

Rosh Hashanah 2017 Day 1: **What I Did On My Summer Vacation**

I'm going to do something I've dreamed about but never actually done. I'm going to give a Rosh Hashanah sermon called "What I did on my summer vacation"!

This summer, my family sent me to Kayak Building Camp to build my own kayak. The idea was first suggested by my father in law of blessed memory, Terry Rose. Terry, an artist, worked with his hands. He noticed that his son in law, me, talked for a living, and he felt that maybe I should actually experience what it means to create something tangible. My more than capable son, Ilan, agreed to tag along as my assistant kayak builder. Sadly, my father in law passed away weeks before I left for kayak building camp, so he never got to see the pictures of the boat he had me build. This sermon is dedicated to him.

When bar mitzvah mom Amy Baden heard about my planned adventure, she immediately suggested that if a rabbi was going to try to build a kayak, it really should be called a "kay-ark." "Rabbis building kay-arks as a way of raising awareness about Global Warming" occurred to me. You heard it here first!

I also realized that "rabbis building" sounds counter-intuitive. My family; and subsequently everyone I shared my plans with expressed astonishment that I would actually agree to do such a thing. Noah decides to build an entire ark and everyone says, "Hey that fool believes in climate change!" A rabbi says, "I think I'll build a kayak," and you hear gasps of astonishment and "Hey that fool thinks he can use sharp implements!" It turns out "Rabbis building things" is oxymoronic. Auto-correct flags it as an obvious typo. I began to realize I may have leaped before I looked. I began to have second thoughts.

Noah's ark is pertinent to my message for another reason. Rosh Hashanah celebrates the *creation* of the world. The story of Noah's Ark purports to describe the *re-creation* of the world. There are several parallels in the Biblical narrative between the Creation and Noah's Ark. "In the beginning" the world was a mass of water. God segregates the waters in order to reveal dry land as a precursor to the sprouting of plant life, and in Noah's story the chaos of the waters of the deep are tamed by the reappearance of the dry land. Upon creating animal life and again upon ordering them out from the ark, God charges them to "be fruitful and multiply" to fill the earth. These parallels hint to us the Torah's view of the process of creation. However, the most striking parallel occurs near the end of the respective narratives. It does not reveal an insight into the process of creation, so much as an insight about human psychology. There is an aspect of creation which gives us pause; which prompts us to waver. Adam and Eve don't leave the Garden of Eden willingly; and Noah, despite having verified that the flood had receded, lingered in the ark.

The Talmudic rabbi, Yehudah bar Ilai, observed that God explicitly orders Noah to leave the ark despite the Torah having informed us that Noah had already looked and confirmed that the flood had ended and the earth had fully dried. Dismayed by Noah's reluctance, Rabbi Yehuda declared, "Had I been there, I would have smashed the doors down in order to get out!"

We may well understand and sympathize with Noah's reluctance. He is the witness to all life on land having been extinguished in a terrible flood. The ark had been his place of safety and solace; his place of refuge, for many days. His instinct is to remain hidden and protected in that ark. With his outburst, Rabbi Yehudah utters a fresh perspective in Jewish thought – That Noah *should* have been clamoring to leave the safety of the ark; and, by extension, that Adam and Eve *should* have been enthusiastic about the prospect of life in the real world, outside the comforts of the Garden of Eden. Adam, Eve, and Noah wanted normalcy and predictability. They want to feel in control. Rabbi Yehudah wants something else entirely. Rabbi Yehudah wants us to smash the doors holding us back and *get out of our comfort zones*.

It's natural to crave comfort and security. Jewish tradition is replete with expressions of longing to a return to the Garden of Eden. In most times and places, the challenge faced by our people has not been resistance to leaving our comfort zones, but the opposite. A life of security and predictability are rare commodities in the context of Jewish history. But the desire for serenity is confronted by the value of growth. Virtually all of our Biblical heroes were thrust from their comfort zones and denied a life of serenity. Abraham and Sarah set out for a life in a strange land; Jacob went from fleeing his murderous brother to wrestling with an angel of God to escaping famine in Egypt. Joseph rose from enslaved immigrant to viceroy and successful entrepreneur; Moses overcame his fear of public speaking to become the greatest orator of our tradition. Hannah stood up to the High priest of Israel; Esther saved her people by manipulating a capricious king. The midrash soberly observes: "Only in death do the righteous find tranquility."

Not just the righteous. Tranquility eludes us all; not just Biblical heroes and the especially virtuous. On the final day of kayak building camp, I loaded my kayak-ark on the roof of our car and tied it securely to the rack. About 30 minutes later, doing about 55 on a state highway, the rack inexplicitly disintegrated, and my beautiful kayak-ark went airborne – sailed high into the air and came crashing down on the shoulder of the road.

Alas, tranquility is not for the living. My reward for leaving my comfort zone to use hand tools to transform wood, wire and epoxy into a boat, was to thank God I hadn't killed anyone behind me, face the predicament of salvaging what was left off the road, and figuring out what to do. From one discomfort zone to the next. That's the way life is. That's the way life is supposed to be.

“The rabbi wished me more stress in my life for the new year.” That seems counterintuitive for a new year’s blessing. We lead hectic lives. People crave a message of reassurance and comfort. Other religions seem to promise bliss and tranquility. New Year’s Eve is a big party. It’s a popular message. It is not the Jewish message. We are promised Divine judgement, long services, and exhortations to do better next year. No wonder we’ve been around for nearly 4000 years and still command less than one percent of the World’s Religions market share!

Our tradition demands not tranquility but equanimity - the emotional capacity to tolerate uncertainty, frustration, and pain.

Consider the Jewish coming of age ceremony; the typical bar/bat mitzvah: A 12 year old studies on top of the demands of regular school for 10 months or longer, learning a prodigious amount of verses chanted in a foreign tongue, composes a thoughtful speech, and performs and delivers the entire product on a single day before an audience of hundreds of adults. Bar mitzvah is way outside most of our comfort zones, and that’s the expectation for kids. We adults should be asking as much of ourselves.

Feeling intimidated boxes us in. Rosh Hashanah calls upon us to overcome the habits and routines which anchor us. We hear the shofar. It is meant to wake us up.

Smashing down the doors of our comfort zones does not, by itself, build a kayak. It is not even the first step. It is actually more important than the first step because it means conquering our fears and making all the other steps possible.

It turns out that kayak construction consists of cutting thin strips of wood and sanding them to create a bevel. The bevel forms a relatively weak connection between the pieces of the boat; but it does form a connection. This connection is then reinforced by tying the strips of wood tightly together with pieces of copper wire. Then, epoxy is applied in order to make it strong enough to ultimately stay together. At this stage, the wire ties have to be painstakingly removed – initially essential, they’ve become a hindrance and must be discarded.

Leaving our comfort zones; whether to learn a language, train for a marathon, or pushing to the next level of accomplishment – takes commitment to steps and the acceptance that some steps, though they can’t be skipped, will ultimately be outgrown. We all have our default settings. Leaving our comfort zones means challenging and resetting those defaults, with patience and perseverance. Somewhat paradoxically, by opening ourselves up to becoming unsettled and vulnerable, we grow to become more resilient, adaptable, and stronger.

The same Rabbi Yehudah was fond of saying: Powerful phenomena were created in the world. The rock of the mountain is hard, but iron cleaves it. Iron is hard, but fire melts

it. Fire is powerful, but water extinguishes it. Water is heavy, but clouds bear it. Clouds are thick, but wind scatters them. Wind is strong, but a body resists it. A body is strong, but fear crushes it.” (BB 10a) The human spirit can overcome fear. Every year is a voyage in an ark until the next Rosh Hashanah. Will we remain safely ensconced in our arks – or will we subdue our fears smash down those doors?