

A Life-Changing Experience
Parashat B'Ha'alotcha
(with thanks to Rabbi Martin S. Cohen)
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Have you ever had a moment that changed your life? That changed the lives of people around you? A moment that, ever after, marks the difference between “Before” and “After”?

For most of us, if we've had such a moment, it was **serendipitous**. That is, it wasn't planned, it wasn't intentional, it just, fortuitously, happened.

A friend of mine, a fellow rabbi, spent his junior year in college in France. One fall afternoon, he was on a bus travelling through the Vosges Mountains of eastern France when his bus broke down. Ordinarily, it wouldn't be such a big deal, but it was Erev Yom Kippur. There he was, by the side of the bus, stranded as the sun was setting. It was the first and only time he wasn't in synagogue on Kol Nidre night. This took place long before cell phones and GPS. The bus driver was able to get help -- but told everyone that it wouldn't arrive for several hours. My friend walked into a nearby meadow, alone. There he stood, contemplating the past, the present and the future. There, he had the kind of experience that most of us hope to have in shul on Kol Nidre night, though rarely do.

I'll say more about this story on a future occasion. In the meantime, let me just say that, even though one might think that this story would have a horrible ending, that isn't the case. In fact, this experience opened my friend up in a way that he hadn't been before. It changed his life.

I can remember the day almost forty years ago that I went to Havurat Shalom, a prayer community in Somerville, with some friends. I went to check out the place.



I was early. A few minutes after I arrived, someone came in and sat next to me. We talked time and again, during and after the service, and, well, within a year, we were engaged, and we've been married ever since.

Those kinds of life-changing experiences make us realize that most of the time, we're just moving through life, trying to get from one day to the next, focused in very narrow ways on very **practical** concerns, but then special moments come along which transport us out of the ordinary, out of the routine, into a different place.

Sometimes, those moments call on us to draw on resources we might never have known we had.

This past week, a man by the name of **Mamadou Gassama** was walking with his girlfriend down the street in Paris on his way to a soccer match. I don't think it was the first time he walked down that street.

This time, he looked up and saw a child, a boy of four, dangling from the balcony of his parents' apartment, four stories over the street.

The boy's mother was out of town; the boy's father was out shopping. The boy was out of reach of neighbors, who were encouraging him to hold on for dear life, for if he were to fall, he'll surely would be killed.

So along comes **Gassama**. He has every reason to keep on walking. After all, he is an undocumented illegal migrant from Mali. He has every reason to keep his head down and stay out of sight. Who wants to draw attention to himself in a situation like that? To risk being identified by the police? To risk deportation?

But instead, he acts. Possessed of almost superhuman agility and strength, he finds himself facing his destiny. If he acts and is successful, the child will live. If he does nothing, the child will almost certainly die.

In a feat that was captured on a video that I'm sure most of us have seen, Gassama climbs up the wall of the apartment building, leaping from balcony to balcony, until he reaches the boy, whom he promptly rescues.

There's an expression in the Talmud: *"Yesh koneh et olamo b'sha'ah achat."* There are people who alter the entire course of their lives in a single moment.

That's what happened to Mamadou Gassama. The next day, Mamadou was sitting in the Elysée Palace being congratulated by Emmanuel Macron, the president of France, who offered him three things: a medal for his bravery, French citizenship, and a job as a Paris firefighter.

In a single moment, Mamadou's life's path was altered utterly and completely.

The day after that, by the way, Gassama met with another person whose life had been altered unexpectedly: **Lassana Bathily**. Lassana Bathily also happens to come from Mali. He also was an undocumented migrant living in France. He happened to be working in a kosher supermarket in Paris in 2015 when an Islamic State terrorist took patrons hostage in the market. Bathily was in the basement at the time with some customers. He ushered them into a refrigerated room, turned off the power and the lights, and thereby saved them from the terrorists. He then escaped himself and gave the police valuable information about the layout of the market, allowing them to storm it and kill the attacker.

He also, by the way, earned French citizenship as a reward for his selfless heroism.

(By the way, these two incidents raise a number of interesting questions, such as whether you should have to save someone's life in order to qualify to become a citizen of France -- or any other country, for that matter -- but that's for another occasion.)

How do we prepare for these moments? How can we live our lives so that, when these moments occur, we will be fully present, and we will hopefully respond the way we would like to respond?

One answer comes from the very opening of our parashah, the part that our Bat Mitzvah, Rebecca, spoke about. Every day, as Rebecca reminded us, Aaron the priest was told that it was his duty to light the lamps of the Menorah in the Tabernacle.

Now, lighting the Menorah each and every day was not of great practical importance. Yet it was of enormous symbolic importance. For it was designed to provide hope and inspiration. It was designed to remind the Israelites that, as important as their own needs might be, they needed to remember that there are values and principles and morals that are above all those. And they needed to be reminded of them each and every day.

As do we.

Just like a ballet dancer can't walk on stage and hope to perform a perfect arabesque without practicing, so too, we can't expect to rise to an unexpected occasion without thinking about, reflecting upon, and committing ourselves to the kinds of behavior we know we should embrace, each and every day.

We no longer have a national *menorah* to gaze upon and to draw inspiration from. But we do have daily prayers. Three times a day we have the opportunity to pause, to meditate; to worship; to reflect.

Our tradition has provided us with other reminders as well that we are not just like the other animals on the planet. We're human beings, and for us life isn't just about fulfilling our wants and needs. It's about reaching for the holy and seeking to incorporate it into our lives. It's about curbing our passions and restraining our impulses.

And it's about reaching for those moments of transcendence, even though we don't ever know when they're going to occur.

Fortunately, not all such moments of transcendence require the kind of courage or skill demonstrated by a **Mamadou Gassama** or a **Lassana Bathily**. But they do require that we rise above our natural self-centeredness. Taking the time, as often

as we can, to appreciate our blessings -- which I believe is the most important purpose of prayer -- and to think beyond ourselves; can give us the courage look at what is right before our eyes -- and to embrace that reality. It can help us be ready for those fortuitous, serendipitous moments that have the potential to change our lives and the lives of those around us.

Shabbat shalom.