

LIFE IS A JOURNEY

Rabbi Steven Kushner

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I remember the first time we ever used this *machzor*, this High Holy Day prayerbook. It was 1980. Ner Tamid was brand new, a merger of Reform Temple Menorah and Conservative Temple B'nai Zion. The decision had been made to use the liturgy of the Reform movement which, in reality, was new to everyone. Temple Menorah was still using the Union Prayer Book, so both Gates of Prayer and this red-covered Gates of Repentance were something of a culture shift (if not a culture *shock*) for everyone. For the most part it was well-accepted. It had more traditional prayers than the old UPB, so the folks from B'nai Zion were pleasantly surprised. And its inclusion of creative readings made the experience an awakening.

But of all the newness, none surpassed the *Ashamnu* of Yom Kippur. You know, it's the prayer where we gently beat our breasts as we enumerate our failures. *Ashamnu. Bagadnu. Gazzalnu.* What makes this prayer so remarkable, however, is not simply that it's an itinerary of our sins, but that it's alphabetical. It's an acrostic. From *Alef* to *Tav* our sins were all-inclusive. Yet rather than simply translate the Hebrew literally, the editors of the Gates of Repentance chose to mirror the Hebrew, they decided to alphabetize the English list as well: Arrogance, Bigotry, Cynicism. It made perfect sense. Use words that we understood, choose words that reflected the intent of the prayer, to help us see how our sins were comprehensive, from A to Z.

The problem came when we got to X. Xenophobia. The fact of the matter is that in 1980 most people had never heard the word before. Many didn't even know how to pronounce it. So when we got to that letter there was a stumbling, a hesitation on the part of the congregation, followed by a muted giggling. We had all just learned a new word.

The next year I gave a sermon on the sin Xenophobia. Fear of foreigners.

Here we are thirty-five years later and the word still sticks in our mouths. But not because we no longer understand it. Alas, we know only too well the meaning of Xenophobia. Especially now, as one of the hot points of the upcoming presidential election, as the ascendant subject facing virtually every country on the European continent, the question of the relationship between the resident and the alien is among the world's most important dilemmas. But, of course, the crises facing fleeing Syrians and unwanted Mexicans is hardly new. The truth be told, this is as old as humanity itself. Since the moment our species began to walk we have had to confront the foreigner, we have had to learn how to live with the other. This is especially true for us.

There is no people that has walked the earth as have we Jews. Under duress or by choice, the Jewish people stands unique as a migrant nation. The wandering Jew is a title we wear with not a small measure of pride. It testifies to our adaptability, our perseverance. It is an integral part of our identity. Because, if you know your Bible, that's the way it's supposed to be.

The Jewish people were born to travel. The first words addressed to us by God were *Lekh-Lekha*. Get going. And we have yet to stop. From Abraham's initial journey toward "*ha-aretz asher ahr-eka* — the land that I will show you," the Jewish people's purpose of existence has been, in part, to be that "stranger in a strange land." And as the prophet Isaiah made clear, our

purpose for existence is to be an *Or Lagoyyim* — a Light unto the Nations. This is our destiny. And it's not something you can do remotely.

We are a people well acquainted with what it means to walk. The very word that best describes the Jewish way of life — *Halakhah* — means literally: the path. In other words, to be a traveler is not merely a reflection of our historical reality, it is at the very essence of our faith.

It would be easy for me to address the growing problem of Arabs and Europeans tonight. Or I could just as easily focus on what I find to be the deeply disturbing attitudes towards undocumented aliens residing here in America. Both should be of paramount concern to us. There is no value articulated and repeated more often in Torah than the commandment to be sensitive to the needs of the stranger, "because you were strangers in the land of Egypt." This teaching is at the very core of Judaism. This is why we were forced — by God — to endure homelessness and oppression in Egypt, so that we would know what it is like to be a stranger. Suffice to say, of all people we Jews should be sensitive to those forced to flee their homes, to those who dream of a better life for their children. When it comes to these issues, you don't need me to tell you what is the right and moral path. It's all low hanging fruit.

But within these issues lies a much deeper and more spiritual reality of which we are all familiar yet rarely cognizant. This is what fills me tonight.

One hundred and ten years ago this month my Zayde disembarked from the steamer S.S. Georgia onto the pavement of Ellis Island. Just a few weeks earlier, in anticipation of a pogrom, he stood on a chair to unhook the chandelier in order to protect it from the rocks and beets that the locals would customarily throw through the windows of the Jews. But, as my aunt Dorothy would later remember, in the process of unhooking it from the ceiling he dropped it. Looking down at the shattered prized possession, my grandfather said in a determined way, "It's a sign. We're going to America."

You all have the same story. We are all immigrants. But more to the point, we are all travelers. Our ancestors weren't just uprooting because of immanent danger. They were seeking hope. A new life for themselves and their children. They understood that staying put is stagnation. And stagnation is death. Moving is essential to existence. Our kids have "Moving Up" days in school. When dealing with the failures and pains of our lives, we get reminded by those who love us that in order to survive, in order to thrive we need to figure out how to "move on." As the beautiful reading before the Kaddish reminds us, "Birth is a beginning, death a destination, and life is a journey." This is not a metaphor.

This lesson, according to the *Baal Shem Tov* (the founder of Hasidism), is the very message of the entirety of Torah.

As I have often taught, I believe that there are only three places in Torah: *Mitzrayim* or Egypt, the land of constriction; *Midbar* or Wilderness, the place of transition and discovery; and *Eretz Z'vat Chalav u-D'vash*, the land that flows with milk and honey, the endgame of all existence. Egypt symbolizes the places we need to leave; Israel is the end of the rainbow, the place we desire and seek; and *Midbar* — wilderness — is that which lies in between, the area in which we live most of our lives.

The *Baal Shem Tov* saw it in an even more personal and microcosmic way. The journey from Egypt to Israel was the course of an individual life. A personal, sacred, spiritual journey. The exodus from Egypt is birth, the emergence through the birth canal of the Red Sea. The land that flows with milk and honey is the *next* world — heaven. And *Midbar*? Wilderness? Not merely

the place in-between, but rather one's life. *Midbar* is where we live out our days. And here is his teaching.

At the very end of the Book of Numbers (*Sefer Bemidbar*) in *Parashat Masei* which literally means "Journeys," the *BeSHT* (an acronym for Baal Shem Tov) is intrigued by the mentioning of every place that the Israelites stayed at from the Red Sea to the River Jordan. There are forty-two of them:

Rameses; Succoth; Etham; Pi-hahiroth; Marah; Elim; the Red Sea; the Wilderness of Sin; Dophkah; Alush; Rephidim; the Wilderness of Sinai; Kibroth Hattaavah; Hazereth; Rithmah; Rimmon-Perez; Libnah; Rissah; Kehelath; Mount Shepher; Haradah; Makheloth; Tahath; Terah; Mithkah; Hashmonah; Moseroth; Bene-Jaakan; Hor-Haggidgad; Jotbath; Abronah; Ezion-Geber; Kadesh; Mount Hor; Zalmonah; Punon; Oboth; Iye-Abarim [Iyim]; Dibon-Gad; Almon-diblathaim; the hills of Abarim before Nebo; and the plains of Moab by the Jordan near Jericho (Nu. 33: 3-49).

So what's the point? Why mention each and every one? Well, the Torah does. And according to the *Baal Shem Tov*, there's a reason for that. Because in each and every place something happened. It might not be recorded, it might not even be remembered, but — teaches the *BeSHT* — it was significant. Essential. A necessary stopping point on the journey.

“The forty-two journeys of the Israelites are to be found in every person from the day of his birth until he returns to his world [at death]...Each individual's birth should be understood within the context of the Exodus from Egypt and the subsequent stages of life are journeys that lead from place to place until one comes to the land of the 'supernal world of life' [that is, the *Shekhinah*, the in-dwelling presence of God]” (*Degel Machaneh Ephraim*, p. 200, col. a).

In other words, each stop along the way is an essential step towards reaching the goal. We might not realize it at the time. We might never realize it. And the teaching continues:

“A person thinks he goes to a particular place to attain something he desires, but in truth that person is led to that place by God so that he may raise the holy sparks that have fallen and are sunk within the depths of the shells” (*Degel Machaneh Ephraim*, p. 202, col. a).

Thus, according to the *Baal Shem Tov*, some of those places may not seem like they are moving us forward, we might feel quite the opposite. But the spiritual process of “raising the sparks”, especially the sacred points that dwell in each of us, is not necessarily intuitive. It might appear to us that we are stuck, even going in reverse. So it must have felt for the generation of the wilderness, especially given the many times they gave voice to returning to Egypt. But these forty-two stages are necessary in our individual journeys to the other side of the wilderness.

Life is not just about the accomplishments, the *simchas*, the things that are remembered at our funerals. The failures, the disappointments, the moments of pain are equally essential. Each one, both high and low, are necessary stops on our personal journeys. And as each one of those places mentioned in Torah is distinguished, they all have encampments and leavings. That is, for each of the forty-two places there is a settling down and a going out. Life is about movement. Life is about transition.

Perhaps you read the story about Mamie Kirkland. Born in Ellisville, Mississippi, Mamie's family fled her birthplace "amid talk of lynchings. On to Illinois, where white mobs rioted. To

Ohio, where the Klan raised torches. To western New York, where she and her steelworker husband had nine children, and the one miscarriage she always includes in her account" (Dan Berry, New York Times). This past summer, at the age of 107, Mamie returned to Ellisville for the first time in 100 years. We could easily focus on the racism and hatred that drove her family from state to state. But her life is more than a road map; there is more to the life of Mamie Lang Kirkland than what other people did to her. Hers is a journey of courage and strength. Of love and loss. Of pain and pride. Only six of her nine children reached adulthood. But they went to college and became professionals. And now at the age of 107 she is the honored guest of the mayor of the town that wanted to hang her father. Hers is a journey of tragedy and triumph.

Here's the truth: Xenophobia is the fear of other people's journeys. Because we mistakenly treasure stability, we are threatened by change, especially the changes that we perceive in the other. The changes we think they will force on us. Would that we knew what gifts they bring to us. If only we could understand that we are all spiritual migrants. As the beautiful prayer from the Gates of Mourning would have us understand, "We are travelers on the same road that leads to the same end." All of us.

All that stuff you're carrying in your metaphysical backpacks — both the bad and the good memories, both the failures and successes, both the pains and the joys — they are all part of the forty-two encampments. They are the sacred oases of our lives. Stops along the path. They might feel like way stations. Even detours. But each one is a place of time or space at which we learn and grow toward our final destination where we finally become our lives. And if we are still here, it means we are not yet there.

Enter the Days of Awe. These are the service stations of our people. These days are the places where we stop and ask for direction. (Even the men.) And tonight? *Kol Nidre*? This is the place wherein we get our hall pass, our permission to let go of the promises and dreams we were unable to fulfill, the stuff that so often keeps us stuck and blocks us from picking up and moving forward. *Kol Nidre* is our formula for letting go. It's the call beckoning us to move on, to find the next stop along the way.

Sigmund Rolat, a survivor of the Holocaust, tells the following story:

When Reb Leizer of Czenstochow walked out of the gates of Buchenwald, he set out to find his youngest son. In the last moments of deportation he had thrust the child into the arms of gentiles. Perhaps he was still alive. So he went to his old town, and when he got there it was suggested that he try the monasteries. Not surprisingly, none of them admitted to sheltering any Jewish children. So Leizer bought a hand-organ and added one melody to the stock of marketplace ditties: *Kol Nidre*. He moved about the countryside as an organ grinder, setting up his instrument in each village and watching as children ran out to hear his music. But when he would play the melody of *Kol Nidre*, he would make a special effort to look at the faces of the children. If when a child's head lifted up or turned toward him as he played *Kol Nidre*, he would know — this child is a Jew. According to the story, Reb Leizer never did find his son, but he helped dozens of Jewish children reconnect to their faith. (As recounted by Rabbi Mitchell Wohlberg.)

This is what *Kol Nidre* is for us, as well. It is the melody of our people. It is the clarion call of our faith. It is our reminder that — as our tradition tries to impress upon us — we are on a journey. From the moment we were driven out of Eden; from Abraham until now; from Egypt to the land that flows with milk and honey, we are travelers finding our way through the

wilderness of life. And we come here tonight to hear the familiar notes, beckoning us to keep on moving. There is more. There is more to me than even I know. The first words spoken to us still resound: *Lekh-Lekha*. It's time to move on. *L'chayyim*. Towards life.

As my teacher Rabbi Eugene Mihaly used to write on all of our assignments: *May the search be rewarded.*