

*Rabbi Daniel Berman*

*Rosh Hashanah Day One 2022/5783*

This is my favorite story about Torah.

I was leading a Shabbat morning service for older elementary school students. It was more of a learner's service, so we paused often for questions.

Just before the Torah service, I began to explain the custom of taking the Torah scroll from the Aron, the ark. Before placing the Torah on the readers table - soon to be chanted with musical notations over a thousand years old - we first carry it around the room, offering everyone a chance to come close, reach towards it, even kiss the scroll with the fringes of our prayer shawls or our prayer books.

It can be a surprisingly moving experience.

So I was curious what the students thought about it. I asked them, "why do we hold the Torah and *walk slowly* around the community?"

The kids thought and thought and then offered these beautiful answers. "So we all feel connected," one girl said. "So we understand that Torah is supposed to be held and touched and smelled and kissed, not just read," another girl offered." That answer prompted another child to say, "Because Torah is alive and fluid. It moves!"

All amazing responses - testament to the ancient teaching of Rabbi Hanina in the Talmud - I learn much from my teachers, more from my colleagues, and most from my students.

One boy , however, was unmoved by the answers. He was a little quiet but you could always tell when his mind was churning because he would just light up. His face was shining. Clearly he had come upon something important.

Over the course of the year I taught that there are no right answers, that questions of Torah are always up for multiple interpretations, that every letter points to infinite meaning, every flourish in the calligraphy leads to endless possibility, every perspective shared in the space of the *beit ha'midrash*, the Jewish study hall, has been preserved on the pages of our rabbinic tradition. Despite all this, the boy was very clear he knew the answer to my question.

I called on him and repeated the question. "Ok, why do we walk slowly around the prayer space, allowing everyone to reach for Torah?"

"Because," he answered confidently, "If you were to run, you could fall."

A very literal boy.

This was the greatest answer I'd ever heard - and I've asked this question many, many times. It's true, if you are holding onto a Torah scroll and you run, you could fall, which, as you may know,

sets into motion a whole series of reverberations including community fasting and Torah learning meant to restore the sacred tones of Torah.

But this boy had offered us this amazing insight: if you try and run with Torah, you can - most likely *will* - fall.

I am not describing Torah now as the way we often think about it - the ancient stories, spiritual wanderings, priestly practices and moral codes, written upon the parchment in the form of a scroll. I mean Torah as our sages describe it: as *chochmah*, as wisdom. I mean walking with Torah as a guide for a meaningful, Jewish life that teaches us to be advocates for justice like Abraham and love generously like Rachel, wrestle with God like Jacob and pray like Channah. The Torah through which God calls out to each of us alone and all of us as a community, saying: "*bakshu fanai*" "seek My presence."

He was so wise, right, this very literal boy? You cannot run with this Torah. These are difficult paths. You must walk slowly.

But this is so countercultural!

We receive so many messages from the time we are young that we must run at high speeds to live with purpose. *Slowing down* might cause us to miss something important, some opportunity for success or achievement. Information about our world and ourselves - and the obligations that then

arise - come at such a rapid pace, it can feel like the only way to live is to run and run and run. This culture of running stands in a fascinating conversation with Torah.

For all of its many gifts of individual freedom, our culture tends to value productivity more than reflection. Torah comes along and says: slow down. Take time to listen to your breath and look inward.

Our culture responds: but think how much you could lose if you slow down. Look around you - you have unprecedented freedom and opportunity for acquisition and abundance.

Torah replies: Stop pretending. We are just borrowers. We don't own anything. We are just passing through.

Our culture, getting anxious now, says, here is so much information you need to fill your time and your life. Torah responds: and here is a quiet prayer.

But look at this world, all of its brokenness - its wars, its violence, its poverty - there is so much work to do. There are reasons to run. There *is* real urgency. Yes, of course, we are responsible for the world around us - to tend to people who suffer, who are in harm's way; to steward this earth, which is in harm's way. These obligations are the *heart* of Torah. But then our ancient sages in *pirkei avot* come in and whisper: *Lo alecha ha'melacha ligmor, v'lo ata ben chorin lihivatel memena*. You cannot hold yourself back from doing the work. But it's not up to you to complete it.

Pause. Breathe deeply. When it comes to living a life filled with the many blessings and many *responsibilities* of Torah, you cannot always be running. There has to be time for introspection, reflection, rest.

Which is precisely why the *art* of Torah and the central practice in Jewish tradition is Shabbat.

Shabbat comes every week and invites us to *shavat v'yinafash*. Rest and breathe deeply. Shabbat is a revolutionary idea - at once a pathway to spiritual rejuvenation and, in its insistence that we provide rest to those who work for us, a moral commitment to social responsibility and equality.

Shabbat is a statement of faith that our world can be a better one. It forces us to stop, not just because we're tired, but because when we pause, we can listen to the cries of those whose voices we have missed when we run.

But Shabbat has another important texture, not in conflict but certainly in animated conversation with this hope for a better world. At the center of Shabbat is *acceptance*. In slowing down, resting, we also set aside our critical eye, and for this one day, we accept the world as it is. It's the spiritual analog to our ancient sages in *pirkei avot*: yes, for the rest of the week you are responsible. Today, though, you don't complete the work.

That acceptance plays out in Shabbat practice - we don't create, destroy, construct or destruct. We don't even cut grass or rake leaves. We *accept* the world as if it's exactly how it's supposed to be.

And when we're together, we don't judge and critique and react. We accept each other as if we are exactly who we are supposed to be. *We don't judge or critique - we just are.*

This experience of walking slowly with Torah is what these holy days are about: starting a process of *acceptance*, which is at the heart of love, at the heart of compassion, and at the heart of forgiveness.

I cannot love you, I cannot forgive you, unless I accept you. You - with all your limitations and your failures, and your inability to understand me. And me, with all my limitations and my failures and my inability to understand you.

Even the people we love the most, the ones we have chosen to spend our very short lives with, may never be the people we hope they will be, or we need them to be. This is where the work of acceptance needs to be most deeply activated, and can have the most impact. The idea of teshuvah, of repentance and renewal, begins with acceptance. *Spiritual work is always about acceptance.*

In the most difficult times, when we have lost someone we love, we stand at burial to return them to the earth and say prayers of *acceptance* of our lives.

גַּם כִּי־אֵלֶךְ בְּגִיאַת צְלֻמּוֹת לֹא־אִירָא רָע כִּי־אַתָּה עִמָּדִי

“Even as I, too, walk through the pathway of the shadow of death, I am not afraid, because You, God, are with me.”

We begin a process of accepting the limits of a human life, and we pray that we not walk through the valleys alone.

Acceptance is what we are doing on these high holy days.

Accepting that we are growing older.

That our bodies feel weaker.

That we have not yet become the person we may once imagined.

That we have to let our children go, even with all the risks that come with stepping back. Your children are not our children, Khalil Gibran reminds us. They are with you but belong not to you.

This kind of acceptance can really change us when it is grounded in love and generosity.

But there is a subtle but important distinction I want to highlight between acceptance and resignation. I came to understand this distinction years ago after meeting a man in his hospital bed.

I was a hospital interfaith chaplain and he was a man in his early 70s trying to recover from brain surgery. I spent many hours with him sitting by his side. In moments of clarity, he talked to me about his regrets. During one visit, he began to tell me about his children, and in the middle of a simple story about the schools they attended and the subjects they studied, he literally wrapped his hands around my head and pleaded, "What have I done?"

There wasn't any single act or rupture in his relationship with his children. No violence or trauma or explicit breach of trust. And yet in his last days he was mostly alone. At his burial, his children told me that they all had come to *accept* the growing distance that took place among them during many years apart. This was the kind of acceptance that settles into resignation, inhibiting our courage to protest, to challenge, to aspire, or to seek repair in relationships that are broken.

The acceptance at the heart of Torah is different. It is grounded in kindness, in gratitude and in grace. It animates repentance and renewal. It moves us together, not apart. The most courageous act of our ancestors who were liberated from enslavement in Egypt, who came through the Sea of Reeds, who stood at the foot of Mt. Sinai, and who opened their hearts and hands to receive Torah, was not their faith in God or Moses, but in each other. They had to believe in one another, *accept* each other, and trust that they were in this together. *There is no such thing as being Jewish alone.*

We, too, look around and see each other and we have a choice: to accept one another and stay in relationship and in community together, even through change and difficult times - or not?

Are we willing to *slow down and walk with Torah*, which is to say, walk in God's ways, who is *rachum v'chanun v'erech apayim*, kind, and compassionate - and patient?

Can we accept our mistakes and misgivings and decide to live together anyway?

The answer may be no - there are times when separation is necessary. But mostly, I think, we're responsible for growing together. The High Holy Days come and *not* so gently tell us:

it's time. Trust in one other. *There is no such thing as being Jewish alone.*

So this is my hope and prayer for us as a *kahal*, a community that strives to live meaningful Jewish and spiritual lives:

*Be countercultural* - try to accept the world as it is - and each other as we are, with all of our beauty and all of our cracks;



Work towards repair. But slowly. Always slowly. It is not up to you to complete the work or do it alone.

And know, if you start to run with Torah and fall, we will be here - always here - to lift you back up.

*L'shanah tovah u'metukah.*

May this be a happy, healthy new year.