

Rabbi Manes Kogan

Devar Torah for Kol Nidrei

5769

There once was a man who gave up on life. He found no joy in his work, his family, or his community. And so he prayed to God to let him leave this world. "Show me the way to Paradise!" he said.

God asked him, "Are you sure that's what you want?" The man replied, "I am sure with all my heart."

"Very well," replied God, who showed him the way to Paradise.

As it turns out, Paradise wasn't very far away - just a few days' journey from his village. So late one afternoon, he set out on his way. He walked until nightfall, and then decided to rest beneath a green, leafy tree. But just before he fell asleep, it occurred to him that in the morning, he might become confused and forget which was the way to Paradise, and which the way back to the village. So he left his shoes by the roadside, pointing toward the path to Paradise, so that in the morning, all he had to do was to jump in the shoes and continue.

But sometimes, unexpected things happen. Shoes get turned around. Was it a mischievous child? Was it an angel? Was it just a squirrel? Who knows? But somehow the man's shoes got turned around. In the morning, he rose rested from his sleep, ate from the tree, and set about to continue his journey. He went to the roadway, stepped into his shoes, and continued his journey ... unaware that he was in fact returning homeward.

By noon, he saw a village on the next hillside, and his heart leapt, "I've arrived in Paradise!" He ran down the valley and up the hill until he arrived at the gates of the town.

"What a beautiful place is Paradise!" he thought. "My town was always so crowded, so noisy. This is different, so filled with life and joy!" He sat and witnessed the town's life. He heard the songs children sang at school, and the

sounds of adults at work and in the market. He felt the vitality, the energy, the love that filled the village. He sat in the square all day. In the evening, he heard the joyful sounds of families reunited at home, and smelled the meals enjoyed by each family. And he began to feel hungry.

He thought, "Since Paradise looks so much like my town, I wonder if there is a street in Paradise like my street." And so he went to look. Just where he thought it might be, there's where he found it.

Then he thought, "I wonder if there is a house in Paradise like my house." And just where he thought it might be, there it was! Just as he was wondering at this marvelous coincidence, a woman came out the door - a woman who bore a striking resemblance to his wife - called his name and told him to come in for dinner. His heart jumped, "They know me in Paradise! There is a place set for me here in Paradise!"

"I don't know what's in Paradise," the woman responded, "but your soup is getting cold at home. Come inside!"

He entered the house. This house in Paradise was nothing like his house back in the village. That house was always crowded, congested, filled with commotion. This place was cozy and homey and filled with life. He sat and ate the best meal he'd ever eaten. He complimented the woman on her heavenly soup. And afterwards, he went up to his bedroom and entered the deepest, most restful sleep he'd ever known.

In the morning, the woman who looked like his wife handed him his tools and sent him to work. At first, the man was incredulous. Who ever heard of working in Paradise? But then it occurred to him that even in Paradise there were tasks to be done. But this work was different than before. Not dull or tedious, this work was filled with a sense of purpose and service.

And that night, he returned to the same warm and loving home, the same kind woman, and more of the same wonderful soup.

The Psalmist wrote:

It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to praise Your name, O Most High. To affirm Your love each morning, And Your faithfulness each night. (Psalm 92)

Why does the Psalmist wake up and go to bed with such a prayer? Did the Psalmist live in the same world we do? Didn't he see the ugliness and evil in the world that we see? Didn't he ever wake up with a headache or go to bed with back pain?

Of course the Psalmist lived in the same world. He probably lived in a world much worse than ours. But like the man in the story, he opened his eyes to a different way to see the world. The facts of his life remained the same. Only his attitude changed. And suddenly, his life was very different.

"The great shofar is sounded, the still small voice is heard, and the angels tremble with fear as they proclaim: 'Behold! The Day of Judgment!' You cause all who come into the world to pass before you like a flock of sheep. Like a shepherd seeking out his flock and causing them to pass under his staff, you cause every living soul to pass before you; you count, reckon and review every creature, determining its lifetime and inscribing its destiny.

"On Rosh HaShanah it is inscribed, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed: how many will pass away and how many will be born, who will live and who will die; who will perish by fire and who by water."

Nobody asks us if we wanted to come into this world and nobody is going to ask us when we want to leave.

"...who will have rest and who will wander about; who will be at peace and who will be tormented; who will be at ease and who will be bothered..."

There are so many variables out of our control...

"...who will become poor and who will become rich; who will be brought low and who will be raised up."

It seems to be all about fate.

Did you go to work on 9/11 or did you stay home? Was your grandfather able to get a ticket to come to America or did he end in Argentina, or in Bolivia? Did you

sell too high? Did you sell too low? How do you know that nobody changed the road marks along the way when you were making your way to paradise?

Indeed, life might be all about fate. Judaism, however, is all about destiny.

In the words of the late Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik:

*"According to Judaism, man's mission in his world is to turn fate into destiny – an existence that is passive and influenced, to an existence that is active and influential; an existence of compulsion, perplexity, and speechlessness, to an existence full of will and initiative."*¹

In the Babylonian Talmud, we find an interesting discussion between Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Yehudah on one side, and Rabbi Yossi on the other.

While Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Yehudah assert that human beings are being judged on Rosh Hashanah and that their fate is sealed on Yom Kippur, Rabbi Yossi maintains that human beings are judged every day.²

So are we judged once a year or every day?

My Torah partner, Rabbi Gedaliah Machlis - may he live a long and good life - suggested a way to solve the apparent contradiction between the Talmudic rabbis. Rabbi Machlis suggests that our fate is decided on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. In this regard, there are many variables which are not in our control and will never be in our control.

However, how we deal with fate, how we respond to the unchangeable variables, is definitively in our hands, and in this regard, we are judged every day. Every day we are given a new opportunity to decide how we are going to live our lives, the same lives we might not be able to change drastically.

Are we going to let fate take the best out of us or are we going to transform fate into destiny? Are we going run away from life in search of an unknown paradise out there, or are we going to try to build paradise here at home, at Hillcrest.

¹ Soloveitchik, Joseph: *Fate and Destiny: From Holocaust to the State of Israel* Ktav Publishing, Hoboken NJ 1992 and 2000.

² Based on Rosh Hashanah 16a-18a

It is true: God holds many keys, many important keys in our lives. However, we still hold the most important one, the one that can give meaning to all the others.

Do you know that in all the years that followed, no one could convince the man in our story that he hadn't really made it to paradise?! Every one of his days from then on was filled with more wonder, more purpose, more joy and more life than the day before. He didn't change his fate. He changed his destiny!

And so we pray:

Master of the Universe; give us the strength to transform fate into destiny and to remember that even when we are not in charge, we are still in charge of ourselves.

"On Rosh HaShanah it is inscribed, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed!"

In this sacred hour we ask You, our Father, our King, to inscribe and seal us for year of life, health, sustenance, meaning and peace.