

“So Over the Moon”

On December 21, 1968, astronauts Frank Borman, Bill Anders, and Jim Lovell, became the first human beings to leave the earth's orbit and go to the moon. Apollo 8 orbited the moon ten times, taking photographs of the lunar surface so that NASA's engineers could figure out where – and how – to land Apollo 11's spacecraft. After a tumultuous year that included the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy, protests against the Vietnam War, urban riots, and the ugly violence at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, an angry and divided nation turned their gaze to the heavens in search of a little bit of hope.

I wasn't one of those kids who wanted to be an astronaut – at amusement parks I didn't like going too fast or being even slightly off the ground – but through the eyes of a child, these men appeared to be courageous and heroic; like athletes, only with puffy uniforms. It wasn't until years later, as Tom Wolfe and others de-mystified their carefully constructed image, that the public realized just how bland our heroes really were. As the writer Charlie Homans wrote of one Apollo astronaut, “He is 40, with the receding hairline and blandly gentle affect of a family dentist.” As Rabbi Gutterman and I enjoy remembering, “Those were our fathers.”

Apollo 8's commander, Frank Borman, was just such a man. Born on March 14, 1928 (my father's exact birth date), he went to West Point, where he was known as a no-nonsense student. He became an Air Force pilot, and in 1961, in the midst of the Cold War, he applied to NASA to become an astronaut. His Apollo 8 crew, Bill Anders and Jim Lovell, had dreamed of going into space for as long as they could remember, building model rockets and studying geology. But Borman wasn't obsessed with moon rocks or stars; he didn't read science fiction or even watch Star Trek on television; his interests were purely patriotic. "I wanted to participate in this American adventure. That's the only thing that motivated me – [to] beat the damn Russians."

In fact, Borman's appraisal of space travel was so nondescript that even the most "wow, how cool would that be" moment in space – weightlessness – held little appeal for him. In a recent interview, when he was asked what it was like, Borman offered this vanilla response. "When you let go of something in midair, it would just stay there." He said it was interesting to watch for about 30 seconds, but then he just came to accept it. As the NASA psychiatrist who evaluated him back in 1961 said, Borman was "the least complicated man he had ever met."

And maybe that's not so bad. Perhaps our so-called moments of epiphany, those indescribable moments when something happens and you murmur to yourself, "no one's ever experienced anything quite like this," are not the moments

that ultimately define who we are. Indeed, our tradition has always been ambivalent about those moments. Our patriarch, Abraham, was never able to reconcile his faith in God with his obligations as a husband and a father. In a moment of insanity, or faith, or both, Abraham nearly murdered his son, Isaac, on Mount Moriah, and then, in the very next verse, Sarah dies. Abraham and Isaac never speak another word to each other.

Our prophet, Moses, who, literally, stood in God's presence at the burning bush and on Mount Sinai, never once described how those encounters felt: not to his siblings Aaron or Miriam; not to his wife, Tziporah, or even his beloved father-in-law, Jethro, who as a religious man – a priest no less - might have understood. And yet, of these glorious, life-changing events, not a word was spoken. Indeed, we come to know Moses's character not by his experience of transcendence, but by his compassion and his thirst for justice for others.

When he witnessed an Egyptian taskmaster striking a Hebrew slave, Moses righteously turned on the Egyptian and struck him down. And in the desert, when a group of shepherds were harassing Tziporah and her six sisters, Moses intervened, drove the shepherds away, and even drew water for the sisters' flock. For us, Moses was heroic not because he stood *panim el panim* – face to face - with God, but because he stood face to face with his fellow human beings - the enslaved and the stranger - gazed into their eyes and saw the light of God.

Borman, like Moses, preferred to speak about the happenings on earth, not the ones in space or on the mountain top. When he was asked what he talked about with his wife, Susan, when he returned from space, Borman answered, “I really didn’t talk about it very much. As a matter of fact, I can’t remember talking to her about it at all.” The journalist pushed a little more. “You don’t remember saying, you won’t believe what the moon looks like. I was up there.” And Borman said, “No, we didn’t talk a lot about it.” “Why not?” asked the journalist. “It was more important to see my teenage boys and see her. I asked her, what have you been doing?...It was a wonderful time of reunion and emotion, and the last thing from my mind was to tell them what the moon looked like.” “Didn’t they want to know?” “No. Nobody asked.” They were simply content that he had come home, safe and sound.

Here was a man who was doing what no person had ever done before – to explore another world, to reach for the stars, to have a perspective on our planet that only a handful of people would ever have, to stand not **at** Mt. Sinai, but **on top** of Mt. Sinai – and in the midst of all this, in the thrall of divine transcendence, Frank Borman wished only to be back on earth, to be a father to his sons, to hold Susan’s hand again.

The reporter pushed a little further. “So, what **did** you talk about?” And Borman said, “How glad I was to be home, how glad they were to have me back,

and how the boys were doing in school, and why the dog's dish was still full. We got right back to the **nitty-grittys**.” In other words, they talked about what happened – all the day-to-day details that define our lives, everything that truly matters.

On this extraordinary gift of a day, this day of atonement, this day of *teshuvah*, we have been given the time, and the space, to think about the “nitty-grittys” – all those ordinary tasks that connect us to our loved ones; the deeds we do, the sacrifices we make for each other, the tasks that cause our days to disappear before our eyes; the obligations we wish would go away, the ones we'll long for when we no longer have them.

It's the nitty-grittys that make life worth living: of being present for a friend who really needs you, listening with intention, holding their hand, offering a hug. It's the nitty-grittys of a seemingly endless day of parenting, the kind of day when you ask yourself incredulously, “who are these children?” and then, when it's time for bed, you read that story for the 50th time, tuck them in so gently, and wonder how long this moment can last. It's the nitty-grittys of having the tough conversations with your spouse, your partner, and doing the difficult, soul-searching work that you really don't want to do – after all, it's so much easier to watch Netflix or the Red Sox - but you have them anyway, discovering along the way that our most intimate relationships open a window to the sacred.

Rabbi Norman Cohen, the professor of Midrash and former provost of Hebrew Union College, reminds us of his own “nitty grittys,” when he got a phone call from his aging father right before Passover. His father was visiting Norman’s brother in Houston for the holiday. “Hello, Normyboy,” his father began. Immediately, from the tone of his voice, Norman knew that his father wanted something. He asked him if he would go from Manhattan to his apartment in Queens – an hour away – and check to see if he had emptied the mailbox and secured all the locks on the door before he left for Houston. Cohen then said, “I told him that I didn’t have a lot of time and I couldn’t get there, but assured him that he had closed the police lock, the chain and the door bar. He asked again, and I begged off, saying that I would do it the following day.”

The next day, Norman’s brother, Marvin, called to say that their father had died just moments ago. All he could do was cry, and replay their last conversation in his head, wishing he had said, “Sure, Pop, I’ll go out to Astoria if it’s important to you.” As Cohen poignantly writes, “the phone doesn’t ring anymore with my father’s voice calling ‘Normyboy.’” I would love to hear it one more time just so I could have a different ending.

Our relationships are so mysterious. We spend an inordinate amount of time kvetching about our obligations, how busy we are, how little time we have just for

ourselves. But, in truth, that's what we miss the most when they're gone. We miss our obligations; we miss being needed.

Borman wasn't entirely unmoved by his mission in space. While orbiting the moon – which was colorless and gray and craggy – he and the other two astronauts noticed something coming up over the horizon. It was the earth, this gorgeous blue and white marble, more than 240,000 miles away. The photographs they took that day – collectively known as “Earthrise” remain the most famous images of our planet ever taken.

Here's how Borman described the moment: “It was small enough you could cover it with your thumbnail. The dearest things in life that were back on the earth – my family, my wife, my parents. They were still alive then. That was, for me, the high point of the flight from an emotional standpoint.” It wasn't the god-like perspective, the “in all of human history nobody has ever seen this before” philosophical platitude, the miracle of the burning bush in an endless desert. Instead, we hear the words of the gruff, taciturn astronaut expressing his deepest emotions; to see the earth as the place where all meaning resides. How precious his loved ones, how fragile their lives, how cosmically small, and yet – as our only home - how stupendously large.

For all of his alleged reluctance, the utilitarian explorer who seemed to take a perverse pride in shunning the poetic, Borman still grasped what the moment

meant to the nation. He was assigned – by President-elect Nixon himself – to give the nation an inspiring address from space. On Christmas Eve, 1968, before the nation’s largest broadcast audience ever, he quoted the first verses of the Torah, the momentous beginnings of God’s creation. And though these verses were surely inspiring, and undoubtedly poetic, it was another verse from B’reisheet that was in Borman’s heart, the one he lived with all his being: “*Vayomer Adonai Elohim lo tov Heh-yiot Ha-Adam l’vadoh.*” “And God said, ‘It is not good for a human being to be alone.’” He may not have been complicated, or philosophical, or even poetic, but Borman understood that human beings were put on this earth not to stand alone at Sinai, not to gaze out in solitude at the vastness of the universe; but rather, to share the magnificence of life with those we love, to care for one another with tenderness, and through our most intimate relationships, build a world of meaning and holiness.

Frank Borman had the opportunity to go up again, to ascend, in NASA’s universe, to the top of the mountain – to walk on the moon. After all, he had been the commander and public voice of Apollo 8, and had earned the right to take the next steps, so to speak. But Borman declined the offer, choosing instead to leave the Apollo program. As he expressed it in 2018, “I love my family more than anything in the world. I would have never subjected them to the dangers simply for me to be an explorer.” For Borman, the decision was clear: he chose family

over adventure; security over the sensational; life's daily pleasures and heartaches over the experience of the infinite.

For most of us, the choices will never be quite so stark. We probably won't have to choose between our family's well-being and walking on the moon. But on this day, when we pause to reflect on our lives and the choices we have made, let us remember that our obligations – the mutual, unspoken agreements we have made with our friends and our loved ones - are not sacrifices; they do not diminish our lives. Indeed, our obligations to one another are the bonds that **fulfill** our lives, and the relationships that give our lives meaning.

These days, Frank Borman is retired and lives on a ranch in Montana. He turned 91 this year, and undoubtedly, writers for all of the major newspapers have already written his obituary. The headline will read that he was the commander of Apollo 8, the first spacecraft to orbit the moon. It will mention that when he left NASA, he went to work for Eastern Airlines, and for a number of years in the 1970's, he served as its president. And it will wax nostalgic for one of the last of a generation of American heroes – strong, silent men who served their country, bravely journeyed into space, and thanks to Life Magazine, were elevated into a pantheon of nobility and courage.

And when these obituaries are published, and our nation remembers the largely forgotten deeds of Frank Borman, I hope we'll remember him as a hero for

other reasons. For putting his family first, even though he gave up a walk on the moon to do so. For recognizing that all of the wonder in life was found not in the stars, but on the earth, standing with the people he loved. And for embracing the depth of his commitment to the “nitty gritty,” the difficult work that a life of integrity demands.

Today – right now – Frank Borman is doing what he’s done every day for the last ten years of his life. It’s the most earthbound act, the nittiest and the grittiest obligation, a mitzvah of pure love and devotion. For the last ten years, Borman’s beloved wife, Susan, has been stricken with Alzheimer’s, and in his own words, this is how this least complicated, least poetic man, describes his life. “I’m with her every day, and she can’t walk or talk or feed herself. So that’s where I come in. So that’s very, very difficult – very. And that’s it.” As Borman well knows, the poetry – the real beauty – of life is found not in the stars, but rather in the daily acts of kindness and dedication – the mitzvot - that build our world. Those are the moments that define what it means to be a hero.

On this day of atonement, this day of holding our dear ones close to us, may we have the strength and courage to fulfill our obligations; to be with our loved ones when they need us the most, and to have the wisdom to recognize that such moments are not a burden, but rather the privilege of our lives. Gamar chatimah tovah. May this year be one of good health and peace for us all.

