

RH AM Sermon

2021

Rabbi Benjamin David

All birthday parties are memorable. Each for their own reason.

This party happened not far from here, in Willingboro actually. The birthday girl, Shira, was smiling a big smile all day. You would do the same if it were your birthday.

After all, to be surrounded by people you adore, to have one singular day all about you, not your sister or your little cousins, to have everyone's attention, at last, amid a life that can feel frantic. To be able to almost feel the love coursing in your veins. She had waited so long for that.

How often do you turn seven anyway?

She wore an outfit she'd saved especially for that day.

She was missing her front teeth. Then again, most kids at the party were.

When you have a November birthday, you're never sure what the weather will be, especially in New Jersey. It could be 70 and sunny. It could be 20 and snowing. On this day it was a perfect 60 degrees, cool and clear, as good as autumn gets. Her friends arrived one by one and ran around in the backyard. When it was time they came in for cake. Parents took pictures with their bulky cameras so typical of the 80s.

And then it happened. Like a dream. Or was it a nightmare. It was hard to say at first. They heard it before they saw it, the sound of exhaust, and distant shouting. There was commotion, confusion, even some fear if the girls were being honest.

But then it came into view. First a spot of color, then in it was there in its full glory. Did their little eyes deceive them? Had the sugar made them weary? No it was real and there it was. A hot air balloon, giant and bright in the sky, and it was descending on their neighborhood.

Page McConnell sings:

Waiting patiently

For the chance to see

Doing what I can

Seems that most events aren't planned

Well this hadn't been planned at all of course. Pin the tail on the donkey, yes. Musical chairs? Definitely. But not this, never this. How could you plan for the emergency landing of a hot air balloon? Not even the boldest childlike imagination could've conjured the possibility.

Well they dropped everything when they saw it. Forks sat at the side of cake crumbs. Soda spilled on the living room carpet as if in slow motion. Shoes sat unattended in the corner. They took what they could; they left what they had to. And they ran for the balloon, a cavalry of disbelief and wonder, ponytails sailing in the air, looking at each other wide-eyed as they went.

They followed and followed, where would it land, how would it land, until it came down easily in a nearby lot, dropping out of the sky right there into suburban South Jersey.

It sat and sat and they watched and watched. And in time it took off once more, lifting into the sky and eventually out of view as if it never happened at all.

What a birthday for Shira. What would ever live up to this? How could any future birthday – hers or anyone's really – even attempt to compare? When she awoke that morning could she have known what the day would bring?

I've been thinking about the idea that we so often fail in our attempt to script the events of our own life, let alone the world around us, how there are so often, maybe more so than ever, plot twists we could've never anticipated, some we welcome, some we don't.

In the time of COVID, we've all had to re-evaluate the idea that we have complete control over our own narrative. We learned this past year to make plans loosely.

We learned we can't control the school board, or whether others choose to get vaccinated. We can't control the decisions of other parents, or children who are not our own. Often we can't even control our own children.

We certainly can't control the actions in and around our beloved Israel.

We can't control our neighbors, or what others do on social media. We can't control those who choose hostility and enmity. We can't control extremists. We can't control how others define patriotism, or Zionism, or Judaism. We can't control tomorrow, let alone today.

To quote the oldest Jewish adage of them all: Man plans; God laughs.

Or to quote a certain bygone sage: Seldom turns out the way it does in the song.

I've thought a lot this past year about the trajectory of my own life. Maybe we all did that a bit during this saga we endured. It was a time of isolation, but it was also a time of reflection.

I thought about how I could have predicted so little of it. If you would have told me when I was a fifteen-year-old kid at Cherry Hill East that I would be here with you, now, spending our tenth high holy days together, I'm not sure what I would have said, or that I'd be five years post-cancer, with an extraordinary wife and three precious children.

What would your fifteen-year-old-self have trouble believing about the current you?

Could my beloved Lisa Bieber David have imagined, as an eleven-year-old at Camp Harlam, gazing up at that iconic Chapel on the Hill, nervous and unsure during her first summer away from home, that she would, some thirty years later, be in charge of the entire place, two hundred and fifty staff, six hundred campers, a massive network of donors and alumni, and lead them all through the deadliest pandemic in a century?

Could my father, arriving at Temple Emanuel in the summer of 1974, his sideburns long, his midwestern accent thick, his experience non-existent, could he have known that he would stay not the two years prescribed by his initial contract, but forty-seven years in the end, through generations, through upheaval, through change, moving from Cooper River to the corner of Kresson and Springdale. Could he have imagined that the first time he ever attended a high holy day service led by his son would be today?

He and my mom are right there in the front row. No autographs please.

You have your examples too. I know you do. You didn't think it would go this way. You weren't expecting it either: the news, the sickness, the sadness, the surprises, the professional and personal transitions one after another. Who would've ever imagined?

I want to think that the Jewish story gives us perspective. I know it granted us perspective this past year as we navigated the setbacks and the disappointments and the toil.

I think here of all of the Jewish communities over time whose lives were upended by harsh realities they never saw coming, realities far more devastating than any pandemic even, relatives of yours and mine who faced historic turmoil and widespread loss of life, relatives who saw murder with their own frightened eyes, whether in the middle ages when Crusaders razed Jewish villages across Europe or the horrors our brothers and sisters saw as they fled the nineteenth century pogroms that decimated Jewish life in Russia.

It was about these pogroms that Bialik wrote:

The agony of their lives, the terror of their death.

Wherefore, O Lord, and why?

There's nothing there,

Save silences that hang from rafters

Of course, we add to these historic atrocities the still impossible fact of the Holocaust not a century ago.

As noted by Israeli poet Dan Pagis:

Here, in this transport

I, Eve, with my son Abel

If you see my other son,

Cain son of Adam

Tell him that I

Their lives were not only upended; they were unfinished.

Our ancestors show us from the beyond how they, with dire bravery and unwavering conviction, held onto hope and possibility even when life turned dark or painful so suddenly. How they insisted on believing in a benevolent God, even as God hid Her face in shame. How your ancestors and mine continued to believe in prayer, even as they prayed alone. How your relatives and mine somehow kept going, even as every cell of their fragile being said 'no more.'

I think of the story of Ruth, which we read each year on Shavuot. First we meet Naomi. She's lost her husband, and soon she will lose her two sons. She has two daughters-in-law that remain. Orpah returns to her own family to grieve and begin life anew. But Ruth, Ruth chooses to remain with her staggered mother-in-law.

She says: 'Where you go I will go; where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people. Where you die, I will die.' She is considered the first ever Jew-by-choice.

Could Ruth have imagined living out the rest of her days with Naomi? Could Naomi have ever conjured this remarkable twist of fate? Never. No doubt Ruth imagined a life of joy with her beloved, and Naomi imagined lengthy visits from her grandchildren. That's the fairytale they'd hoped for, just as we hope for the fairytale.

Years later, Ruth will meet Boaz. They will marry and have a son, Obed, and Naomi will treat him as her own grandchild. She loves the baby to no end. For both Ruth and Naomi, Obed is a balm to their pain. It is surely not the script they had envisioned, but it's a beautiful script, just as your least predicted script can of course be a beautiful script.

The Book of Ruth ends by noting that it is little Obed who will in time become a grandparent too. His grandson will become none other than King David.

Here the Jewish story goes straight through the complexity, the tragedy, the persistence inherent in human life. King David, leader of our people, musician and warrior, author of our Psalms, stems directly from all of it. As do we. It *is* a fairytale, but with thorns and turns, with highs that feel higher because there were no shortage of lows.

We think too of Job, the proverbial beaten man. He is lost and he's lost so much. As his story begins we learn that Job is 'blameless and upright.' He has health and wealth and a large, loving family. He has it all.

We then watch in horror as he loses his family, then his possessions. He grows bitter, despondent. He says: 'What I dreaded has come upon me.' He says: 'If my calamity were weighed, my full calamity laid on the scales, it would be heavier than the sand of the sea.' He is shortly surrounded by three friends who console him, comfort him, cry with him.

We are told that through it all he doesn't lose his faith. He is angry, yes, shaken, yes, but he lives with faith and grows closer to his God and his people, impossibly. The story ends by telling us that Job will move forward, even slowly, and live to see new generations rise up, children and grandchildren. Job will live to the age of 140 and die content.

We are not Job. We are not Ruth. But we understand their stories of woe and wonder. We know what it means to live with sadness, with dreams dashed, or maybe just delayed. We know what it's like to watch the control we thought we had wrenched from our hands.

So what do we do? Now we enter a new year so what can we control, if anything? Where can we find some level of predictability in this unpredictable world?

Actually we can control a lot. We can control our words, our own choices, the tzedakah we give and why, the authors we read, the heroes we venerate, and raise up high for our kids to see. We can control the faith we live with, our relationship to prayer and study, how we parent, the battles we fight, the battles we don't, when we listen and when we speak up. We can control the advocacy we take up.

You can choose whether you engage on Facebook, or not. You can choose the values you raise up at home no matter what your neighbor or your friends or the other parents choose to do in their home.

You can choose to work on that muscle that helps you to be more open-minded, more flexible, more ready to adapt, all of which we need more than ever. You can choose to be ready for the unexpected, whether in the form of hot air balloons, or news, and respond with perspective, with patience, and with wisdom you too have built up over the years, like Ruth, like Orpah, like Rabbi David over there.

Did he imagine at 15 that he'd be sitting here now?

We can't control it all, but we can choose to remember the strength that we have within, the quiet voice that urges you forward even when you're not so sure, call it your past, call it your God, call it that awesome and unmistakable spirit that burns bright within you now and always.

Here's to a year of joy and a year of peace. Amen.