

# CLIFF-HANGER

(Eizehu Hakham?)

Kol Nidre 5773

One of my favorite books, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, tells the story of Paul Farmer – Harvard professor, anthropologist and infectious-disease specialist, whose dedication to treating the world's poor led him to Haiti, where he worked to establish treatment plans for the many people suffering from AIDS and TB.

Many of Farmer's patients believed that their illnesses were caused by magic spells sent by their enemies, and were therefore resistant to taking anti-retrovirals and other life-saving drugs. He recalls one woman who dutifully took her medication and was cured, but when Farmer went back to visit her, he asked her about her feelings on sorcery. She told him that of course she believed in it. "I know who sent me my sickness," she said, "and I'm going to get her back." "But if you believe that," Farmer cried, "Why did you take your medicines?" Smiling sympathetically, she said to him, "Honey, are you incapable of complexity?" (35).

Many rabbis bemoan fact that so many people show up only once or twice a year. I love it. It's not that I wouldn't want to see you here more often. It's that I love that for all of your cynicism, skepticism, discomfort, alienation, marginalization - you still come. Trying to find *something* – holding out the possibility that maybe, just maybe *something* will happen. So you fight for parking and stand in line and come and sit here on our crummy rental chairs, no idea if the AC will blow out mid-service turning this into a sweat lodge or some kind of bikram davening experience. You come pretty much knowing it's not all going to feel good – the day is long and the liturgy is challenging and I'm going to, if all goes well, push you to the brink of profound spiritual discomfort. (And on top of that, we're even going to ask you for money.) But you show up – with your questions of imminence and transcendence, your struggles over life's meaning and your purpose in the world.

The one day of the year that the most Jews around the world show up in services.

And for what? To hear a Torah reading about a crazy scapegoating ritual.

Here's what happens: Aaron, the High Priest, takes two goats and stands them before the entrance to the Tent of the Meeting. Lots are chosen and one goat – the lucky one – is slaughtered and offered as a sacrifice before God. The other, marked for *Azazel*, is kept alive. If you've ever been in a fight with an Israeli cab driver, you may be familiar with the phrase *Lekh l'Azazel* – go to... Azazel. It's not the King David Spa he's sending you to. The High Priest places his hands on the head of the goat destined for *Azazel* and transmits to the animal all of the sins of the entire people Israel – from petty snubs and minor acts of disrespect to murder. The goat is then sent away, all of Israel's sins with him, to some far away, inaccessible wilderness – or according to Rabbinic interpretation, thrown off a rugged cliff, never to be heard from again (Yoma 67b).

What's going on here? We're sophisticated people - we know all too well that you can't actually ship your problems away. You can't make your mistakes disappear. The hurt you have caused, the damage to your own heart and to others... no matter how much you wish it would magically disappear, life doesn't work like that. So why is Judaism taking the opportunity *in primetime* on the holiest day of the year to promulgate what clearly falls somewhere on the spectrum from magic/ myth to pants-on-fire lie?

And you don't have to be an atheist or a cynic to be uncomfortable with this. Even those with deep faith could feel offended by suggestion that the answer to life's problems lies in scapegoating. What is holy or inspired or inspiring about putting your *shmutz* on some poor animal and then sending it off a cliff to die? What meaning could we possibly draw from it?

Let us backburner this question for a moment, because I want to tell you about an Australian woman named Bronnie Ware, who began a career in palliative care several years ago, working with patients in the final stages (usually the last 3-12 weeks) of their lives. Over the course of her time with these patients, she began to note trends in the ways that the dying spoke about and reflected upon their lives, and she compiled a list of the top five regrets people in hospice express on the deathbed:

**1. I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.**

Ware says that this is the most common regret of all. On the cusp of death, people see their lives with a kind of clarity that generally otherwise eludes them. And what do they see? Unfulfilled dreams. Unnecessary sacrifices. Time wasted, as we undermine ourselves trying to please others.

**2. I wish I hadn't worked so hard.**

(Just because it's obvious does not mean it's not worth saying.) Someone once told me that he realized when his daughter left for college that he could count on one hand the number of times he had made it home for family dinner. Many of Ware's patients spoke about work as a treadmill that they just couldn't step off.

**3. I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.**

The dying speak of having lived in fear – of working to suppress their instincts and feelings in order to appease others and not stir the pot. “As a result,” Ware says, “they settled for a mediocre existence and never became who they were truly capable of becoming...”

**4. I wish I had stayed in touch with loved ones.**

Even with Facebook, folks. On their deathbed, people talk about the one who got away – and the ones who got away. The relationships that we devoted heart and soul to over many years, which faded into obscurity when life got busy. As Ware says: “Everyone misses their friends when they are dying.”

**5. I wish that I had let myself be happier.**

This is all about being stuck. Stuck in a broken relationship, stuck in a destructive pattern or dynamic. Imprisoned by habits that ought to have been left behind years ago. Stuck in a script and suppressing, for a lifetime, our real longing. An elderly woman once told me after 60 years of loving marriage that her husband was wonderful but not the love of her life – he had left for the war when they were 20, and by the time he returned she was married with a kid, so it never came to be. She spent her whole life married to the wrong man.

After years of working with the dying, Ware’s research indicates that – without some dramatic intervention - most of us will die with regret – personal, relational, spiritual. I doubt that any of this is surprising to you.

But here’s what might surprise you:

We all know that ruptures – big, dramatic moments of struggle: losing a loved one, suffering from an illness, getting in an accident, living through an earthquake or a terrorist attack – have the potential to wake us and shake us and change our lives. Over the past few years, a number of psychologists have been developing theories around a psycho-spiritual phenomenon called Post Traumatic Growth. Post Traumatic Growth is when the change after an extremely challenging experience is ultimately POSITIVE rather than negative. It’s when a person is able not only to survive and overcome a traumatic experience, but to actually emerge strengthened. And even though it’s not experienced by *everyone* who suffers from trauma, it’s not nearly as rare or unlikely as it may seem. This doesn’t mean that the trauma doesn’t hurt, but rather that the pain is ultimately fortifying and can lead to deeper wisdom and growth.

Our tradition teaches that the *ba’al teshuvah* – one who has caused hurt, to himself or someone else, but then returned/ reconciled/ brought about healing – lives on a higher spiritual plane than a *tzadik* – one who is completely righteous. Why? Because he has plunged to depths – seen what is possible, and made it back. The same principle is at play here: because of what you have experienced, you are able to come back with a deeper appreciation, with better perspective, with a stronger will to live meaningfully.

Here’s the astonishing part: a fiercely smart game developer named Jane McGonigal noticed that the five leading characteristic benefits of Post Traumatic Growth are actually the direct inverse of the top five regrets of the dying.

1. Instead of dying feeling that they were not, ultimately, true to ourselves, people who go through Post Traumatic Growth will be much more likely to experience a **deepening of their spiritual lives** and a concomitant sense of personal authenticity.
2. Rather than regretting having spent so much **time at work** –those who experience Post Traumatic Growth are likely to have a deeper sense of wakefulness and a **greater appreciation** for life in general, leading them to make better choices about how they spend their time.
3. Instead of hiding their true feelings out of fear – those who experience Post Traumatic Growth are likely to find an **increased sense of their own strength** – in other words “if I lived through that, I can face anything.”
4. Whereas so many of us will regret having abandoned **core relationships**, someone having gone through Post Traumatic Growth will likely experience a deepening of those relationships.
5. Rather than feeling stuck – those who have gone through Post Traumatic Growth are likely to look at the world imaginatively, seeing instead **endless possibility**.

So the question is: how do we receive the benefits of Post Traumatic Growth without falling off a bridge or narrowly escaping a terrible accident? Or, as one of my friends recently wrote – after her 8 year old daughter got her first clear PET scan a year and a half after her initial cancer diagnosis:

Parents of sick kids rarely need extra impetus when it comes to appreciating the gift of time we have with our kids and finding wells of compassion and love for their child. But what if parents of a healthy child could relate to that child as if she or he had just had a clear PET scan? What if we looked at anyone we love with eyes that see only gratitude for the time we have together?

How do we receive the clarity and consciousness of someone who has been through hell, without actually going there and back?

Here's where the crazy, ancient Yom Kippur scapegoat ritual comes in – if you let me take you back to the angry cab driver and the rugged cliff.

Micah Goodman, a brilliant teacher of Torah who came to visit our community last year, brings a beautiful rendering of the meaning of this ritual:

He points out that Rambam, in his Guide for the Perplexed (vol 3, ch 46), reads the scapegoating ritual not as a magical act of cleansing, but as a first step – an awakening of the possibility of change. Here's how it works:

The reason that movement, change, forgiveness and growth are so difficult is that we tend to identify too strongly with our worst characteristics and our lowest moments. We allow them to come to define us – which blocks our ability to change. But if we could believe, even for a moment and even against all reason, that all our worst mistakes can evaporate – that it can be as if they never happened (*the sin that was scarlet now as white as snow*, in the language of Isaiah) – we'd be liberated to begin the process of *teshuvah* - return. So the ritual of sending that poor goat off a cliff is not magic. It's not replacing the real, hard work of *teshuvah* with a Biblical sleight of hand. It's actually a catalyst to *teshuvah*. The ritual only works if it moves you – if it plants the seed of possibility that something in you can change, fundamentally. It's not enchantment or augury; it's spiritual mobility. And it all starts when you imagine – for even a moment – that everything could be different.

That you could make it ok again.

That you could recover the part of you that got lost somewhere along the way.

That you might be able to heal from your grief.

That you might be worthy of love. Or forgiveness.

Take away the defining shortcomings for a moment.

Take away the fear and the guilt.

Take away the paralysis – and you are just you.

Beautiful and pure and vulnerable and alive.

Only once you see that beauty – that purity – are you able to begin the process of changing your life.

What would it feel like to breath, for even a moment, the possibility that we could be relieved of all of the *shmutz* that clouds our vision and weighs us down with guilt and shame? Wouldn't you want that release, if you could have it?

So what do we do now, when there is no longer a goat and no high priest, no laying of hands and no mysterious incantations? How do we achieve that kind of spiritual mobility – in which we again allow ourselves to believe that it's possible?

Here's the power of Yom Kippur today – and why you're right to show up – even with all of your cynicism and skepticism and doubt. It's no longer the goat who is brought to the edge of the rugged cliff – *it's us*. We are standing – all of us today - peering over into the deep, teetering on the edge. We have spoken before of how Yom Kippur is the ultimate deathscape – we come here clothed in white, some wearing the actual kittels we'll be buried in. We dive, on this day, into memories of loved ones who have died. We confront a liturgy that reminds us of the inevitability of the end. We read *Unetaneh Tokef* and wrestle with the words *who will live and who will die?* We grope, desperately, for pretty reinterpretations, twisting and contorting the words to strip them of their power and their message. *Who will really live, and who will merely exist, we tell ourselves. Who will birth new ideas into the world, and who will let dreams die prematurely?* And while these versions are certainly far more palatable, we allow ourselves to miss the point at our own peril. Because somewhere in the recesses we know that *who will live and who will die* really means just that. We are called today to recognize – for even just a moment – the stark and bitter and awful reality that some of us will live through the year and some of us will die. Some will be here next year and some will not. There will be unforeseen tragedies – fires and earthquakes and illnesses – which no amount of preparation can protect us from.

Is it an act of cruelty, to bring a bunch of flawed but generally well-intentioned people to the brink? Or is it as an act of love? An awareness that the way to begin life again is to stand at the abyss and not fall into oblivion, but instead feel the strong hand of destiny pulling us back into life – this time awake to what could be in our lives.

In our version of the scapegoat, we stand on precipice of death and imagine that this is the end - without any magic and without any dead animals. We do this not only because it's true (as Jonathan Franzen once said: "the fundamental fact about all of us is that we're alive for a while but will die before long") – but also because we need to do SOMETHING to create an opening. We simulate our own trauma because we know that in surviving the trauma, in being gently guided back to life after peering at our own demise, growth is possible. Post Traumatic Growth. Only then do we allow ourselves to believe that we can shed, change, redefine ourselves and our world.

Many years ago, someone I knew well came to see me to tell me I didn't know her well at all. The person I thought she was was all a fabrication. A façade. Falsehoods built upon lies to cover over inner-absences that nobody in the world had any idea about. She falling apart inside, and the contrast between who she knew she was and who the world thought her to be was simply unbearable. She told me all of this the day after her attempted suicide, when someone accidentally discovered her and saved her from herself. Alive. Pulled from the depths the way the angels Michael and Gavriel reach into the depths to gently and firmly take the hands of the fallen ones, who would not otherwise find a way out on their own.

I was shocked as she spoke – shocked to realize that no matter how well you think you know somebody, you never really know what's happening in someone else's heart. Shocked that she was courageous enough to speak so frankly about what she had been through. And shocked that she smiled the whole time as she revealed her deepest truth. Her greatest shame. Her most profound humiliation. She smiled, she laughed, her eyes glowed with life – because she knew in that moment that the very fact of her being alive was miracle and a blessing. She really thought that she wanted to die – but now felt instead the euphoria of being grabbed just at the final moment before falling off the cliff.

It was the euphoria that terrified me. It can't last, I remember thinking. She'll crash soon, it's inevitable. We'd better make sure there's a landing pad for her when it happens.

But here's the stunning and wonderful part: days passed and she didn't lose her ecstasy. Weeks, then months – there were so many painful revelations. I watched from the bleachers, startled by her tremendous, almost inhuman strength. And through it all, I witnessed her singularly radiant smile. A smile with not only the lips but also the eyes. A smile that said, "I made it." That's Post Traumatic Growth.

The gift of this terrifying and awesome holy day – is the ability to walk away when the sun sets tomorrow night with the euphoria of someone whose life has been saved, without having to undergo the humiliation, debasement, and risk of actually standing on the rugged cliff. Instead we imagine – collectively, powerfully, publicly - that we are all, on some very deep level, truly at the edge, but able to come back, at least this time.

*Eizehu hakham?* Ben Zoma asks in Pirkei Avot. Who is wise? *Halomed mikol adam* – one who learns from everyone. And also *mikol adam* - from *all* of a person – not only his strength, but also his weakness. Not only from how she lives, but also from how she dies. Or nearly dies. We are wise when we learn – and we are even wiser when we let it change us – forever.

*G'mar hatima tova* – it should end well, for all of us.