

Finding Our Path – Erev Rosh Hashanah
September 27, 2020 – 10 Tishrei 5781
Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester
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It was time to call Jen. I placed my pack precariously on a root that stuck out of the steep slope and reached in to get my phone. Yes. I had a signal. Not much of one, but a signal. I called.

“Honey,” I said when she answered.

“Yes? Are you done with your hike? I need you pick up a few things for dinner on your way home.”

“I love you.”

“What’s wrong?! You don’t call and say that in the middle of a hike unless something is wrong.”

“I’m sure I’ll be fine. I might be a bit late. I lost the trail on the way down. The terrain is, well, a little sketchy.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll call you when I’m down. I love you.”

“Love you, too.”

The trail that I had lost runs down Breakneck Ridge between Cold Spring and Beacon on the east side of the Hudson. The name is well deserved. The trail has a few spots where a misstep would mean a long fall and, well, a broken neck.

I had prepared appropriately for my hike: full water bottles, a paper map, a digital map on my phone. Jen had my planned route and I had brought along enough snacks to keep me fueled for my ascent and descent. But I made a rookie mistake: deciding to hike down Breakneck Ridge instead of up. I had come to the top of the trail via another route and the descent known for broken necks I left for the end. When I was tired. Attempting the toughest trail in the Hudson Valley. Not smart.

And so, tired and going in the wrong direction, I had lost the trail. I had wandered off the ridge and stood on a very steep slope of rocks and leaves. A few trees clung to the mountainside performing gravity defying acts of natural magic. There was no going back to the trail, I could not see how to retrace my steps, I had to keep going.

I do not usually count on divine intervention but thought it couldn’t hurt in that moment. I prayed from the morning blessings, “Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Haolam, hameichin m’tzadei gaver.” “Praised are you, Adonai our God, ruler of the universe, who makes firm our steps.” I took a deep breath and resumed my descent down the untracked mountain side. Slowly. Carefully. Testing each step. And hoping for the best.

At this moment many of us feel like we're a long way into a hike, tired, on unmarked terrain, and worried about keeping our footing, worried that we – as individuals, as a community, as a nation – that we may slip and tumble toward loss and pain and uncertainty. It's a decidedly uncomfortable feeling for a community of people who are accustomed to being in control, to being the ones who not only walk the trail, but who cut the trail, who even erected the mountain on which the trail exists.

Just as my preparation failed me on the hike, no amount of preparation could have gotten us ready for the moment in which we now live. We stand on the perilous hillside of life in 2020 Pandemic America. We have worked hard to create our lives, our homes, our families, our careers. We planned, studied, toiled, compromised, and did it all as right as we could. And then, back in March, the trail disappeared. Together with every person on the globe, we stood there as the hillside became precarious, as the way forward became fraught with danger.

Hiking is risky. Life, too, has become more risky revealing our individual risk tolerance. Each of us chose different routes and methods for living on the unstable slope. Some wore masks from day one, others waited until told to do so. Some have barely left their house since March, others have been out and about the whole time. Some will see friends for walks and others for backyard meals and others will not see anyone at all. And then, as if making our own decisions is not difficult enough, we judge others for their decisions. We look at a family biking in our neighborhood and bemoan the fact that they are not wearing masks. We hear about our neighbors going to the grocery store rather than getting them delivered and wonder what's wrong with them. We feel hurt when our friends refuse to see us in the backyard because we allow our children to have outdoor playdates. Our judgement makes us angry. Angry with others for failing to see the world the way that we see it. Angry at ourselves for not being more cautious. Angry at the people we live with for insisting on a measure that we would not otherwise take. This anger mellows to resentment, less sharp but more caustic. All of it adding to the stress of the unstable hillside.

And still, we have to find a way to traverse the slope, to make it down the unmarked path. And we cannot do it alone. We seek a way that lessens our anger, that calms our anxiety. We seek paths that feel familiar, that show us what beauty exists in the forest despite its danger. We reach out for community. Even when we cannot agree on a medium for connection, we reach out over the phone and through zoom and on socially distant walks – whenever we can match our risk-profile with another long enough to connect, to remember that we do not walk this unmarked path alone.

There are signposts along the ways, even on this uncharted hillside. Birthdays and anniversaries cause us to lower our guard a bit for a socially distant visit in a mask in a back yard. Passover brought people from around the world together in ways we could never have imagined – possibly a new way to celebrate the ancient in the years ahead. We'll see. And now the High Holy Days that we enter tonight. Rosh Hashana is here as it comes every year. It comes with its offer to look back on the year just past. It comes with its call to stop on the hillside, to take stock, to examine where we are, how we got here, and how, in some way, we can move forward into the year to come.

These ten days are known as the Yamim Nora'im. We typically translate this as Days of Awe because *norah* does mean awe. We are called before God and one another to consider our lives. If that is not awesome, I'm not sure what is. But *norah* also means terrifying. Yamim Nora'im, Days of Terror. In our Reform movement, with our liberal theology, we usually avoid this translation. But the line between terror and awe is quite thin. The central metaphor our services – the Book of Life – is terrifying indeed, the notion that our deeds speak for us and that our fate is written in a celestial book and sealed at the end of these ten days – if that's not terrifying, I don't know what is.

But then, it is only metaphor. The liturgical Book of Life exists to help us recognize that our deeds do matter – that doing the wrong thing can lead to more brokenness in our lives and that doing the right thing can lead to more wholeness. It's a powerful metaphor, one that has helped us and our ancestors consider our lives each year, consider the ways that we can live better, more completely, more compassionately, more wholly and more holy. And, perhaps this year, the Book of Life will help us discern a path down the unmarked ridge to the safety below. Perhaps as we consider our lives in this strangest of times we'll realize that we have more capacity for kindness and service, more room for love and passion, more energy to create the world we hope to see rather than wallow in the difficulties of the present moment, a moment so fraught in so many ways.

These Days of Awe will be like none we've ever observed. We cannot simply show up in the sanctuary and allow the service to wash over us. We need to create the sacred spaces in our homes, we need to intentionally log on for the service and the Torah service. We need to drive through to hear the shofar and reach out to one another in different ways for the nourishing sense of community that sustains us. It will be so different. And it will still give us the chance to examine what's written in our Book of Life. To look at the stories, memories, and deeds we inscribed this past year. And, these days will give us the chance to imagine what pages we'll add to our Book of Life in the year to come. How will we make ourselves, make our world, better in the year 5781? These Holy Days will be so different. And these Holy Days will be like every other year.

I do not fully recall how I climbed down from the side of Breakneck Ridge. I remember sliding a couple times, glad for a tree to grasp. And I remember stopping and sweating and taking a drink of water before taking the next scary steps. But, after a couple of hours, I was down, back on the road and headed to my car and calling Jen to tell her that I was out. None of us know the path out of the wilderness in which we now reside. But my prayer is that we can use these Yamim Nora'im, these Days of Awe, to reflect on the people we are and the people we hope to become. In that reflection, reading our Book of Life and imagining its next chapters, perhaps a path of safety and healing will illuminate itself for each of us and for all of us. “Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Haolam, hameichin m'tzadei gaver.” “Praised are you, Adonai our God, ruler of the universe, who makes firm our steps.”

Ken Yehi Ratzon
May this be God's will