

*D'var Torah*  
*Erev Rosh Hashanah, 5779*  
Rabbi Steven Folberg  
“Painting Targets”  
Congregation Beth Israel, Austin, Texas

Dear Friends,

Rabbi Mitchell Chefitz tells this great story about a gifted archer who, despite all the honors and trophies that he’s accumulated, is never satisfied with his performance. To challenge himself, he’d choose a target 100 yards away, raise his bow, and release the arrow. But as the arrow rose through the sky, it would encounter the wind. When it fell to the target, it often fell a few inches to the right. Or, a few to the left. A stunning accomplishment, but less than perfect. In frustration, he leaves the city to search for a place where there is no wind, not so much as a breeze, so he might polish his archery to perfection.

One day, as he travels, he comes upon a barn. On the side of the barn are twelve targets. And *precisely in the center* of each target is an arrow. *Precisely*. “Whoever did this is a much better archer than I am,” he thinks. “I must find and learn from this master.”

So, he inquires. Each person he asks tells him, “You’re not looking for an archer. You’re looking for an idiot.”

“An idiot, perhaps,” the archer says, “but whoever produced these bulls-eyes is a great archer nonetheless.”

“You don't understand,” they tell him. “He shoots the arrow first, *then* he paints the target around it.”

The champion archer is furious! What a fraud, and what brazen disrespect for the discipline of archery! (You might say he took this personally.)

After weeks of searching he finally finds the house of this *fake*, this *painter of targets*, and pounds on the door.

The painter opens the door, stares a moment in disbelief, and cries, “It's you!

You're the famous archer!! You're the greatest archer who ever lived, and you're standing here, at my house, in my doorway! I've been your biggest fan for years! I can't begin to tell you...” On and on the painter goes. With each flattering phrase, the archer's resentment diminishes. At last he sits with the painter and accepts a cup of tea.

Now no longer angry, he asks, “Would you be kind enough, please, to tell me why you did what you did? Why did you shoot a dozen arrows at a barn and then paint targets around them where they landed?”

“A *dozen* arrows?” The painter laughs until he nearly spits out his tea.

“I didn't shoot a dozen arrows at that barn. I shot *a hundred* arrows! When I practice, I'm thrilled when even *one* arrow strikes the side of the barn! On that day when I managed a dozen hits, I had to celebrate. But how? Then it struck me: I may not be much of an archer, but I am an excellent painter, so I celebrated hitting

the barn twelve times by painting the most beautiful targets I could paint, one around each arrow.”

The archer sits there, his teacup in midair, his mouth hanging slightly open.

He spends the night in the painter’s house. Early in the morning they both leave with bows – and a box of paints – in hand. They walk until they find a different barn and stand 100 yards away.

The painter strings his bow, fits an arrow, and prepares to shoot, but the archer raises his index finger in the air stops him. He shows him where to plant his forward foot, how to hold the arrow, how to focus on the target.

The painter releases the arrow, it rises into the air, descends in a graceful arc, and strikes the barn – way, way off to one side. But still, having hit the building at all, the painter is delighted.

Then the archer strings *his* bow. There is a *tiny* knot in the grain of one of the wooden boards on the side of the barn, a dot the size of a penny. He chooses that dot as his target. He pulls back the arrow. He takes a deep breath, meditates on his chosen target, and releases the arrow. It rises into the sky, falls toward the target and – misses... a few inches to the left.

The great archer is crushed. He has traveled so far yet accomplished so little. The cruel wind followed him. “Were it not for the wind,” he moans, “it would've been a perfect hit.”

But in truth, it *was* a perfect hit, and the painter knew it. He took the archer by the hand and, patiently, showed him how to paint a lovely target around the arrow, in the spot where it had landed, a few inches to the left of that tiny dot.<sup>1</sup>

At this moment, you might think that this is going to be a sermon about the misery of perfectionism, about how the painter was elated to hit any spot on the side of the barn, while the archer was depressed at not meeting the nearly impossible goal that he had set for himself. Or, it could be a sermon about our natural, human tendency to needlessly inflict suffering upon ourselves by taking things personally, as when the master archer feels that he, and he alone, is being mocked by the painter's practice of painting targets around arrows he has already shot.

But the part of the story that speaks most powerfully to me at this point in my own life, and especially at this Rosh Hashanah season, is how this archery master cannot reconcile himself to the uncertainty – the lack of control – that the wind introduces into his practice.

It's so unfair! After all, he does *everything* right: hours of practice, tremendous concentration, mindful attention to his technique, his stance, his posture, his grip. And, you just know that this archer spends *hours* at the gym, am I right? I mean, can you imagine the biceps, pecs and forearms on this guy? And yet... And *yet!*

---

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Mitchell Chefitz, *The Curse of Blessings*, introduction.

All his planning, all his practice, all his workouts cannot overcome the uncontrollable meddling of the wind.

And so, he travels far and wide to find a place without wind, without randomness and uncertainty, a place where he can be his arrow's only master – but the wind follows him wherever he goes.

My Yiddish speaking ancestors had a proverb that might provide an epigram for the story: *Der Mensch tracht und Gott lacht*; a person plans, and God laughs.

Truth be told, I *hate* that proverb. I hate that it portrays God as having a nasty sense of humor, that it imagines God as somehow finding our struggles, frustrations and disappointments to be amusing. I prefer the John Lennon version: “Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans.”

The result of the unpredictability of the wind is that the archer doesn't have the final say over the destination of the arrow. No matter how much he practices, how hard he concentrates, how perfect his execution, he isn't in control. Even on the stillest day, there *isn't* a place devoid of wind.

Rosh Hashanah reminds us that we are very much like the archer. We plan, strive, work, dream, and yet, there is so much that we deeply desire – life, health, peace, love, safety, happy children, a close, contented family – that we cannot guarantee for ourselves, no matter how strong, clever, hardworking or successful we are.

In our Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur prayers, the chilling poetry of the famous *Unetaneh Tokef* asks, “Who shall live and who shall die? Who shall be tranquil and who shall be troubled? Who shall know prosperity and who deprivation?”

Things happen. The doctor’s office calls with a bad test result. Our partner loses a job and we, like Abraham and Sarah in the Torah, must pick up and move to a strange, new place. In the middle of the night, we receive the telephone call dreaded by every child taking care of an elderly parent – Mom has fallen, dad is having chest pains. Our once happy child is now inexplicably moody, angry, depressed, unreachable. And we realize again that we are dependent on circumstances and forces that we do not control.

It’s no coincidence that the Hebrew root word *yarah*, which means “to shoot an arrow,” is also the root of the word “Torah.” Torah seeks to point us in the right direction, to help us hit the mark of goodness, joy and holiness in our lives. *Yarah* – to shoot an arrow – is also the root of the Hebrew word for “teacher,” *morah*, as well as the root of the Hebrew word for “parents,” *horim*. Parents, teachers, the Torah: they are all archery instructors, they seek to launch us into our lives at least pointed toward the most worthwhile targets. But neither Torah, nor parents, nor teachers can dictate our trajectory. They don’t decree our choices or manipulate the circumstances we don’t control. Even with the help of parents, teachers and Torah, there is no place without wind.

Sometimes, our desire for control, as well as our desire to make sense of things, causes us to inflict needless suffering on ourselves: we blame ourselves for things that simply aren't our fault, things over which we had no control. If I had a dime for every grieving person who sat with me in my study, torturing themselves with thoughts of, "If only I had or had not done such and such, my loved one would not have died..." I wouldn't be rich, but I would have a nice sized pile of dimes.

The past few years of my life have bought me face to face with the wind, with uncertainty, and with the limits of my power to control some of the most important things in my life. My heightened awareness of this vulnerability began three years ago, when my mother died of Alzheimer's. Then about 18 months later, my father landed in the emergency room with a relatively straightforward G.I. issue, but four days later he was gone.

I often wonder: what is it about watching our parents age that's so uniquely difficult? Is it the role reversal, doing things for them that they used to do for us, while simultaneously, silently, grieving over their increasing dependence upon us? Or is it the fact that – as fraught and complicated as our relationships with our parents can be – there is always a part of us, no matter how old we are, that, in their presence, is an eight-year-old version of our adult selves, wanting their approval, trying to make them happy by being a good boy or girl? And when we

can't be a good enough boy or girl to make Mom or Dad okay, the sense of failure, the guilt, can be overwhelming.

You know, I have been given a nickname (one of several) around our house: "Mr. Fix-It." Like a lot of people who go into helping professions like the ministry or psychology, I get a lot of ego gratification from making things better for other people. But that can lead to an inability to accept things that I *cannot* change, things that I *cannot* fix, like my late mother's Alzheimer's, or my late, CPA father's shame and frustration over finally coming to a place where he needed my help to pay his bills. I could visit my mother, but I could not give her back her memory or her sense of self. I could take my father to his doctor's appointments, but I couldn't eliminate his fear of being "a burden," nor talk him out of his sense that "maybe it was time for God to take him..."

This same sort of inner conflict is also so often at the heart of parenting our own children, isn't it? Whether your child's pain is physical or emotional, few things in life will tear at your heart quite as savagely as seeing your kid struggling or unhappy. Again, not being able to hit that elusive bull's-eye, not being able to take away the pain, to function as the all-powerful demigod that our youngest children, think we are, is agonizing. But then there is an added dimension: walking that tightrope, trying to know when to rush in and help them out of their distress, and

when to step back and allow them to struggle so that they learn how to identify and correct their own mistakes, how to cope when things are hard.

These experiences around being parents and taking care of our own parents when the time comes, and so many other related experiences, bring us face to face with the same, painful problem: our inability, despite our best efforts, to eliminate or sometimes even just to *lessen* the suffering of someone we love. How do we not sink into despair when we cannot even hit the side of the barn? How do we find wisdom and strength in these hard times when the winds of uncertainty and the limitations of our own influence frustrate our best efforts and intentions? How, especially, do we continue to move forward when we are enduring a hard time in our lives, a time with no short-term fix, a problem that feels not like a sprint, but like a marathon?

Judaism offers us some life-giving wisdom here. It's particularly precious wisdom because it is deeply counterintuitive, helping us to push back against some of our most basic, yet most unhelpful crisis mode instincts.

Remember the Ten Commandments? The first one of them is, "I am Adonai, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt..." The problem is, in what way is "I am God" a commandment? It sounds more like a statement. My favorite solution to this problem is offered by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, who calls to mind the first couple of seasons of Saturday Night Live, when Chevy Chase used to moderate the

Weekend Update segment. He would always begin by saying, "Good evening. I'm Chevy Chase, *and you're not.*" This is how Rabbi Kushner suggests we read the first of the Ten Commandments: "Good evening! I am God... And you're not." Consider one of the most interesting and suggestive Jewish names for God. It comes from Kabbalah, the mystical, experiential stream in our ancient tradition.<sup>2</sup> The name for God is *Ayn Sof*, meaning Limitless, Without End, Infinite. True, we exist within and as part of that great, endless, Divine Reality, yet are finite and limited. We cannot fix everything that needs repair. We will not hit the bull's-eye 100% of the time. We will often have to accept – and even, like the sign painter, *celebrate* – just "hitting the side of the barn."

Hopefully this isn't TMI<sup>3</sup>, but I used to see a therapist who would regularly call me out for what he called a tendency toward "grandiosity," meaning, "If I am only good enough, nice enough, hard-working enough, learned enough, then I can be the son/husband/father/rabbi who makes everyone happy all the time, who fixes everyone's problems and protects everyone from unhappiness." But taking on that grandiose role – especially in a time of extended crisis – leads to a place of burnout, anxiety and self-loathing that *lessens* your ability to be helpful. Learning

---

<sup>2</sup> Within large portions of the Jewish mystical tradition, God is *not* a "personality," and certainly not an old man with a long white beard on a throne up in heaven.

<sup>3</sup> "Too Much Information"

to accept that "that's all I can do, for now, in this moment," is deeply counterintuitive, but also profoundly wise and important.

A true story. The first couple of days in the hospital after my mother required hip replacement surgery were extremely difficult. It took her longer than expected to come out of the anesthesia. She was having difficulty swallowing and required a feeding tube inserted in her nose, which gave her a constant, miserable sore throat, and necessitated her mouth being suctioned out from time to time. And, at night, she would “sundown,” the nickname given to the increased anxiety and confusion that often overtakes elderly people in hospitals and nursing homes toward the end of the day.

One evening, around 10 PM, I got a telephone call from the hospital. They explained to me – as my heart pounded – that my mother was sundowning, disoriented, not clear why she was in the hospital and generally very upset. Would I agree to the nurse giving her Ativan to help her calm down and sleep? In the moment, the thought of my mom being given a tranquilizer sounded awful to me, so I said, “Hang on, I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

When I got to the hospital, I sat with my mother for quite a while, holding her hand, explaining to her repeatedly why she was in the hospital, and then, when I realized I had photos of the interior of her and my dad’s house on my cell phone, flipping through those photos with her, over and over, reminding her that the

hospital she was in was only a 10 minute drive from home. Eventually, she settled down and I said goodbye and left. I arrived home close to midnight and, after quite some time, managed to settle down and get back to sleep.

The next day, I was speaking to a doctor friend, telling him what had happened and how completely wrecked I was as a result. He said to me, “You know, Steve, what you did for your mother was quite wonderful. But it would’ve been just as fine for them to give her the Ativan, so you could get some rest.” His comment has stuck with me all these years. In my own need to inhabit the role of Mr. Fix-It, Perfect Son, and in my inability to tolerate her discomfort, had I unnecessarily punished myself and compromised my ability to function? Remember the First Commandment: “I am God, the Limitless One, and you are not.”

Accepting the limits of our own humanity also suggests another huge Jewish teaching: accepting our own need to restore, replenish and rest. As a beloved seminary professor of mine, Rabbi Jerome Malino, of blessed memory, used to say, “When an empty cup is passed around, no one’s thirst is slaked.” When we don’t listen to our minds and bodies, when we drain ourselves dry, we have nothing left to give to others.

Remember that the most important holiday in the Jewish calendar isn’t Rosh Hashanah, or even Yom Kippur. The most important Jewish holiday is Shabbat – the day of rest. In the creation story in the Torah, on the Seventh Day, even God

takes a breather. *Uvayom ha-sh'vi'i, shavat vayinifash*, “On the seventh day God [literally] took a breath,” which Rabbi Arthur Waskow translates, “On the seventh day, God said, ‘Whew!’” Every seven days we are to let go, to allow ourselves for 24 hours to *pretend* that everything is finished, even knowing that it is not. But, with practice, we can give ourselves moments of Shabbat at any time, even amid chaos and uncertainty, even when the unpredictable wind becomes a tornado. Just pausing, closing your eyes, breathing in, noticing what is going on in your body, can be a healing, Shabbat moment, whatever day of the week it might be.

It is hard to overstate how deeply wrong it can feel, in a time of uncertainty and crisis, to pause and focus upon ourselves and what’s going on inside, but it’s crucial that we do this. So often, coping, as our culture understands it, involves burying or denying our needs and feelings and pushing ahead, even when it is unhealthy to do so. “I’m tired but I’ll keep going, I’m hungry but I’ll keep going, I’m sad but I’ll hold back the tears,” and on, and on... I know, I know: sometimes we behave this way because it feels disloyal, irresponsible, selfish to engage in acts of self-directed *hesed*, lovingkindness, when someone we care about is struggling. But I don’t have to tell you that there is a heavy price to be paid for this kind of repeated denial of what we are feeling and experiencing. This is one source of that numbness, that inability to feel anything, that we’ve all experienced at one time or another.

Here's a quote from the Torah that we all know: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Notice, the Torah *doesn't* say "Love your neighbor *more than* you love yourself"! To know what it is to be loving toward others, to increase your capacity to behave lovingly toward others, you must first be generous and loving to yourself.

This reminds me of a conversation I had with a mentor at a Jewish meditation retreat for Rabbis, helping working rabbis to deepen their prayer lives through mindfulness and meditation. My dad was still alive then, and I told my mentor that I found myself dreading that inevitable moment to come when I got the call that something had happened to my dad – that he had fallen or had a heart attack or stroke. How was I going to cope with the outbreak of chaos that would surely ensue? He responded: "Taking time for prayer, for mediation, for spiritual practice is like Noah constructing the Ark. By practicing now, you'll have a safe container to keep you afloat when the floodwaters finally come."<sup>4</sup>

It's also easy in times of anxiety, uncertainty and suffering, to slip into loneliness and isolation at precisely a time when we most need to accept support and strength from every source that offers it to us. When, in the Torah, Ishmael and his mother Hagar find themselves wandering in the wilderness without water, she "lifts up her eyes and sees" a well of water. We, too, need to lift our eyes and see those who

---

<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to Rabbi Jordan Bendat-Appel for this insight.

stand ready to offer support and comfort when our lives feel like we are lost in a wasteland. Looking back now at the ten weeks that I was on family medical leave from the Temple this past winter, I am humbled by the memory of all the people, some of them strangers, who stepped forward to offer us their help when we felt lost in the wilderness.

What is the most asked question on earth? I wouldn't be surprised if it was "why me". Everyone loses perspective in times of darkness. Everyone, like the archery master in our story, takes their misfortunes and challenges personally, or to imagine them as some sort of punishment. When I was still a seminary student, and I'd call a classmate to catastrophize about some crisis I was going through, she'd say, "Folberg, you think you invented this, but you didn't."

Jewish wisdom gives us the same message, in the form of some really practical genius.

I'm talking about our huge catalog of *mitzvot*, sacred behaviors for all occasions.

Each one reminds me that I am not the first person ever to experience this pain, that it's not something I invented. I know this because there's always a time-

honored, sacred Jewish act, a practical response with a fancy sounding Hebrew

name to be performed. Knowing that countless generations of my Jewish ancestors

did the same thing reminds me that this is not just "my pain," it is also "*the pain of something that I didn't invent; the pain of something human and universal.*"

When I visit someone in the hospital, or at home, I am performing the mitzvah of *bikkur holim*, reminding me that the experience of worrying about a sick friend or loved one is a part of the human condition and that paying this visit is an honor and a privilege for a Jew. This also means that I don't have to feel like a burden when someone does a mitzvah for me. Rather, I'm *doing them a favor* by giving them the opportunity to bestow this meritorious act of service upon me. There's a world of difference between "I did a nice thing," and "I performed a sacred Jewish act of service."

When all I can do for a friend or loved one in crisis is listen as they pour out their heart, I have not failed to help, because I am fulfilling the Jewish religious practice of *v'ahavta l'ra'akha kamokha*, loving my neighbor as myself, elevating my careful attention to their words to godly behavior, and helping me to tolerate the pain of not being able to offer an immediate solution to their suffering.

And what about honoring our parents?

When I could no longer tolerate that my father was wearing cheap, worn-out sneakers with holes in them, I insisted on taking him to Pay Less shoes for a new pair. (I knew that going to Foot Locker would be a non-starter once he saw the prices there. "I'm spending *your* money," he'd have said.) But to even get him into the store, I told him "Dad, don't let strangers look at those awful shoes and conclude that nobody cares about you." (Guilt works both ways.)

Later, when I found myself squatting on the floor in front of him in the shoe store, tying and untying several pairs of sneakers for him because he was having trouble bending his arthritic knees enough to tie his own shoes, it hit me that this was how the Talmud understands the sacred Jewish religious act of *kibud av va-em*, honoring your father and your mother – to make sure that their physical needs are not neglected when they are elderly. And somehow, in that moment, I was lifted out of sadness of “It’s gotten to the point that Dad needs me to help him tie his shoes,” to “This is the universal human mixture of joy and grief of helping your elderly parents get along in the world.” Like the chef at a hipster restaurant can elevate a bowl of mac and cheese with fancy ingredients, Judaism’s system of mitzvot can elevate the most mundane acts to joyful, sacred occasions for celebration and gratitude. This is another way that Judaism helps us to paint a bullseye around the arrow, no matter where it lands.

At the end of the day, what is the most powerful thing that the champion archer learns from the painter? His greatest lesson, I think, is the hardest one to internalize: to paint a target around the arrow, no matter where it lands, is to practice acceptance. Acceptance is not being passive in the face of evil or injustice. Nor does acceptance mean that I have to like something that is painful, unfair or unpleasant. It simply means acknowledging what is true in this moment. I might

wish that the arrow had landed somewhere else, but I will paint a target around it nonetheless because the truth is that *it landed here*.

I think that it's useful to make a distinction between acceptance in the short term, and in the longer term. In the short term, Jewish sources<sup>5</sup> advise us to cultivate a quality of *Menuchat Ha-nefesh*, literally, "Calmness of the Soul."<sup>6</sup> Sometimes we can do this by pausing and silently and compassionately naming what's arising: "This is fear." Or, "This is disappointment." When we can create some mental space between where the arrow landed and how we're reacting to it, we are already practicing acceptance and painting our own target. And now, seeing clearly what true, we can better hope to respond wisely and skillfully to what is actually going on.

In the longer term, acceptance or "calmness of the soul" can come from pulling the camera back to take in a wider-angle view of my life. As Jews, each of us possesses two Torahs: there is the Torah of tradition, that which is written in the scrolls in the ark and that which the rabbis built upon it over the centuries. And there is a second Torah, the ongoing text of the story of each of our lives. Our life stories are also Torah from which we learn. Some of the twists and turns in the plot

---

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the chapter on Equanimity in Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar*, pp. 98-106.

<sup>6</sup> These sources teach us to "distance ourselves" from anger, jealousy and excessive pride. This does not mean fighting with or "stuffing" difficult emotions. It means developing "an inner attitude that creates some distance between the experience of something inside or outside of us, and the way we react to it. We make this space by cultivating an inner capacity to bear witness."

of this Torah are things that we choose for ourselves. Other plot devices are things we never would have chosen for ourselves: illness, disappointment, broken promises. But, over time, we can bestow dignity and honor upon even the most difficult episodes in the Torah of our lives, painting targets of acceptance around those misguided arrows. We can make those painful times our own. They are part of our sacred story.

Friends, I wish you a Jewish New Year in which the pleasant far outweighs the unpleasant, and the good far outweighs the bad. And I wish you a year in which we all learn to bring greater strength, courage, compassion, acceptance and dignity to whatever challenges we face. Amen.