

Rosh Hashanah—2nd Day Talk
September 22
by Rabbi Steve Gutow

I was honored when Lauren asked me to give one of the three talks today—talks I have enjoyed greatly over the years given by others on Day 2. Part of the enjoyment was the fact that many of the speakers had not spoken much. When Lauren asked me to talk, she knew I had spoken in this shul as a rabbi. She said, “Steve, you are giving this not so much as a rabbi but rather as a human being on a new pathway after a difficult illness.” She said something like that. I was honored.

I am here and happy in a synagogue that welcomed me over a decade ago and has always helped me feel that I belong. I will never forget each of you who brought me soup, sent me cards and notes and offered so much love. Ruth and Lauren and Geri and so many others made a huge difference.

I am lucky to have good people in my life. I dwell among a community who allow me to feel loving and loved. My family and friends and doctors other caretakers and neighbors, here in New York and in other places, were there for me. I awaken into my own, at least for the time being, cancer-free and chemo-free world ready to take on challenges and full of gratitude.

I think I know what brought me through the awful fog of my illness and that knowledge was realized when I was a young boy. I came to believe that God lived within each of us as a bright light that was always shining, a light that kept me going thru the cancer’s onslaught. I have never been sure about a transcendent god that acts in history but I have always been sure about that light. While some of us are smarter or less smart than others and some more charming and others drab and some more athletic and some ungainly, I believe all of us are imbued with an inner light that matters more than any other attribute and I understand that among all my good fortunes, the good fortune of knowing about that light, is by far my greatest treasure because it is everyone’s greatest treasure. All that is required is realizing that. That light is a divine equalizer. We all have it and we are all due and can offer great love and respect because of it. When I was sick with cancer, that light was my salvation and I think, if we permit, it can be all of our salvations.

The light has had many powerful moments in my life opening me up to the support of an immanent and spiritual divinity but its prior greatest moment happened when I was stranded in the middle of the night as a twenty year old climbing to Zeus’s home at the top of Mt. Olympus in Greece. I had to be rescued by a former Olympic Alpinist named Zolotas. This famous mountain was populated by wolves and glaciers and legends about people who died on it while trying to climb it.

On that mountain it was June and hot--and it was a time when climate actually conformed to the seasons. While climbing, I began laughing at Zeus—thinking and saying out loud ‘Zeus, you are no big deal!’ and while I was laughing, that mountain went suddenly from heat and summer to hail and a thunder storm. When I reached Myticas, the highest peak of the mountain and the actual home of Zeus, Zeus’s anger became clear as the skies darkened and the mountain became treacherous. I had been warned by Mr. Zolotas and an older man who was staying at the mountain Hostel not to continue up that mountain but to

wait for the next morning because it was a three hour hike and three hours up is three hours down. They both said ominously “Darkness on a mountain is certain death!” But foolhardy and a little stupid, this young Texan went on up. Little jumps which had been challenging going up were frightening coming down. The terrain became slick and it actually began hailing....in June.

As darkness became pervasive, I could see the light emanating from the mountain hostel and recalled the legends of people dying and falling into the glacier which was right below me.

I decided to ignore the fact that there was a trail and began going directly toward the hostel. I fell off a doozy of a cliff. I landed on a stone which was not seeable the next day. I began singing and yelling and the old man came and started yelling back—I felt the light and I believed that I was supposed to live and not die on that mountain. Zolotas appeared ---to save me which he did.

He was none too pleased with me; he said that he had told me not to go up and that he had a wife and child in the village of Lichtohoron at the foot of the mountain and, with controlled anger in his voice, he said he had risked his life to save me. But to make a longer story shorter, he got me back. I knew that I was living with the love of god inside and I felt very, very fortunate.

I know that all of us need to find that light inside, whatever we call it, all of us need to feel great gratitude for our plentitude of blessings, that all of us need to know that we are blessed by our humanity and our divinity—AND OUR DIVINITY.

I learned on that mountain that one should never laugh at a god WHEN YOU ARE IN THAT God’s home, even one named Zeus, and I learned from this cancer that the light inside us is what we should be seeking every moment of every day not just when our lives are threatened.

Memories of god’s love came roaring back when I was challenged by cancer and chemotherapy less than a year ago and came through well enough to stand here today and say to so many people here and in my world. Thank you.

The feelings are physiological, emotional, spiritual-- --I am full of a good hope that this world will be better and I will be engaged in doing my little part to make it so.

Life is an amazing adventure---totally unpredictable--the one thing that ties it to God is love and I feel love so abundantly. I have great gratitude, feel great love, and feel more strongly than ever that our most holy attribute is that light I first encountered as a young boy. It has gotten me through a lot and I will continue to look for it and to praise it and to thank god that I am aware of it. My new path will simply be to seek in myself and others that divine light which is basically all that really matters.

L’shana tova u’metucha and thanks to you and the light within us.