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Rosh Hashana 2017

Courage

The following are quotes from a TED Talk from 2015:

If you were a brand, what brand would you be?

That's a question I was asked in an interview—a job interview just several years ago.

Let me tell you, when you're Monica Lewinsky, that's a loaded question.

All of you here today touch marketing and advertising with successful, established and respected companies. You're familiar with what it means to nurture, grow and shape a brand. And while unfortunate, it's likely that at one point or another, you've experienced a brand crisis, when your brand's narrative ran away from you.

But can you imagine what it is like when the brand is you? You personally. Your likeness, your name, your history, your values, your soul?

That's what happened to me in 1998.

You're looking at a woman who was publicly silent for a decade due in part to a brand crisis and branding, or rather how I was branded, by whom and for what purpose. Obviously the publicly silent bit has changed, but only recently.

Now, I'd like to see a show of hands, please. Who here has ever made a mistake that you regretted? Now leave your hand up if everyone in the auditorium knows about that mistake. Not a one of you?

Like me, a few of you may have made your mistake at 22. You may also, like me, have taken wrong turns and fallen in love with the wrong person, maybe even your boss. Unlike me, though, your boss probably wasn't the president of the United States of America.

Not a day goes by that I'm not reminded of my mistake, and I regret that mistake deeply. But, having your narrative stolen can be devastating.

We talk a lot about our right to freedom of expression, but we need to talk more about our responsibility to freedom of expression. We all want to be heard, but let's acknowledge the difference between speaking up with intention and speaking up for attention.

Monica Lewinsky's TED Talk differentiated between speaking up as a courageous act, versus as an act of cowardice. Let us begin with 2 definitions by *Martin Luther King Jr.:*

Courage: noun. An inner resolution to go forward despite the obstacles

Cowardice: noun. A submissive surrender to circumstance

We are living in a historical moment that may well test our patience and our courage, elicit every ounce of every skill we command, break our hearts over and over, and strain our capacity for hope. Each moment, we have a choice. We can accept the way our life is and the situation in the world...or we can have courage and fight to change our circumstances. With courage, we can choose our personal narrative and the narrative of our country rather than feeling apathetic or silenced.

Rachel Naomi Remen tells the story of her uncle, a physician, who received a medal for heroic action in World War II. As a medic, he was embedded with troops who found themselves under enemy fire. Within minutes, the ridge that they occupied was covered with wounded soldiers, and the fighting persisted for 12 hours. Remen's uncle, realizing the men would die if he did not treat them in the midst of battle, strapped his medical supplies to his back and crawled on his belly to one man after the next. He placed tourniquets to stem the blood flow and transcribed notes to loved ones, all under enemy fire. He was honored for saving dozens of lives and brought comfort to many more in their final moments.

Remen was 7 years old when her uncle returned home, and told him how proud she was of him – a war hero - for never being afraid of anything. He told her that, on the contrary, he had never been more terrified in all his life. “But why did they give you a medal then?” she asked. He explained, “Being brave does not mean being unafraid. It often means being afraid and doing it anyway” (Remen, Kitchen Table Wisdom, 50).

What does it mean to have courage? Is it a step forward into the abyss when you are unsure of what comes next? Or about how you will react to a circumstance.

We all have moments in life in which we are a coward – the moments when we ignore something happening in front of us with either apathy or a lack of desire to mix in. Is this avoidance about ego or fear?

When someone joins in gossiping or stands by idly and allows it to happen – what is going through their mind? My guess – they are embarrassed in some way or afraid of the repercussions from the person in their presence.

Is that what cowardice is – fear of rejection?

As much as we don't want to believe that it's true, statistically and historically speaking, even when the stakes are highest, we'd likely do absolutely nothing too.

Rabbi Sharon Brous shares the research that

“it turns out that there are two determinants that change the otherwise reliable and consistent effects of the bystander hypothesis: The first is the witnesses identifying with the victim. If you feel a real sense of kinship – either through gender, religion, race, or nationality, the odds are you will find a way to intervene to save or protect a victim, even at great personal risk. Like the man who turned back into the movie theater to throw himself in front of a mother and her two children as he saw gunfire erupting. Courage – he understood whom he was saving and could identify or in that split second, he could imagine a world without a parent. So, he acted with courageousness.

There is another factor that reliably changes the outcome of the bystander effect: if a person is warned before walking into a simulated crisis: you are about to be thrust into a moral dilemma and you will be judged based on how you respond. Essentially, if someone waves a flag in front of your face saying Moral Conundrum Ahead, you are likely to find your moral compass, and fast.

Today we read the story of Abraham, who is called by Sarah to exile his son, Ishmael and Hagar, his second wife. When Abraham agrees to exile his son and Hagar – was he courageous and passed God’s test or was he a coward and failed? Is there always a clear answer?

And tomorrow we read of the binding of Isaac – Akeidat Yitzhak – Again did Abraham pass or fail his test by agreeing to slaughter his son for God?

Two days of Rosh Hashanah, two Torah readings dealing with moments in which Abraham is tested by God. Two ambiguous examples of either courage or cowardice. Our tradition teaches that these were the last, and perhaps the most awful, of the 10 trials Abraham was forced to undergo, all by the hand of God.

God puts Abraham to the test 10 times. From being called to leave behind everything he knows to starting his life in a foreign place, to sending away one son and nearly killing another, Abraham is put to the test again and again. The trials are unrelenting. Why; is that what love is? What does it say about a God or a person that needs to test you in order to determine your commitment or character flaws?

A few years ago, there was a crazy story of a 30-year-old Russian mogul who faked his own death by staging a car crash (replete with stunt drivers, screenwriters and makeup artists) in order to see how his fiancée would respond to the sight of him sprawled across the ground and covered in blood, and to make his marriage proposal even more romantic (NPR 9.8.12). Perhaps this was the beginning of fake news?!

Rabbi Meir had a similar idea in the Talmud when he decided to test his wife Bruria's love for him by trying to tempt her with seduction from a younger, presumably more handsome student of Torah.

Bruriah was known to be a great scholar and woman of profound integrity, but she ultimately could not help but succumb to the pressures of her suitor (AZ 18b Rashi).

I tend to think of tests of faith and love as ill-conceived and ill-fated; a recipe for relational disaster. But as we have seen fake news, natural disasters, disregard for humanity and war with increasing severity, I wonder if God wants us to believe that all of life is a test. That the way we respond to life's most trying moments – great and small - actually matters. It is like there is a big sign looking straight at us that says WATCH OUT: Moral conundrum ahead –

Me'or Einayim, the 16th century Italian scholar, teaches: This is the lesson of all of the trials: Just as Abraham our father had ten trials, so too every single person is

tried, over the course of his life, with ten trials. The whole of our lives is a series of trials... (Parashat Va-eira).

Rabbi Brous shares:

Each of us faces ten trials in the course of our lifetime. The problem is that we can't tell at any given moment if the dilemma that stands before us is one of the essential tests of our lives. We are compelled to assume that any moment could be the moment. That the way we respond, or don't respond, could come to define us. The theory: if you know you're always being tested, if you walk through life thinking 'maybe this is one of the ones that will really matter' – you'll actually start to live differently.

As a new resident of Montgomery County, I am still paranoid about traffic cameras. As a New Yorker, the standard was to always drive at least 5 miles per hour above the speed limit and if you were driving the allotted speed – someone would be beeping and yelling profanity at you. Speed cameras and even red-light cameras don't exist in NYC. Here in Olney, I am so paranoid that there is a camera watching me for the moment when I am speeding to ticket me– that I actually drive the speed limit –always! Obviously, Montgomery County's speed cameras are a response to the Jewish understanding that we act differently when we believe someone is or might be watching us?!

In Plato's Republic, Glaucon asks Socrates to imagine that a just and righteous man finds the Ring of Gyges the legendary golden band that gives a person the ability to become invisible at will. Will he remain just, or will he steal, kill, and sleep with whomever he'd like – making himself "in all respects like a god among

men"? (Plato's Republic, 360b-d). There is no question, he argues, that without the threat of discovery or recourse, there is not a person in the world who would not pursue his basest appetites. Even the most just, he argues, are good only when they believe people are watching. In other words, if we don't have to do the right thing, we won't. Maybe we really are only good when others are watching. Glaucon may have been right about human nature. So rather than deny or try to fight nature, Torah instead tries to train us to work on the assumption that someone is always watching.

We are charged to build, in the Promised Land, what Michael Waltzer calls a counter Egypt. A place in which human beings are free and tasked to honor their neighbor's dignity through impartial laws, fair judgment, and acts of compassion and love that reaches above the letter of the law.

We read these sacred narratives to discern what it means to be Moses, Aaron and Miriam in a world of Pharaohs. What it means to be Tamar, when you are made to be invisible by a misogynistic legal system that undermines your very humanity. How to hold grief and anguish, like Hannah; how to fight back against injustice like Abraham, even when you are but dust and ashes.

Religion means nothing if not a response to the greatest moral crises and challenges of our day.

Today we begin our reflection. We look at the moments in the past year when we have been tested and we reflect on how we responded. We hope that we acted with courage and that we did not act as a bystander filled with cowardice. We hope we didn't hear the cries of someone asking for help and ignore them or let someone else take the blame for our own mistakes. We evaluate the people we hurt and the moments filled with love. We wonder what God's commentary might say about the way we lived our lives. When did we pass the test? When did we fail?

Eizehu gibbor? Ben Zoma asked. Who is a hero? Hakovesh et yitzro – one who is able to overcome his inclination.

But this is not just the inclination to do evil – the inclination to be ruled by our greed and hunger and desire, our inclination to indulge in undeserved profit, cut corners, cheat the system, cheat our partners.

Hakovesh et yitzro is also about overcoming the inclination to hide. To quietly turn away and slip out the door, rather than confront injustice when we see it.

As Rabbi Brous teaches:

In the language of Netivot Shalom, (riffing on Me'or Eynaim): Every person is called to some shlihut elyona – sent into this world for a higher purpose. Through these trials, he suggests, we are actually achieving what we were put into this world to do.

Each one of us is called to greatness. But we have no idea what our moment is.

For one of you, you may have fulfilled your shlihut elyona – your higher calling - when you called your friend, bereft after her child's death, every day for years.

For another with a parent struggling with dementia and incontinence, it may be changing a parent's diaper and helping them to still feel dignity.

And it's entirely possible that finding the courage to leave an abusive husband – to save your children and yourself – was an act of shlihut elyona – higher calling for another.

And in a world in which the stranger and poor are suffering, anti-Semitism is rampant and neo-Nazis are parading down America's streets – what are you doing to fulfil your shlihut elyona?

We are caught between two conflicting cultural impulses – on one hand, the time-tested, quantifiable human impulse to do nothing, to hide as if helpless or to walk away when it matters most.

And on the other hand, our Jewish impulse – the legacy of Abraham – to understand that every single moment is a test. That every battle and every attempt at peace is a test. Every act of submission and every act of defiance is a

test. How you respond when the store clerk miscalculates in your favor, how you respond when your professor professes bigotry – all of these are tests.

After the flood, God tells Noah to come out of the ark. Commentators and midrashim debate whether Noah needed God's permission to disembark the Ark.

The moral Rabbi Rabinovitch drew - was that when it comes to rebuilding a shattered world, you do not wait for permission. God has already given us this responsibility. God expects us to move forward and rebuild.

This year, we will all face different types of trials.

But I can guarantee one thing: *All of us will be challenged to restore dignity to another person.*

So here is your warning: MORAL CONUNDRUM AHEAD.

With each choice, consider:

What if you were put in the world to do this- but your fear paralyzes you?

What if this trial is the way that you will fulfill your shlihut elyona – your higher purpose?

What if this decision is the one that comes to define you?

Heschel once said, ““I am the heir to a great religious tradition, and as such it is not only my right but my duty to speak in its name as best I can.”

A prophet usually was not a popular person but that did not stop the prophet from speaking its truth and speaking out against injustices. Prophets had the courage to pioneer, to do something new, to take the road less travelled, to venture out into the unknown. That is what Abraham and Sarah had done when they left their land, their home and their father’s house. It is what the Israelites did in the days of Moses when they journeyed forth into the wilderness, guided only by a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night.

Will you be a prophet? Will you find the courage?

God, give us the insight and the strength to feel responsible for what happens in our world. Help us to act bravely and decisively like our prophets – to see in every moment, great and small, the opportunity to be courageous.

Ken Yehi Ratzon – God, may it be your will..

Shana tovah.