

*Crossing the Narrow Bridge*

**Rosh Hashanah Morning Sermon**

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A rabbi was greeting folks at the door after the service when a woman enthusiastically shook his hand and said, "Rabbi, that was a great sermon!"

Flushed with pride but wanting to appear humble, the rabbi said, "Oh, it wasn't me. I have to give credit to God."

The woman then replied, "Hey, it wasn't *that* good."

Well, if you don't like today's sermon, don't worry. I won't blame God!

But I must admit to some trepidation this year in speaking to you. This being my fourteenth year as your rabbi, it might be hard to believe that I would feel challenged to preach before you. But these are not normal times. In the year that has passed since last Rosh Hashanah we have seen our country in general and our Jewish community in particular suffer through economic upheaval and unbelievable disappointment. People here have lost jobs, or their retirement investments, or both.

In addition to disappointment there has been anger that this upheaval occurred and that those who perpetrated it may not be punished. There is a shaken belief in the ability of our country to get things right. And the new president's promises for cooperation and societal advancement have yet to see fruition.

I suppose, looking back in the year that has passed, it could have been worse for many of us. Most of us still have our jobs. And most of us never knew who Bernie Madoff was before last December. And yet, we, too, are not immune to the gloom of these days. Where is the hope for a better future? Who can say what tomorrow will bring?

Now, I know my role is not to remind you that times are tough. I remember last fall beginning Shabbat services every week by recognizing the economic problems people were facing. After one service, a congregant came up and told me to stop reminding them that times are tough. My job was to help people forget.

That, you see, is why I pause before speaking words to you today. How can I bring hope in an age of great uncertainty? It's a New Year, but there are so many questions out there. What can I say to the turbulence of our times?

Fortunately, I am familiar with great minds and souls who, over the centuries faced

similar dilemmas. And I can draw insight from them. This year as a congregation it is fortuitous that we are focusing on one particular Jewish sage, Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav. Reb Nachman was a Chasidic master who lived two hundred years ago. On the surface, it would be fair to wonder what an Eastern Europe Orthodox teacher who died in 1810 would have to say to us twenty-first century liberal American Jews. And you can be sure that most of Nachman's followers these days would not be comfortable in a Reform synagogue.

But Rebbe Nachman's wisdom was perfect for our times. His life was short, only thirty-eight years. But he achieved great spiritual insights in that brief amount of time. He lived and taught in an era of great upheaval, a time of wars and economic collapse. His lifetime spanned the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution, the American War of Independence and the French Revolution. Goethe, Kant, Byron, Beethoven and Mozart were all active during his day. The large issues still on the pages of our newspapers were first poised at this time: the rise of reason and the prevalence of profound doubt. New worlds were conquered even as our inner lives faced a new and pervasive emptiness. The Rebbe himself was plagued with personal challenges.

He famously taught that life is a very narrow bridge, complete with ever-present stumbling blocks and dangerous passages. But the view from the bridge can be breathtaking. And so, as we cross the bridge of life, we are enjoined to approach the future with hope and joy, not fear and anxiety.

In this age when fear and anxiety appear to have won, I can think of no better corrective. And I am glad we have the wisdom of Rebbe Nachman to guide and inspire us.

How exactly can his teaching help on the New Year? Fortunately, it turns out that Nachman's favorite holiday by far was Rosh Hashanah. It was the day when his followers would check in with their teacher and practice the difficult art of celebrating life amidst its uncertainties.

At its essence, Rosh Hashanah, despite any surface comparisons to the secular New Year's Day, is not conducive to joy. The ancient rabbis called it the Day of Judgment. Our health, our wealth, our very lives, are at stake. The year ahead is an open book and no one knows what the title reads. Is it the Book of Life or the Book of Death?

How do we respond to the uncertain future, especially at a time such as this? This is what Rabbi Nachman taught:

Rosh Hashanah is a vital day because even its name reminds us what matters most. Rosh Hashanah: the head of the year. And thus we learn, when contemplating the challenges before us in the year to come, what matters most is...the head! He asks us: What can we accomplish in the months to come if we attempt to begin the year right and have our "heads" – our thoughts – in the right place?

And so he teaches us: We must be wise on Rosh Hashanah and only think good, positive thoughts: that God will be good to us and give us a good year. We have to find a reservoir of hope deep inside of us.

Let's not allow the simplicity of this message to fool us into thinking that this work is facile or unimportant. In an age where we seem to have so little control, how we think about the future is no small matter. And "getting our heads" in the right place is no small thing. Because, even though the challenges are real, so often the biggest obstacles we face are the ones inside our heads.

**Let me share a personal example.**

Since I was a child I liked riding a bike. I have owned many bikes, mostly what we would call the "hybrid" variety. After moving to Miami I enjoyed riding around my neighborhood. Eventually I would ride about ten miles or so. It seemed like a lot to me.

Shortly after moving here, people told me they would ride from Coral Gables to Miami Beach for breakfast. They might as well have told me they were flying off to Mars. It seemed impossible anyone could ride that far. For one thing, they would have to cross a bridge. A very narrow bridge, what with all the cars zipping by. And I said to myself, "that will never be me." And I believed it.

This spring Melanie and I decided to visit friends in Aspen and I was informed that I would be riding a bike. Up a mountain. "Right!" I thought. But while driving over to Key Biscayne for the annual tennis tournament I seriously considered the Rickenbacker Causeway. I had always thought there was NO WAY I could ever make it up that bridge on a bicycle. No way. But then it occurred to me: "What if, after thirteen years of telling myself it was impossible, I was wrong?" And a couple of weeks later I took my old bike and rode up to the top. I even passed some guy on a sleek road bike! And when I got to the peak of that not-so-narrow bridge, I said to myself, "Eddie, you are a fool. The only narrow bridge here is your lack of faith in yourself." In other words, it was all in my head!

Thirteen years I could have been riding around the city but for one thing: it never occurred to me that I could.

I share this story with you because I hope it will inspire all of us to reconsider the givens in our life. In an age of so much anxiety, maybe there are things we can do that we never trusted ourselves to do before. After all, Miami Beach is not Mars. The Venetian Causeway is not so narrow. And the Rickenbacker Causeway is not so very steep. I was wrong.

I also tell this story because I believe, in an age of so much fear, it's important that we share our stories with one another. By sharing our stories we unburden ourselves and we bring others into our lives. And we need each other, now more than ever. It's no accident that Rebbe Nachman was known as a premier storyteller. He understood that in the telling of our story we open up ourselves and others to healing.

And so I challenge you to think about the narrow bridges in your life. What barrier is keeping you away from crossing the bridge? What obstacle is really "only in your head?" Maybe it's a project that you thought you could never complete. Or a relationship you felt was beyond repair. Maybe, having lost a career, you have a dream you think is impossible to realize. And just maybe, this dream is easier than you think to come true.

As Rebbe Nachman said, So much is in the head. And we should begin the New Year with our heads filled with hope.

Think back to the Torah portion for today. The text does not say that a well suddenly appeared. It says that Hagar's eyes were opened so she could now see it. The miracle was spiritual, not physical. The well had always been there, but Hagar was too afraid to see it. Only when she finds the strength to see the well and hope for salvation does the well become visible to her. For Hagar the crisis really was in her head.

**Having allowed me to share a personal example, please also permit me to speak about Temple Judea.** It is no secret that the Jewish community has been rocked by the upheavals of the year. Local synagogues have not been immune and there is uncertainty here at Temple. Your synagogue staff has even voluntarily forgone contracted raises because of justifiable anxiety about the future.

Nevertheless, taking Rebbe Nachman's teaching to heart, your leadership has refused to give up hope that our congregational future will not be rosy and bright. We are continuing to dream of transforming our educational wing into a first-class learning institution, a place where all ages, including our youth, will learn in a twenty-first century environment that bespeaks the relevance of ancient Jewish insights.

I know for many it is hard, in this day and age, to imagine a new building on the educational side that excites our students and allows us to grow in quality. But I challenge us to dream it and to "get our heads around it". You will hear more about this plan from our president, Sheila Freed, on Yom Kippur.

Because if nothing else this day, I want us to see that, as Rebbe Nachman taught, even narrow bridges are built for only one reason: to be crossed. And the vistas they offer are breathtaking. They speak to us of a better tomorrow, of journeys yet to take, and dreams yet to be realized. We only have to imagine that the way ahead will be possible. That somehow we will get across.

**And in our success, we also will be called to help others on their journey.** It is not enough to overcome the obstacles on our path, the fear and anxiety, the lack of vision. We must also help our friends and family, especially our children, make their way in a scary world.

The words of this poem tell us what we must do:

An old man, going on a lone highway,  
came, at the evening, cold and gray,  
to a chasm, vast, and deep and wide,  
through which was flowing a sullen tide.  
The old man crossed in the twilight dim;  
the sullen stream had no fears for him;

but he turned, when safe on the other side,  
and built a bridge to span the tide.  
Old man, said a fellow pilgrim, near,  
you are wasting strength with building here;  
your journey will end with the ending day;  
you never again must pass this way;  
you have crossed the chasm, deep and wide;  
why build you the bridge at eventide?  
|  
The builder lifted his old gray head;  
Good friend, in the path I have come,  
he said, there followeth after me today  
a youth, whose feet must pass this way.  
This chasm, that has been naught to me,  
to that fair-haired youth may a pitfall be;  
he too, must cross, in the twilight dim;  
good friend, I am building the bridge for him. <sup>1</sup>

Friends, when it comes to our journeys, let's remember we are not sole travelers. We also lead the way for others. May our efforts bring a brighter future to those who follow us. Especially when it comes to ensuring a vibrant Jewish identity for our children and grandchildren we must be strong in showing them the way.

When I finally made it across the Rickenbacker Causeway I was treated to an amazing sight: the most beautiful rainbow I ever saw, stretching across the very vault of heaven.

And I knew a sign when I saw it. Rebbe Nachman was right: the world is a very narrow bridge. And the most important thing, especially when greeting the New Year, is to go ahead and cross it. And – as best as we can – not to be afraid.

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<sup>1</sup> The Bridge Builder is attributed to Will Allen Dromgoole