

Rabbi Rick Kellner
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5770

“Reach In, Reach Up, Reach Out”

Last week, a Ziggy cartoon pictured Ziggy driving in a car passing a billboard that read, “It could be worse...next 1700 miles.” As I read this cartoon I thought God I hope not. Can the future really be worse? We don’t really know what the future holds but we know that anything is possible. We know that this past year has been one of the most challenging years we have collectively faced in some time. As Americans it has been challenging, as Jews it has been challenging and for many it has been personally challenging. We have all experienced these challenges in our own unique way. And we know that no one has gone unscathed by them.

The challenges of 5769 carry such powerful images that have drained the strength and resolves of those who face them. What are the images of 5769? Foreclosure. We see signs on people’s lawns as we drive through our neighborhoods that say foreclosure, for sale by bank, bank owned. Between last Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the stock market crumbled, with the Dow dropping from 10,800 points to 8400 in a matter of ten days. Stocks tumbled for months bottoming in mid march. Retirement funds were ruined and entire savings were wiped out. Job loss. As we watched unemployment numbers climb, we realized that each one of us in the congregation knows someone who has lost their job or may have lost their job themselves. In December in the middle of this economic crisis, the Bernie Madoff scandal fractured the nation even more. One man, with so much power, violated the trust of so many. Companies filed for bankruptcy and the government passed bailouts and stimulus packages. War raged in Gaza as Israel continued to struggle to protect its fragile borders.

Among these sad images are pictures of joy as well, babies were born, 13-year-olds read from the Torah for the first time, brides circled their

grooms, and grooms broke the glass as they stood together underneath the chuppah.

The glass broken by the groom is such a powerful symbol of the Jewish wedding. In an instance the glass goes from one whole smooth beautiful glass to shattered, sharp shards. It is a reminder that in times of joy, there is also sadness. Even on one's wedding day when the world seems completely perfect, we have to realize that there is brokenness in the world. It is a reminder of how fragile our lives are. In one moment our lives seem great, they are stable and everything is in balance, but in the next we could be searching for a crutch to hold on to, or for the arm of a friend to hold us up as we fall. One moment can be so different from the next. Conversely, the glass reminds us that in times of sorrow, there are pockets of joy. Regardless, be it sadness or joy, we want stability.

So much of life is based on stability. "How are you?" "Fine." When something is wrong we don't answer the question "how are you?" by saying lousy. Fine exudes an image of stability, it does not let on that we are hurting inside, but we are trying to appear strong when strength is what we are searching for. When there is too much difficulty in our lives we turn to television to shows like "The Office", "Two and a Half Men", "Law and Order" or "Grey's Anatomy". The images on our screens are just an escape; they are not solutions to our problems. In these challenging times we want to feel stable, we want to know that everything will be ok. We want something to hold us up.

But what do we do when it is hard to find joy? Where do we turn when there is crisis? How do we overcome life's challenges? There is such a wide spectrum of responses to a crisis including anger, depression, and shutting out others who wish to help us. We often look to come out of challenging times without seeking the help and partnership of the people who love us and want to help. When we hurt, when we suffer what we want is strength. We want strength to turn to the people around us for help. We want strength to

continue searching for a job after being turned down. We want strength so that we can put our faith in others as they manage our portfolios and help us save so we can send our children or grandchildren to college.

Over the past few months I have watched my daughter learning to walk. As she learns to walk and she searches for stability she is searching for strength. Are her little legs strong enough and stable enough to hold up her precious little body? She has been walking holding on to a walker giving her support. She knows that when she holds onto the walker or a shelf or a toy, she can walk, but when she lets go she has to stand on her own. And then she started to stand on her own, discovering she could stand for a few moments. In this new experience she had to find a new source of stability. She had to have faith that her legs were strong enough to hold her up and propel her forward. Responding to crisis is like learning to walk, what gave us stability and strength is not there anymore. We have to find a new source of strength.

Rabbi Simkha Weintraub recommends that finding strength comes when we reach in, we reach up and we reach out. This is not calisthenics. This is not physical exercise. This is mental exercise. This is knowing that the tools we need are just an arm's reach away.

We begin by reaching inward. Rabbi Abba ben Joseph bar Hama, simply known as Raba was an important and influential scholar among Babylonian rabbis. In all but 6 instances in the Talmud, his teachings were accepted as the legitimate practice, living in the 4th century, Raba taught in the Talmud, when painful suffering comes upon you, what do you do? You look at your actions. We don't look at anything or anyone else; we look at ourselves and what we have done. Perhaps there is something we can change. We reach inside and take a long hard look at who we have become. Is there something we can change so that we can become better? Sometimes we have to do this as individuals and sometimes the companies and corporations around the country have to do as well.

This year when General Motors declared bankruptcy, it was a shock that one of the most prolific companies of the century had come to a point where it had to declare bankruptcy. Bankruptcy law provides for the development of a plan that allows a debtor, who is unable to pay its creditors, to resolve its debts through the division of its assets among its creditors. Bankruptcy law allows for companies and individuals to take a look at their entire entity, examine what is essential and make changes to promote the rebirth of a better company.¹ When we are in personal crisis, we may feel as though we are in great debt; we may feel like we are in a hole unable to climb out.

For decades GM made the cars that outsold all the others. We remember the Pontiac Firebird, the Chevrolet Corvette, or the Camaro, Cadillacs, and Buicks. I was recently at a car show featuring classic cars and saw all of the great historic cars made by GM. They were really a sight to see. Over time, the appearance and the quality began to wane and it is clear based on sales numbers that GM is no longer the best producer of cars. Once GM declared bankruptcy it began to look inward at all of its parts. Going forward, the company has decided to downsize to focus on four brands. It has sold off some of its debt and has decided to reemerge with production of new cars based on new technologies. The Chevy Volt and a new Buick Hybrid to be released in the coming years will showcase a post-bankruptcy GM, a GM that goes back to the innovative and design savvy cars of the past. When pain, suffering and challenge was in GM's path it reached in, looked at its actions and found new ways to operate. Even though great pains were felt by GM's creditors, investors and other stakeholders, GM is trying to recreate itself, time will tell if it is successful, but it has designed a plan for an improved cooperation.

Facing crisis enables us to grow. We can try to grow from facing the challenges in our lives and sometimes growth means change, it means that we have to stand up in face of our challenge and say I can do something

¹ Bankruptcy law, <http://topics.law.cornell.edu/wex/Bankruptcy>

different by reaching in, seeing what I have done and ultimately choosing a new path.

Once we have reached in, we can try to reach up. Reaching up is another way of trying to get in touch with God. It is another way of turning to God in prayer. And reaching up may be the hardest of the three. I recently spent some time at Westwood Horizons Senior Living Facility in preparation for a program we are offering to our eighth and ninth graders. I sat with one of the residents named Bob who shared his story about reaching up. A number of years ago before moving into Westwood Horizons, he had been riding his exercise bike in his home as he did every day. For whatever reason that day Bob fell off his bike and he could not move. The phone in his house rang and rang as family members made their daily calls to check in on him. But Bob could not move to answer it. Bob lay on the floor for 2-and-a-half days before his son came to the house to check on him. At that time Bob was rushed to Cedars Sinai Medical Center, where he underwent many tests to find out what had happened. It was decided that he would need to have surgery on his spine if he were going to live a normal life again. Bob was very afraid of the pending surgery and he was unsure if he should have the surgery. As he lay on his hospital room bed, a priest entered and asked if he was Catholic, he said no, and then the priest asked him if he wished to have a prayer said for him. Bob not being a religious man said, "Sure, I'll take any help I can get." The next day, a minister walked in and offered a prayer for him and then finally a rabbi entered and to offer a prayer for him. As Bob relayed this story to me, he said it was at that moment, after three members of the clergy, helped bring him closer to God, which he overcame his fear and found the strength to decide to go ahead with this very challenging surgery.

Prayer can be a source of strength for us. We can find stability in our lives by reaching up towards God. In the morning blessings, we thank God for girding Israel with strength. In our daily prayers we recognize that God

is the source of strength but we need to open ourselves up to God to let God give us the strength we need to go forward.

This morning we read from our Torah a story that is arguably the most challenging of all stories in the Torah. In reading the *Akedah*, we ask ourselves so many questions, how could Abraham even think to offer his son as a sacrifice? Where was Sarah when all this happened? In response to this last question, the rabbis realize that her silence is deafening. The midrash teaches us in Leviticus Rabba, and in Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer that Sarah cried out to God and her cries correspond to the three blasts of the Shofar. Tekiah, God give me the strength I need to face life again. Shevarim, God my world is broken, I don't know how to proceed, help to me to realize that your breath of life is in me and that you sustain me and give me strength. Teruah, life is short, many challenges will come my way but God you are with me, you can comfort me and give me strength. These are the blasts of the Shofar, long, short and shorter. When we hear the calls in just a few moments, let us be stirred to know that God is with us, that these sounds are forms of prayer and that the sound is a sound of stability, giving us the breath of life, sustaining us, supporting us and giving us strength.

We reach in to ourselves, we reach up to God and finally we reach out towards others. The Talmud in Tractate Brachot, reminds us that we can find strength in community. The lesson is told in the following story, R. Hiyya bar Abba fell ill and Rabbi Johanan went to visit him. Rabbi Johanan asked him, are your sufferings welcome to you? Neither they nor their reward, he replied. Rabbi Johanan said to him, give me your hand. Rabbi Hiyya gave him his hand and he healed him. Then Rabbi Johanan fell ill and Rabbi Hanina went to visit him. Rabbi Hanina asked him, are your sufferings welcome to you, R. Johanan replied, neither they nor their reward. R. Hanina said to him, Give me your hand, Rabbi Johanan gave him his hand and he healed him. The Talmud then asks, why could Rabbi Johanan not heal himself if he could heal Rabbi Hiyya? The answer is that a patient

cannot heal himself. The lesson here is that we need help; we need others in our community to help give us healing and strength in times of crisis.

In a new publication called *Life, Faith and Cancer*, Rabbis Hirschel Jaffe and James Rudin recall a conversation they had together as Rabbi Jaffe battled the crisis of his life, Leukemia. “Before my illness I thought, what do I have to pray for? I have physical strength and courage.’ But now I am praying for another kind of courage, another kind of strength, spiritual stamina for a different kind of climb. Not necessarily to make it up to the top of a mountain, but just so I won’t fall down again. We are all like climbers, trying to conquer life’s precipices.”

Rabbi Rudin then said to him, “Does Judaism help you accept your illness? As a rabbi you’ve quoted from the bible the Talmud to people who are ill, or to their families. Do these passages help you now?” “Yes they do help, but words aren’t enough. People want to hear more than bible quotes. Words and formulas alone can’t bring comfort.” “So what does help, Hirshel? What helps you?” “The real comfort comes when you know that other people care about you. You know, Jim, we only have each other in this life. We only have other people.”²

We cannot face challenges alone. We can find strength in knowing that other people care about us. Real comfort, real strength is found when we turn to others, or when we offer a hug, or a hand on a shoulder to someone in need. That is being present; that is being in a helping relationship; that is giving strength. Some people may choose to find that comfort and strength right here in this community, others may turn to a friend at a coffee shop, or on a walk around the park. Wherever it may be, we may find ourselves reaching out to someone else, or we may be reaching out to others, together as a community and as individuals we must remain open to the possibility that we may be called upon to give strength.

² *Life, Faith, and Cancer*, ed, Rabbi Doug Kohn. *Learning and Discovering: Systems of Support*, Rabbi Hirschel Jaffe, Rabbi James Rudin, and Marcia Rudin

Over the past year I have welcomed the conclusion to each book of the Torah. I am not sad that it is over, but I am excited about the power of the words that we say as a community when we conclude the reading. We say, “*Chazak, chazak v’nitchazek*. Be strong, be strong, and let us strengthen one another.” The power is in each of us to strengthen another. Through a listening ear, or a welcome look, letting the people we love know we care about them helps them to heal and find strength.

Reach in, reach up, and reach out. The images that we recall from this last year are so powerful. Together we are facing challenges that may be greater than we can possibly imagine. But there is comfort in knowing that we can reach in and grow, we can reach up to find strength and support, and we can reach out to strengthen one another. May we find the inner strength to change, may we find comfort in knowing that God is here holding us up and may we know that our loved ones and friends are there to help us out of trouble. Chazak, Chazak, v’nitchazek, may we find strength and may we strengthen one another. Let us say, Amen.