

YOM KIPPUR DAY-2009 THE NARROW BRIDGE

This is the year that Senator Edward Kennedy reminded all of us of what it means to be Jewish. Not that he was- but Ted Kennedy lived a life, that with all of its messy failures and abundant blessings, was biblical in scope, worthy of our own Israelite First Family. He was very much like our ancestor, Jacob, who ‘struggled with beings known and unknown, and prevailed’. Both Jacob and Ted were God wrestlers, wounded leaders in their time. They both understood that

“All the world is but a narrow bridge and the most important thing is not to be afraid at all” (Rabbi Nachman of Bretzlov)

The bridge at Chappaquiddick in that summer of 1969 was narrow indeed. And the young Teddy Kennedy was very much afraid. I am certain that he spent a lifetime replaying those fatal ten hours between the time that the car plunged off of the bridge into eight feet of water with young Mary Jo Kopechne and his belated call to the authorities. Was he drunk? Why did he not sacrifice his life to save her? Where was the heroism of this youngest son who was to replace his murdered brothers at the front of the Kennedy dynasty? Locked into mortal combat with his soul, he was tested, and found lacking. Defeated in his ensuing bid for the Presidency, the nation never forgave him. Ted Kennedy was broken.

“All the world is but a narrow bridge and the most important thing is not to be afraid at all”. Yom Kippur is the day when we acknowledge, to ourselves and to others, how narrow that bridge really is, how shaky the tightrope between this world and the next. We all fall, we ALL are broken at some point in our lives. In ways large and small, we are tested and sometimes, we fail.

But as Ted Kennedy writes in his memoirs, “Some people make mistakes and try to learn from them and do better. Our sins don’t define the whole picture of who we are”.

This is the process of tshuvah. On this day of Yom Kippur, we attempt to right our wrongs, examine our broken places, and to make atonement for causing pain to ourselves and to others. We then redefine that picture of who we are. This is the tshuvah we seek.

As the great Ernest Hemmingway once said “The world breaks everyone, and afterwards, some are strong at the broken places.”

The world breaks everyone – sometimes, through our own failings, and sometimes through the suffering and sorrow that are inevitable in this world of living and dying. The question is not whether or not we are wounded, but how we can continue to move forward despite our wounds. Scar tissue forms, rendering us immobile. We sink into depression, or substance abuse. A thin membrane of pain seals our hearts. Often, we give up our hopes and dreams, and settle for a half- life, barely lived, rather than face our pain.

But if we can access our wounds, we see that the very places where we have failed, where we have been most battered by life, can become our greatest teachers. “Bless me,” our ancestor Jacob cries out in his pain. It is through our tests, our struggles, our wrestling with our demons and forces greater than ourselves, that we are blessed. We heal, and become strong in the broken places, even though we may limp for a lifetime.

There are many parallels between Ted Kennedy and our ancestor Jacob. As heroes, both were deeply flawed, both were subjected to great sufferings and loss. Both became strong in the broken places, fulfilling the mission of their long lifetimes.

Jacob's life was lived in the shadow of his father Isaac and grandfather Abraham, and that of his stronger brother Esau. The same was true for Ted Kennedy, who reminisces, "When I think back to my brothers, and all that they had accomplished before I was even out of my childhood, it occurs to me that my entire life has been in a constant state of catching up." We know that baby Teddy was not the first choice of the Kennedy clan for President.

A biblical commentator of the last century, writing in Yiddish about the Patriarchs, calls Abraham the "gewerrener" the one who came; Isaac the "geborrener"-the one born into it- and Jacob the "farfallener"- the one who no longer had any choice. Farfallen. Ted Kennedy was the "farfallener"- the one who had no choice but to pick up the mantle after the death of his brothers. Though he never became President, Teddy Kennedy has come to be regarded as the Kennedy who left a lasting legacy to the American legislative process. Jacob became a Patriarch of the Jewish people.

Our Forefather Jacob hardly seemed destined for greatness in his early years. Jacob, whose name means "heel" or crooked", grabbed the heel of his brother Esau at birth, and wrestled with him from the time of the womb. A smooth "Momma's Boy, who stayed at home in the tent, Jacob's early childhood is marked by deception. Much like Ted Kennedy, who was expelled from Harvard for cheating on a Spanish exam, Jacob tricks his brother Esau into selling his rights of inheritance for a bowl of red chili. Years later, Jacob, disguised as his brother Esau, tricks his blind father Isaac into giving him the blessing of inheritance. Esau is furious at having been cheated once more. He vows to kill his brother Jacob upon his father's death. Rebecca urges the young Jacob to flee. He runs. There is nothing exemplary about his character at this time.

But Jacob is the “farfallener”, the one to whom the dynasty falls. Frightened, alone, he rests his head on a pillow of stone that first night in a field across the river, and behold! He dreams of a ladder with angels going up and coming down. God appears, declaring, ”Remember, I am with you. I will protect you wherever you go, and bring you back to this land.”

Unlike Abraham, Jacob never signs on to be the Father of the Jewish people. He wasn't even willing to make a sacrifice. All Jacob desired, according to the Rambam, was a life of stability; a stability that constantly eluded him. He had little desire for conflict, and like so many of us; he was tardy in his actions. Ten hours passed for Ted Kennedy that night in Chappaquiddick, and twenty years passed before Jacob was forced to face up to the brother that he had cheated.

Without facing his demons, Jacob can not go home again. The only pathway back into the Promised Land is through a meeting with his angry brother. After twenty years, Jacob sends his brother a message. “I will meet you by the river” Jacob says, “ and I will be bearing gifts.” “ Wonderful”, replies Esau, “ I'll be there, along with 400 of my men to greet you”.

All the world is but a narrow bridge, and the most important thing is not to fear at all.

Jacob is terrified. He takes his four wives, Rachel and Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah, and his eleven sons across to the other side of the river.

“And then” the torah tells us, “ Jacob was left alone.” (Gen 32:24)

Alone as on that first night when he ran from his brother's fury. Alone as Ted Kennedy as he struggled with his soul in those hours after the car hit the water.

Alone as all of us as we struggle with our deepest secrets here on this holy day;

Surrounded by family and friends, but alone.

Yom Kippur beckons us to stand on this narrow tightrope, in community but alone, and to confront our fears. It is on this bridge where we struggle with our evil inclinations, our past histories, and the unresolved issues of our lives that continue to haunt us. The day itself, we are told, brings atonement, if only we can wrestle ourselves into honesty.

“And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn”(32:25)

A man? What man? The soul of his brother Esau? His own evil inclination? An angel of God? Jacob wrestles with the man/angel/demon throughout the night, and when his opponent sees that he can not prevail, he wrenches Jacob’s hip at its socket. This wound becomes the touchstone, the sign of struggle that Jacob will carry with him for the rest of his life.

The bridge between the worlds of dream and reality is crossed in the flicker of an eye. “Let me go, for dawn is breaking,” pleads his opponent. “I will not let you go, says Jacob, unless you bless me.” This time, he wants to his blessing to be earned, and not bestowed through the trickery that characterized his name. “What is your name?” He replied. “Jacob” “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, “Yisra-El”, for you have striven with beings Divine and human, and have prevailed”.(32:29-30)

Jacob/Israel limps away, body broken but spirit intact .He returns home to face his brother, and to inherit the mantle as a founder of the Jewish nation.

The Hebrew language eloquently portrays the connection between brokenness, despair, and boundless hope. Without shever - brokenness, one can not come to “severa”- hope. Shin, Bet, Resh... Hebrew has the same root for hope and despair. Jacob’s life for

the next period of time is an endless round of shever and severa, brokenness and hope. V'Yeshev, and Jacob dwelt in peace, only to be broken-shavur- by the news of Joseph's death, the rape of his daughter Dina, and finally the death of his beloved Rachel. Jacob, forefather of the Jewish people, feels God's presence, depart from him. Years pass in despair. Many of us can relate. And then, the hope of food rations in Egypt, and the news that Joseph is alive, brings sever-hope once again. The seventy souls that go down to Egypt in search of food turn into multitudes. The growing clan of Israelites may be enslaved for another 240 years, way beyond Jacob's lifetime, but hope never dies.

“The work goes on, the cause endures, the hope still lives, and the dream shall never die.” Jacob could not have said it better.

Ted Kennedy uttered these stirring words at a moment of true brokenness. Like Jacob, his life continued to be plagued by despair. His marriage collapsed, his son lost a leg to bone cancer, and his daughter struggled with lung cancer. “ I tried to stay ahead of the darkness,” he said. He fell into a pattern of womanizing and alcoholism. In 1980, hoping to fulfill the dreams of the Kennedy clan, he challenged Jimmy Carter for the presidential nomination. Many claim that he was defeated by the undertow of Chappaquiddick.

Ted Kennedy returned to his seat in the Senate. Rising from a place of brokenness and despair, he became one of the greatest legislators in American history. No, I do not agree with every bill that he guided through the senate, but I am deeply moved by his ability to heal the broken places, and to move on.

In the words of President Obama, who delivered the eulogy at Kennedy's funeral:

Through his own suffering, Ted Kennedy became more alive to the plight and suffering of others – the sick child who could not see a doctor; the young soldier sent to battle without armor; the citizen denied her rights because of what she looks like or who she loves or where she comes from. The landmark laws that he championed -- the Civil Rights Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, immigration reform, children's health care, the Family and Medical Leave Act –all have a running thread. Ted Kennedy's life's work was not to champion those with wealth or power or special connections. It was to give a voice to those who were not heard; to add a rung to the ladder of opportunity; to make real the dream of our founding. He was given the gift of time that his brothers were not, and he used that gift to touch as many lives and right as many wrongs as the years would allow.

Spoken like a good Rabbi .The Gates of Tshuvah are always open.

An aristocrat who could have spent his lifetime living off of a trust fund, Kennedy chose to devote his life to helping those less fortunate. A devout Catholic, Ted Kennedy reminded us of the tremendous power of Tikkun Olam- our imperative to repair and improve the world we live in. His actions reflect the great charge to the Jewish people given by Isaiah in today's Haftorah reading:

Do you call that a fast
A day when the Lord is favorable?
This is the fast I desire:
To unlock the fetters of wickedness
And untie the cords of the yoke
To let the oppressed go free;
To break every yoke
It is to share your bread with the hungry
And to take the wretched poor into your home;
When you see the naked, clothe him

And not to ignore your own kin.
(Isaiah 58)

Both Jacob and Ted Kennedy spent their later years surrounded by kin. Uncle Teddy helped to raise his thirteen nieces and nephews, the children of his brothers John and Robert. Jacob spent his last seventeen years in Egypt, surrounded by thirteen children, great and great great grandchildren.

Given their lives of struggle, it was a “good ending”. Ted Kennedy knew that he could not defeat the cancer that had invaded his brain. He spent his last days with his beloved wife Vikki and the Kennedy clan, sailing and singing when possible, and treasuring each day as a gift from God.

And when the time had come for Jacob to die, he expressed his desire to return home to the land that God had promised. He instructed his sons:

“I am about to be gathered to my kin,” he said. “Bury me with my fathers in the cave bought from Ephron the Hittite in the land of Canaan.” Then, he drew his feet from the bed, and breathing his last, he was gathered to his people” (Gen 49:29-33)
With Jacob’s death, the list of Patriarchs is closed.

Ted Kennedy was gathered to his people on August 25,2009, and buried with great fanfare in the national cemetery in Arlington. He takes his rightful place next to his brothers, John and Robert. With his death, the gates of Camelot are closed.

Zichrono l’bracha, we say: May his memory be for a blessing.

Zichronam l’bracha. May all their memories be for a blessing.