

Its whats inside that counts

Yom Kippur 5774 – Rabbi Stephen Wise

This past summer I spent a week in one of my favourite places on earth, Killarney National Park. There are no cellphones in Killarney, nor are there computers, laptops or tablets. Just you outdoors, paddling a canoe, looking for a campsite, setting up a tent and starting up a campfire. It's so quiet, a time to be disconnected from the world of beeps, buzzes and pings . If you want to talk to someone, you sit down by the fire and look them in the eye. If you need directions, you can't ask google or check your GPS , just an old fashioned map to guide you to the next portage or campsite. And when you're lost in Killarney it's as close as any Canadian Jew will get to knowing what Moses felt when he wandered in the desert for 40 years.

On our second day we left our canoes behind and hiked up a quartz and limestone mountain known to the locals as The Crack - due to the large split down its middle allowing you to peer down into a crevice far down below among the rocks and craters. As most of the park is quite flat, you can see the Crack from a far distance. But though the goal is easy to spot, the journey is not so easy. It required following closely to the trail, set by either piles of rocks, or small markers on trees. It went sliced through canyons, meandered in the forest, over bluffs and finally ascended straight upwards towards the peak. It's not a straight path either, its twisted and winding, sometimes turning away from the goal until eventually curving back. The key was to trust the map, follow the signs and keep the goal in mind. The peak was always there beckoning us and while the journey was hard, we knew the view would be spectacular when we got there. And it was. We could see as far as Sudbury in one direction, with Georgian Bay far off in the other, and gorgeous lakes and mountains in between. It reminded me of most goals in life, they are out there, sometimes you can see the peak, but it takes a lot to get there, there are many detours along the way, lots of setbacks, lots of starts and stops. Sometimes I have to climb a mountain to give me the spark of a sermon.

No one wants to admit that the life journey is hard. We all have goals we want to achieve in life. Early on they seem much easier to set and accomplish, but its just as likely that we don't always achieve them. And often while it appears on the outside to others that we know exactly what we are doing and are on the right path, deep down we might be broken, unhealthy, confused or unsure of the right way to go.

Sometimes someone looks great on the outside but conceals a great mental or physical ailment that is hard to overcome. As Henry David Thoreau wrote in Walden, "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation". Certainly we are all striving to achieve happiness, but it's not always that easy. We want to be successful, to keep things together but so often we wear masks to hide what hurts inside, what pains us. When we suffer we suffer alone, in silence, without community to help us. We make pains to keep it fine on the outside, and let our guard down alone.

Perhaps we can relate to the character of Moses, Moshe Rabeinu, our greatest teacher and leader of journeys. Here is a man who seemingly had it all together. He is spared from certain death by his quick thinking family and raised in a palace with the pharaoh. Though he flees to the wilderness when he finds out the truth of his birth, he returns with the power of God in his hand to punish the Egyptians and lead his people out of slavery into freedom.

But if we dig a little deeper, Moses masks a very difficult life. He really has no parents, as his birth parents gave him away and his adopted parents were not ready to admit his true identity. He always appears decisive and in control but this is far from the truth. When he first confronts injustice seeing a slave beaten, he comes to his aid but then runs away to the desert to contemplate his actions. He is found by God at the burning bush but is insecure and unsure when God tells him to go back to Egypt to lead the Israelites. I can't talk right, no one will

listen to me, I'm not the right person, I'm not good enough, choose someone else.

Does this sound like someone confident and in control. And who does he have to support him. His parents aren't there. His father in law is a non-Jewish priest who shows up once to lecture him on leadership then disappears. His wife Tziporah is mentioned only once at their wedding, then accused of being a foreigner by his brother and sister. Brother Aaron is busy heading the priesthood and Moses loses two nephews in service to God. We never hear one about his children after their birth. His is such a convoluted family he could easily host his own modern family reality show. And this is Moshe Rabeinu, our great teacher and leader. If the leader of the Jewish people, who talked to God face to face, who appeared calm and in control yet deep down was insecure and made mistakes, certainly we can do no less.

Today on Yom Kippur we get a chance to name some of the challenges we face, by calling them aloud, together with everyone around us, during the special teshuva liturgy. We sing Ashamnu, We Have Sinned. We chant Al chet shechanti, "for the sins I have committed this year". Like to primal therapy of the 1970's, we release out loud the pain inside, lamenting our mistakes. Here in our synagogue community, we don't have to hide our doubts and insecurities anymore but bare all before God, as we pray in unison.

It seems to be that this can be a powerful moment for us. Yes we all face challenges. But here together in community, we don't have to face it alone, we pray together - with friends and family around us. They are the people who ultimately will help us get through the pitfalls and hardships of our life.

I can prove to you that coming to shul can be a great help. According to the latest statistics, about 20-25% of the population are without a religion. But let's look at this another way. It means that despite predictions of religion's imminent demise, 3 out of every 4 people declare allegiance to faith. Superpowers may last a century but the great religions last millennia.

Why do we survive? Rabbi Jonathan Saks, the chief rabbi of Britain reminds us that even Darwin in his theory of survival of the fittest witnessed a human phenomenon that contradicted his basic thesis. It's called altruism. Those who risk their lives for others usually die before passing on their genes. Darwinism suggests that trait should thus disappear. Yet it has not died out, it gets passed on. We have mirror neurons that lead us to feel pain when we see others suffering. As Rabbi Saks notes,

"We are hard wired for empathy, we are moral animals".

As individuals we want to survive, but as a group we act not solely for our own advantage but for the group as a whole. And that is what religious communities are, the place to do things for others. That is what makes them successful and ultimately survivors. That is why religion helps us keep on track in life's journey.

I quote Rabbi Saks "It strengthens us, turning altruism into instinct, through the rituals we perform, the texts we read and the prayers we pray. It remains the most powerful community builder the world has known. Far from refuting religion, the Neo-Darwinists have helped us understand why it matters."

Robert Putnam, the political scientist who wrote the famous book Bowling Alone back in 2000, created a phenomenon with his thesis that while more people were bowling, fewer were bowling in teams. His theory was that we are individuals, we like to play the game, but not in a group, we would prefer to do it alone.

A decade later in 2010 he published his next book, called American Grace. Just the opposite, this time he showed that there was one place where social capital could be found and where people still worked in teams. Not the bowling alley but the house of worship - the church or synagogue. Mr. Putnam's research showed that regular church- or synagogue-goers were more likely to:

give money to charity,
do volunteer work,
help the homeless,
donate blood,
help a neighbour with housework,
spend time with someone who was feeling depressed,
offer a seat to a stranger
or help someone find a job.

Religiosity as measured by church or synagogue attendance is, he found, a better predictor of altruism than education, age, income, gender or race. Religion is the best antidote to what ails us, not just the rituals and mitzvot, but the sense of community we gain when praying or doing social justice or fundraising or learning... together.

The NY Times a few months ago published an article called “The Benefits of Church” that applies to all religious communities. The article illuminated a startling scientific discovery - going to a house of worship weekly is actually physically good for you. I will repeat that...going to shul is physically good for you. Religious attendance —boosts the immune system and decreases blood pressure. It may add as much as two to three years to your life. Don't we all seem very calm right now, rather than at work or school. Why? What do we get here?

The first answer is Social support. It is here where we talk to each other about more than spreadsheets, balance books and final grades. We have different conversations, think about the bigger picture, look out for each other. Social support is tied directly to better health.

The second answer is Healthy behavior. Certainly many members of congregations struggle with behaviors they would like to change, but on average, regular synagogue and church attendees drink less, smoke less, use fewer recreational drugs and are less sexually promiscuous than others.

The third reason is that Faith demands that you experience the world as more than just what is material and observable. Because God is immaterial – can't be seen or touched, those of faith must use their imaginations to represent God. To know God, you must experience what can only be imagined as real, and you must also experience it as good. Those who experience a loving good god were healthier as judged by a standardized psychiatric scale. When we feel good mentally it often translates into better physical health. It lets us know we have support when the journey is hard. When we see the mountain peak, but the path has obstacles and we feel we can't get there alone, we are more likely to turn for support along the way and not depend only on ourselves.

This summer up at Camp George I was asked to lead a prayer service during one night they call “Choose your own Tefillah. I decided to try something new, a prayer session in the lake, I called it “Shake in the Lake”. Unfortunately I chose the coldest night of the summer, about 12 degrees, overcast, windy, basically the worst possible night to go jump in the lake, let alone to pray.

But I really wanted to do it so I convinced Rabbi Katz to announce my option and see how many campers would actually show up. When I got to the waterfront, I was the first one there. After a few more minutes I was still the only one there. But ya gotta have faith. Sure enough 3 boys showed up who said they were excit-

ed to jump in with me. Then a few more kids showed up and suddenly we had a group. Wrapping ourselves in our towels, we said the prayer for wearing a tallit. Then we sang water related songs like Mayim Mayim. As we approached the dock the wind was howling and the water looked frigid but it was too late to turn back. I told everyone to put their toes over the edge and as we said the barchu, we bowed over the water. One of them said “you first, Rabbi”. I had no choice but to jump in and, guess what, the water was slightly warmer than the air. Soon everyone jumped in after me and we had a beautiful shul in the pool.

Moses may not have understood what shul in the pool was, but surely he knew he had to lead the way to the promised land even when he was unsure of the way to get there. Not only that he had many personal obstacles along the way, ranging from personal doubt, complaining co-workers, to uncertainty of mission. But Moshe Rabeinu kept his eye on his objective. When things got difficult, he found ways to get the support of the people around him, even if his family was dysfunctional. When he got exasperated with God, he yelled out his frustrations or hit rocks with his staff. When he was overwhelmed he gathered his advisors and worked together to adjudicate over the difficult fights between people. He listened and he prayed to God for guidance and hope.

Unlike Moses we might not have the luxury to talk to God face to face. But we do have a chance on these high holidays to reduce the obstacles in our life that hold us back from our goals and visions. We do have a supportive religious community right here in this beautiful room. We are not bowling alone here. The power of community is strong and can help set us back along the path towards those mountain peaks that we are climbing towards.

Let us remember that not everyone around you knows where you are going or where you want to go, but, if you let them, they can help keep you on the path. The goals in life are there, follow the signs, continue to aim high and you’ll get there.

Shana Tova