

Hitting The Wall

Rosh Hashanah 5783¹

The US State Department recently issued an urgent travel advisory designed to deter anyone from visiting Ukraine. Those who decide to visit there anyway, in contravention of this advisory, should be prepared to do the following², and I quote:

- Prepare a contingency plan for emergency situations.
- Avoid demonstrations and crowds. Draft a will and designate appropriate insurance beneficiaries and/or power of attorney.
- Discuss a plan with loved ones regarding care/custody of children, pets, property, belongings, non-liquid assets (collections, artwork, etc.), funeral wishes, etc.
- Share important documents, login information, and points of contact with loved ones so that they can manage your affairs if you are unable to return as planned to the United States. Leave DNA samples with your medical provider in case it is necessary for your family to access them.
- Last but not least, get a COVID vaccine before traveling.

¹ I am grateful to Rabbi Shaanan Gelman for his partnership and input in preparing this sermon

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<https://ua.usembassy.gov/message-for-u-s-citizens-considering-travel-to-uman-f-or-rosh-hashanah-u-s-embassy-kyiv-ukraine/>

You might be wondering why *anyone* would want to travel there in the middle of a bloody, brutal war. Yes, in recent weeks, the conflict seems to have turned. Ukraine has recaptured thousands of miles of occupied territories, using the fighting spirit of which Jews were usually on the receiving end, and the Russians are fleeing like unprepared cowards. Still, millions of Ukrainians have been displaced, living as refugees in other countries. The specter of rockets and hand to hand combat still hovers over many cities, once-proud boulevards have been reduced to rubble and there is still a threat of nuclear reactor explosions. This was of particular interest to the tens of thousands of (mostly male) followers of Reb Nachman of Breslov, who were hoping to make the annual pilgrimage to his gravesite in Uman for Rosh Hashanah. Reb Nachman reportedly promised anyone who spends Rosh Hashanah at his gravesite that they will experience salvation from any trials and tribulations they are experiencing. In his words, he promised to “pull them out of Gehennom by their payos.” People travel there annually in the hopes of a change in fate- for children to be born, for professional success, for a partner in marriage and even for a favorable verdict in an impending criminal proceeding. Indeed, stories abound of those who have experienced a dramatic change of fortune, for the better, after visiting. Even those who don’t necessarily believe in the *segulah* attached to this pilgrimage report that the *tefillah* is truly something to behold, a magnificent and spiritually uplifting experience unmatched anywhere else. Would this year be any different, a year to stay home? Or would this be a year to renew commitment and double efforts to get there? Thousands

of people still chose the second option, and went. The uncertainty surrounding the travel to Uman is emblematic of a larger question, though, that applies to all of us. Considering the myriad challenges we confront in our lives- interpersonal, religious, financial, medical and psychological- what do we do when we confront an obstacle in life, known in the world of chassidic thought as a *מניעה*? When we hit a wall, when we encounter one closed door after another, is God saving us from a course of action or a path in life that is harmful to us? Or do the walls in our way play the role Professor Randy Pausch described in his Last Lecture,

“The brick walls are there for a reason. The brick walls are not there to keep us out. The brick walls are there to give us a chance to show how badly we want something. Because the brick walls are there to stop the people who don’t want it badly enough. They’re there to stop the other people.”

So is God placing brick walls in our way to see if we are willing and faithful enough to forge onward?

Linking the Torah readings of the two days of Rosh Hashanah is the story of Yitzchak: On the first day, we read of his long-awaited birth after decades of infertility and Yishmael’s negative influence on him. The reading on the second day is dedicated to

God's inscrutable demand that the very same child be sacrificed at the hands of his father, Avraham. As if this series of challenges wasn't daunting enough, the Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni) tells us about a set of obstacles that stood in the way of Avraham's fulfillment of God's commandment:

ילקוט שמעוני תורה פרשת וירא [המתחיל ברמז פב]

כיון שלא שמעו לשטן הלך ונעשה לפנייהם כנהר גדול שלא יוכלו לעבור אמר אברהם אם יורדים הנערים מתירא אני שמא יטבעו ירד עמדו להם המים עד צואריהם תלה אברהם את עיניו לשמים אמר רבון העולמים נגלית עלי ואמרת לי אני יחיד ואתה יחיד הודע שמי בכל העולם והעלה בנך לעולה ולא הרהרתי אחר דבריך ולא עכבתי מאמריך ועכשיו באו מים עד נפש אם טובע יצחק בני היאך יתיחד שמך מיד גער הקדוש ברוך הוא בשטן והלך לו:

Satan appeared before Avraham in the form of an overflowing river, threatening to overtake anything and anyone who tried to pass. As the river engulfed him and reached his neck, Avraham called out to God, declaring "Master of the world, You know well, that the day you designated me to place my own son upon the altar, I never questioned you, and I did not delay. Now that the water has reached my neck, how will I be able to sanctify Your Name if Yitzchak drowns?" At that moment, The Holy One rebuked Satan, and he abated.

This Midrash was made famous by the Maharil, Rabbi Yaakov Moelin, the codifier of much of what we now know as Ashkenazic custom, who cited it as a reason we recite Tashlich by a body of water on Rosh Hashanah. But of course, this Midrash is not about Tashlich. It is the story of someone trying to live a God-fearing life who is thwarted and challenged at every turn. Avraham is the first Jew who was confronted with the existential problem of מניעה. And how does he choose to respond? By going forward - by taking one daring step after another into the unknown, because he senses that it is what God wants from him.

And yet, this is not the only obstacle standing in Avraham's way. When the moment of the *akeidah* arrives, the angel calls out to him and orders him not to touch the child:

בראשית פרק כב

(יב) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהֵי-שָׁמַיָּהּ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי-הַנֶּזֶר וְאֵל־תַּעַשׂ לוֹ מֵאֲוִמָּה כִּי עַתָּה יָדַעְתִּי כִּי־יִירָא אֱלֹהִים אֶתָּה וְלֹא תִשָּׁכַח אֶת־בְּנֶךָ

אֶת־יְחִידָךָ מִמֶּנִּי:

Once again, Avraham is stopped while attempting to perform his task. Only this time, the מניעה was not a spur to action- it was a sign he had gone far enough. It was time to put down the knife. When we consider all that Avraham endured, we wonder: How was he supposed to know from the angel that God really wanted him to stop? Why is it that when the angel appears to him as a river, it was an act of Satan, but when the angel appeared to him as he held the knife, on the top of the

mountain, that was a voice he had to heed? Perhaps it was an angelic manifestation designed as yet another test of his resolve. Would he still be willing to go through with it? Was the voice of the angel authentic?

The Midrash³ adds that Avraham indeed struggled mightily with this decision, as he thought it was yet another of Satan's many diabolical schemes. So convinced was he of this, that he was willing to take a drop of blood from Yitzchak's neck to prove his devotion⁴. It wasn't until God Himself appeared and reassured him, that Avraham relented. So how does Avraham know- indeed, how do any of us know- when to throw in the towel and accept that something isn't the will of God, and when to stay the course? If only there were a blueprint in the words of our Torah and our sages for negotiating life's most daunting choices. Fortunately, the saga of Avraham Avinu provides us with some guidance in exactly this area. The answer comes down to one word: *inertia*. When the task at hand was to take his beloved son and summit the mountain- the son for whom he waited his entire life- the *yetzer hara* gave every reason not to go. What did Avraham do instead? He combatted inertia by waking up early in the morning, turning his doubt into conviction, binding his son extra tight. In that sense, the Akiedah was never about Avraham *shechting* his son- it was about pushing himself against the voices in his head that told him he needed to do nothing. On the other hand, once he had bound Yitzchak and held the *shechita* knife in his hand, momentum was working in the

³ Mirash Addagah Vayeira 22:12

⁴ Ibid

opposite direction. At that moment, even an angel wasn't enough to stop Avraham. He had been so bent on following through with his task that he had to do *something*, to draw some blood at least. אוציא ממנו טיפת דם At that moment, the test was to lower his knife and seek out alternatives. Whenever the little voice calls to you and says “atta boy...,” when you feel no compelling force to change something about yourself, when you feel propelled to do exactly what you’ve been doing and follow the path of least resistance, that is nothing more than confirmation bias that must be vigorously counteracted.

Chani and Reb Shloime Bochner⁵ were a typical Chassidic couple. They married young, and assumed that, in short order, their home would be filled with the sounds of the laughter of children and the pitter patter of little feet. Sadly, like Avraham and Sarah, like Yitzchak and Rivka, like Rachel Imeinu and Chana- and like so many people we know and love in our lives- they experienced fertility challenges. Test after test, procedure after procedure, traveling far and wide to consult with the premier fertility specialists, visiting the graves of many tzaddikim and receiving blessings from living ones- every avenue was explored, and every one of them proved futile. Almost two decades had passed, and after one such appointment, the doctor they were seeing, who was supposed to be a source of optimism and potential, told them that they should begin thinking in terms of

⁵ <https://mishpacha.com/born-of-hope/>

closure. Unlike our forefathers, who were granted salvation through prayer and patience, their *yeshua* was not to be. Can you imagine a bigger *meni'a* than this one? Especially for someone in a community that prizes children, whose rhythms revolve around lifecycle events. How would the Bochners move forward? What did God want from them, anyway? What does God want from us when He says no? The Bochners realized that during their fertility journey, they amassed an enormous amount of information that could be useful to others. No one in Boro Park, and the chassidish community in general, talked about infertility, though many surely suffered from it. Rabbis had no idea about the latest procedures and were not in dialogue with fertility specialists to be able to render halachic rulings. And the cost of fertility treatments was astronomical, itself a serious *meni'ah*. Chani decided that they had the opportunity to help others who were navigating the same journey they did, by sharing the information they gathered and the contacts they made. She proposed forming an organization to do just that, but Shloime was reticent. After all the *meni'os* he had confronted, it would have been eminently reasonable for him to say, "I guess God has closed this door for us- I don't want to relive my pain anymore. I prefer to remain private." But, like Chana, her biblical namesake, Chani persisted. One Erev Yom Kippur, when parents everywhere bless their children with the beautiful and special blessing of the day, Shloime was standing in the doorway of their beautiful, well appointed and sadly quiet home, bedecked in his kittel and tallis, about to leave for Kol Nidrei. Chani turned to him

and said, “Shloime, I need you to do this with me. Please.” Finally, he relented- and the organization Bonei Olam was born. Shloime and Chani Bochner are **directly responsible** for the birth of over **10,000 children** in six countries, with over twenty regional chapters.

It can be daunting, when confronted with a rocky marriage, to decide what's next.

The decision to change careers, after investing years in a professional path, is a momentous one, as is deciding whether or not to make *aliyah*. It can be

overwhelming and draining to deal with the challenges of a child who requires special educational attention, and the decisions that constantly need to be made.

Suffering from addiction is a daily struggle, and just because I conquered yesterday doesn't mean that Satan won't appear to me tomorrow. In the face of all of these *meni'os*, and so many others that are part of our daily lives, it is easy to fall into a mode of inertia, doing what is safe and not growing from the obstacle itself. When faced with these challenges, it would behoove us to recall the timeless words of Reb Nachman (Likutei Moharan 115),

ומי שהוא בר דעת, הוא מסתכל בהמניעה, ומוצא שם הבורא ב"ה,

Whoever is a person of intellect can look at the obstacle, and that is where God can be found. No matter what our obstacles look like, Rosh Hashanah reminds us that we *can* move beyond what is comfortable, beyond the status quo- and extend ourselves to do what is right, and what will lead to our personal growth. It won't be

easy, of course, but it will be rewarding. Our souls, our bodies, our relationships, our families, our communities, our Homeland and our planet will all benefit. With God as our partner, may this be the year we succeed.