

D'var Torah for the Second Morning of Rosh Hashanah

5774

I love Dr. Seuss' books!

I don't find a deep meaning in some of them, like *Hop on Pop*, or *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*, but I still like them because for a long time they were the only books in English I could read and understand. Other books by Dr. Seuss are actually quite deep, despite the funny pictures and convoluted rhymes, like *Yertle the Turtle*, or *The Lorax*. However, one of my favorites is *Oh, the Places You'll Go!*

Oh, the Places You'll Go! was first published by Random House on January 22, 1990, making it Dr. Seuss' last book published before his death. The book concerns the journey of life and its challenges.

In the United States and Canada, *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* is a popular gift for students graduating from high school and college, spiking in sales every spring.

The book goes like this:

Congratulations!

Today is your day.

You're off to Great Places!

You're off and away!

You're on your own. And you know what you know.

And YOU are the guy who'll decide where to go.

You'll be on your way up!

You'll be seeing great sights!

You'll join the high fliers

who soar to high heights.

Wherever you fly, you'll be best of the best.

Wherever you go, you will top all the rest.

Except when you don't.

Because, sometimes, you won't.

I'm sorry to say so

but, sadly, it's true

that Bang-ups

and Hang-ups

can happen to you.

Although I graduated some time ago, I find Dr. Seuss' words almost prophetically inspiring.

Dr. Seuss is talking to the recent graduate, ready to be "the best of the best," ready "to top all the rest," and he is reminding him, or her, that "bang-ups" and "hang-ups" can happen, or I may say, will happen, along the way. As a matter of fact, "bang-ups" and "hang-ups" are not the prerogative only of graduates, but, I am afraid, happen too often, to you, and to you, and to you, and to me.

I asked my daughter Daniela to explain to me the difference between "bang-ups" and "hang-ups." She suggested that "bang-ups" are unpredictable things that happen to you, over which you have little or no control, and "hang-ups" are things that happen to you somehow as a result of poor or wrong calculation.

Again in Dr. Seuss' words,

You can get all hung up

in a prickle-ly perch.

And your gang will fly on.

You'll be left in a Lurch.

You will come to a place where the streets are not marked.

Some windows are lighted. But mostly they're darked.

Dr. Seuss is telling us that sooner or later in life we all get stuck in dark places, and that un-sticking ourselves “ain’t easy,” as they say in the south.

Have you ever gotten stuck? Did you get stuck in the middle of a family fight, or a work conflict? Did you ever find yourself stuck in between jobs, in between relationships? Did you get stuck in life, between a rock and a hard place?

Your mother passed away, you were a good caregiver for many years. You took her to the doctors, you did her shopping, you sat by her bed, or by the phone, half asleep, half awake, for days, for weeks, for months... Now she is gone and you know that it is time for you to move on, to get back to your life. Except that you can’t. You are stuck.

Your last child is out of the house and you and your wife were looking forward to this moment. You had so many plans. You wanted to travel, to go places, to enjoy life, but suddenly you find yourself arguing over little things. And before even realizing it, little things become big things, minor arguments become major ones. How did it happen? Who started the fight? You can’t even remember. You are stuck.

You were laid off and the world crumbled under your feet. You are angry and full of resentment, worried for the future and feeling depressed. You know that in order to get a new job you must face the outside world with a smile. After all, nobody wants to hire an unhappy employee. And yet, you cannot even force yourself to fake a smile. You must move, but you can’t. Again, you are stuck.

What do you do when you get stuck? How do you “unstick” yourself?

Dr. Seuss provides the reader of his book with only one possible answer: pull yourself together! It’s up to you, the stuck-one, to unstick yourself!

*But on you will go
though the weather be foul.
On you will go
though your enemies prowl.
On and on you will hike,
And I know you'll hike far*

*and face up to your problems
whatever they are.*

All Alone!

*Whether you like it or not,
Alone will be something
you'll be quite a lot.*

For Dr. Seuss, dealing with “bang-ups” and “hang-ups” is a lonely endeavor. In Dr. Seuss’ book there is no outside help, there is no community. A self-made man, or woman will do it all by himself, all by herself.

"The concept of the self-made man is deeply rooted in the American Dream. Benjamin Franklin is sometimes said to have created the concept of the self-made man. In his autobiography, he describes his way from a poor, unknown son of a candle-maker to a very successful business man and highly acknowledged member of American society. Franklin creates the archetype of someone coming from low origins, who, against all odds, breaks out of his inherited social position, climbs up the social ladder and creates a new identity for himself."¹

As I mentioned before, I like Dr. Seuss, and I also happen to love Benjamin Franklin (his portrait is on one of my favorite dollar bills). Nevertheless, I never liked the concept of a self-made man.

First of all, as religious man, I believe in a partnership between God and human beings. I believe God is the one who made us, the one who sustains us, and the one who provides us with strength to go on with our lives. In the words of the Torah:

"You may say to yourself, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.' But remember Hashem your God, because he is the one who gives you the strength to produce wealth..." (Deuteronomy 8:18)

¹ See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-Made_Men

As a parent, I want my children to work hard, I tell them, using the proverbial words of my friend Harold Moskowitz: "You must push yourself!" A part of me even wants them to believe at times that the self-made dream is possible. I tell them, quoting Dr. Seuss:

*With banner flip-flapping,
once more you'll ride high!
Ready for anything under the sky.
Ready because you're that kind of a guy!*

But unlike Dr. Seuss and Benjamin Franklin, I want my children to know that they don't have to be self-made human beings. I want them to learn how to ask for help when facing the "bang-ups" and "hang-ups" of life. I want them to believe that the world is not a lonely place, that there is more than one way to unstick yourself. You must push yourself, that's true, but there are others out there to help you as well. There is family, and there are friends, and congregants, and just good people in the world. And there is God.

In today's Torah reading, our forefather Abraham gets stuck between his love for God and his love for his son. Faced with the absurd commandment to sacrifice his son, Abraham begins a three day journey, three days that will probably be the longest ones in his life.

At the end of our story, Abraham gets unstuck, and as you know, so does Isaac. (The ram gets stuck, literally and figuratively, but I will leave the ram for another dvar Torah). As you know, an angel finally appears and unsticks Abraham from his nightmare.

I'd like to believe that God wants Abraham and all of us to learn that life is not always a lonely journey as we often are made to believe. You don't have to solve every problem by yourself. You will find angels along the road, disguised as friends, family members, fellow congregants, or even strangers, who will lift you up, who will unstick you.

Dr. Seuss, at the end of his book, asks the magical question:

And will you succeed?

After pushing myself, and asking for help, and trusting in God, will I succeed?

Yes! Says Dr. Seuss, You will, indeed!

(98 and 3/4 percent guaranteed.)



"B'rosh Hashanah yikateivun uvayom tzom kippur Yeichateimun."

"On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed."

Our rabbis teach us that on Rosh Hashanah the outlook of the incoming year is being decided.

Raise your hand if you are ready to take "98 and 3/4 percent guaranteed?" I am!

And so I pray:

Master of the Universe: Help me to accept the "bang-ups" and "hang-ups" of this world. When stuck in life, give me the strength to push hard, but teach me to ask humbly for help and to accept it when offered. Bless me with faith in You, in Your goodness, in the overall goodness of this world. Send Your angels along my way and help me to discover them in the good people all around me.

Bless all of us and our loved ones with a 98 and 3/4 percent of success, health, sustenance and peace, and with a good and sweet year.

Amen