

NEILAH - PAY IT FORWARD  
12 OCTOBER 2016

As many of you may know, I greatly enjoy bike-riding. Some years ago, I acquired a used Fuji bike – and it is one of my most cherished possessions. As I bike – even though my adrenalin is racing – I have discovered that I relax, I decompress, and I can look at my problems and challenges with a new and often-sharper perspective. Lo and behold, I have even written some sermons and articles on these rides – at least metaphorically in my head.

So please back-track with me to Sunday afternoon, June 19. It is Father's Day – hot and humid as is generally the case in Washington at that time of year. I decide that my Father's Day gift to myself will be a long bike-ride in Rock Creek Park. I heave the bike into the trunk of our SUV, drive to the top of Rock Creek Park at East West Highway, park the car and start down Beach Drive – a route with which I am very familiar.

Everything is going well. I reach my destination just beyond the Zoo – turn around and start on the way back to Chevy Chase. About a mile into the return trip, my front bike tire – suddenly and without any warning – implodes. The sound is so loud and frightening that a passer-by tells me that for a moment she thinks that it might have been the discharge from a gun. Fortunately, it is only a blown tire – and as luck would have it, I do not fall forward over the handlebars. I am okay . . . but the bike is, at least temporarily, unusable.

My car is about 5 miles away . . . Rock Creek park has very limited vehicular traffic on Sundays – and even if I would call Beverly on my cell phone, the other car which she has cannot accommodate the bike. And no, I do not have a spare tube or any tools with me – and even if I did, my mechanical ability in using them is generally not stellar.

I pick up the bike – lift up the front frame with the busted tire still attached – and start walking back along Beach Drive towards Chevy Chase. Another biker stops for a moment and offers to help but does not have the correctly-sized tube.

Please remember that it is very hot and humid. I quickly exhaust my water supply – and sweating profusely – continue onward. By now, you get the idea – and a small vignette of my unhappiness and my less-than-polite language, at least to myself.

When I reach Military Road, the bike that I am lugging and I stop at the Park Police station there. I knock loudly and repeatedly on the door. At last, an officer responds but does not seem particularly sympathetic to my entreaties about getting back to Chevy Chase more expeditiously.

And so I trudge further and further . . . recognizing with each step how intensely awkward it is to carry a bike for any protracted distance. Between Sherill Drive and Wise Road going north on Beach Drive, there is a long hill – as the roadway rises above Rock Creek. As I slowly start up the hill – with still almost 2 miles to go to my car, another biker stops and asks very solicitously if he can help me. He is dressed in sharp looking bike garb and offers to change the tire – on the spot. He promises that the entire process will be done in a few moments . . . and he is as good as his word. He flips my bike over, finds the appropriate tools and faster than I could possibly imagine, my bike – while not perfect – is certainly in good enough condition now to ride back to my car.

Before my “rescuer” drives away, I, of course, thank him profusely and offer to pay him for the tube which he has provided – and for his efforts on my behalf. I have my wallet with me. He adamantly refuses. Somehow, while a bit embarrassed and flustered by his total nonchalance, I manage to extract from him that his name is Chris, he lives in Silver Spring and works in the District at Children's National Medical Center in the hematology department. I file the information in my head – and beginning the next day, try through the switchboard at National Children's Medical Center to locate a guy named Chris. I spend a couple of hours over the next week in what ultimately proves to be a fruitless endeavor. I never find Chris – and therefore never am able to express my appreciation more fully to him for the spontaneous kindness that he extended to me. Clearly, Chris did not expect any reward from me. In Jewish terms: he did a mitzvah for its own sake. He reached out and helped another person – to whom he had absolutely no connection – simply because that is how he ticks.

Wow! What did I learn from my bike ride in Rock Creek Park on that hot and sultry June afternoon – and why am I telling you this narrative – as we experience Neilah, our concluding service of Yom Kippur?

We often cannot project precisely when or how we can be of assistance to someone else . . . but when that opportunity next emerges for you, I want to encourage you to recall your tired rabbi trudging with a busted bike tire in Rock Creek Park on a steamy June afternoon and how that miserable moment-in-time was turned around through the caring and concern of a stranger.

Each of us has great capacity for kindness. In the New Year ahead – long after the gates of Yom Kippur close, please “pay that kindness forward” as vigorously as you possibly can.