

*Windy Canoe - Yom Kippur Morning
September 28, 2020 – 11 Tishrei 5781
Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester
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Since March 15 I have been isolating at Brant Lake, New York. This has given me time to reflect on my life and recall past summers spent in the Adirondack mountains. One event in particular has resonated in my mind. It was a summer many years ago when my parents rented a cottage at the head of the lake while I was a councilor at Brant Lake Camp. For me, my parents visit was a special opportunity to spend time with my father, a rabbi. Now, for several days, he would not be the rabbi instead he would be dad. Only dad.

On the first day of my fathers visit I raced down to the dock at rest period.
“Joe” I called out to the waterfront director,” I am taking out a canoe. I am going to visit my father down the lake.

Joe frowned and wrinkled his face filled with scars from many years playing football at the University of Alabama

“Up to you Dan, but the winds are pretty strong. I wouldn’t advise it.”

“No problem Joe, I am paddling with the current. Should be an easy trip.”

The canoe cut through the churning water and before long I glimpsed my father standing on the dilapidated dock of the rented house. As I neared the dock my father raised his hand to wave. I waved back. It was time to execute a J stroke and paddle into the dock, but the canoe would not turn. Instead it continued to forge ahead, propelled by the fast current and a very strong wind. Faster and faster I sped ahead. I swept pass the dock where my father was standing. He lowered his hand, a puzzled look on his face. He did not know that I could not control the canoe and was carried along until, finally, with a shudder, the boat beached at the end of Brant Lake

As I think back on that event many years ago, in the light of the present pandemic, I realize that I did not have control over my life when I was canoeing to meet my father. So too, I have very limited control over what is happening today. Our lives aren’t certain. We do not know when or where we will beach. I am not sure where I am headed as I was not sure when I sped past my father many years ago. Today is consumed by uncertainty

But as I sit by the shore today I also realize that all of our life is strewn with uncertainty. The pandemic is only a microcosm of that uncertainty

In our liturgy for the high holy days we read: On Rosh Hashanah it is written who shall live and who shall die
Who shall see ripe age and who shall not
Who shall perish by fire and who by water
Who by earthquake and who by plague
Who shall be tranquil and who shall be troubled

This prayer assumes that our future will be determined but I am not aware of what that future may be. I have no idea when I will die and for how long I will live. I have no idea when a doctor will call with words I do not wish to hear. I have no idea what tomorrow will bring.

So with the uncertainty and the lack of control the pandemic has created we need to ask how do we live when our existential destiny is uncertain

First ,we make the most of every day. We cannot look to the past and we should be very cautious about looking to the future. There are small things that we can control day by day and this is where we should dwell for the present time.

This much I know: In the words of Desmond Tu Tu, I need to have confidence there will be light despite all the darkness.

I also remember the words of Clinton Bailey, the foremost authority on the Bedouins in the Sinai desert. I accompanied him once as he was interviewing a Bedouin chieftain, poet, and smuggler. The Bedouin had built a small house on the urging of the Israeli government. However, he did not live in that house. Instead his sheep and goats went into the house and at night we slept outside on the sand. I asked Clinton Bailey why we were sleeping outside and the animals were sleeping inside. He answered me “Dan, We sleep outside so we can see the stars. No matter what our situation stars shine at night and when we look at them we can see there is brightness in our universe.”

“Look at the stars.”

Now, in retrospect, I realize that sitting in my canoe I hoped that eventually I would beach. I did. At that time I did not know that my father at the age of 58 would die within the year. Use your time well, always look for the stars. They are out there, just above you.

Hard times are difficult. We may not see an immediate resolution of the pandemic but eventually we will reach the beach, and with hope and confidence we will move forward

It has been said that the game of golf is like life because it can be played on a rough surface with good and bad bounces. We are in the midst of a bad bounce and do not know what rough spots lie ahead.

But let us look at the stars, traverse the rough spots and may we come together once again in the spirit of Rejuvenation and Thanksgiving --- secure in our canoe.