

Erev Rosh Hashana 5783 – The Cornice

It was a beautiful winter day, the first time I had ever been to Mammoth, many years ago. I remember approaching the top of the Cornice at Mammoth Mountain. The sky was blue, the air crisp and cool, and packed snow was everywhere. My blue and white ski jacket and matching gloves were keeping me warm, my ski boots were comfortable and even my toes were happy. The view on the way up was tremendous. My boyfriend Ken (yes the same guy that I married) and I held hands, Ken was excited for the upcoming ski run. As the very top of the mountain approached, I realized with sudden panic: How do I get off this ride?

My 19 year old boyfriend decided that the best way to teach me how to ski would be to take me up to the very top of the mountain, and we'd ski down. I'm still both impressed and horrified that he thought I could do all that.

The ride to the top of the mountain ended, with me face down in the snow under the lift. The lift operator stopped the lift long enough so I could, with the most ungainly moves ever imaginable, get out of the way.

That accomplished, Ken reminded me of the snowplow method of skiing, and it would be better, if I could, to parallel my skis so they don't cross and me crash. He then lined me up at the top of the Cornice ski run, and said, "go!" Frozen, not with cold but with self-preservation, I did not move. Ken skied down a portion of the way, and said, "follow me, we'll go together, it's fine!"

It did not look fine! It was icy and incredibly steep. I suddenly knew with great certainty that I was not capable of doing this, and with Ken encouraging me from below, I was smack in the middle of a dilemma. How was I going to get myself off this mountain? I didn't know at the time that I could have gone back to the lift, humbled myself, and ask for a ride down. So I stood there on my skis, searching for courage. Many, many minutes went by. It felt like an eternity. But the mountain did not change. It just waited. Ken was slightly less patient. He yelled up, "you can do this, just go!" He skied down a little farther, trying to encourage me with how easy it was – for him. It didn't help. I think I prayed a bit, thanked God for my life, and prayed it should continue beyond this day.

At some point I moved forward, and as I felt my skis tipping downward over the side, it was even steeper than it looked! This was a terrible idea! I began awkwardly snowplowing through and over the icy moguls at the top, as slow as I could, and with gravity propelling me down against my will, I endeavored to stay out of anyone's way and almost succeeded. An accomplished skier flew by me, lacing me with words I didn't quite hear and couldn't do

anything about even if I understood. Ken was cheering me on though. After the moguls, the snow was less icy, and it wasn't so steep. I maneuvered closer to Ken, off to the side of the ski run, and I hit some deep powder, fell face first into it, and my skis somehow kept on going down the mountain without me. But I was completely fine. Ken was all excited, "you did it!"

I've wondered many times, what did I learn from that? Well, I did learn how to ski, and later skied the Cornice and other black diamond runs many times over. I learned I could do more than I thought I could. I've also learned that it's okay and sometimes wise to say no, that I can ride the lift back down – that's a metaphor – it's sometimes wise to take the easier path. I've also since learned most people learn to ski at the bunny slopes, not at the top of the mountain. That too, can be a metaphor! The whole mountain is a metaphor!

But it was very real to me. On reflection, the most difficult part of standing at the top of the Cornice was the many, many agonizing minutes of not doing anything. Worrying, and waiting for something that I couldn't do anything about, except go forward.

There's been times I've reminded myself that being stuck at the top of the mountain, or anywhere, is not a good place to be, and it is better to weigh the choices and take an action. "I've done the Cornice, I can face this," was my mantra for many years.

Inaction, worry, limbo, can be one of the most uncomfortable places in the world to be. Not knowing what to do is torturous. Our lives are shaped by both the events that happen in our lives, but even more, by the choices we make. Even not making a choice is a kind of choice.

Rabbi Laura Geller teaches:

Your Book of Life doesn't begin today, on Rosh Hashanah. It began when you were born. Some of the chapters were written by other people: your parents, siblings, and teachers. Parts of your book were crafted out of experiences you had because of other people's decisions: where you lived, what schools you went to, what your homes were like. But the message of Rosh Hashanah, the anniversary of the creation of the world, is that everything can be made new again, that much of your book is written every day — by the choices you make. The book is not written and sealed; you get to edit it, decide what parts you want to emphasize and remember, and maybe even which parts you want to leave behind. Shanah Tovah means both a good year, and a good change. Today you can change the rest of your life. It is never too late.¹

¹ Mishkan Hanefesh: Machzor for the Days of Awe

Sometimes though, we don't quite do anything, we wait, we fear, we ponder, we procrastinate, sometimes we just go back to sleep.

The blasts of the shofar are meant to call out and awaken us.

The Rambam, the 12th century rabbi, philosopher and physician wrote in his epic work, the Mishneh Torah, that the shofar is saying, "Wake up, sleepers, from your sleep! And slumberers, arise from your slumber! Search your ways and return in *teshuvah* and remember your Creator! Those who forget the Truth amidst the futility of the moment and are infatuated all their years with vanity and nothingness that will not help and will not save, therefore, examine your souls and improve your ways and your motivations! Let each of you abandon wicked ways, and thoughts which are no good."

The word shofar has the root ש-פ-ר, and one of the meanings of this word is "to improve." There is a saying that above every blade of grass is an angel whispering, "grow, grow!" For each of us on Rosh Hashana it is a shofar, blasting, "Awaken! Awaken! Improve! Improve!"

Anne Frank wrote in her diary, "How wonderful it is that no one need to wait a single moment to start improving the world."

Improving the world, *tikkun olam*, is a daunting concept. Who, me? How do I do this? There are a lot of problems out there, and I have my own! – I don't know where to begin!

Moses, at the burning bush, was instructed by God to go back to Egypt to be God's instrument in freeing the enslaved Israelites, and what do you think Moses' response was? He said to God, "מִי אֲנִי? Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?"² "When I come to the Israelites ...what shall I say to them?"³ "What if they do not believe me and do not listen to me, but say: 'The LORD did not appear to you!'"⁴ "Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue."⁵ "Please, O Lord, make someone else Your agent."⁶

But this was an invitation that Moses could not refuse. God answered Moses' questions, and sent Moses' brother Aaron with him. Moses was meant for a purpose, to free the Israelites and become their leader and teacher. We call him, Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses our teacher.

² Exodus 3:11

³ Exodus 3:13

⁴ Exodus 4:1

⁵ Exodus 4:10

⁶ Exodus 4:13

So what do we do now? How do we improve the world? How do we do *tikkun olam*?

We begin the High Holy Days by doing an internal accounting, an accounting of the soul, *cheshbon ha-nefesh*. On the High Holy Days the entire community of Israel gathers as one, and we reflect on our purpose. As Jews, we believe that life has purpose, that there should be justice and human dignity in our world. We are free to choose, act, and conduct ourselves, and therefore we are capable of shaping our lives, and living according to our highest ideals. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks zt"l, taught that we were created in love and forgiveness by the God of love and forgiveness who asks us to love and forgive. Although we make mistakes – mistake after mistake, nevertheless, we have the chance and the power to begin again. Indeed, on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, the holiest days of a holy people, God summons us to greatness.⁷

This is challenging. We have challenges during the High Holy Days. First, is the language of our Machzor. It contains ideas, wording, and prayers that have come down to us over the last two thousand years. We hear words like *Father, King, Judge*. Ideas like *being judged, the Book of Life, and repentance*.

It can be helpful to imagine that tomorrow, on Rosh Hashana morning, we are part of a great drama, that as we enter the sanctuary, we are entering a holy courtroom, indeed the whole world is a holy courtroom. God is the Judge. The shofar calls us to attention, and we get shivers down our spine. This is it. This is the time to give an accounting of our lives, and ask questions we can only ask ourselves: Who am I? Why am I here? What am I doing with my life? Am I spending the time that I have in the best way that I can? Where do I want to do better? What is broken in my life, and what needs mending?

Another challenge is the question, what is God, the One Who we address with multiple names and titles? God – a Presence, a feeling, a noun, a verb? It helps when we remember that we are the people Israel. Israel has a built-in meaning, to struggle with God. It is honest to say we haven't got God all figured out – it takes something to reach out to the Infinite, the Intangible, the Eternal, from a world that is tangible, earthy, and limited to finite space, and finite time. It is beyond us to see or prove God, but perhaps there is something within us that knows or recognizes God in precious fleeting moments.

The third challenge is that doing this work during the *Yamim Nora'im* requires our attention and courage. We enter the High Holy Days as a community, a world of Jews stepping into the Days of Awe. We are drawn together by invisible lines of connection, from our pasts, our present, and our future. We belong here together at this time. Being together brings us

⁷ Introduction, The Koren Rosh Hashana Machzor, p xi

courage. It takes courage to look at the world and see what needs to be done, see the pain that exists in everyday injustices, and pray and work toward dignity and justice for every human being. With courage and hope may we know that revealing, restoring, and nurturing the goodness and Godliness within one's self *is* a response to the pain and injustice we see in the world. It starts with each one of us.

Entering these doors today is the way that we can move forward, it is the way out of an uncomfortable waiting, an uncomfortable anxiety, hoping that something will change, wondering what to change. The Cornice did not change for me. I changed, I moved. We know we can change, we can learn, we can grow. Doing so sometimes takes courage.

May we enter these *Yamim Nora'im*, these Days of Awe humbly and with hope. Humility at the nature of what it is to be human, yet imbued with sacred gifts, and also imperfect, bound to make mistakes. Hopeful, as we move forward into a new future as we reveal, restore and nurture the goodness and Godliness with us. *Teshuvah*, the call to return, is *the* message to us today, a call to begin the conversation within each of us, and take steps of *teshuvah*, to return to the truest and best selves that we know we can be. And indeed we have already begun, together.

Wishing you a Shana tovah, a good change, a year of goodness.

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