

Rosh Hashanah Evening 5780
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Because I Knew You

Rabbi Sam Pollak

I once found myself in the arms of a stranger, being carried down a mountain.

It was the summer before I started high school, and my family was on the last day of vacation in Utah. My dad and I rented mountain bikes, and we took them up to the top of the ski slopes—green and sunny in July. About halfway through our ride down, I hit a rock, stepped off the bike, and rolled my foot.

“I’m broken, I’m broken!” I shouted as I tumbled. It didn’t hurt yet, but I felt the snap. There was no way I was biking the rest of the way down.

A quarter mile back, we had passed a person in tractor, who was mowing the grassy slopes. Not knowing what else to do, we decided that my dad had to go back and ask him for help. So, my dad propped my swelling leg on the wheel of my bike, gave me a granola bar, and left me there.

My ankle still didn’t hurt much; the worst part was the bugs.

When my dad got back, he said the man was going to get his truck and drive it up the ridge where I was stranded. But it was a ski slope, so when he arrived with the truck, the highest he could reach was still fifty or a hundred feet below us.

And that’s how I found myself in the arms of a stranger, who, along with my dad, carried me down a mountain.

Only later did we realize: we never asked his name.

How often it is that someone plays a significant role in our lives, and we don’t recognize it at the time. Sometimes the person is anonymous, like my mountainside rescuer, and sometimes the person is a dear friend. When we look back, we are astonished to think how different things would be had we not been at that place at that time, with that other person. And sometimes we *are* that person for someone else, and we never realize it.

In the book of Genesis, in the story of Joseph and his brothers, there is such a person. Joseph’s father, Jacob, sends him off to ask after his brothers’ wellbeing. They are away, shepherding the flocks in Shechem, far from their home in the valley of Hebron.

When Joseph reaches Shechem, he doesn't know where to find his brothers. He is lost, wandering in the fields, when an unnamed man happens upon him. "What are you looking for?" he asks.

Joseph says he is looking for his brothers; he asks where they are. The unnamed man shows him where to go.¹

That man is everything. Without him, Joseph doesn't find his brothers, doesn't end up in Egypt, doesn't set the stage for the eventual redemption from Egyptian slavery and acquisition of the Torah at Sinai. That man—and his chance encounter with Joseph—set our story on the path that leads to us.

Episcopal priest and professor Barbara Brown Taylor looks at the Bible not as a "book of certainties" but as a "book of encounters." I think we can use her frame in Jewish contexts. Think of the encounter between Abraham and God that establishes the covenant, the encounter between baby Moses and Pharaoh's daughter that saves his life, and of the encounter between Joseph and the anonymous man that enables our story. In Taylor's words, the Bible's characters "run into God, each other, and life—and are never the same again."²

This is the season of *teshuvah*, repentance and atonement. The word literally means "return": return to ourselves, return to the right path, return to the Holy One. *Teshuvah* is a course correction, a chance to change the direction our lives are heading.

How is it that we know which way to go? So often it is an encounter with another that gives us our direction. We run into God, each other, and life—and are never the same again.

Like billiard balls, the paths we travel are inevitably altered by an encounter with another. Some encounters aid our *teshuvah*, nudging us back toward the right path; others knock us far off course. Most do a little of both.

Last year, we were fortunate to have author and political commentator Sally Kohn speak in our congregation. When she was young, Sally had an encounter with another girl in her grade in which she bullied the other girl. As part of her *teshuvah*, Sally has made it her mission to educate against hate and towards mutual respect.

¹ Genesis 37:14-17

² Taylor, Barbara Brown. "The Bright Cloud of Unknowing." *Day1.Org*, 2 Mar. 2014, day1.org/5560-the_bright_cloud_of_unknowing.

Sally writes frequently online, and her remarks attract attention from fans as well as foes. Once, she decided to confront the people who were harassing her online—those commonly known as “trolls”—known for such lovely comments as “GO JUMP OFF A BRIDGE” and “Your dog is cute. But you are freaking hideous.”³

Those specific comments come from a person whose name on Twitter is @LindaLikesBacon. When Sally finally spoke to her on the phone, she began by asking @LindaLikesBacon about her hobbies. She also asked why she likes bacon so much. The answer is that the username was *meant* to be offensive—to Muslims who don’t like bacon, and whom @LindaLikesBacon doesn’t like. Sally, a Jew who happens to *like* bacon, asked if she meant the name to offend Jews—but, no, Jews were okay.⁴

In the course of their conversation, it came out that @LindaLikesBacon has a twenty-four-year-old son who was then in rehab for meth addiction. All at once, Sally felt bad both for herself, for having to experience @LindaLikesBacon’s harassment, and for @LindaLikesBacon, for the suffering she bore.⁵

It didn’t absolve @LindaLikesBacon of her behavior, but it did help Sally realize that behind those words was a human being.

In November, we’ll have another visiting author: Ariel Burger, who at age 15 had a life-changing encounter with the great educator Elie Wiesel, of blessed memory, and later became his student and friend. He learned from Elie Wiesel that encounters don’t need to end with agreement, don’t need to end with collapsing the distance between us or between our opinions. Rather, we can serve one another as “‘friendly antagonists,’ partners in clarifying our thoughts.”⁶

By the end of their encounter, Sally Kohn and @LindaLikesBacon became friendly antagonists. They ran into each other, and they were never the same again.

In the early twentieth century, the Jewish philosopher and mystic Martin Buber wrote, “All actual life is encounter.”⁷ But by encounter, Buber meant something deeper than a chance meeting.

³ Kohn, Sally. *The Opposite of Hate: a Field Guide to Repairing Our Humanity*. Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2019. Page 19.

⁴ *Ibid.* Page 20.

⁵ *Ibid.* Page 39.

⁶ Burger, Ariel. *Witness: Lessons from Elie Wiesel's Classroom*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018. Page 55.

⁷ Buber, Martin. *I And Thou*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann, Touchstone, 1970. Page 62.

Buber is known for teaching that there are two types of relationship: I-It and I-You. I-It relationships are impersonal, transactional; they are most of the interactions we have in our day-to-day lives. In an I-It relationship, “I,” the conscious subject, experiences or uses the other, the “It,” as an object. I-You relationships are transcendent. They arise when one conscious subject meets another, and they form a connection unbound by time and space.

That may sound like poetic gibberish, but we all know what a true I-You encounter is like. It’s what happens when we gaze into the eyes of our beloved, or watch a newborn explore the world; when we lose ourselves in the spirit of a song, or hold our breath in awe before a mountain vista. It lasts just a moment: Everything else vanishes from our awareness—we don’t even really have thoughts—and we know a deep sense of connection. And then it’s gone.

For Buber, our lives are constantly oscillating between everyday interactions and true, I-You encounters. And in those true encounters...there lives God. And this is love.⁸

In this case, *teshuvah* is returning to God, returning to all-encompassing connection. It is atonement—“at-one-ment”—with the Eternal Other.⁹

When those fleeting moments happens, we can’t help but know our lives will never be the same.

A story:¹⁰

A woman had been wandering about in a forest for several days, not knowing which was the right way out. Suddenly she saw another woman approaching her. Her heart was filled with joy. “Now I’ll certainly find the right way!” she thought.

When they neared one another, she asked the woman, “Sister, tell me which is the right way. I have been wandering in this forest for days.”

“Sister,” replied the other, “I don’t know the way out either, for I too have been wandering here for many, many days. But *this* I can tell you: do not take the way I have been taking, for that will lead you astray. But now, let us look for a new way out—together.”

⁸ *Ibid.* Page 66.

⁹ *Ibid.* Page. 37.

¹⁰ Adapted from story by Rabbi Hayyim of Zans, as told in: Agnon, S. Y., editor. *Days of Awe: A Treasury of Jewish Wisdom for Reflection, Repentance, and Renewal on the High Holy Days*. Edited by Nahum N. Glatzer, Schocken Books, 1995. Page 22.

In our lives, we know there's no one right path for us to take. Each of us is doing the best we can, trying to make the best choices in our specific situations. What a comfort it is to know that those who sit beside us, who walk with us, are doing the same.

Even when we make *teshuvah*, even when we correct our course and return to the right path, we are still making our way through a great unknown.

How do we know which way to go? We meet one another, we learn from one another, and we forge a new path—together.

It's strange, really, to reflect on all the encounters in our lives, and review how each person changed us. I think, of all things, about Facebook. I have countless "friends" catalogued on Facebook, but only a fraction are actually in my life today. Most *were* important parts of my life for a time: real friends with whom I've lost touch, teachers and counselors who mentored me once, acquaintances I meant to get to know but never did. It's as if I have a digital collection of those who changed the course of my life, in large or small ways. And when I think of it that way, I can't help but feel grateful.

All our relationships are temporary. Some are brief encounters, like with the man who carried me down the mountain, and some are encounters for life, like with a child, a spouse, or a friend. There will come a time when each encounter will end. Let it be enough that, for a while, they helped us know which way to go, and we helped them.

It's like Glinda and Elphaba sing at the end of the Broadway show *Wicked*: "Who can say if I've been changed for the better? But, because I knew you, I have been changed for good."¹¹

Every moment, every encounter—the possibility is there, if we are open to it.

In this season of *teshuvah*, of returning to the right path, may we help one another as we find our way. May we have moments of transcendent connection, knowing the love that binds us all together. And may we continue to run into God, each other, and life—and never be the same again.

L'shanah tovah tikateivu. May we be inscribed for goodness in the book of life.

¹¹ Various Artists. "For Good." *Wicked (Original Broadway Cast Recording)*, 2003.