

THE FIVE THINGS – ROSH HASHANAH 5771
Rabbi Suzanne Singer

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, a physician and a healer, believes in the power of stories to unlock some of the secrets of the human condition. Here is one from her book, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*:

“MY BACKYARD ON the slopes of Mount Tamalpais in Northern California is actually a very small meadow. In the summer and fall of every year a stag visits at dawn and at twilight. This is quite a thing for someone who grew up in Manhattan. This year he has six points on his antlers. Last year five or perhaps four. He is heart-stopping. Actually, I did not plan to have a stag, I planned to have a garden. The year after I moved here, I planted fifteen rosebushes, gifts from my friends. It was a lot of hard work, but I could see it in my mind's eye. Just like in *Sunset* magazine. The roses bloomed in the late spring and for a month the garden was glorious. Then the roses started disappearing. Puzzled, I eventually realized that something larger than aphids was eating them and I became determined to catch it in the act. Getting up one dawn and glancing out the window, I was transfixed by seeing the stag for the first time. He looked like an illustration from one of my childhood books. As I watched in awe he unhurriedly crossed the yard, browsed for a while among the roses, and then delicately ate one of my Queen Elizabeths. Every year since then I have had to make a difficult choice. Am I going to put up higher fences and have roses, or am I going to have a stag ten feet from my back door? Every year so far, I have chosen the stag. After two years of watching each other through a pane of glass, I can now sit outside as he dines. If I tell people this, some say in disbelief, "You mean that you are letting this deer eat your roses?" Sometimes I will invite someone like this over to watch. One friend, stunned into silence by the sight, said simply, "Well, I guess we are always doing the right things for the wrong reasons."

I had thought I was planting rosebushes in order to have roses. It now seems I was actually planting rosebushes in order to have half an hour of silence with this magical animal every morning and every evening.”

Life is unpredictable. One day you are living in a lovely house, the next the bank serves you with a notice of foreclosure. One day your spouse is healthy, the next the doctor calls to discuss the results of a biopsy. You were going to retire until the market crashed and you now have insufficient funds to keep you afloat. You had beautiful beachfront property until one day, a horrible oil spill deposits tar on your sand.

Certainly, the Unetaneh Tokef prayer we read this morning, the one that speaks about floods and earthquakes and fires, underlines this reality for us in a pretty stark way. Of course, as the Rachel Naomi Remen story illustrates, unpredictability can also result in unexpected gifts, sometimes even from the most painful sources. In the Torah, Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, which caused him enormous suffering. But he ended up as the vizier of Egypt and saved his family from starving during a famine many years later. Job suffered the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, but he became a more sensitive and compassionate man as a result.

But, as a rule, we do not like surprises. We want to control what will happen to us. We don't want life to lead us: We would rather take the lead. Why is control so important for most of us? Perhaps, we believe that we will avoid losses and maximize wins, increase pleasure and protect ourselves from grief. In a book called *The Five Things We Cannot Change and the Happiness We Find by Embracing Them*, psychotherapist David Richo suggests that the obstacles we encounter in our lives can offer us rich lessons about who we are and what we are meant to accomplish. Rather than fighting against problems that arise, Richo invites us to ask:

“What can I learn here? How does this serve?”¹

He challenges us to consider:

“Are we here to get our way or to dance with the flow of life?

Are we here to make sure everything goes according to our plans or to trust the surprises and synchronicities that lead us to new vistas?...

Are we here to avoid pain or to deal with it, grow from it, and learn to be compassionate through it?”²

For Richo, following are the FIVE THINGS WE CANNOT CHANGE, the things over which we have no control :

1. Everything changes and ends
2. Things do not always go according to plan.
3. Life is not always fair.
4. Pain is part of life.
5. People are not loving and loyal all the time.³

If we could just embrace these realities with an open heart, we might find that life can be a really good teacher.

Pema Chödrön, a Tibetan Buddhist nun, elaborates this in her book, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*.

“This very moment is the perfect teacher...feelings like disappointment, embarrassment, irritation, resentment, anger, jealousy, and fear...

are actually very clear moments

that teach us where it is that we’re holding back...

They’re like messengers that show us exactly where we’re stuck.”⁴

“What we call obstacles are really the way the world and our entire experience teach us that where we’re holding back.

What may appear to be an arrow or a sword

we can actually experience as a flower.”⁵

We basically have a choice: we can give in to the feelings of anger, despair, disappointment, outrage and let ourselves be carried away by the stories these feelings create for us -- always the victim, or always the fighter, never getting a fair break or never having to give in.

¹ xvi

² The Five Things We Cannot Change and the Happiness We Find by Embracing Them, David Richo, p. xv.

³ Richo, p. xii.

⁴ P. 12.

⁵ P. 65.

Or we can use the difficult situations as an opportunity for growth -- asking ourselves: why do I keep feeling like a victim? Or why do I need to keep fighting? Rather, how can I bring more justice into the world? Do I need to learn to compromise more? How can I turn this tragedy into a spur to help others? What are the hidden blessings in this experience that I am ignoring? The more open we are to accepting the surprises that await us, the more serenity we can achieve.

Indeed, trying to insulate ourselves from the more extreme experiences in our lives means we don't truly live, as this poem from Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai, suggests. It's called,
From the Book of Esther I Filtered the Sediment

From the Book of Esther I filtered the sediment
of vulgar joy, and from the Book of Jeremiah
the howl of pain in the guts. And from
the Song of Songs the endless
search for love, and from Genesis the dreams
and Cain, and from Ecclesiastes the despair, and from the Book of Job: Job.
And with what was left, I pasted myself a new Bible.
Now I live censored and pasted and limited and in peace.

A woman asked me last night on the dark street
how another woman was
who'd already died. Before her time-and not
in anyone else's time either.
Out of a great weariness I answered,
"She's fine, she's fine."

But, if we do not wish to live in a state of numbness,
the key to navigating the chaos of life is compassion,
particularly for ourselves. As one of Chödrön's teachers pointed out to her:
"When you have made good friends with yourself,
your situation will be more friendly too."⁶
We need to avoid blame, judgment and guilt.
We need to acknowledge that everything cannot be explained.

⁶ P. 7.

The truth is *pain is not punishment, and pleasure is not reward.*

They are simply features of any existence.⁷

Buddhist Chödrön points out that things falling apart is a kind of test -- but also a kind of healing.

“We think that the point is to pass the test or to overcome the problem, but the truth is that things don't really get solved.

They come together and they fall apart.

Then they come together again and fall apart again.

It's just like that. The healing comes from letting there be room for all of this to happen: room for grief, for relief, for misery, for joy.”⁸

Rabbi Sheila Weinberg, who teaches at the Institute for Jewish Spirituality that I attended, told us about the mother of a friend who is suffering from dementia.

Her response to most things that occur in her life is to say, “Unexpected and temporary.”

Which really sums it all up. Uncertainty and change are really at the very core of our humanity.

If we can embrace this reality, we will find ourselves at much greater peace -- with ourselves and our world.

A colleague of mine came to this realization when he went through the painful death of his brother. He writes: “Letting Go of the Need to Know.”

“I left the shul at about 9:00Pm and made the 3 hour drive to the hospital where my brother had been in the ICU for almost 2 weeks.

He was on a ventilator, in and out of consciousness.

It was a bright room in a dark and stormy night.

His wife, was holding his hand when I walked in.

I sang, *ufros aleinu* [-- shelter us in your sukkah of peace].

I talked about his kids and his son's up-coming bar mitzvah...

After a few hours I had to leave; it's a long drive home and another day awaits.

I hug his wife, kiss my brother on the forehead and hit the road.

The storm has intensified since I was inside; I have to pull over.

I can't see the road. I beat my fists against the steering column.

I scream. I break down. I cry.

⁷ P. 69

⁸ Ch. 2.

There is nothing to ‘understand,’ I realize as I begin to drive again. Trying to make sense of what would kill my brother was killing me, and exiling God from my experience. I made it home in the early morning, showered, shaved, kissed my wife and the kids and went to work. I *davened*⁹ and God showed up, or should I say, I let God in. It still hurt (it still does) and there were a few agonizing months to go before my brother was gone; he did not make it to the bar mitzvah, but I was there. When I let go of the need to know, I let God in and that made living with a dying brother more bearable and it still does.

The Unetaneh Tokef prayer tells us that repentance, prayer, and charity can alter the severity of the decree. In other words, we cannot control the facts -- diseases, earthquakes, floods -- but we can control our responses to these realities.

How might repentance, prayer and charity help us cope with the painful experiences in our lives? If we understand repentance in its true Hebrew meaning of return, we can think of it as turning inward to discover strengths we never thought we had. Indeed, tragedies often bring out coping skills and spurs to action that surprise us. We can think of prayer as an opening to God, as a means of discovering the blessings that a challenge might unfold for us. And we can think of charity as compassion for ourselves, a move away from blaming ourselves for our lack of control, a move away from the frustration and anger that come from trying to find answers for the unanswerable. This kind of acceptance, while not eliminating the pain, can go a long way to bringing us a sense of equanimity and peace.

Psychotherapist Richo reminds us also that, aside from the tragedies and disappointments in life, we also “experience bliss, our hopes are sometimes exceeded,

⁹ Prayed.

we discover unique inner gifts, things have a way of working out, luck comes our way, miracles of healing happen.”¹⁰

So let us continue to plant rosebushes –
but let us not assume that we have planted them to grow roses.
Let us remain open to the possibility that they were planted as food
for a beautiful stag with whom we can spend some exquisite quiet moments.

¹⁰ P. xiii.