the word "whole." And in Hebrew, the word "*shleymah*, wholeness," is related to the word "*shalom*." Part of healing is to be whole. To feel complete. To be at peace.

To recapture that feeling we once had, we don't have to have everything we want. One can live in the lap of luxury and feel broken; one can live with pain and still feel whole.

What we hope for is the acceptance of ourselves and others. Which is, after all, the central struggle in our lives. Whether we are sick or not.

There is something else that I learn from the Scriptural selections for these days. It is that my problems are shared. They are even, almost, common. We are all in it together.

How do we get there from here? The second step: be open to each other.

Long-suffering sports fans know.... I wrote these words long before this afternoon... [*when the Redskins just lost to the Lions, giving Detroit its first win in 20-games]... Long suffering sports fans know the phenomenon, when games get more crowded as a team finally begins to win. Where were they all before, they wonder, all these fair-weather friends? Easy to be there, on sunny days. Harder, though, to be open and present... when times are tough.

A friend is in the hospital. But he is sure to be tired. She needs rest. You don't know what to say. You don't know what to do.

Look, there is such a thing as too much. Mendel went to visit his friend Hershel, and stayed with him for three hours. To which the tired patient responded, on the visitor's eventual departure: "Mendel," Hershel said, "no matter how sick I am when you come to see me, I always feel better when you leave."

And no one is perfect about doing this. I know that I am not. It's harder, now, than ever: worries of co-infection, truncated hospital stays, distances too great to drive. But assuming we are talking about patients in a hospital, the danger of being overtaxed is far less than the danger of not being paid attention to at all. What's the most important thing we can do? Go. Be There. And try to touch your friend. Not with words. With your hand.

I'm not talking about the laying on of hands here. And in this era of swine flu and multi-resistant staph infections, a world in which the French question the double-cheek kiss, where germs are found even in the sand on ocean beaches, who knows what will become of the basic instinct to reach out, and touch one another. We carry on, perhaps, but with Purell in the pocket, hand wipes at every turn.

But let us remember that a touch is not merely a matter of hygiene, nor an optional add-on to human interaction. There is something deep and profound in a physical approach to healing. There is power in a touch, a bond, a "being-with," the simple connection of caring between human beings.

Martin Buber said that all real life was meeting, the true encounter of one soul with another. Hard to describe but you know, you know it when it happens. Robert Heinlein made up a word for it: he called it *grokking* another person. In those rare moments when you feel understood and embraced and accepted for who you are... what a healing moment that can be.

How can we get there from here? Finally, by being open to God.

Like you, I've heard stories of experiments done in recent years, places in which certain patients had people pray for them, and others did not. The claim was that those who had people praying for them did better than those who did not – whether the patients knew people were praying for them or not!

Like you, I have heard of such studies. And like many of you, I am skeptical. I don't know. I just don't know that God works that way.

But I do know that when we say the *Shema* with people in a hospital room, people cry. Not always, but often. More often than not.

And I know that those are good tears.

Reform Judaism was founded on principles of strict rationality, and so we banished from our services all petitionary prayers calling for God's intervention in the course of natural events, anything that might smack of the overly supernatural. And yet, those prayers are back now, and I know that the *Mishebeirach*, the traditional words set to music, first by Debbie Friedman and

now, as well, by our own Cantor Lisa Levine, somehow these words, this prayer, is the single most powerful change in the service we have made in recent years.

And I know that there have been times, moments of my life when everything flowed together, and all was right with the world, moments when my spirit was whole. On those precious occasions I was able to say the words at the end of *Adon Olam*, and mean them: "*v'im ruchi g'viyati, Adonai li, v'lo ira*, if my soul should perish, God will be with me, and I will not be afraid."

Or, in more familiar words perhaps, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death... "

One night a woman had a dream. She dreamed she was walking along the beach with God. Across the sky flashed scenes from her life. For each scene she noticed two sets of footprints in the sand. One belonged to her and the other to God. Then the most recent scene of her life flashed before her. She looked back more carefully, and noticed that many times along the path of her life, there was only one set of footprints, not two.. And she noticed that this happened at the very lowest and saddest times of her life.

This really bothered her, and she questioned God. "God, you said that you would walk all the way with me. I don't understand why, when I needed you the most, you would leave me."

God replied: "My child! I love you and would never leave you. When you see only one set of footprints, it is then... it is then that I carried you on my shoulders."

How we get there from here? Healing is an expanding balloon of hope. It is the hope we find in ourselves, the hope we bring to each other, and the hope we find in the One who gives... not life, but the potential of life and the possibility of meaning. And love.

Life is not a fair. Too often, life is not fair at all.

The great Jewish sage William Shatner called the future "the undiscovered country." And long ago, the matriarch Sarah, on hearing the promise of news she had wanted... Sarah laughed. I am not sure why Sarah laughed. But I know that that laugh is linked to the core of her being, that it comes from that feeling she had known many years ago, and had thought was lost forever.

This night, this season, each one of us enters this sanctuary with a different need. May we find some of what we seek in this place. And here, alone and with each other, alone and with God, may we come to know healing. And wholeness. And peace.

L'shanah Tovah.