

TRANSITIONS

KOL NIDRE 5777

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A few years ago I was introduced to Dannan Parry's poignant essay, "The Parable of the Trapeze--Turning the Fear of Transformation into the Transformation of Fear." This piece resonates with the themes embedded in these 10 Days of Awe. It moves us beyond the past and the present—and hurls us into the abyss that leads to the future.

Parry wrote:

"Sometimes I feel that my life is a series of trapeze swings. I'm either hanging on a trapeze bar swinging along, or, for a few moments in my life, I'm hurtling across space in between trapeze bars.

Most of the time, I spend my life hanging on for dear life to my trapeze-bar-of-the-moment. It carries me along at a certain steady rate of swing and I have the feeling that I'm in control of my life. I know most of the right questions and even some of the answers.

But every once in a while, as I'm merrily, or even not-so-merrily swinging along, I look out ahead of me into the distance and what do I see?

I see another trapeze bar swinging toward me. It's empty and I know, in that place in me that knows, that this new trapeze bar has my name on it.... In my heart of hearts I know that, for me to grow, I must release my grip on this present, well-known bar and move to the new one.

Each time it happens to me I hope, no, I pray, that I won't have to let go of my old bar completely before I grab the new one. But in my knowing place, I know that I must release my grasp on my old bar and, for some moment in time, I must hurtle across space before I can grab onto the new bar.

Each time I am filled with terror. It doesn't matter that in all my previous hurtles across the void of unknowing I have always made it. I am each time afraid that I will miss, that I will be crushed on unseen rocks in the bottomless chasm between bars. I do it anyway. Perhaps this is the essence of what the mystics call the faith experience. No guarantees, no net, no insurance policy, but do it anyway because somehow to keep hanging on to that old bar is no longer on the list of alternatives. So, for an eternity that can last a microsecond or a thousand lifetimes, I soar across the dark void of "the past is gone, the future is not yet here."

It's called transition.

For us this evening, this Yom Kippur of 5777 is our Transition Zone – we are suspended this day between the year that has ended and the New Year unfolding before us. We hang between our misdeeds of the past and our resolve to better as individuals, parents, children, spouses, partners, siblings or friends. We hold onto our trapeze bar hoping that we have enough momentum to break away from this past year’s burdens and hurl ourselves toward a more promising, less stress- induced future, all the time knowing we have no assurance as to what that future may hold. At the same time, Jewish tradition teaches us that forward motion is not possible unless we engage in *T’shuva*—in turning and returning...to ourselves, our loved ones our God. Our trapeze bar does not swing straight, rather it zigzags between time and place.

On Yom Kippur, each of us seeks the path that will lead us into a safe, healthy and secure New Year. Would that finding that path be as easy as turning on our spiritual GPS and requesting the easy or direct route to get us there. Would that we could imitate migrating birds that just know when to head south and intuitively know the route. Unfortunately, that road is neither easy for us to find nor simple to navigate.

Jewish tradition suggests that to move ahead in our lives we may need to turn or return to previous places and times that gave us direction and purpose. *Teshuvah* is about turning and finding our way home. But what if “returning” is impossible? Suppose that path is forever blocked!

For some of us, the place to which we desperately crave to return can no longer exist on our road map. How can we return to places and times of fulfillment and joy, when we can no longer embrace the source of our greatest joy—a loving husband, a playful child, a caring parent, a supportive sister, an adored wife, a trusted friend.... Our loved ones upon whom we relied and depended, whose lives complimented our own—provided us with balance...sanity...and whose fading smile we only now glimpse through the eye of memory—no matter how fervently we pray—how we bargain with God for a different outcome—we can’t bring back those whom we desperately miss.

And there are individuals in this sanctuary--who know what it’s like to stretch to make ends meet—as careers have derailed, financial security evaporated. Prior to the chanting of *Avinu Malkeinu* I read a piece from the New Reform *Machzor, Mishkan HaNefesh*—a piece that dares to acknowledge what so many feel in our hearts--that no one in this sanctuary

is immune from misfortune—who this night, consider themselves a statistic of the walking wounded. The last line of that prayer is our appeal to God—to cause us to have faith when our daily reality makes praise of God challenging, at best. And for those who struggle with debilitating and devastating illness—patients and caregivers alike—who pray that the New Year return them to a life of health and to a daily routine void of doctors, hospitals and tests. Do these individuals sit in the driver’s seat and map a course to their desired destiny, or are they merely passengers on a ride they cannot totally control.

God willing, most of us will not encounter insurmountable hurdles in this New Year; yet, we also know that no one has a crystal ball to guarantee or assure us how this year will play out. The present may be safe or scary, comfortable or contentious, but two facts are certain: 1) the future will come and 2) No one knows what that the future holds. This zone of uncertainty renders us vulnerable, and we can’t predict how we shall respond to life’s challenges. So when our trapeze bar swings us toward another bar--encrusted with chronic emotional or physical pain-- how do we transition through those difficult encounters? How do we emerge from

them with greater wholeness and less resentment or anger? Are there words or Jewish rituals that can help us on our journey?

I'd like to suggest that one particular prayer, whose underlying theme is woven into the High Holy Day liturgical fabric—provides us with direction. On both *Rosh HaShanah* and *Yom Kippur* we read the sobering *Unataneh Tokef* prayer—a prayer that gives us an eerie glimpse into our possible future. It's last line--that hangs like a dangling preposition, identifies three actions that can help us temper judgment's severe decree: *Teshuva*—Repentance; *Tefila*-Prayer; *Tzedkah*—Righteous deeds or charity.

I would not be surprised if there is more than a few people here tonight who are shaking their heads—expressing disagreement with the idea that by repenting, or praying or doing *tzedakah* we can shield ourselves from premature death, or physical pain, or incapacitating illness? Throughout my rabbinic career, I have held the hands of congregants who gazed at me through tears...unable to understand why her son had to die in a car crash...or why his four -year old grandson developed a malignant, inoperable tumor... Or why her college daughter perished on Pan Am flight 103. If their loved ones had prayed more fervently or performed more acts of *Tzedkah*—would their fates have been altered?

In 1981 Rabbi Marc Saperstein wrote an article about the *Unataneh Tokef* prayer's final line. His interpretation provides us with the lens through which to view this line suggesting that it can assist us in responding to the inevitable pain and anger that accompanies our losses and disappointments in life. Originally, the last line of our prayer had two possible Hebrew texts. The *Yerushalimi Talmud* reads: *T'shuva, Tefila, U'tzedakah mevatlin et hagezeirah*: They annul the evil decree. A later version, the one included in our *machzor*, changed the Hebrew text to read: "*U'teshuvah, u't'fila, u'tzedakah ma'avirin et ro'a hagezeirah*"—

Repentance, prayer and *tzedakah* cause the evil of the decree to pass.

In his article Rabbi Saperstein suggested that this translation frees us to take control when paralyzing doom swings our way.

He wrote:

"Death, sickness, impoverishment, tragic as they may be, are not identical with evil. They do bear a potential for truly evil consequences. They can poison, embitter, fill us with self-pity, destroy a marriage, blind us to the needs of others, turn us away from God. But the evil consequences of even the most fearsome decree are not inevitable. If penitence, prayer and charity cannot change the external reality, if they cannot arrest the

malignant cancer, they can indeed ensure that the evil potential in that reality will not become actual and enduring, but will pass. They can enable us to transcend the evil of the decree. “

Although we cannot change the external realities of our lives, we can control how we respond to them. We can choose to let go of our trapeze bar that is encased in bitterness, anger, spite, or sadness. Indeed, in order for us not to be consumed by the pain we encounter, we must keep a sharp lookout for a new trapeze heading our way. We need to forge a transition that enables us to leave behind our pain and paralysis.

We have many examples of individuals who can teach us to navigate through this difficult transition and emerge whole, more focused and even renewed. On *Rosh HaShanah* I spoke of the impact of 9/11 on our city—our synagogue. I would like to share a personal reflection. Fifteen years ago, I found myself conducting Yom Kippur services in a most unusual and most sacred place. The setting was a small room ...linoleum flooring...desk chairs placed in multiple circles...no window treatments...no smiling greeters at the door... no cantor...no ark...no *Torah*. There were off set copies of a condensed *Yom Kippur* liturgy placed neatly at the back of the room. The congregants were not particularly well-dressed and the group

that gathered seemed distant...distracted...pre-occupied. When it came time to recite the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer, I sensed their discomfort and my own. I put down my *machzor*, and instead of reading the prayer--we talked about their discomfort with the prayer and their palpable anger...at the terrorists...and at God. I shared Rabbi Saperstein's interpretation of the text. I knew, in my knowing place, that these men and women needed and deserved a radically different interpretation of this prayer. "Who shall live and who shall die." My congregation that morning consisted of volunteers from Ground Zero—men and women who witnessed the aftermath of 911 - both in the faces of those who survived the towers' implosion--and those who mourned the death of loved ones. Our sanctuary that morning was the Red Cross headquarters in Brooklyn. Despite the horror some of them had witnessed, they channeled their negativity and hurt into life affirming acts---the performed the mitzvah of consoling the bereaved... often providing non-verbal comfort to the inconsolable... Their large, enveloping hugs provided the grief stricken with the soft shoulders necessary to absorb the mourner's tears.

We can also be inspired by Marcia Kannery's story. Marcia is the president of the Dialogue Project in Brooklyn, an organization committed to

fostering dialogue between Muslims and Jews in America. Marcia helped found the Dialogue Project, not out of some left-wing liberal, rose-colored glasses desire. No, her passion emerged from profound personal pain and loss. While living in Israel Marcia's life was forever changed when her fiancée was killed in a terrorist attack. Two trapeze bars reeled towards her...one drenched in all-consuming loss, anger and hatred. The other, wrapped in tolerance, dialogue and coalition. Although her fiancée's violent death could have unleashed an insidious evil within Marcia, she chose – *ma'averin et roa ha'g'zeirah*—she chose to let the evil pass...to dedicate her life to actualizing the biblical vision of turning spears into pruning hooks.

And, in the recent best seller *When Breath Becomes Air*, Paul Kalanithi, an accomplished neurosurgeon about to begin the most rewarding chapter of his life—all his dreams about to be realized--was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. The book chronicles his life from immediately preceding the diagnosis through the last days of his life---He died before writing the last chapter. His wife, Lucy, literally became his ghost-writer. *When Breath Become Air* is a roadmap for how we, when we feel most out of control, when faced with a unique challenge for which

there is no script, how we o grasp hold of that wobbly trapeze bar—and infuse the ultimate life transition with meaning, providing a legacy for those who will follow. Sadly, each one of us here tonight knows someone who is battling or has succumbed to a horrific disease—ovarian cancer, ALS, heart disease, Parknsons, to name a few. Paul Kalanithi reminded us that one of the early meanings of patient is ‘one who endures hardship without complaint.’ The weeks and months leading to their death are often consumed by doctor’s appointments, treatment, pain, medication, depression, loving albeit helpless family and friends. In the epilogue, his wife wrote, “During the last year of his life, Paul wrote relentlessly, fueled by purpose, motivated by a ticking clock.” Earlier in the book he stated, “I had trained for years to actively engage with death, to grapple with it, like Jacob with the angel, and, in so doing, to confront the meaning of life.” Kalenithi, in his book, echoed the teachings of Victor Frankel, who like Kalanithi, was an author and physician—a psychiatrist. Frankel, though, was also a Holocaust survivor who wrote the profound book, *Man’s Ultimate Search for Meaning*. Frankel wrote “*Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way....*”

When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.”

When we find ourselves suspended in the transition zone...between life's sometimes harsh realities and the unknown future....that we have the potential and opportunity, not necessarily to alter what fortune or misfortune befalls us—Rather, like the people I've just mentioned, we too, can jettison ourselves through transitional moments while retaining our own integrity and self-worth. While clutching the unknown trapeze bar of our future, we can affirm life and strive to find meaning and purpose.

The same is true of this sacred congregation, we move through this year of transition. We, too, have the power to inject meaning and direction—shaping a future that is robust and joyful...or not.

And we are not alone on our journey, for God is both the chain from which the trapeze bar dangles...the chain that supports our spiritual heaviness when we are afraid of falling...and God is the *ruach*—the wind at our back and the spirit within us that pushes us forward...into our awaiting future.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, who had to deal with his emotions following the death of his son, wrote the following.

“We can’t pray the God makes our lives free of problems; this won’t happen, and it is probably just as well... We can’t ask God to weave a magic spell around us so that bad things will only happen to other people, and never to us. People who pray for miracles usually don’t get miracles any more than children who pray for bicycles, good grades, or boyfriends get them as a result of praying. But people who pray for courage, for strength to bear the unbearable, for the grace to remember what they have left instead of what they have lost, very often find their prayers answered. They discover that they have more strength, more courage than they ever knew themselves to have. Where did they get it? I would like to think that their prayers helped them tap hidden reserves of faith and courage, which were not available to them before.”

Indeed, for us, Tefila—prayer can provide us with the strength to...*ma’averin et roa ha’g’zeira*—to enable the evil that can redound to us from our life’s struggles-- to pass.

Tonight we prayed: “O Hope of Israel: In our weakness give us strength. In our blindness, be our guide. When we falter, hold our hand.”

In this New Year, as we find ourselves swinging from one trapeze bar to the next...from joy to sorry...from loss to celebration...may we find the

strength to hold on...the courage to move forward...and may God be with us on our journeys. *Keyn Yehi Ratzon.*