

Dad, I need to go to the mall today!” “I can’t take you today.” “But, “Dad, I have to go to the mall today!” “Why do you “HAVE” to go to the mall today?” “I need to hang out with my friends today, EVERYONE is going to be there, and it would be devastating if I weren’t there. IT WILL RUIN MY LIFE!”

“Darling, I can’t take you. Since at least you and I are not going to be there, not EVERYONE will be there.”

“But Dad, IT WILL RUIN EVERYTHING if I am not there!”

“Darling, thank you for helping me be successful in giving you something to talk about on the psychiatrist’s couch. I can’t take you AND I promise your life will not be ruined.”

How many of you have had teenagers? How many of you remember being teenagers? Then this conversation is very familiar to you. Our children don’t realize how many of their “problems” aren’t problems; they are inconveniences. I feel badly that the face of their iPhone cracked, or that the concert date got changed, or that this friend or that had to cancel plans last night. These are not life and death situations!

There are, though, families who face life and death situations: homelessness and hunger, or living in the middle of a war. We watch the news and see how people are struggling to maintain any sense of normalcy in their lives. The media cannot oversensationalize the trauma people face, and it is hard to go through a day and not feel bombarded with ugly news around this country and around this world.

Even closer to home, we have very real needs and conflicts that challenge our sense of shalom daily. We suffer personal losses; we face job difficulties; we experience the blessings and the challenges of raising children, caring for aging parents, and keeping our head ... and our spirits above water. Very locally, we all still know people who are displaced because of a hurricane that happened three years ago.

If you ask me how I am, you know the answer you will get. I am blessed every day. Part of this understanding of being blessed comes from having had to figure out how to face challenges in my life. Part of my sense of blessing happens because I had to figure out and work through the challenges I have faced. I have learned how to appreciate the many gifts and blessings I enjoy, but too often overlook or take for granted. I am not going to stand here and tell you that I do not face adversity. I cannot stand here and

tell you that I do not sometimes get overwhelmed with my struggles. I do know that I work hard never to lose sight of what is sacred in my life.

You met my rabbi, Gene Levy at my installation. The day before I left for Israel to begin rabbinical school, he gave me his innermost blessing and sage advice. “Marc, every day you have to take a look in the mirror. If you do not ask yourself, ‘What the heck am I doing here?’ you do not belong in the rabbinate.” I felt that this was the most horrible advice I could get. Having just closed my law practice and uprooted my family, he was telling me that if I don’t ask myself why I am here, then I don’t belong in the Rabbinate! Who needs this? It felt kind of like Groucho Marx’s line, “I wouldn’t to be a member of any club who admit someone like me.” It did not take long for me to learn that he was correct. There are days that the blessings flow easily. There are also days that I feel so spiritually drained that I do not know how I can write another sermon, counsel another person, or smile for the next wedding or baby naming ceremony. Every day, I have to be “INTENTIONAL” about asking myself why I am here. In doing this, I affirm this blessing, and hope never to take it for granted.

Adversity comes in all shapes and sizes. Some are real ... some are about the mall. Some are large problems and some are small

ones. Some are just plain overwhelming. We get stuck letting all of the difficulties interfere with our search for wholeness. We let these problems fester inside of us; we let them go unresolved and often unexplored. We hide from them. We pretend that if we don't go to the doctor over a persistent cough, he can't tell us that it is more than a cold. The warning light on our car's dashboard cannot be real, it sounds like it is running fine. Our children can't possibly be in trouble, they must just be too busy with homework, can't be hiding from us in their rooms. My spouse "really" is just working late every night with unknown co-workers. Yes, I just lost someone I love, but I am tough and can make it through just fine. Often, we actually convince ourselves that ... we have convinced ourselves ... that all of the above is nothing, and that all is really ok.

Often, even when we internalize real problems we fail to recognize their severity. We either rationalize them away, irrationally worry, "Why does God hate me and do this to me," or put up a stiff upper lip and charge through. Either way we exhaustingly drag all of the baggage behind us. Often, even when we can name our "demons," we do not know how to let them go. Some of us find coping skills to make it through each day. A colleague once taught me that burying our head in the sand, like an ostrich, serves only to leave our rear end up in the air

unprotected ... able to be unsuspectedly kicked from any direction.

This holy day season is supposed to help us change this paradigm. Our liturgy and tradition aim at returning wholeness and holiness into our lives. Sometimes, though, the language of the prayers leaves little room for healing amidst the traditional countless demonstrations of contrition. We beat our chest atoning for personal and communal transgressions against each other; and against God. Some prayers speak about the wrongs we have brought upon ourselves. Too few, though, help us see past the contrition to a place of healing. Perhaps the greatest impacting transgression we commit on a regular basis is not something that we do to ourselves or to others. The most impacting transgression we commit is in failing to acknowledge the trauma in our lives in ways that empower us to do something about moving through the adversity and into wholeness. The reason this is so touchy is that we first have to admit that we need help. As a counselor, I have learned that even if I can have the perspective necessary to help someone else, I am often too close to see my own problems clearly. There are times when I am stressed; I am the last person to know it ... and I usually find out because of someone with whom I was short. My confession: I am still very much a work in progress. Show of hands ... who joins me in this? We all do.

Sometimes we knowingly hide from our adversity and sometimes we just cannot see how things affect us. More often we judge others, unable to see how they feel afflicted with their own baggage.

How many of us have faced adversity this year? The news from around the world paralyses us in fear. We do not know how to recover from cross words with a loved one. How many of us feel burdened, and do not know what to do about it? How often do we write people off because of our inability to cope? We human beings are fragile. We made it here today, and many of us made it here struggling with all sorts of issues for which we have not found a healing process or solution. How do we handle adversity?

I want to share a story, a folktale, with you. It spoke volumes to me as it unfolded.

A young woman went to her grandmother and told her about her life and how things were so hard for her – her husband had cheated on her, and she was devastated. She did not know how she was going to make it and wanted to give up. She was tired of fighting and struggling. It seemed as soon as one problem was solved; a new one arose.

Her grandmother took her to the kitchen. She filled three pots with water and placed each on a high fire. Soon the pots came to boil. In the first she placed carrots, in the second she placed eggs, and in the last she placed ground coffee beans. She let them sit and boil; without saying a word ... staring awkwardly at each other and at the pots.

In about twenty minutes, she turned off the burners. She fished the carrots out and placed them in a bowl. She pulled the eggs out and placed them in a bowl. Then she ladled the coffee out and placed it in a bowl.

Turning to her granddaughter, she asked, 'Tell me what you see.'

'Carrots, eggs, and coffee,' she replied.

Her grandmother brought her closer and asked her to feel the carrots. She did and noted that they were soft. The grandmother then asked the granddaughter to take an egg and break it. After pulling off the shell, she observed the hard-boiled egg.

Finally, the grandmother asked the granddaughter to sip the coffee. The granddaughter smiled as she tasted its rich aroma. The granddaughter then asked, 'What does it mean, grandmother?'

Her grandmother explained that each of these objects had faced the same adversity: boiling water. Each reacted differently. The carrot went in strong, hard, and unrelenting. However, after being subjected to the boiling water, it softened and became weak. The egg had been fragile. Its thin outer shell had protected its liquid interior, but after sitting through the boiling water, its inside became hardened. The ground coffee beans were unique, however. After they had been in the boiling water, they had changed the water.

“Which are you?” she asked her granddaughter. “When adversity knocks on your door, how do you respond? Are you a carrot, an egg or a coffee bean?”

I have to think about this: Which am I? Am I the carrot that seems strong, but wilts with pain and adversity? In wilting, do I become soft and lose my strength and resilience? Do I bend in every direction unable to stand for anything? Do I look whole, even while my spirit is broken? It is as if I lost faith in my ability to cope.

Am I the egg that starts with a malleable heart, but changes with the heat? Did I have a fluid spirit, but after a death, a breakup, a financial hardship or some other trial, have I, like the yolk of an egg, become hardened and stiff? That which had the potentiality of giving life became hard and unyielding. Does my shell look the



same, but on the inside am I bitter and tough with a stiff spirit and hardened heart? Did you know that the shell of a raw egg also has greater resilience than that of a hardboiled egg? After trauma, I may look and seem the same, but I am fragile and barely resemble the person of potential and hope that I once was.

Or am I like the coffee bean? The bean changes the hot water; the very circumstance that brings the pain. When the water gets hot, it releases the fragrance and flavor. If we are like the bean, when things are at their worst, we get better and change the situation around us. When the hour is the darkest and trials are their greatest, do we elevate ourselves to another level? When someone dies or when someone hurts us, we are not cursed, unless we choose to be. People are meant to live and then die. People hurt us out of their own insecurities. We cannot undo the hurt, but it never has to own our future. You have heard me say that our biography is not our destiny.

During these holy days, we wrestle with two basic concepts. First, we must experience a *Khesbon hanefesh* ... an accounting of the spirit. We need to look at where our heads and our hearts meet and diverge. We are taught in Psalm 90, "Teach us O God to number our days, that we might gain hearts of wisdom!" Note that the wisdom is not of our mind. We are not talking about the

intellectual engagement. Rather, the heart should be wise – filled with compassion and a loving respect for the reality that life is finite. Our minds hold grudges. Our hearts know that there is not enough time in life to waste it holding grudges. Where our hearts control our behaviors, we can clear away the baggage that holds us back; even where we created the baggage. We can then confront ourselves, we can then face each other, and we can move more freely into tomorrow.

Second, when we can honestly face each cause in need of healing and each cause for celebration, again ... our destiny is never our biography. Yesterday has a vote but not a veto in our future. We cannot fix what we have done wrong. We cannot rest on the laurels of what we did well. Each day presents us with a new opportunity to rise and fall; to become hardened or weakened; to change our circumstances in an effort to continue and secure our growth.

Our prayer is for the strength and support to faithfully face our next steps in our pursuit of blessing. This is the path of prayer that can lead us to healing.

This holiday is about honesty. No one knows what is in your heart as you read the words of the prayer. Just reading the words of the prayer does nothing to invite healing. The sages teach that we

have to live with open hearts, open minds, and open spirits. We have to have the integrity to face what we need and to change what we can, even if it means changing how we see ourselves in light of the problems that we face. This change roots in love. Dr. King taught us that pain can never drive out pain. Only love can drive out pain. We have to love ourselves enough to force these conversations. We must love ourselves enough to want to heal. We have to be honest to see the world around us and be able to see our own problems in a more proper perspective. We must be honest enough so that we will not spend our days avoiding, pretending, or dancing around the barriers in the path of shalom that keep us from full lives. Whether we are the child who is stuck being upset for not getting his way or the adult struggling to make ends meet, the path for shalom is available to us, if we care enough about each other and about ourselves to follow its lead.

Or Zarua latzaddik, oolyishrae lev simkha. Light is sown for the righteous, and joy for the upright in heart. Let us lead each other to light and to joy. Having been here today, may we be blessed with each other's energy and love such that we can face ... we can change even our darkest moments with the intent and ability to emerge in peace.