

Yom Kippur Evening
Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim
Rabbi Stephanie M. Alexander
October 11, 2016

This is not the sermon I was to have given. *That* sermon had formulated itself in response to current events throughout the summer. It was, if I do say so myself, thought-provoking and spiritual – and, most importantly, well on its way to being written. But the relevance of that sermon seemed to deteriorate as Hurricane Matthew intensified, and essentially flew out the window this past week before it was boarded up.

So *that* sermon became Plan A. *This* sermon is Plan B.

Had you told me last week I would take a road trip between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, I would have laughed. There's *never* a road trip between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. This is Go Time for rabbis – our Super Bowl, World Series and Election Day all wrapped up into one. The plan for the intermediary Days of Awe is always to review the mechanics of Rosh Hashanah and make the necessary tweaks for Yom Kippur; polish up sermons and other remarks; review cues and choreography. There are Shabbat Shuva services to lead, Tashlich rituals to conduct, and cemetery memorials to hold. But Plan A wasn't happening this year. Instead it's become a good opportunity, for all of us, to reflect on embracing Plan B.

Radio personality Ira Glass asked a group with whom he was speaking if they remembered their vision for their lives when they first reached adulthood – their Plan A. "How many of you are still on Plan A?" he asked. Only one person, the youngest in the room, raised her hand. The rest of the audience laughed. "Plan B?" they said, "What about Plan C and D and F?"¹

Jewish law and tradition, it turns out, is moderately obsessed with Plan B.

We're supposed to recite *Birkat HaMazon*, the blessing after a meal, for instance, when we're done eating. Pretty simple and straightforward. Yet, the blessing is really a series of blessings, and it's pretty long. What if you're in a place of danger? What if you're not sure you ate enough to warrant saying it? What if you don't have the words with you and don't know them by heart? What should you do?

We're supposed to recite the *Sh'moneh Esrei*, the central prayers of a worship service that constitute the *T'filah*, without interruption. But what if someone comes up to you needing guidance on where we're at in the service, or how to stamp their ticket for the parking garage? Or someone you haven't seen in a long time taps you on the shoulder? Or a person of prominence in the community asks how you're doing? What should you do?

¹ "This American Life," Feb. 1, 2002.

There are precise instructions for how to clear the *chametz* out of one's house before Passover – searching the nooks and crannies of your home by candlelight, collecting even the most minuscule of crumbs with the brush of a feather. But what if you've gone through all of that work, and then you see a mouse enter your home trailing crumbs of who-knows-what from God-knows-where? Or part of the building collapses before you've had a chance to clean it? Or you planned to be back home from a trip in time, but camels or thieves slowed you down? What should you do?

These and many, many more are the Plan B scenarios that have consumed rabbinic imagination throughout the generations. If it weren't for Plan B, the Talmud would be the size of a pocket guide rather than the many volumes of an encyclopedia.

The rabbis get it: Plan B is inevitable. But that doesn't mean we don't plan at all. The amazing thing is how smoothly things generally do go. Our liturgy reminds us of this every morning. *N'kavim n'kavim, chalulim chalulim* we pray – the rhythm and repetition of the Hebrew underscoring the amazing dependability of creation:

Blessed are You, Holy One, who has formed the human body with wisdom – an intricate network of channels, vessels, and openings. This wondrous structure, and the flow of life within us, allows us to stand before You.²

Or in our new prayer books:

Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is symbolic as well as actual beauty in the migration of the birds, the ebb and flow of the tides, the folded bud ready for the spring. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature – the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after the winter.³

Or that less than 24 hours after the evacuation ended here in Charleston, Starbucks was back up and running.

So we make our arrangements for Plan A. We dream and formulate and strategize. But we remain flexible. And if Plan B is called for we pivot, and adjust, and – like that great language on our GPS – recalculate our route. We adapt and accommodate.

Yet sometimes Plan B is far more than an inconvenience or hassle. Sometimes Plan B is heart-wrenching.

² *Mishkan HaNefesh*, p. 156.

³ *Mishkan HaNefesh*, p. 181.

Sheryl Sandberg, the Facebook executive known for encouraging women to "lean in," lost her husband suddenly and tragically at the age of 47. At the conclusion of Sh'loshim, the first thirty days of mourning, she reflected on her loss publicly with deep, raw emotion.

I think when tragedy occurs, she wrote, it presents a choice. You can give in to the void, the emptiness that fills your heart, your lungs, constricts your ability to think or even breathe. Or you can try to find meaning. These past thirty days, I have spent many of my moments lost in that void. And I know that many future moments will be consumed by the vast emptiness as well.

But when I can, I want to choose life and meaning. ...

I have learned to ask for help—and I have learned how much help I need. Until now, I have been the older sister, the COO, the doer and the planner. I did not plan this, and when it happened, I was not capable of doing much of anything. Those closest to me took over. They planned. They arranged. They told me where to sit and reminded me to eat. They are still doing so much to support me and my children. ...

I was talking to one of these friends about a father-child activity that Dave is not here to do. We came up with a plan to fill in for Dave. I cried to him, "But I want Dave. I want option A." He put his arm around me and said, "Option A is not available. So let's just kick the pants off option B."

Dave, to honor your memory and raise your children as they deserve to be raised, I promise to do all I can to kick the pants off of option B. [But] even though sheloshim has ended, I still mourn for option A. I will always mourn for option A.⁴

We can't always greet Plan B cheerfully. In fact, even as we're walking down its path we might be mumbling to ourselves – or screaming to the world – this sucks. But, as Sandberg reflects, Plan B is the path of life. It's the implementation of the all-important imperative we will hear in tomorrow morning's Torah reading to choose life.

And the fact is that, even under the most difficult of circumstances, there can be great beauty in Plan B. As friends helped us prepare our home for the storm a week ago, as neighbors checked in with one another and stopped to exchange cell phone numbers as we walked our dogs up and down the street, our son told us: "I like our neighborhood right now. It feels like a family."

Sebastian Junger, has covered war and tragedy throughout his career as a journalist, and finds truth in a sociologist's observation that "in every upheaval we rediscover humanity and regain

⁴ Sheryl Sandberg, June 3, 2015.

freedoms. We relearn some old truths about the connection between happiness, unselfishness, and the simplification of living."

What catastrophes seem to do – sometimes in the span of a few minutes – is turn back the clock on ten thousand years of social evolution. Self-interest gets subsumed into group interest because there is no survival outside group survival, and that creates a social bond that many people sorely miss.⁵

Junger wrote about these observations in a book he called *Tribe*. Generally, he says, "our tribalism is [limited] to an extremely narrow group of people: our children, our spouse, maybe our parents." But during emergencies it's as though our tribe expands. This week our tribe included the weary travelers we would run into in the hotel lobby and elevator, people from all over the southeast who, under ordinary circumstances, would remain strangers. But this week we exchanged words of strength and comfort, holding each other up. Our tribe included the sweet employee at the animal hospital down the road from our temporary quarters, who stood ready with a boarding spot for our pet, understanding that we just had no idea how the next few days in the hotel would go. Our tribe included the incredibly kind workers at the pharmacy who realized there would be no way to track down our doctors for official prescription refills and gave us the medications they knew we needed anyway. Our tribe included so many of you who checked in, colleagues who reached out, neighbors who helped make repairs, friends from across the country who offered their support. Plan B this past week was stressful and, at times, scary – but it was also filled with love and tremendous beauty.

On Rosh Hashanah we welcomed the New Year; on Yom Kippur we prepare ourselves for it. And here's what we know: 5777 is going to be full of surprises and Plan Bs. There will be circumstances over which we will have no control, except how we choose to respond to them. "Be soft like a reed, not stiff like a cedar," the Talmud tells us, and this past week we saw this sage metaphor of Jewish teaching come to life. Large, unyielding trees were uprooted from where they had seemed so firmly planted, while the flexible, swaying reeds of the marshes weathered the storm and immediately rebounded. Let us enter 5777 like reeds, knowing – whatever comes our way – we will find and savor its beauty and blessings. And let us say: Amen.

With deep gratitude to my colleague, Rabbi Sarah Mack, whose support and counsel were instrumental to this sermon – and my spirit.

⁵ *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*, Sebastian Junger, p. 66.