

Rosh Hashanah Sermon 2022/5783

Pain as the Bridge

At the end of our Torah scroll, we read in the book of Deuteronomy the instructions to bring our “first fruits” when we enter the land. While we are not entering the Promised Land this morning, although it is certainly great to be back in this enchanting outdoor space, we are entering the New Year. Let’s take a moment and imagine selecting the metaphorical fruits you have harvested from the past year, bringing the wisdom and growth of all that learning into 5783. As you picture filling a basket with the beautiful and bruised lessons of the year we just completed, I hope you see these as gifts. Gifts that you bring to your family, your friends, our community, and to the Divine. In psalm 69 we read “Va’ani tefilati l’cha” - And I am a prayer to you. The psalmist is saying “I am the offering.” Yes, YOU are the gift and I am encouraging you to bring it. Whether that gift feels unfinished, less than perfect, or even filled with pain, you are bringing something unique and wonderful from which we can all learn. As one of my mentors says, “Be shy on your own time!” Let’s greet the new year with our gifts!

And yes, some of those gifts might not be wrapped in shiny paper and tied up with a bow. Many of us are walking into the New Year feeling very different than we did last Rosh Hashanah. Sure, we can all find something sweet about the year we just completed. Hopefully you have

more sweet memories than you can count. Yet you also may be entering 5783 carrying pain from the preceding year.

What comes to mind when I say the word “pain?” Do you think of a physical injury, to yourself or someone close to you? Do you wince at the memory of a broken bone, strained muscle, or a surprisingly sharp paper cut? Or did your mind drift to emotional pain? Heartache at the loss of a beloved, sadness from feeling left out of a group, or frustration at your inability to reach an important goal.

Whatever type of pain resonates most with you, I think we can all agree that we *have*, we *do*, and we *will* experience pain. It is a part of being human. We can try to avoid it and we can refrain from discussing it, yet that will not keep pain from visiting each of us. In one of my all-time favorite movies, Wesley tells the Princess Bride, “Life is pain, highness. Anyone who says differently is selling you something.”

What if we stopped hiding from pain and we embraced it as our teacher? Why do we try to protect our children from pain when we know it is pain that will form them into the wise, kind, thoughtful adults we want them to become? By shielding them from painful experiences, we rob them of opportunities to learn and grow. We spend so much energy on managing, accepting, transforming, living through, and growing from pain. Pain is a teacher, although not always a welcome one. Still, it helps us emerge better than we were before.

I'd like to tell you a personal story about pain. Like 50 million other Americans, I live with chronic pain. In 2007, I was diagnosed with fibromyalgia, a disorder causing muscle pain, fatigue, tenderness and a bunch of other manifestations in about 2 million adults. Over the years, I have learned to manage the symptoms and lead a pretty normal life. I left a stressful profession and rediscovered my love of Jewish music. I adjusted my expectations and collected a team of caring specialists including a doctor, a physical therapist, a nutritionist, an acupuncturist, and a yoga teacher. Not everyone with fibromyalgia has access to all these resources, and many are simply unable to do all the things I can do, so I am grateful for what I can accomplish each day.

Fifteen years into my chronic pain journey, something happened last fall that felt very different. The pain in my back and leg was so acute that I knew this required attention. Many of you know that this eventually led to spinal surgery in March of this year. With the work of two skillful surgeons, three days in the hospital, multiple physical therapy sessions, and weeks of attentive care from my family (including my Kol Nefesh family) and friends, I can stand here six months later with full strength in my back. The recovery from surgery was really hard, and I can look back with a bit of distance and recognize that I learned several lessons.

First, I finally learned how to ask for help. Why on earth are we all so hesitant to ask for what we need? After years of imagining that some

day my husband would read my mind and anticipate my needs, I realized that asking for help is a super simple way to get my needs met. I know - shocking! With the post-surgery restrictions of no bending, lifting, or twisting (yeah, they told the Jewish clergy to avoid BLTs... haha), I was unable to pick up whatever I dropped or help care for our dogs. Little tasks became impossible, at least temporarily. Yet every time I asked for help, the problem was solved. No drama. No questions. Occasionally I had to wait a few minutes, but that offered lessons as well.

I also learned to surrender to the mystery. This has been a lifelong journey, of course, yet the level of not-knowing was even higher in this past year. Our human brains are wired to find answers and create timelines, yet pain and healing do not follow a prescribed plan. There was the waiting to figure out what might be causing my pain, compounded by confusion over which doctor had the right solution. Once an answer was declared, the pandemic caused me to wait two months for the surgery. Hearing stories of other people's experiences with spinal fusion and nerve repair tested my ability to live in a place of not-knowing during those months. My pain was intense enough to drown out my fear, yet I juggled both of them throughout the journey. And after the surgery, I wanted to believe I would be back to normal activities in a set number of weeks and yet the recovery process is different for everyone. I had to let go of the story in my head and live the reality each day. I have a friend who often says that if you don't learn a

lesson the first time, the universe will keep trying to teach you, louder and louder each time. I thought that I was an enlightened Jew who could sit in the not-knowing and hold multiple truths at once and all that groovy stuff. Turns out I needed one more reminder that I am not in control and I must surrender to the mystery.

My experience with pain has also taught me about relationships. When we are in pain and we don't address it, we project pain out into the world. We look for someone to blame for our suffering, even when that isn't a logical response. This cuts us off from our family, our friends, and even G!d. We shut out the outside world and miss out on the opportunity to connect with those who could actually help us through the pain. Rather than hiding in our personal caves of pain, what if we open ourselves to vulnerability and connection? We know the only way out of pain is to walk through it, yet we should remind ourselves that we need not walk alone.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, the great Chasidic teacher and storyteller from the early 1800s taught these words, "Kol haolam kulo, gesher tzar me'od. V'haikar lo lifached klal." This could be translated as: "The whole world is a narrow bridge. The whole point is not to make yourself afraid." It is a message of hope. Even when we feel fear and pain, we can move forward with the support of our family, our community, and the everlasting love of G!d. Keyn y'hi ratzon. May it be so.

(Ended with Dan Nichols' new song - Bridges: Gesher Tzar Me'od)