

Interpreting the Map of Our Lives

High Holy Days 5769
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Ohr Shalom Synagogue

IV. How Do I Create A New Map?

Or

Asking for Directions

Kol Nidre

Wednesday, October 8, 2008

Erev Tov. Shanah Tovah. I want to acknowledge from the very beginning that tonight is different, this talk is different.

In the reading that we will share tomorrow morning, Torah commands us on this day:

וְעַנִּיתֶם אֶת נַפְשֵׁיכֶם

And you shall afflict your souls.

I hope that as we shared Rosh HaShanah, that our time together has been meaningful to you. I hope that the wisdom of: “If the map don’t agree with the ground, the map is wrong,” as well as the challenge of finding where we stand, how we got here, and plotting our future course, has been thought provoking, led you to deep reflection and wonderful conversations and sharing.

But tonight is different – וְעַנִּיתֶם אֶת נַפְשֵׁיכֶם, And you shall afflict your souls. Tonight I want to look into the heart of darkness, the ugliness, the scariest places that I have ever seen. We are going to suffer together in recounting stories, being honest about the places we don’t like to talk about, places we don’t even like to acknowledge – except sometimes we have no choice.

This is a difficult talk – difficult for me to deliver and I think it will be difficult to hear. It is not a good talk for children. I believe it is an important for adults – an honest telling of part of real life, but truly an afflicting of the soul.

So far we have been talking about maps. Tonight I want to talk about places whose coordinates can’t be found on any map. There are places, that when we discover them, when we stand in them, they obliterate the map from around us. They are life’s most unpleasant places.

We only truly know them when we stand in them directly. Only then do we know what it means to have our map destroyed.

I think of a very special friend, who not too long ago lost his job, to discover that the big house he and his wife and children had just recently moved into was more expensive than they could afford without his salary, and now worth as much as it was when they bought it. The spot that marked “home” on their map was torn from the page.

I think of the healthy young mother, with a loving husband and beautiful children, with no family history of illness, who discovered a lump, and watched as her map unraveled around her.

I think of a beautiful ninety-five year old man I know, who a year-and-a-half-ago stood at the funeral of his wife of sixty-six years, and for the past eighteen months has reached behind him in bed (hand motion), the bed they received as a wedding present, to discover, dreadfully, that it is not a dream, he really has lost his partner, his anchor in this world.

I think of a loving young couple, who were blown off the map upon which they thought they lived when they discovered that their toddler has a very serious brain tumor, and would need major surgery and aggressive chemotherapy, before his second birthday.

I think of those who are Survivors, who were yanked up off of their maps, thrown into cattle cars, marched great distances, and were beaten, and watched as others were shot or gassed.

I cry with all parents whose world went completely wrong, as they lived through the death of a child.

No lies. No pretending. No excuses. No easy answers. This too is also our world. This too exists though I don't know where to put it on the map.

The question for those people, and WE are those people, is what does one do, what are you going to do, what am I going to do, on that day when it is my turn to stand with my map blown to pieces and my world seemingly collapsing around me?

What did God do when there was no map, where there was no world? God created. The *Midrash* teaches us when God created the world, God used Torah as the blueprint. So God created, and God created through Torah.

What do all of those people above have in common? They are all survivors. They are all still here. Not a one of them cashed in their chips. Not a one of them laid down and said: "In this world where my map is destroyed I can't go any further. Right here is where I will lay down. Right here is where I will stay." At least if they did say it, they didn't say it for very long.

I know another lady, in fact, she is one of my heroes. Married young, four children, divorced young. Single parent, went on with her life, survived. Redrew her map. Remarried, didn't end well. Redrew her map. Successful in her career, mistreated there. Redrew her map. Not a millionaire, not close, but talk to this lady and she will talk to you about her vast wealth – her children, grandchildren, her siblings and father, her friends who are among the finest God put on this earth. She believes she is immeasurably wealthy. Who can argue?

When the map, like a rug, is pulled out from under your feet, it is time to redraw it, recreate it anew.

So how do we do it? How do we go on when it doesn't seem possible? To quote from a great movie, how do we make the right choice, when the choice is "get busy living or get busy dying?"

It strikes me that I know two answers, for simplicity sake, let's call them the American and the Jewish.

In the face of diversity, we Americans stand up tall and proud, can weather any storm, steadfast, resolute. Our American value system praises the strong individual, who cannot be bent.

But this individualistic thinking, is not the thinking of our tradition.

There is an amazing passage in the Talmud that compares being in a process of mourning, having lost a loved one, to being a person who is excommunicated from the community. On the one hand this comparison makes no sense – the former is suffering from something beyond their control, the death of a loved one, and the latter is being punished for their own deeds. But on a deeper level, these two have something in common – they both are separated from, isolated from their community. Nobody is allowed to do business or even to talk to the person who has been excommunicated. And anybody who has suffered loss, knows that losing a loved one, a parent, a spouse, a sibling, a child, can be the most isolating, alienating experience. I have never felt so alone as when I have suffered a loss.

The following is attributed to Orson Welles: “We're born alone. We live alone. We die alone. Only through our love and friendship can we create the illusion for the moment that we are not alone.”

Here, not limiting himself just to those who have suffered tragedy, those whose maps have been destroyed, Welles labels the human condition as being one of isolation, and we can create the illusion of not being alone, but it is only an illusion we are still fundamentally alone. I guess the illusion is better than just being alone. But this is what I like to label Non-Jewish wisdom.

And I believe it is absolutely wrong.

We are not born alone. I have stood there when babies are born. We are born tethered to another human being, having gestated within her womb for months. We are conceived with the help of another human being. We enter this world, most of us, in a room with a number of other people, doctors, nurses. All of whom have received the support of communities of people for their training. We are born in an institution that is supported by a much larger community. We are not born alone.

As Jews, we do not die alone. I have stood at the bedside, with family and friends as loved ones die. The body is watched over and Psalms recited until burial. We stand together at grave side for the *Levayah*, the funeral accompanying our loved one as they continue on their journey, and accompanying the mourners to support them on theirs. And after, we as a community do not fail to make minyan. No, like being born, we Jews do not die alone.

Finally, we do not live alone. We live within community, within family. We live together.

Love and friendship are not the illusion. Alienation, loneliness, depression, these are the illusions and they are dispelled by living together, by living Jewishly, by celebrating life.

How do we as Jews survive life's ugliest and most brutal? We do so together. We keep each other company. We share our food and our clothing. We share our houses. We lend shoulders to cry on, ears to bend, and food, always plenty of comfort food. It helps.

What happens when life brutally destroys our map? We hitch a ride with a friend, somebody whose map is still, at least mostly, functioning. They accompany us, escort us, support us until we get back on our feet. They guide us down the path until we regain our bearings.

These ways we have of carrying each other have a name in our tradition. We call them *mitzvot*. I don't the *Yiddish* word for good deeds. I mean good old fashioned, based in the *Torah* commandments. This is the heart of our system of *mitzvot*.

We learn: *kol yisrael aravin zeh bazeh* – All Jews are interconnected, supporting each other, guiding each other. We visit the sick. Why do we do *Shivah* visits and make minyan for those saying *kaddish*? Because when people are feeling their most isolated, we are COMMANDED to be with them. We feed them. We comfort them.

Just like when God created the world, *Torah* served as the blueprint, so too when we help each other to create a new map, a new world, *Torah*, our tradition, teaches us how to help each other.

What is the right thing to say when somebody is struggling to survive as their map is being destroyed? I have no idea. But we know how to be there for them. To send cards. To make minyan. To bring food.

Since it seems to be the theme for me these days, I want to conclude with a lyric from another Broadway show. I don't find it as meaningful as *Pippin*, or as much part of my story as *Fiddler*, but in general, I think of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* as fun and entertaining.

There is a song that Joseph sings while in prison, in a moment of despair, far from his family and truly lost from the map he thought was guiding his life. In this state of mind, with his map destroyed, Andrew Lloyd Weber and Tim Rice have Joseph sing a song far removed from the up tempo, festival of the rest of the score (remember Pharaoh as Elvis, the King?). Joseph, feeling totally isolated, abandoned, forgotten, sings: "Children of Israel are never alone." There it is.

What happens when we visit somebody in pain, when we make it real that they are not alone? Many of you have heard me say this in *Shivah* homes: *mevatel bashishim*, we reduce their pain by one sixtieth. And why one sixtieth? The tradition doesn't tell us, but I have a theory.

The question is asked in the Talmud about how much milk can fall into a pot of chicken soup before we consider it trayf, not-kosher. In today's world, one drop falls in and we give the pot to our non Jewish neighbors, but not in the world of the Talmud.

The first answer in the Talmud, is that the milk falling in, by accident, is okay up to the point where you can taste it. This is obviously problematic since the only way to find out is to taste the soup. And if you take a sip of the soup and taste the milk, then the soup is declared not Kosher and you just ate something you shouldn't have.

The second answer in the Talmud is much more interesting. The second answer is that if a little milk falls in, it is okay, up until one sixtieth, and then when one sixtieth falls in, the soup is transformed from delicious kosher chicken soup to inedible trayf.

Somehow or other one sixtieth, about one point six percent is that amount that needs to be added to something to radically change its nature.

So when we visit, care for somebody who is suffering – illness, loss, destroyed map – we remove one sixtieth of their distress. To say it differently, we who come to bring comfort radically change the nature of the experience of the sufferer. We don't make it all better, but by making sure they do not suffer alone, we carry them, nurture them, support them.

In our tradition, the Mikveh is the place we go to mark life's greatest transitions – rituals around birth, marriage, death. In today's world mikva'ot mark other life passages as well. It is in the Living Waters of the Mikveh that we are transformed from the old reality to the new. It is the liminal moment connecting yesterday with tomorrow. It is the waters that make the passage possible.

When we care for each other, carry each other, we become the Living Waters of the Mikveh for that member of our community who is suffering, who is lost. We are the Living Waters of the Mikveh as they go through their transition – from destroyed to recreated map.

Sitting together, tonight, we are a community, all together. We include many who are in pain and suffering. Many who are mourning lost loved ones, illnesses, great pains, uncertain future, and much more. Many of us have experienced the destruction of the maps of our lives. Many of us are experiencing it now. Looking ahead, we do not know God's inscrutable wisdom, and who will suffer in the coming year.

But we do know that we are a community, a Jewish community. That we are commanded to be with each other, and to carry each other. Individually, I am a weak thread easily snapped, together we are a strong rope that cannot be broken.

In this coming year, may God grant us the commitment to our tradition and the compassion to each other to not hide when we are lost and suffering, and to come forward to help support and guide others as they work to create a new map. May You be our strength, may Torah be our guide, may our community be our greatest asset, and may the coming year bring us health and joy. *Gamru chatimah tovah.*