

Our Narrow Bridge to God -- Yom Kippur Day 5775

One day three men were walking along and came upon a raging, violent river. They needed to get to the other side, but couldn't figure out how to cross it.

The first man prayed to God, saying, "Please God, give me the strength, courage and ability to cross this river."

Poof! God gave him big arms and strong legs, and he was able to swim across the river in about two hours.

Seeing this, the second man prayed to God, saying, "Please God, give me the strength, courage and ability to cross this river."

Poof! God gave him the skill to chop down a tree and fashion it into a rowboat; he was able to row across the river in about three hours.

The third man had seen how this worked out for the other two, so he also prayed to God, saying, "Please God, give me the strength, courage and ability to cross this river."

Poof! God turned him into a woman, and he walked across bridge.

כל העולם כולו גשר צר מאד. והעיקר לא לפחד כלל.

The whole world is a very narrow bridge. The essential principle is not to be fearful at all.

These words, the essence of a teaching of the Chasidic master Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, speak a truth about life, about our passageway to God, and about the foundations that connect and separate us as individuals, as members of the Jewish community, and as Jews in relationship to other nations, including the Palestinians.

I started my way along this bridge these past weeks thinking about Israel.

What am I going to say about Israel these Yamim Noraim?

It's the erstwhile rabbinic question -- asked with even greater penetration this year, in the aftermath of the war in Gaza.

And with perhaps fewer answers than ever.

Truthfully, what more can be said about Israel, after a summer consumed by Israel's tragic conflict with Hamas -- and its related media reports, analyses, opinions, divrei torah, etc.?

As Jews, we are all burned out by the recent war, nobody more so than Israelis themselves -- who lived in the heat of the cauldron for seven consecutive weeks, the entirety of their summers.

Right now, at least for the moment, we have no more space for worry, even though we know that, at any moment, the conflict can erupt again,

be it in the South or, perhaps in shorter order, in the North, with Hezbollah.

We need a period of "peace," to regain the strength to fight and advocate for another day.

Our lives and our minds are crowded on the very narrow bridge we traverse, and there is only so much room that even matters of life and death, war and peace, can take. Other priorities resurge. Case in point, again in Israel, as absurd as it sounds, school needed to start on September 1, as it's legislated, and its deferral would have opened a whole other host of complications for Israelis -- both practical and existential. Pressure was building to bring a cease fire before school started. After all, goes the thinking, if we can't even open our schools, the beating pulse of our hope for the future, what's it all worth anyways?

Transitioning from Israel to Yom Kippur for a moment, and then doubling back, I'd like to focus on another matter of ultimate priority which loses attention on the narrow bridge, in the crowds of our minds and lives -- God.

The second paragraph of *Oo'nitaneh Tokef*, I believe, speaks the truth of our constricted relationship with God. God speaks to us consistently in

a still, small voice, that which David Saperstein spoke of last week, *kol dimama daka*, but we don't fully hear that voice without being first awakened by *the shofar gadol* -- blasts of nature, ritual, and human crisis that cut through our crowded minds. This is the case at *Yam Soof*, the Sea of Reeds, when God commands the attention of a dispirited, enslaved people by splitting the sea. This is the case at *Har Sinai*, where thunder and lightning jolt a people consumed with food and comfort, to a higher plane of awareness. This is the case during war, for, as the saying goes, "there are no atheists in foxholes." And this is the case today, during the *Yamim Noraim*, as consistent moments of pomp and pageantry -- such as the blowing of the shofar, our prostration during *Alaynu*, and others -- enable us to hear the still, small voice in the many hours of quiet prayer and reflection.

Today, in the cloistered quiet of the synagogue, removed from the loud, profane noise of the world and prompted by the sacred noise of Jewish tradition, we hear. We hear the still, small voice of God and make our way steadily across that bridge to God. As the day progresses, the crowding of our minds lets up, and, by the day's end, we feel the sense of clarity, renewed purpose, and relief that only a day of commune with God can engender.

We have trouble discerning the still, small voice in the crowded every-day -- when we try at all. But this is the way God chooses to speak to us -- quietly, constrained in a narrow space between the lines, requiring the conscious activation of our senses.

Nachman of Bratslav speaks about God's constriction (צימצום) in the world and the challenge of gaining God's attention, in a teaching found in *Likutei Moharan*, which is the source of the famed גשר צר מאד metaphor:

ליקוטי מוהר"ן ח"ב - תורה מח

"When a person enters the service of God, they show him how distant he is, so he should know that he needs to cross a very narrow bridge, and that the essential rule is to not be afraid at all."

כְּשֶׁאָדָם נִכְנָס בְּעִבּוּדַת הַשֵּׁם, אֲזִי מֵרְאִין לוֹ הַתְּרַחֲקוּת

וְדַע, שֶׁהָאָדָם צָרִיךְ לָעֵבֶר עַל גֶּשֶׁר צָר מְאֹד מְאֹד.

וְהַכֹּלל וְהַעֲקָר שֶׁלֹא יִתְפַּחַד כָּלל

Expanding on this notion in one of his tales, Rabbi Nachman says,

"There was once a king who had a wise man. The king spoke up to the wise man, 'Inasmuch as there is a king, his signature declares that he is a great man of might, and a man of truth, and humble. Mighty — I

know that he is a great man of might, for the sea flows around his country, and on the sea is stationed a navy on warships with cannons and they do not allow anyone to approach, and inwards from the sea there is a great swamp surrounding the country, *through which there is only one narrow path wide enough for only one person to pass*; there too cannons are positioned, so that if someone comes to attack, the cannons are fired, so it is impossible to set foot there."

The imagery is severe, portraying a God-king consumed with defending his kingdom against attackers, with only *one narrow path wide enough for only one person to pass* into the kingdom.

שָׂאִין שָׂם כִּי אִם שְׁבִיל קָטָן שְׂאִינֹ יִכּוֹל לִילֵךְ שָׂם כִּי אִם אָדָם אֶחָד

This is not a warm image of God and his kingdom, but it does reflect the world we live in. God is under attack from so many directions, the words of his mercy and justice either obliterated or turned on their heads by forces of evil, such as Hamas, Islamic State and others. Long finished with demonstrations of the supernatural, God withdraws from direct manipulation of the world, defends his kingdom, and challenges humankind, in the everyday, to find our way to God through a narrow pass or bridge.

In the cloistered, idyllic setting of of Yom Kippur, we as a Jewish people have God's attention. God's presence is immanent, even overwhelming us. Our relationship is present, tangible and broad. In the everyday, however, God remains transcendent in his kingdom, shepherding us quietly through the words of the shechina, the divine presence. In Rabbi Nachman's imagery, we have to proceed single file, one behind the other, over a long and narrow, one-lane bridge, to hear God.

And we know how frustrating it is to be in a long line or to be in slow, one-way traffic -- let alone waiting to even enter the traffic, as we recently witnessed on Walnut Lake Rd. It gets the best of us, we lose our equanimity, we get angry, and we try to find every way possible to avoid the line, often ending up right back at the back of the line again.

To get across that narrow, one-way bridge takes our patience, our *savlanut*; our *hitbodidoot*, our meditation and mindfulness as we remain focused on our destination, not on the profane noises along the way; and our *anava*, our humility as we affirm our bonds with those in front and behind us, and their equally important religious missions.

Discerning the still, small voice, going across the narrow bridge, also requires our unity with those in front and behind us -- our joint purpose with community. Today, shocked into awareness by the sounds of

Tishrei and the *shofar gadol*, we, as the second paragraph of *Oonitaneh Tokef* reads, "pass before You like the children of Maron." יעברון לפניך כבני מרון.

The Talmud Bavli explicates the phrase *Kivnei Maron*. It offers three possible explanations. The first explanation is adopted by the framers of the liturgy -- we pass before God like sheep in a flock, who pass before the shepherd's staff one at a time, looked at carefully by the shepherd but with all the other sheep in sight. כבקרת עדרו מעביר צאנו תחת שבטו, כן תעביר ותספור ותמנה "As a shepherd examines the flock, making each sheep pass under the staff, so God too reviews, number and counts."

In the second explanation, we are like those who climb a certain cliff called Beit Maron, a passageway so difficult to negotiate that each climber has to file over the narrow ledges by himself, but is buttressed in confidence by the one who goes before him. In the third explanation, passing before God like children of Maron is like the soldiers of David's army, walking single file in front of the general, both as courageous individuals and as a one powerful unit. God sees the sheep, climbers and soldiers as individuals and as a community simultaneously, as the Talmud notes, "viewing [them] together in one glance."

The Talmud's explanation of Kivnei Maron tells us a truth not just about Yom Kippur but about tefillah in general. When we come to tefillot, we come for ourselves, for others, and for the whole community. As we come together, we generate a more robust bridge to God. We pray together, and we pray privately, together, supported in an inexpressible way by the souls and spirits of our neighbors. Though no one's taking attendance, the success of our crossing at BI depends on every one of us. That's what it's like to be part of a small, yet vigorous shul, with an intense spiritual life.

I want to circle back now to Israel and its path across the bridge to God, and to the Palestinians.

Israel is perhaps unparalleled in the world in the complexity of challenges it faces, as it moves slowly across the narrow bridge toward God and the Jewish democracy that best reflects God's words to our people.

The image is ironic, because Israelis are, in the moment, one of the least patient peoples in the world. They cannot stand in line in the moment but, paradoxically, as Israelis and Jews, they know how to stand in line forever. They argue bitterly and openly about the policy choices of the day, but know ultimately that their most important skill remains managing the line, getting through one tree at a time in the dense forest. Of

course, we'd like Israel to be a Yom Kippur sanctuary in macrocosm, ushered into the gates. Yet it cannot be, in the real world of geo-politics and security.

Sadly, Israel does not have the luxury to discern God's most profound messages for it while it resists those who wish to terrorize and obliterate it. Pursuing peace is an element of that message, but it's not its entirety. It's often people outside Israel who miscast Israel's sole raison d'être as being a herald of peace. They cannot see that Israel needs to carefully walk across the long-bridge, single file, rather than overwhelming it, caving it in, and thereby extinguishing itself.

Israel does not live a cloistered, Yom Kippur existence, and it cannot yet reach the gates of Neilah in its current circumstances. There's little glory in Israel's security tasks - better managing a bad situation, and yes, making difficult policy choices between bad and worse.

We travel a distance over the narrow bridge to God on Yom Kippur, a bit more slowly in the crowding of the everyday. Likewise, individuals are able to build strong and navigable bridges to each other. They let bygones be bygones, or go through the process of teshuva with each other, and move on in relationship. Nations, however, are different, though there are certainly exceptions. It's much harder for past con-

flicts to be forgiven or forgotten when they're between nations. Bygones don't become bygones. Teshuva doesn't happen on a broad enough basis. Nations see themselves differently; have their own unique stories, values and land attachments, and have separate takes on the historic conflicts between themselves and others. The bridges between create contact, but acknowledge that there is ground beneath that cannot be tread. With Israelis and Palestinians, it is only more so. Israel's day of peace with the Palestinians will be one with borders, fences, bridges and safe tunnels, once there is the minimum of trust to jointly build them. When peace comes, please God, speedily in our day, the bridges between Israelis and Palestinians will likely be well-fortified, poorly passed, and largely abandoned by two peoples with completely different understandings of the shared space and time between them. There will be some bridges of understanding between individuals, arcs of grandeur constructed in a loving, painstaking way with the visionary toolbox we human beings reserve for bridge-building, and I'm hopeful to be part of them, but most bridges will be ones of separation.

Thank God that the bridge between us and God is grand, if but narrow, and reflects understanding, not separation, primarily. God is there at

the end, and God's still, small voice is the shepherd -- the *roeh* -- that guides us across.

In the words of Yehuda ha-Levi in our Machzor, in the piyut יה אנה
ךמצא,

"I sought Your closeness,
I called to You with all my heart,
And going out to meet You
I found You coming toward me."

The sound of the shofar may scare us, but we ought not fear the long, slow passage, which we do individually, and as one unit -- in the spirit of Rabbi Nachman.

May God give us the strength to continue the passage, year to year, toward his kingdom, and may God give Israel the relief it needs to help pave the path for all Jews, both in Israel and abroad. In the mean time, Israel will carefully manage its crossing, short of a destination, pining subconsciously for God's voice from the other side.

G'mar chatima tova.