

Because Life is Not a Rollercoaster

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This summer saw the opening in Kansas City of the world's tallest roller coaster. It is actually a waterslide and is called the Verruckt, which is German for insane. It is 17 stories tall. That's taller than Niagara Falls and the Statue of Liberty – you have to walk 264 steps to reach the top before enjoying the heart-stopping pleasure of cascading down on a 4 person raft. The company's spokes-person said the drop's "not 90 degrees, although when you stand on top of it or are looking down the structure, it does have the optical illusion, which is part of the fun of the attraction or the fear. People are going to get that lighter-than-weight feeling as they descend..." There is also a second five-story hill climb before another drip. "You're going to descend and then you're blasted up the second hill. Apparently, nobody has ever tried that before with this steep of a drop." Sounds fun, yes? Not for me. I watched the video. It put me in the front seat. As the ride crested the initial downward curve and I saw the earth far, far below I got dizzy and almost threw up...and that was from my office chair. Now granted I hate roller coasters. I have never understood what is fun about having my stomach thrust up into my throat and paying for the privilege.

People often say that life is a roller coaster. I disagree. Roller coasters have preset ups and downs. You see where it starts and how it ends –

OK, I get that parallel – but you also know what things will look like every step along the way. That is nothing at all like life. For the really scary rides, I can imagine people holding on to the handle bars for dear life and can see in my mind's eye their terrified faces – and hear their screams. But throughout it all, they're really not in fear. They know they are safe.

Speaking of gripping on tight - A few weeks ago while in the last stages of labor my lovely wife gripped the guard rails on the side of her hospital bed so hard that a nurse said, "don't worry, no one has ever broken them off." Her screams, deep from the gut were filled with agony. Thank goodness for epidurals. But even with that easing of the pain, with each contraction, the look in her eyes and in mine too held the terror that could not be spoken – there are no guarantees how this particular ride will end. There is no baby until we see it breathing, pink fleshed...holding it in our arms. We have had too many bad endings – 5 miscarriages in 3 years – to take anything as a given. The terror of not knowing is when seeing a pregnant woman the Jewish tradition is that we say, B'sha'tova – in its good time. We save Mazel Tov for after the birth. The terror of not knowing is why life is not anything like a roller coaster. And for Micah Rodney, this unpredictable ride has only just begun.

As a young man in my mid 20's I shared with my Aunt Ruth that I wanted 3 or 4 children. In a soft, tender and compassionate voice she said, "start with one and see how it goes." Though simple and even obvious, that was very sage advice. My daughter Yael is now 27. Noah is 23. Noah was born with a tumor located in his neck, throat and tongue called Cystic Hygroma or Lymph angioma. The puffiness on the right side of his face was noticeable almost immediately after birth. This tumor isn't cancerous but as it grows it takes up space that needs to stay open. When he had an MRI at 2 weeks we saw that his windpipe was open only a crescent moon and closing fast. Surgery was scheduled as early as possible at 6 weeks. Cystic hygroma is pretty rare. We found a pediatric surgeon in the Philadelphia area who had the most hands-on experience with it. When we met with him I noticed that his finger nails were perfectly filed and his sideburns meticulously trimmed. I found this reassuring. The surgery took twice as long as expected and went well. Though they couldn't get it all out since some of the tumor was just too close to nerve branches that control the right side of the face and because they didn't want to mess with his tongue, he was out of danger. Things would be manageable. Over the next few years we only had to rush Noah to the emergency room 3 times – when his tongue swelled and breathing compromised. Thank goodness for IV steroids. Years ago, someone once asked me when Noah was born. I said Nov 16th. Noah corrected me. "No dad, it's Oct 8th." The 16th was the day of his surgery. Noah's in great shape – no residual issues now or on the horizon. You'd never know. And should you ask him about the scar that starts under his right ear and continues under the jaw line to his chin, he may very well tell you about the terrorist attack he survived when living in Israel... especially if you're a cute girl in a bar. Thinking back, yes, I wanted more children, but I knew that a baby demands all of your attention but so does a child who at any moment might have to be rushed to the emergency room. And yet here I am 23 years later having found the strength to start again.

In the Torah reading for this first day of Rosh Hashanah we drop in on Abraham and Sara at a time of good news. The Lord took note of Sara as He had promised and she bore a son. Recall that this was no smooth ride. When an already quite old Sara first heard that God would finally bless her with a child her reaction was one of disbelief, scorn and self pity. "Sarah laughed in her heart, saying, Now that I am withered am I to have enjoyment – with my husband also so old?" And yet here we are reading about the birth of Isaac, "Sarah said, God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me... who would have said to Abraham that I would suckle children: I have borne a son..." No surprise that on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast. His cup runneth over. Yes, for Abraham and Sara the news... finally, was of the good variety. But of course, that's not always the case and who knows what the future would bring?

There's a story about a farmer who owned a horse.
He wasn't a rich man and his horse was his most prized possession.
One day he woke up to find that his horse was missing.
The other men in the village came to visit and commiserate with him. "What terrible luck, losing your prized horse."
"Let's wait and see" the farmer responded.

A few days later, the farmer's horse returned and brought another horse back with him. "What good fortune," the man's friends said, "now you have two horses, you have been blessed."

"Let's wait and see" the man answered.

A week later the farmer's son was riding one of the horses and he fell off, breaking his leg.

"What terrible luck," his friends said, "You have surely been cursed for such a horrible accident to take place."

"Let's wait and see" the man again responded.

A week later, the country went to war and every able-bodied young man from the village was conscripted to join the military. The farmer's son was excused from duty due to his injury, but every other young man from the village was forced to leave.

Once again the men from the village gathered and congratulated the farmer on his good fortune.

"Let's wait and see," was again his response.

Good luck, bad luck...who knows. There are no guarantees. Life is not a preset rollercoaster. This story reminds me of what a good friend says about his father, "if there wasn't such a thing as bad luck, my dad wouldn't have had any."

The unitane tokef prayer we say on each day of these High Holidays puts this question to us in stark terms: we don't know how many will be born into this world and how many will leave it, who will live and who will die, who by water and who by fire, who by sword and who by beast, who by hunger and who by thirst, who by earthquake and who by plague, who shall find rest and who will be forced to wander, who shall be at peace and who shall be tormented, who shall be poor and who shall be rich, who shall be humbled and who shall be exalted. This prayer screams out life's unknowns.

Rabbi Harold Kushner writes in his book *Conquering Fear: Living Boldly in an Uncertain World*, "I worry in the knowledge that I and the people around me can do everything right and still experience misfortune. We can be careful about what we eat and how much we exercise and still fall victim to a genetic time bomb hidden in our DNA. We can drive carefully and still be in the path of a careless driver. We can work hard at our jobs and save for our retirement, only to have events beyond our control force our employer to terminate our job..."

So the question hangs in the air - What does it take to live through life's uncertainties, to overcome the terrors that can not be spoken? What, I ask, makes it possible for a couple who have lost both of their sons to reminisce about them with a smile and to share joy-filled, funny memories about a bris during a snow storm?

Or a man who suffers the loss of his young wife to cancer and remarries only to see that a few years down the road he must help this wife too fight an all too familiar battle. What inner strength makes it possible for Holocaust survivors to bring new life into a world

that they know, first hand can be filled with outrageous cruelty, despair and pain. What chutzpah gives them the courage to envision for themselves a new life or even want to try?

Rabbi Kushner, a man who lost his son at 14 from progeria, the ageing disease, speaks an inner truth when he says, “I worry that all this worrying makes my life less enjoyable than it ought to be.” Indeed, fear or its first cousin anxiety, can take a very serious toll on the body. And also on the soul. Fearful people can not be happy. Fearful people have a hard time being generous, charitable or forgiving. Fear constricts the human spirit.

OK, so what do we do? For me, guidance for how to deal with, confront and overcome the terrors that are out there but can not be spoken comes from the wisdom I have gained over the years from our very ancient, very practical and very human Jewish tradition. Rosh Hashanah celebrates the creation of the world as we wish for ourselves and others a sweet year in a world that is filled with both light and darkness, good and evil.

In the Torah’s creation story G-d evaluates each aspect of creation with the conclusion “ki Tov – and God saw that it was good.” On day 6, after looking over the entirety of everything he had made, God declares, “v’hinei tov me’od – He found it very good”, but to me, when it comes to the challenge of facing fear and uncertainty, what matters most is the first and only thing God realized was Lo Tov.....

And God said, it is not good for man to be alone. And with this realization, God made for Adam an Ezer K’negdo, a fitting helper. Companionship, true, deep connections to others, is the first, necessary step in successfully confronting and overcoming a world of both light and darkness.

As some of you know, when I moved to the Boston area in 1999 after living in Jerusalem for 4 years, I arrived as a single father. I didn’t know a soul and by that I mean that I didn’t know anyone soul to soul....having no family here and never having lived here, I had no close friends. It was easy making acquaintances, through shul, sports and volunteer organizations. But the truth is that I felt a sense of existential loneliness because what I was missing was the emotional openness and intimacy that comes with friendship. Yes I dated, but building a relationship takes more than time.

It also takes being in a good place internally and for me that wasn’t the case. For very understandable reasons, while I was doing my best to deal with the practical side of getting settled in this new life, in this new place, inside I felt very unsettled. My priorities were to be successful at work and as a parent to my children. I trusted that with time the rest would come, that patience would pay off. Just like it was when I first moved to Israel, I accepted the fact that it would take 3 years to develop true, meaningful friendships and only then could I take the next steps. And by the way, dating was no picnic especially when that inevitable question, “so what do you do for a living” came up. Believe me, most of the time, Rabbi is pretty much the kiss of death.

What I came to realize is that I'd much rather spend time with people I really cared about and who cared about me than go out on another interview...I mean date. With my friends I was guaranteed a good time. Neil Gaiman was right when he said, "Wherever you go, you take yourself with you." If the person you are is unsettled, then it doesn't matter who you meet. Being my friends, my true chaverim, gave me that sense of connection and wholeness that I knew would carry me through until life circumstances would make it possible, would make me ready for a deeper, more profound relationship. 10 years as a single dad taught me that there is a big difference between being single and feeling alone. What had to change, what had to transition was what was going on inside of me. Yes, the Torah says it is not good for a person to be alone but just being in the presence of another person doesn't guarantee that you're not still alone.

The first steps in building deep, profound connections with others – the connections that ultimately help us successfully make it through the vicissitudes of life - are found in the words that represent the crescendo of the same unetaneh token prayer I mentioned earlier. With confidence we sing that Teshuva, Tefillah and Tzedakah have the power to avert the severity of whatever decree life inflicts upon us.

Teshuva which is often translated as repentance, in its simplest and most basic understanding actually means "return". But what is it we are to return to? From the, who is the me that I am bringing into relationships point of view, the answer is a return to a time when we approached others and the world with openness and honesty, from the perspective of promise and potential. Many of us have experienced the joy of this emotional transition of return when we have taken someone on a trip to a place that is new for them but a longtime favorite for us. By going with someone new, our experience of the place is somehow renewed. As the expression goes, we see the place with fresh eyes and for some wonderful reason the joy-filled feelings we experienced on our first visit return. That's the kind of attitude of return Teshuva wants us to bring into relationships. And if we do, if we find a way to cut through the unhealthy barriers and internal barbed wire that is in our way then the intimacy of true friendship is possible.

Tefillah, which translates as prayer, is the next step but before you roll your eyes and say, "Oh no, the rabbi is getting all religious on us", know that tefillah at its core refers to the things in life we have the desire, courage and commitment to hope and work for. Tefillah is an expression of what we value, the things we WANT to be inconvenienced about. The values we live by and strive for – that we bring into our relationships - reflect the red lines of what for us is acceptable and what isn't. That it isn't easy living up to our greatest vision of self isn't what matters – what matters is that that vision is the standard by which we judge our lives. It is the self designed inner compass that points us back on course even when life has tossed us about in the wrong direction. It is the same compass that leads us away from some and toward others.

On Friday Jan 16th 2004, schools in the Boston area were cancelled due to cold. At the time I was an instructor at the Solomon Schechter Day School in Newton and was just getting back into playing ice hockey after Achilles tendon repair the previous year. With the day off, I decided to play in a pick up game at the Fessendon School rink. Getting

there late, I quickly dressed and jumped on the ice. Not warming up on such a cold day turned out to be a big mistake. An hour and a half later, back in the locker room I felt a burning in my chest that just wouldn't go away.

Considering my family's medical history with heart disease I quickly agreed that someone should call 911. Indeed I was in the process of having a heart attack. When the ambulance got me to the emergency room at Newton Wellesley I was asked the standard questions....like, were you sweating when these symptoms appeared? Ah...I was playing hockey. Not knowing right away how serious the situation was I had my own question for the doctor, "So it's now 2 o'clock. I invited people over for Shabbat dinner at 7, do you think I'll be home in time?" Ah.....no. You better cancel those plans.

The good news was that because of a miracle clot busting drug I ended up not having a heart attack. But there was more good news. When I called my brothers in Stamford CT to fill them in on what was going on, 2 of them, Jim and Sandy, showed up at my bedside 4 hours later. My oldest brother Dan also responded. It was his job to do whatever it would take to convince my mother not to fly to Boston from her winter apartment in LA. Thankfully he was successful. The next day I called a friend from Congregation Kehillath Israel in Brookline – a man who happened to be the head of the Cardiac Care Unit at the hospital. Later, as I entered the room to have a stent inserted, there he was with a big smile. He also took the time to share a few quiet words with the physician who would be performing the procedure. Talk about feeling reassured. He also spoke with my brothers.

Relationships, friendships, connection – feeling anything but alone when the terrors that can not be mentioned become reality. I didn't know for sure what would happen. I remember a tear falling from my eye wending it's way down my right cheek....I remember not feeling afraid. Anxious...but not afraid.

The commitment to show up is a fundamental value for me and so it is a quality I look for – I require - in potential friends. So too is following through and doing what you are capable of doing when the need arises. To me that is Tefillah – when the words in our hearts find expression in action. When my father died in 1994 I was associate rabbi in Cherry Hill.

One day during Shiva, I was surprised that the senior rabbi and the president of the congregation drove 2 and a half hours to visit and to share some time with me and my family. They stayed 45 minutes before driving the 2.5 hours back. I think the rabbi was officiating a wedding later that day. Unlike in Jerry Mcquire they didn't have me at Hello. They had my heart when they walked through the door. Their presence was an answered prayer.

The third and final piece of advice the unetaneh tokef gives about evaluating the self we bring into relationships is Tzedakah. Charity is an inadequate translation in every way. Tzedakah comes from the word Tzedek which means justice. The symbol we have for it, 2 scales being held aloft, sometimes dangled by a person who is blindfolded, shows that

in life, the whole story can never be understood from only getting one point of view. When we bring ourselves into relationship, when we truly want to transcend our existential loneliness, we must remember that it is not, it can never only be about our needs, our wants and our desires being satisfied. It can not be about our perspective being the only one worthy of consideration. If you want this shul or any organization to always see it your way, then put up a one room building and stop taking any new members. The votes will go your way every time.

A little over a year ago Alison and I went to Spain. As I was working on the itinerary, I'd often ask whether she would like to go to place a, b, or c...or do x, y or z. Her response was often, "well, what would you like to do?" At one point I looked at her and said, "Alison, for 10 years when I traveled I was able to do whatever I wanted. I know what it feels like to travel alone. I did it – you've done it too. I had good times. I met nice people. What do I want to do? I want to travel with you. It's not only about what I want." Tzedakah is accepting and integrating the concept, deep down inside, that to be a friend, to create the richness of intimacy, the other person must be heard. Martin Buber, the famous European Jewish philosopher, says that true caring can develop only when there is an I-Thou relationship between two people; when they see and accept the fullness of each other's souls, each other as equals in Godliness. On the other hand, when people see and treat one another in I-it relationships, the other person is not a subject of love, caring and concern but rather an object whose role it is to fulfill wants and needs...and as long as they do so, there will be emotional and tangible benefits and rewards. But should those wants and needs stop being serviced, the deal is off. No wonder people in I-it relationships feel so alone. Imbuing relationships with Tzedek is the way to ensure connections with others that are whole-hearted.

Right after graduating college, my wife's all-star athlete younger sister Lori – in High School she earned 12 varsity letters, some for playing on the boys teams – was diagnosed with cancer. For 14 months, Lori, Alison and her parents fought together to win this battle. Two bone marrow transplants were not enough. In 1998, though Lori was technically cancer free, she passed away at the age of 23. As fate would have it, I met Alison Lorraine Moll a little over 10 years later. There was something that drew us toward one another, a kind of emotional awareness that life's joys must be savored, that there is no reason to waste your energy getting upset over little things, that as life qualities go, resilience is a must and that to love someone and let them love you is a responsibility. Kushner writes that to love someone is to make yourself a hostage to fortune. How true. After Alison and I got engaged her dad found a quiet moment to share something in private that was on his mind. He looked me in the eyes...his own a bit teary and said, "Fred after Laurie died, I never thought I'd see Alison happy again. Thank you for making my daughter so happy." (WAIT) I told him that of course, that happiness went both ways.

It has always struck me as profound that we Jews make a big deal about the Shema, Hear Oh Israel the Lord our God the Lord is one. Yes, God is one...because only God can handle being one. The rest of us need others. How wonderful it is to be able to say and feel that when I count my blessings, there are some people I count twice.

Life is an unpredictable journey that has the potential to bring as much promise and purpose as panic and pain. Jewish wisdom and belief hold that the best way to ensure modicum of peace - peace of mind, heart and soul - is to build deep, lasting, intimate bonds of companionship. We are best able to make that happen if the Self with which we approach others does so-

With an attitude of Teshuvah – openness, promise and hope.

With a commitment to Tefillah – values that define what we stand for and toward which we aspire.

And finally with a mindset of Tzedakah – that we treat, recognize and honor in others the fullness of their souls as much as we see and want that recognized in ourselves.

This thing called life is quite the ride. Unlike roller coasters, its height requirement is always adjusting and there's never a line....you just find yourself on board. What really matters aren't the ups and downs. What matters is who you're sitting next to and who wants you to sit next to them.