

Sermon for Rosh HaShanah Morning
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Temple Beth El of Boca Raton
By Rabbi Daniel Levin

When I was a kid, each year for Memorial Day weekend, our family would head off for a weekend of family camp. We would jump in the car and head off to YMCA Camp Letts, a rustic "Y" camp on the shore of the Chesapeake Bay for a weekend of archery, horse-back riding, soccer and football, canoeing and sailing. I always looked forward to these weekends, and invariably, every single year, it rained.

I mean it RAINED. I can't remember a single year when it didn't rain. It usually started on Friday night and by Saturday, there was a good, chilly, soaking rain coming down as we made our way to the dining hall for breakfast. And as the water poured down from the heavens, the camp director, a jovial red-faced man named Jack would always begin the day with what has grown to be my favorite ditty: "Zippity do da."

I love Zippity Do Da. It's the happiest song ever written. Scientific studies show that it is physically impossible to frown while singing Zippity Do Da. Try it. And somehow, after a hearty rendition of Zippity Do Da, we were ready to face the day. Canoeing in the rain didn't seem so bad, nor did playing a game of slippery-sidey mud sloppy football. I credit our morning Zippity Do Da to making those rainy weekends so memorial and enjoyable.

But while Zippity Do Da can shake away the rainy day blues, our world today is not simply caught in a rainy day, or even a downpour. We find ourselves, many of us, on this Rosh HaShanah, this first day of the year 5771 buffeted by the winds of a storm our country hasn't seen in more than 80 years. Businesses have suffered from plummeting sales, many of us have lost our jobs or seen our closest friends lose theirs. Many of us have seen hard-earned savings evaporate and rainy-day funds exhausted. We are exhausted, tired of being made to constantly do more with less for less.

Others for whom the economy is less of a worry are dealing with illness and suffering, for ourselves, or a loved-one, or a friend. We are sandwiched between taking care of our children and taking care of our parents. We are watching as our friends and loved-ones decline, coping with the extraordinary frustration that comes from the mind or body refusing to do what

the spirit would bid it do, and still others who have lost the will to even engage the spirit.

These times are so extraordinarily difficult. Members of our congregation are unemployed, some on welfare, some even homeless. With all due respect my friend Jack from Camp Letts in Maryland - Zippity Do Da just isn't going to cut it.

But what will? What will help us find the strength, the gumption, the sheer spiritual and physical will to move through this dark and difficult time? It seems almost cruel to have to read the Unetaneh Tokef prayer this morning, while knowing that there are so many of us who are beset this year by fire or water, sword or beast, hunger or thirst, or ... something.

Does God deal out afflictions like a deck of cards - a bankruptcy for you, unemployment for you, cancer for you, dementia for you? Does God really care if I do everything right, if I follow the honest and good path, if I act with integrity and compassion? You can do everything right and still find yourself overwhelmed by forces beyond our control. You can eat healthy and exercise and still get sick. You can be a hard-working and honest businessman and still go broke. We have worry, and we have fear. We cry out to God and we wonder: is God even listening?

Mitch Albom, in his book *Have A Little Faith*¹, shares with us the story of Henry Covington. Henry was the second-youngest of seven kids - in their tiny apartment "four brothers slept in one room, three sisters slept in another, and the rats occupied the kitchen." During his childhood, Henry's mother did two years in prison and his father died when he was just a teenager. His parents loved him and he loved them, but the pain he bore inside made him angry and bitter. Eventually, Henry became a small-time drug kingpin, earning tens of thousands of dollars a month. But then one day, he tried the product he was selling, and soon it all came crashing down. The addiction became all consuming and soon Henry was broke, strung out, and desperate, so desperate in fact, that he rallied some friends, drove to another dealer's house, pulled out a gun, demanded jewelry, cash, and drugs. He left the jewelry and the money for his friends and kept the drugs.

"Later that night, after he'd smoked and sniffed and guzzled alcohol as well, paranoia set in, and Henry realized the dealers knew who he was and where he lived. And they would want revenge. He yelled at his wife to keep the lights off and to stay inside with his daughter. Henry went outside with his

¹Mitch Albom. *Have A Little Faith*. New York: Hyperion 2009.

shotgun and hid behind a row of trash cans. He trembled with worry, shame, anxiety, and fright, and called out to God, "If I promise to give myself to you, will you save me tonight?" He wondered if with everything he'd done, a troubled child, a delinquent teen, a bad man, whether God would hear him.

When we call out to God, we wonder whether God will hear us too. When we find ourselves alone, in the dark, our hearts racing with anxiety and fear, we wonder whether we should call out to God too. We wonder if there is a God who can hear, if there is a God who will answer.

It's the question that jumps straight out of this morning's Torah portion. God tells Abraham to take his son, his only son, whom he loves, Isaac, and offer him up as a sacrifice on a mountaintop that God will show him. The Torah tells us that early in the morning, Abraham prepares and sets out with his son and two servants. And they travel for three days.

How did Abraham make it through those three days? With the anxiety, the fear, that sinking feeling we all feel in our hearts when we have to walk toward a foreboding and maybe even dangerous future. How do you keep walking? Knowing what might be coming next, what you fear is on the horizon, wondering if the worst case scenario is the real-case scenario - how do you keep walking?

It isn't easy. Psalm 130 expresses it with elegant simplicity - "MiMa'amakim K'ratcha, Adonai. Adonai Shim-a V'Koli - out of the depths I call to You, Adonai. O Lord, listen to my cry." We want there to be answers, we want to understand the purpose of our suffering, the meaning in our pain. Why, we cry out, why, why why? We think if we could only understand the purpose then we could endure the pain.

But does "why" really help us? I once knew a family where the father was dying from lung cancer. It was painfully ironic, for the man actually worked as an administrator at Memorial Sloane Kettering in the department devoted to researching lung cancer. One day, his wife came to see me and we sat together in the sanctuary.

"I just want to know why," she said. "Why him? Why us? Why now?"

What if I could have known the answer? What if I could have told her why. What if the answer was that when he was 15, he went to a party and tried smoking, and then realized that he never wanted to try that again? And what if that one try at smoking was just enough to cause a mutation that 30 years later

would turn into a pernicious, metastatic lung cancer? Does that help?

In wanting to know "why", what she wanted was an answer to an even bigger question - "What now?" "How do I go on into a scary and uncertain future? How will I be able to live? How will I make it through the darkness?"

For three days Abraham wanders with his son and his servants and the awful, but God - God is silent. Seemingly absent. A presence hidden and distant. How lonely must that journey have seemed, to Abraham, to Isaac, to the servants. How lonely do our own journeys seem these days.

How did Abraham pass the night along the way? What did he do with his hours in the dark? Like Abraham, like Henry Covington, we lie awake at night, wondering what tomorrow will bring. We stare into the darkness, wondering how we're going to make it through. How will we take care of those we love who depend on us? How will we take care of ourselves when we feel weak and helpless? How can we get up in the morning and spend another day wandering in the wilderness?

Ultimately the answer is faith. Faith is the belief in that which you cannot prove. Faith is the sense of certainty that arises from a belief in the unshakable power of an idea. Faith is the humbling recognition that while we are not the sole masters of our destiny, and that the broken world in which we live may thwart our ultimate ambitions, still we keep on walking toward a promised land we believe to be out there, somewhere, if we persevere.

The first element of faith we must build is faith in ourselves. In the famous flight of Apollo 13, a serious explosion threatened the lives of the astronauts. Looking at the ever increasing list of failures, Gene Kranz, the flight director asked: "What do we have on the spacecraft that's good?" So often in facing a challenge or a crisis our minds focus only on what's broken, or what's missing. We may assemble a puzzle of hundreds of pieces, but our eye only focuses on the one that is missing. Finding faith in ourselves requires us to turn not to what's missing but to what we have not lost. Finding faith in ourselves demands that we take an inventory of our talent, our capability, our blessings. It means believing that we can marshal the resources to get where we need to go, to say, as Gene Kranz told his team at mission control: "Failure is not an option."

Abraham can keep walking in the wilderness because he has developed a measure of faith. He has met all the challenges put before him, and he has emerged through each one. In meeting

life's challenges he does not come through unscarred, but he comes through with the experience and wisdom that tells him that he will come through this trial too.

Henry Covington did not die that night. When the sun rose, he slid the shotgun under his bed and lay down next to his wife and child. It was Easter Sunday. He thought about his life. He had stolen and lied and waved guns in people's faces. He had blown all his money on drugs. He got on his knees and began to pray. Then he embarked on a self-imposed detox where he couldn't eat for three days or barely even move. He realized that he needed to make a new reality for himself, to change his life for himself, for his wife, for his child.

But while faith in ourselves is crucial to our ability to move forward in difficult times, we need more. If all we have is faith in ourselves, then ultimately we will find ourselves engaged in the greatest idolatry of all - the worship of the self. We need to believe in something greater than ourselves. We need to know that there are higher and holier purposes to our lives, that there is something greater than ourselves that is worth fighting for.

Abraham and Isaac ascend to the summit of Mount Moriah. Abraham builds the altar, arranges the wood, binds his son Isaac and lays him on the altar on top of the wood. He lifts the knife. And what happens? Isaac looks into his father's eyes. Abraham looks into the eyes of his son. And as they look into each other's eyes, something extraordinary happens. In that moment of connection between father and son, God's silence is broken. God speaks: "Do not raise your hand against the boy nor do anything to him." In that moment of meeting, Isaac's face reveals, for Abraham, the hidden face of God. Abraham even names the place *Adonai Yireh* - God will see, for it was on that mountain that *Adonai Yeraeh* - God is seen.

When he recovered, Henry Covington went to the Pilgrim Assemblies International Church in New York where he studied with the pastor Bishop Roy Brown. Eventually, Henry was ordained a deacon and his family moved to an exceptionally poor neighborhood in Detroit where Henry started the I Am My Brother's Keeper Ministry at a large broken-down church on Trumbull Avenue. The plaster was peeling and there was a large hole in the roof.

Henry spent his days preaching hope to the desperate. He drove around with donated food and fed the hungry. He opened his own home to men and women who were homeless, people he hardly knew but understood that they needed a break. He opened the doors of his church to men and women and children who had

nowhere else to sleep. He led drug addicts to become sober. To so many who felt like God had abandoned them, Henry became the image of God in their lives. His desperate parishioners, most poor, some still addicted to drugs, many often homeless and penniless, heard in his sermons the voice of God, telling them that if they would keep walking, then God would walk with them. People saw in his eyes the light of God's presence piercing through the darkness.

As we wander through the wilderness together, we need to become the face of God for each other. We need to see, in each other, the divine partners we need to make it through this journey. We need to be the ones who light up the darkness with our love and God's presence. We need to build lives that are devoted to helping others find the strength we all need to get to where we need to go. When people wonder if there is hope, let us be the ones to say, put your faith in God and put your trust in me.

We need to put ourselves out for each other. There are so many people in our congregation who are looking for work, but what are we all doing to help each other find a job? So many people need the support of a community, but what are doing to support the community? So many people are suffering in the dark, but what are we doing to ease their way?

In the aftermath of the earthquake in Haiti, an amazing group of Israelis volunteered to help. They were from an organization called ZAKA, a group of ultra-orthodox Jewish men who do extremely difficult and extraordinary work. Whenever there is a disaster, they are the ones who go and make sure that all the human remains are cared for with appropriate dignity and respect.

They were assigned to a school which had collapsed, and they assumed they were there to take care of the bodies of some of the hundreds of thousands who were killed. But to their surprise, when they arrived, they realized that there were people alive beneath the rubble whom they could rescue. They worked for several days, and then it was Friday afternoon. Shabbat was coming.

They stopped their work, and lit candles. They found some wine and made Kiddush. They said their evening prayers. And they went right back to work, for Jewish law teaches that you can violate all the laws of Shabbat if you can save a life. And it doesn't matter if it's a Jewish life. For our tradition teaches that God at the beginning created just one person to teach us that if you save a single human life, it is as if you saved the entire world.

What Abraham realized was that in saving his son he was saving himself. What Henry Covington realized was that in living in service to others, he was living in service to God. What we all will realize when we open our hearts to each other and pledge our lives to service to something greater, even as we struggle with our own concerns and worry, we will sleep easier each night, and wake up each morning to a renewed sense of purpose and strength to continue our way through the wilderness.

I pray that 5771 will be a year of blessing for us all - a year of health and goodness and prosperity. I pray that as we walk together on this difficult and uncertain road, that we will find strength in the knowledge that we walk with caring, loving, and good companions. I pray that in this New Year we will all be the face of God to each other, that we will provide the answer to each other's prayers, and that together we will eventually find our way to a promised land of love, fulfillment, holiness, and peace.