

Getting Lost to Find Your Way
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Hiking in the mountains east of Seattle one day, as my dad tells me, he lost the trail. Alone, at the top of the mountain, he couldn't find himself on his map. He couldn't find the way down. He had no plan for what to do. Finally, he saw a person approaching. He asked her "where am I?" She responded, "well, that depends on where you are going".

As I spoke about on Rosh Hashanah, working as a chaplain at Children's Hospital challenged me. Beyond feeling like I could not always help people, what really scared me was having no idea what would happen when I visited a patient and their family. Before entering a patient's room I glanced at their chart, noting what religion they followed, their age, their diagnosis and how recently a chaplain visited them. That was all I knew. I then sanitized my hands, knocked on the door and walked in... I didn't know if they were having a good day or a bad one. If they found meaning in a chaplain's visit or if they wanted nothing to do with me. I did not know if this visit would make me want to cry. I didn't know if it would last for 5 minutes or for an hour. I could not predict anything that would happen beyond that doorway. How could I have planned to react to hearing that before every surgery a young girl sees her dead grandfather and it brings her comfort. Or to a young cancer patient who said if he had a super power, it would be immortality.

As much as I like to have a plan for what to do, in the hospital I couldn't plan for how a patient visit would go.

One time, after visiting with a family for an hour and telling them I needed to go, I asked if they had any other questions. I couldn't plan for what happened next: suddenly the patient's younger brother, who had been silent, pipes in with a question. I am prepared for him to ask about God or his brother's sickness. Instead he asks, why are turtles so slow on land? He asked me how to make cookies. And how x-boxes are made. He asks me why I have a watermelon on my head. I tell him I am wearing a kippah, which means that I am Jewish and it has a watermelon on it. He says, "oh, you're Jewish, well I'm American". I am about to explain that Jews can be Americans too, when his dad tells him, "no you're not, you're Mexican!" There was no way I could plan for such a funny exchange.

The patients and their families also lacked a plan. I met with one family on the oncology floor a number of times over the course of the summer. I first encountered the patient, I'll call her Rosa, after she had finished her chemo. Her hair was sprouting, beginning to cover her head that had been bald for the last year. She was just starting immunotherapy. Rosa was diagnosed right around the time of her second birthday. It was now almost a year later. As an almost three-year-old, she did everything you would expect. She loudly played with her trucks and airplanes in her hospital room. She watched silly videos on an ipad. And she cuddled into her parents often.

No parent expects their child might be seriously sick, and even in their worst nightmare they cannot imagine cancer. No one plans for how their life will be changed when they hear the news. They had not anticipated the days and nights spent in the hospital, seeing their child

become so weak and nauseous. Nor the fear of being confronted with the mortality of a small person who was supposed to live for a long time.

I spoke to Rosa's mother, Rachel, when I first stopped by her room. At one point, Rachel told me that she felt "so blessed." I tried to hide the shock on my face. "What?" I said to myself, "how could she feel blessed? Her child was diagnosed with cancer as a two-year-old and a year later she is still in treatment. What could be worse than that?" Luckily, I did not say that to her. Instead, I called on my training and asked her to tell me more about "feeling blessed." She told me her daughter's cancer caused her to change her entire perspective on life. It forced her to reassess her priorities. She now realized that her work was not as important as she previously thought. Prior to Rosa's diagnosis, she went through the motions of life, lulled by day to day tasks and to do lists. She now describes herself as "awake," as aware of the fragility of life and how important each day is.

She said that she has learned to accept what life gives her. In her words, she learned that she can only make suggestions, not a plan. Everything is in God's hands.

Rachel's sentiment is quite close to a Yiddish saying-bear with me, I don't actually know Yiddish- *mann tracht, un gott lacht*"- a person plans and God laughs. You may have experienced one of these moments in your life. You think you are going on a hike, picnic or doing something else outside, and instead it starts to rain.

This Yiddish phrase, *Mann tracht, un Gott lacht* reminds me of our high holiday prayer, Unetaneh Tokef, which vividly describes our lives hanging in the balance.

On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on the Fast of Yom Kippur it is sealed. How many will pass away from this world.

Yom Kippur, and Unetaneh Tokef in particular, force us to face our mortality. I do not believe in a God who judges our previous year and decides who will live and who will die in the coming year. But Unetaneh Tokef demands we think about the unthinkable, that terrible things happen and their occurrence is sealed- sealed off from our control, sealed off from our best intentions, regardless of whatever plans we make and our best effort.¹ Unetaneh Tokef lists a litany of the many possible calamities that may befall us. It reminds us that there is randomness beyond our control. Unetaneh Tokef forces us to acknowledge that we may die in this coming year.

Like Rachel and her daughter Rosa, A famous Jewish thinker also found his life veering completely out of his control. Born in Germany in 1905, Victor Frankl studied medicine and became a psychiatrist. By 1937, Frankl opened a private practice in neurology and psychiatry in Vienna. His career started to take off and then we all know what happened...

The Nazis rose to power. In 1942 he was deported to the Theresienstadt Ghetto.

In October of 1944, the Nazis sent him to Auschwitz. He was then placed in Dachau, where he spent five months as a laborer. American soldiers liberated him, but his mother, brother and wife were murdered in concentration camps.

¹ David Stern in *Who By Fire* p. 173

In his memoir, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl describes life in the concentration camp and in particular how finding meaning allows a person to endure terrible experiences. In the book, he tells the following story:

We stumbled on in the darkness, over big stones and through large puddles... Hardly a word was spoken; the icy wind did not encourage talk. Hiding his mouth behind his upturned collar, the man marching next to me whispered suddenly: "If our wives could see us now! I do hope they are better off in their camps and don't know what is happening to us."

That brought thoughts of my own wife to mind. And as we stumbled on for miles, slipping on icy spots, supporting each other time and again, dragging one another up and onward, nothing was said, but we both knew: each of us was thinking of his wife.

A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth ... that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which [humans] can aspire... I understood how a [person] who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved. In a position of utter desolation, when a [person] cannot express [herself] in positive action, when [her] only achievement may consist in enduring [her] sufferings in the right way – an honorable way – in such a position [a person] can, through loving contemplation of the image [she] carries of [her] beloved, achieve fulfillment.²

Frankl quotes Nietzsche, who said, "[a person] who has a *why* to live for can bear almost any *how*." In other words, people who have a purpose in life, people who find meaning in their lives, can, to quote Frankl, "transform a personal tragedy into a triumph, to turn one's predicament into a human achievement."

Certainly, the Holocaust, and a serious illness, are times where the plan is thrown out the window. Those cases may demand the creation of new meaning. But it is not only brushes with death that can throw the plan out the window and create a need for new meaning. Even having a child, a joyous blessing, no matter how well planned for, ends up derailing the plan. Lack of sleep, unexpected runny noses or tantrums make plans laughable.

Sometimes an experience can be the catalyst to leave the plan and search for new meaning.

Traveling to a new country, backpacking for weeks or attending the right festival can be those moments. Or meeting someone who instantly transforms your world.

Creating meaning out of hardship or new circumstances is anything but easy. Some people are never able to do so. For others it takes months or years.

These moments are so powerful. But not all of us experience them when we need them. Luckily for us, as Jews, we have an entire day designed to force us to face these questions. Yom Kippur is said to be 1/60th of death. We imitate death by refraining from eating and drinking and other worldly pleasures. We wear white and some even wear a kittel, the shroud in which we are buried, to rehearse for our death. We recite the vidui, the confession of our sins, the same vidui we recite as we are dying. In facing our death, we are faced with how to live our lives.

Alfred Nobel exemplifies the power of facing our death. He was not always known for the Nobel peace prize. He was first known as the inventor of dynamite. When his brother died, the newspaper accidentally thought it was Alfred who died and printed his obituary. Having the unusual experience of reading his own obituary, Alfred read the words "Dr. Alfred Nobel, who

² P.56-57

became rich by finding ways to kill more people faster than ever before, died yesterday”. Angrily, he threw down the newspaper and said aloud “that is not how I want to be remembered. That is not what is important to me”. That is when he decided to dedicate his entire fortune to reward people for making this world a better place. Faced with his death and his legacy, Dr. Nobel found his why and did tshuvah.

Unetaneh Tokef tells us that Tshuva, tfillah and tzedekah *maarivin et roah ha'gzerah*- that repentance, prayer and righteous giving reduce the severity of the decree. I do not believe in a god who determines who will live and who will die in the coming year. I do not believe that praying or giving tzaddekah convince God to move a person from the Book of Death to the Book of Life. But I do believe that *tshuva*, improving ourselves, *tfillah*, prayer and meditation and tzedekah do help us to find meaning in the storms that life throws at us. We are not able to control the randomness of life. We will be knocked off of our path. But in forcing us to contemplate our death, Yom Kippur demands we fight for a life of meaning today.³

Rosa, the three-year-old patient, never wanted to get cancer. The last thing her mother Rachel ever imagined is that her daughter would have cancer. And yet, out of this terrible circumstance, being forced off of her plan, Rachel found new meaning in her life.

Like Victor Frankl and Alfred Nobel, when faced with death, they found purpose in life.

Sometimes it is getting lost that best helps us find where we are.

That doesn't mean we have to experience tragedy or come close to death. It does mean we need to recognize that the best-laid plans in life are no more guaranteed than life itself. And the way to make the most of our lives is to recognize our blessings, find meaning, and work towards a larger purpose.

We only know where we are when we know where we are going.

³ Sharon Brous in *Who By Fire*, p.144