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The Art of Travel: The Mindfulness of Self Discovery

Fourteen years ago, I asked my Uncle Stuart to deliver a toast at my wedding. He began by saying that there were many embarrassing stories about me, but he decided not to share them because I would probably officiate his funeral one day. Uncle Stuart died this summer. Like so many who have faced loss recently, I was unable to be physically present for the funeral. As I spoke to my family over the phone - and attended the Shiva minyanim on Zoom - we consoled each other saying, "Our lives will never be the same." It's true, for those who loved and were loved by my uncle - our lives won't be the same, precisely because he lived and precisely because he died.

Throughout 2020, I have heard variants of this phrase, albeit used in different ways. In talking about the pandemic, people have said, "Our lives - and our children's lives - will never be the same." In discussing losses of jobs and businesses - or even new opportunities, people have said, "My life will never be the same." In sharing joy after the birth of a child, "Our lives will never be the same." The monumental events of our lives transform who we are and how we understand ourselves.¹

This summer, Ana and I had a few masked and socially distant get-togethers with friends. We hadn't seen their children in months. I was silently stunned by the kids' growth. What were our friends feeding their children? But then, one of our friends said how much our children had grown. Of course they had, it was just harder for us - who have been trapped....I mean....home with them since March, to see the growth of their minds and bodies and souls.

It was all a good reminder. Ecclesiastes wrote: "One generation goes, another comes...." Birth. Death. A Diagnosis. Lost jobs. New opportunities. These big moments certainly impact us. Ecclesiastes also reminds us, "The sun rises, and the sun sets – And glides back to where it rises...."⁵ personal changes happen in the subtle moments that, like the growth of a child or a plant, are often hard to notice up close. Profound growth happens in the subtle and slow day-to-day changes.

In March, Ana and I were consumed with the cataclysmic changes going on in our lives. We also took advantage of the beautiful weather to eat dinners outside. We noticed the changing of the season completely differently. There can be great peace in noticing the smaller and subtler changes. The sun rises and the sun sets. There will be a tomorrow - and there can be beauty and calm and much needed perspective in noticing the small growth that's right before you.

¹ This idea came from a sermon delivered by Rabbi Oren Hayon at Temple Emanu-El in Dallas, I think around 2008 or 2009. I don't have the sermon but remember the conversations we had while he was writing it.

Each of us is changing all the time. Yom Kippur gives us the opportunity to take a step back and reflect on the changes that often happen without us actively noticing: A relationship that isn't working the way we wished it would. A career that requires such long hours that we are not the present parent we want to be. The debts that pile up. The challenge of taking good care of ourselves. The loneliness felt after the death of a family member. Yom Kippur is all about facing these truths.

On Yom Kippur, we engage with these truths through what our tradition calls *cheshbon hanefesh* - an accounting of our souls - and the work of *teshuvah* - repentance and repair. So often, however, the *cheshbon hanefesh* becomes painfully self-judgmental. We agonize that we are not better than we are. We teach children all the time that it's okay - even good - to make mistakes. We are all human, and real growth happens when we fail forward. But when it comes to ourselves - we can be so, so, so unforgiving of our failings, for slipping up and stumbling, for our fumbles and falls.

But shame isn't the Jewish way. And anger isn't the Jewish way. Judaism has a different response: Teshuvah - Spiritual Return and Spiritual Repair.

We are imperfect. (Repeat after me)

I make mistakes.

I am imperfect.

I sometimes let myself and the people I love down.

I sometimes do not live with my highest ideals and values.

I sometimes fail.

Judaism expects this of us, even anticipates our imperfections because we are human. How else could we possibly exist in the world? It's okay to be human, to react under pressure. Mistakes don't take away from our identity. They don't change our DNA or our soul or the core of who we are. If we believe in kindness and practice kindness and we have a moment where we are unkind, it does not take away the core of kindness. Rather, it is from that tried and true core that we can discover the strength to fix and adapt and reorient in order to practice kindness again.

Even (and perhaps especially) our greatest biblical characters are flawed human beings who often fail in one way or another. Maybe, in our self-flagellating fantasies we can be perfect and never err. But Judaism brings us a painful yet reassuring reality check: We will err. And we can find our way from these moments to the core of who we are through teshuvah. In teshuva, we are urged to not merely recite our litanies of failings, but instead to use our pasts to look forward and envision how we can restore our relationships, repair what we have broken, and rebuild our lives.

Twenty years ago, while I was doing research in the Wadi Rum Desert in Jordan, I had an experience that changed my life. Known as the Valley of the Moon, Wadi Rum is a beautiful and

otherworldly valley cut into the sandstone and granite. One day, our Jeep broke down. We hiked into the shadow of a huge rock, sat down, made a small fire and made Arabic coffee. We sat for hours waiting for help. I spent the afternoon gazing out on the desert expanse that our ancient Israelite ancestors had walked through thousands of years ago. I felt both connected to our past and drawn towards a new conviction that if I became a rabbi - which I had been considering - I'd likely never be stuck in the middle of a desert waiting to be rescued. In all honesty, it was a slightly terrifying and beautiful experience which allowed me time to calm my mind and consider what I really wanted from life.

One of our most cherished beliefs is that traveling to new places can help us discover new things about the world and ourselves. We think that the way we vision and restore, the inspiration to rebuild our lives and re-imagine our gifts, comes from experiences that help us to explore and re-orient our thinking.

But then the pandemic happened, travel came to a halt, and we largely stayed in the confines of our homes. Alain de Botton, author of *The Art of Travel*, a beautiful book that muses on the pleasures of travel, recently wrote that in our current pandemic-grounded state, we find, "that there [is] already a treasury inside us... we [have] within our own brains already accumulated a sufficient number of awe-inspiring, calming and interesting experiences to last us 10 lifetimes. What if our real problem was not so much that we are not allowed to go anywhere — but that we don't know how to make the most of what is already [in our minds] and hands?"²

In that sense, the pandemic has given us benefits, too. Time with family. Time to think. Time to stumble upon new ideas. Time to try new recipes. Time to revisit previous journeys and consider the impact that they had on our lives. Time for quiet aloneness. Time to reconnect with old friends. Time to re-evaluate what matters - to our families, to our friends, in our careers, how we really want to spend our time.

Botton explains that during this moment in time we have all been granted a unique opportunity "where the mind can order and understand itself. Fears, resentments and hopes become easier to name; we grow less scared of the contents of our own minds... We start, in faltering steps, to know ourselves [and our needs] slightly better."

Yom Kippur is the trip we've been waiting for this year and you don't have to go anywhere, physically. Stay where you are. But give yourself the gift, use the next 25 hours as a period of personal reflection, a moment to stop and see the changes that have been taking place all around us. Consider how you can become a little more complete, a little more visionary, a little more courageous and imaginative. Yom Kippur, "gives us an opportunity to appreciate a great deal of what we generally see without properly noticing; and to understand what we have felt but not yet adequately processed."³

² <https://www.ft.com/content/c8114022-650e-11ea-abcc-910c5b38d9ed>

³ Ibid.

For many of us, the pandemic has been filled with silence and isolation. And for many of us, it's been filled with kids and work and zooms and everything in-between, with no time for reflection. This soul-work - whether we are in solitude or having real difficulty finding a single moment of solitude - is a mindfulness exercise. To take a breath. To travel in our minds-eye, is to take a journey and to take notice: what is this moment teaching me right now? How do I want to grow and change?

May we each journey towards Teshuvah - seeking return to the land of our souls. May we make our way towards forgiveness - with a phone call, or a zoom, or a text, or a note, or a journal entry. And may the embrace of Yom Kippur lead us to a mindful year of hope, promise, wholeness and Shalom - Peace.

Amen