

## Kol Nidre Sermon 2018

### How we Journey

#### Rabbi Lori Koffman

I have a wonderful and dear friend who doesn't live in New York and whom I see far too infrequently; life just always seems to get in the way of our getting together. So, I was so excited this summer when we were able to make a plan to see each other!

The plan was for my friend was to come visit with me for a few days after dropping her kids off at camp. The drive from camp to me is about 3 hours, and she estimated she would arrive around 4pm. I used the excuse of her visit to make a dinner reservation at one of my favorite restaurants in Manhattan and was grateful that I was able to get one—even if it was for 6 pm (which is a bit on the early side for me).

The day for our visit arrived. At about 4:00 I received a text from my friend saying that she was about 30 minutes away—perfect timing I thought (especially since this particular friend does have a tendency to run a bit late 😊).

Then at about 4:20, another text: “just kidding, I will be there in about 3 hours.” Worried, I immediately picked up the phone called her. She answered her phone hysterically laughing. She was fine, she said, the kids were fine, the car was fine. But there **was** a problem.

At around 4:00, right after her first text to me, she noticed something strange...the surroundings seemed unusually rural given the fact that, according to her GPS, she was due to arrive soon. So she pulled into a gas station, and asked the attendant how much farther it was to Manhattan.

The answer: quite far, since she was actually about 1 ½ hours from the Canadian border! It turns out that my friend had been so absorbed in listening to podcasts and catching up on phone calls while on the road, that she didn't realize that when she plugged my address into her GPS she hadn't focused on making sure it was in the right City...and so she had driven north instead of south.

It's a great, funny story right? But here's my favorite part.

When I said to her ‘oy!’ You drove 4 hours yesterday to stay with relatives, drove 2 ½ hours from your relatives this morning to drop your kids at camp, and now just drove another 3 hours! You must be exhausted! Do you want to just escape your car and stay where you are for the night instead of coming to me?’

NO WAY! She laughed into the phone. “I am absolutely coming to see you! Anyway, I have so many more podcast episodes to catch up on.”. She got right back in her car and drove another 3 hours to the real New York, NY.

I share this story not just because I got to spend time with my friend—which of course I treasured-- but because of her attitude about the whole thing. She didn't whine and complain about the long road she had already traveled. She didn't hesitate about the long road yet ahead. She laughed at herself and didn't miss a beat. She got right back in her car and saying, 'I wanted to catch up on more podcasts anyway.'

Her attitude totally inspired me.

### **Pause**

I've been thinking a lot about journeys lately, and reflecting on HOW we journey. Because journeys can be complicated; they are not always easy, and they don't always take us exactly where we thought we were headed.

Unsurprisingly, the Torah has quite a lot to say about the subject, and it provides a good road map to help us think about them.

There are two journeys in the Torah that are central to the Jewish narrative.

The first, is a journey that our founding father, Abraham took after hearing from God: "Go forth, *lekh lecha*. Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to a land that I will show you, and I will bless you."

I think that Abraham's response to God is pretty striking—even with the promise of blessing: Abraham simply picks up and leaves his home, his family and his whole life to venture to someplace new. Not only to someplace new, but to a completely unknown destination! AND, as if that's not enough, Abraham does so at the age of 75—which at the very least is well into middle age in Torah terms.

How many of us would do that?

Avivah Zornberg, the great modern Biblical scholar, suggests that God chose Abraham to be our founding father specifically *because* Abraham was capable of hearing and following the *Lekh lekha*; that Abraham's ears were open to an invitation that most of us would repress. (Zornberg, *The Murmuring Deep*, p 168)

It takes a certain kind of optimism to do what Abraham did. It takes hope.

And indeed, as God promised, Abraham was rewarded and blessed for his journey of hope.

That's Torah story number one. Abraham's journey of hope.

The second of the Torah's great journeys, however is quite different.

The second great journey in the Torah is the journey of the Israelites after their escape from slavery as they sojourn toward their 'Promised Land.'

A mere two weeks into the Israelites journey out of Egypt, into freedom and toward the Promised Land, the Israelites begin to complain. They begin to yearn for their life back home where everything seemed better, even slavery. "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt...when we ate our fill of bread," they say, preferring death back home to the unknown that lies before them.

The Israelites say this a mere two weeks after experiencing the incredible miracle of being freed from hundreds of years of slavery! The Israelites say this a mere two weeks after experiencing the life-saving miracle of the parting of the sea! So very anxious about the future are they, that the Israelites lose sight of the blessings that had brought them thus far and lose all hope about the future.

And what happens to them as a result? God decides that a people so full of fear and negativity cannot be the ones to inherit the Promised Land after all; that only a new generation unsullied by such anxiety is worthy of such a place. So a journey that geographically should have taken 2 years took 40 years, as the Israelites were forced to wander in the wilderness until that first fearful generation died off.

The striking difference between this journey from that of Abraham, is the attitude of the travelers.

A few weeks ago I was at the Rubinstein museum in Manhattan where I saw an incredible art installation. I wish I could show you a picture, but I will try my best to paint a visual with words. Imagine a wall as long and tall as the one behind me including the windows. Now imagine a 'seam' down the middle of this wall, and on the left-hand side a blue background with a series of pegs of about 20 rows high and about 40 rows wide, with white index sized-cards hanging from each peg. And imagine on the right-hand side a red background with the same array of pegs and cards.

What was on these index cards? Hand-written notes, hundreds and hundreds of them, stacked deep on each peg, written by visitors to the museum.

What did the visitors write on these notes?

Upon entering the exhibit the visitors are greeted with two stacks of cards and pens with which to write on them. The heading at the top of the cards on one stack says, "I am anxious because...." And the heading on the top of the cards on the other stack says, "I am hopeful because...." The creators of the installation invited the visitors to share their hopes and anxieties

on these cards, and to then hang their hopeful cards on the blue side of the wall and to hang their anxious cards on the red side of the wall.

As I said earlier, I wish I could show you a picture of this ‘Monument for the Anxious and the Hopeful’ as it is called by its creators Candy Chang and James A. Reeves. It was an incredibly powerful sight: witnessing the hopes and fears of hundreds and hundreds of people about ‘a moment that has yet to arrive.’

It reminded me of the Western Wall in Jerusalem, with its notes of people’s hopes and fears stuffed into every nook and cranny, but with a difference: these notes were publicly shared, for all to see.

I started to read through them. And to read, and to read and to read. I could barely tear myself away. Some of them were personal. Many—no surprise--were political. Some were spiritual. Some were very specific, and some were very theoretical.

I would like to share just a very few of them with you now. On the anxious wall people shared: ‘I am anxious because people are not nice enough to each other.’ ‘I am anxious about aging and my health.’ ‘I am anxious because nothing is certain.’ And ‘I am anxious that my mother will try to kill herself again...’

On the ‘hopeful side’ were cards that read: ‘I am hopeful because I believe there is more good than evil in the world.’ ‘I am hopeful because he seems committed about his recovery.’ ‘I am hopeful because I believe I really will sort my stuff out.’ And ‘I am hopeful because in the end we will make the best out of what life gives us. We have choice.’

I especially like that last one, because it reminds me of my lost friend in her car.

Let me read it again: ‘I am hopeful because in the end we will make the best out of what life gives us. We have choice.’

We come together over these next 25 hours of Yom Kippur to reflect on where we have been and to think about where we want to go. It is, I suspect, a time of mixed emotions for many of us, as we wonder, what will our journeys look like in the coming year? Where will they lead us? How will we feel? How can we hang on to hope even in the face of any anxiety we may also feel?

It’s something I’ve been thinking about a lot, because of course, this Yom Kippur marks the end of one journey and the beginning of a new one for me. And I know that as I stand on the cusp of this next step, I am experiencing a jumble of feelings: excitement and hope at the future, but also sadness at saying goodbye to this very special place. But what I feel mostly is a tremendous sense of gratitude and of blessing.

So I would like to close by offering each and every one of you, and this whole, precious, dear and beautiful Bet Torah community one of my most favorite blessings:

**A blessing for Journeys by Rabbi Sheryl Lewart z'l:**

May you be blessed on your journey,  
Finding comfort and refuge as you travel.  
As you step into the strange  
and become a stranger,  
may each traveler, wanderer and seeker you meet  
offer wisdom and empathy  
as you step into the unknown journey of your life.  
May you be protected from all harm.  
May you learn and grow from encounters  
with gentle teachers and sympathetic guides.  
May you hold onto the awareness that  
you have the courage to walk away from difficult situations.  
You will move towards compassion and clarity,  
awareness and appreciation.  
You will find answers and more questions  
May you find what you seek. Amen