

Adventures in Moving
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5767
September 23, 2006

This summer, on Cape Cod, having found no evidence of a daily minyan anywhere nearby, but wanting to say Kaddish at least on Shabbat, I broke out my laptop, googled the closest Reform synagogue, noted what time the website said the Friday service began, put on whatever decent clothes I had, and schlepped off to find my fellow Jews.

The synagogue was several towns away. We have gone there before; it's a very nice synagogue. But this time, right on our arrival we knew that something was wrong. People were walking out. Many had empty wineglasses in their hands. Never mind that they were getting *in* to their cars. No, what bothered me was that it was clear that a service was now over. Turns out the synagogue had just held a Chardonnay Shabbat, an early and clearly creative service. One part of me thought: nice idea! But another part of me...was crushed. I was far more upset than I would have imagined I would be about something like this... definitely more upset than I should have been. I had come to say Kaddish. I really needed that service. Their website was wrong. And it... well, it hurt.

I don't know if that's the first time I have ever really felt the full power of what it is like, to count on a synagogue and have the information wrong. But it did leave an impression.

You know, it's a minor detail, not updating a site. But, my friends, I want to open our High Holy Day season this year together by saying... I know we're not perfect. Sometimes we get it wrong. A time, a name, a detail. Sometimes we blow it. I know it matters. I know it can hurt. And for all we have done that isn't right, I'm sorry. We can't be perfect. But we're going to keep trying, to be as good as we can be.

Speaking of getting things right... People say that all publicity is good publicity. I'm not so sure. What's the worst ad you've ever seen? What's the worst slogan you've ever heard?

For me, it was the old ad for U-Haul. Remember the slogan? Use their vans for...“Adventures in Moving!”

Gevalt! Who wants an adventure while moving! I don't! I want it smooth and uneventful. Three cheers for a *boring* move!

And witness the company's new slogan. U-Haul long ago ditched the promise of excitement. Now their slogan plays it safe. U-Haul, they claim. “Moving Made Easy.”

And yet... Maybe... Maybe, you know, it wasn't such a bad slogan after all.

For we all face obstacles, as we move through this world. We all face an unmarked road, an out of date map, an unplanned detour, an unexpected stop. Do we really want it all made easy? Is that all we want

of the world? Or do we want to face life with gusto and verve, with openness and eagerness? To embrace life, to drink “l’chayim!”
Adventures in Moving.

This past May appeared called *Stumbling on Happiness*. Its author, Daniel Gilbert, notes that, after a major tragedy, a trauma from which they thought they could never recover, many people somehow adjust, adapt, find something inside themselves that allows them to cope. Others, though, others are trapped by trivia, psychologically immobilized by what objective criterion would categorize as minor annoyances. Not that, God forbid, any of us are willing or want to face a major tragedy, nor, God forbid again, am I minimizing the loss and the pain and the hurt that any of us might face. And for all the “growing” I’ve done in the wake of pain I’d very often rather not have gone through it at all, thank you. But. But. Surprising as it may be – shocking as it seems -- surveys say, apparently, that somehow, sometimes, for some of us, we can recover from big things... better than from little ones.

“*V’haya k’eitz shatul al-palgei mayim, asher piryu yitein b’ito...* the righteous,” we are promised, in the words of the very first Psalm, “the righteous is like a tree planted beside streams of water, which yields fruit in its season... *Lo chein ha’r’sha’im, ki im kamotz asher tid’fenu ruach...* but not so the wicked, who are like chaff that the wind blows away.”

It's a question of disposition. Some of us... somehow... stand up through every storm. It is not that the storms will not come. God knows, even before Katrina came, who could say such a thing? The storms will come. But some people can bear up, and be fruitful in every season. Others... even some who seem so strong... others are blown away by the passing breeze. Swept aside by the smallest of setbacks. Chaff in the face of fortune. Blowing in the wind.

Life is an adventure. It is filled with joy and triumph, sweetness so intense it lifts our every step...and sadness so deep it pulls us to the ground. Today happens. And tomorrow comes anyway. It is a world of wonder, filled with awe and opportunity... at every moment in our lives. Every single moment.

One of my core beliefs, at the center of my own spiritual life... is the idea of the unity of God, the Oneness at the heart of the world. In this I do not mean any traditional notion of an easily discernible Divine Personality, although I yearn for that, nor a Voice whose message is clear and instructions precise down to the kind of cutlery I should use, although I sometimes choose to act as if that were the case as well. I don't necessarily mean, in other words, the God that comes across through Jewish liturgy or Jewish law.

When I speak about the unity of God and the oneness of the world, I mean a sense of power beyond our ordinary experience, of purpose

beyond our usual range of sight, of connections underlying that which we perceive on the surface to be so different. Physicists call it the Unified Field Theory, the idea that, at one time, in one place – even if it was only for the first fraction of a second in the life of the universe, still, somewhere, somewhen, everything was connected. And the throbbing, beating pulse of that primordial unity is still out there, just beneath the surface of the material world, just beyond the corner of our minds.

From that moment of singularity, that cosmic water-breaking birth of the universe, we learn that every moment is an opportunity to make connections with the great beyond, with the world within. Every breath we take is part of the pulse of the planet, the heartbeat of life. If only... if only we open our eyes.

Many of you remember the opening scene of *Fiddler on the Roof*. In the shtetl, the stage is set, the picture of the old world unfolds before us: disciples approach the rebbe. “Rabbi,” they ask, “is there a blessing for the czar.” And the rabbi replies: “Of course, of course, there is a blessing for everything. May God bless and keep the czar... far away from us!”

But it’s not the punch line that’s so profound. It’s the set up. A blessing for everything! Now *that...* is an answer from a rabbi. *That...* is a pretty good summation... of a Jewish approach to spirituality.

But first, if I may: the notion offends. It smacks of arrogance, and gall. How dare we... how can we... so glibly look at the world and

proclaim that there is a *blessing* for everything. Have you seen the world lately? Have you read a newspaper? Even Katie Couric can't make it all sound alright. How dare we look around, and call it good?

The notion offends, I believe, because something is... lost in translation. For the word "blessing," in English, implies... something good. But in our tradition, there is a *b'rakha* to be said on hearing that a loved one has died. I have led others in that prayer for the seventeen years I have been a rabbi. I said it myself, as a mourner, for the very first time this past summer. I hate that *b'rakha*. It is hardly a "blessing." The word, then, must mean something else.

So what is a *b'rakha*? What does it accomplish, and how can it change our lives? Why do we need a formula at all? Why can't we just find God in the forest, or in the mountains on our own? What do we gain, from all this fuss and bother?

The Talmud, in the very first tractate, called *Berakhot*, takes two verses from Psalms which seem to contradict each other, and teases out a startling insight into the nature of reality and the proper posture of human beings vis a vis the world around us. "Rab Yehuda said, in the name of Sh'muel: 'To enjoy anything in this world without reciting a *berakha* is like making personal use of things consecrated to heaven, since it says: *L'adonai ha'aretz u'm'lo'ah*; the earth belongs to Adonai, and all that fills it.'"

But, the Talmud goes on, “Rabbi Levi raised a point of contradiction. It is written ‘the earth belongs to Adonai,’ but it is *also* written” – and here he quotes a different Psalm – “the heavens are the heavens of Adonai, but the earth God gave to human beings.”

So which is it? Does the world and all that is in it, its richness and resources, its plenty and its pain, does it belong to God? Should the sacred in its essence and substance always trump the mundane, our lives led for the sake of our faith, and for no other reason or purpose?

Or, on the other hand, does the world belong to us? Are we, indeed, only the authors of ourselves, the only thing that matters, the secular center of a self-serving universe?

And the Talmud answers by refusing to make a choice. It answers the either/or with a simple “yes,” an affirmation of balance and purpose and perspective. “*La kashya!* No problem!” the Talmud assures us. “*Kan, kodem berakha.* Here – in the first case, claiming that the earth belongs to God – it is *before* the recitation of a *berakha!* *Kan, l’achar berakha.* Here – in the second case, claiming that the earth belongs to human beings – it is *after* a *berakha!*”

What do we learn, from the ancient words? That the whole world is holy! That in its natural state, in created form everything *does* belong to the Creator, to the One who spoke and the world came to be. But that there is something we can do, to reach into that which is sacred... and bring it in to our lives.

Imagine the scene, at the Bat Mitzvah celebration! The family has made its choreographed grand entrance; it is time to begin the meal. In preparation for a Kodak-moment *motzi*, the DJ/MC announces: “Now it’s time for Uncle Itzy to come forward to bless the bread!”

If the Talmud is to be believed, though, blessing the bread is precisely *not* what we do. The bread is *already* blessed; it already resides in the realm of the Divine. What we do is to *recognize* that reality, bring it *out* of God’s realm and, safely, appropriately, into our own.

Is this what a *berakha* can do? How, then, to translate the word? It is not a “blessing,” as much as an “awakening,” (Rabbi Lawrence Kushner) a radical “awareness” – an acknowledgement that there is something miraculous, extraordinary, yea, even sacred, underneath the surface or tucked into the corners of the apparently ordinary events of our lives. It is an opening of the eyes, a connection with the cosmos, a chance to catch a glimpse of that throbbing pulse of unity which serves as our origin and our destiny, yesterday and tomorrow, where everything is one, and we are one with everything.

I believe it matters to know that every step on our journey, every encounter in our lives, offers a sacred opportunity. Every moment we have a choice and a chance, to see beyond ourselves, to taste a transcendental awareness. Our lives are like a single cell which contains the code for the entire organism. One moment leads to all moments. The particular reveals the universal.

And I believe that the synagogue, for all its flaws, and with all its communal and cultural and prophetic and pastoral functions – indeed, manifest through those functions – the synagogue is, in its primary purpose, a center of the spirit, a place to help any one of us discover, and recover... this sense of the unity of all. And our own new slogan – moving beyond the prerequisite starting point about “Warmth” – will be just about this goal. “Making Connections: Through Community, Prayer and Learning.”

A story. Once there was a man who saw a beautiful bird high in the top of a tree. No one else saw it. And a great longing came over him to reach the bird, and see it more closely. But the tree was too high, and there was no ladder. So he devised a plan. He persuaded the people who stood there with him to form a pyramid so that he was able to climb to the top, and reach the bird. Those who helped knew nothing of the bird; they never even saw it. But the one who did would never have been able to reach the bird without them. Indeed, had any of them left his or her place, then everyone would have fallen to the earth.

Rabbi Larry Kushner writes, in his comment on this story, that a congregation is a kind of human pyramid. The goal is to raise more and more of us high enough to reach the bird’s nest. We never know who will be next. We only know that without one another, no one can make it.

My friends, if the synagogue is primarily a place of the spirit, then our task is to create a space in which spiritual growth can take place. We may disappoint. But our role is to point out a path, to work out a way, to be the place where deep and real and meaningful connections occur.

And I want to make sure this happens. This year I plan to begin an effort to reach out to every family in this congregation, to begin a dialogue, to open a door. This year, God willing, I'll be calling you.

But you do not need to wait to hear from me. You know, although we often put it off, most of us, eventually, take the initiative, for the sake of our body, to schedule an Annual "Physical." Friends: I invite your calls to me, to set up a time... come on in, or we'll meet at Starbucks, or we'll find some other place to talk, for each of you, for your own Annual "Spiritual." My friends I want – and don't take this the wrong way – but I want... to talk about you!

How can such a conversation help? Here is one approach. I believe we are called by the world and its maker, to respond with our soul, to open up our lives, to walk in wonder, to count and to care. I believe we can *create* such moments, and write the *berakhot* out of our own lives. We can use the ancient opening and traditional formula but then, consciously and creativity, add our own words, share our sense of amazement. God is all around us! The whole world is holy! Adventures in moving.

I am here to teach that anything, and everything, is an opportunity, a potential point on a sacred journey.

What is a spiritual moment? When we fill up our cars with gasoline. Think about it: fossil fuel! We are using the energy of life, to

get to the soccer game. “*Barukh atta Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh HaOlam,* who helps us fly, on the wings of life.”

Pluto, the demoted planet? “*Barukh atta Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh HaOlam,* blessed are You, Eternal our God, Sovereign of Existence...who teaches us to fight for the meekest among us.”

Steve Irwin, the Croc Hunter, killed by the tail of a stingray. *Barukh atta Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh HaOlam,* who gives us commitment and a cause, passion and persistence, love as well as loss.

This past summer a well-known Hollywood superstar had an encounter of his own. In a somewhat altered state of consciousness and a series of unfortunate events, Mel Gibson decided to hold forth with his own less than enlightened views on world politics, interfaith relations and neighborly cooperation. Later, of course, both sober and sold on a rehabilitation campaign by his expensive image consultant, he touched on the Jewish themes of this season, *teshuvah*, repentance, and *tikkun*, repair, reconciliation, fixing what is broken, making things right. But even before the apology another question came up: how much can we hold someone to account... for what he or she says and does while drunk? Legally, of course, yes, we are all responsible for our actions. But what does it say, what does it really reveal, about the character of a man? I mean, the man was smashed. Who cares what he said?

And here, too, the words of the Talmud impress, with ancient wisdom, and ongoing relevance. From Tractate Eruvin, from the second major order or grouping of tractates: “*Amar Rabi Eliezar* – Rabbi Eliezar said – *b’shelosha d’varim adam nikar* – a man is known through three things – *b’koso, b’kiso, u’v’ka’aso* – through his cup, through his pocket, and through his anger.” Three things reveal who we truly are: how we handle our drink, our money, and our emotions. “*V’amri lei: b’sachako*. Some would add – through our laughter.”

Recreation and labor, work and play, good times and bad, thickness and thin... every moment writes itself as a new page in our book, a new chapter in our lives. Every moment is a chance to catch a glimpse of a pattern, a hint of a purpose, a connection with eternity.

Vay’hi achar ha’d’varim ha’eleh... after all these things... *v’ha’Elohim nisa et Avraham...* God tested Abraham. So, too, are we tested in our lives. We hurt for our families. We hurt, indeed, too often we hurt from our families.

But through pleasure and pain, in loss and in gain, there is a hope we hold dear. “*Ki vareich avareichacha...* I will,” God promises “bestow my *berakha* upon you. *V’hitbar’khu v’zarakha kol mishpachot ha’adamah...* and through your descendants and your actions, through your paths and your progeny, the fullness and fulfillment of your lives shall be blessed... all the families of the earth.”

You are the source... and you are the center... wholeness and holiness wrapped in every filament of every experience, waiting to be perceived, given vision, and voice.

That... is what we are here to teach.

It may not... it can not... it will not happen every time. But it *can* happen... any time.

L'shanah Tovah.