

# Yom Kippur Day 5768

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Beth Chayim Chadashim

“Get your hopes up” (on cranes, loss & longevity)

For their 50th wedding anniversary, my mother – in her inimitable way - picked out a present for her sisters to give her. And so her sisters bought for my parents, on their 50th anniversary, a beautiful Japanese wedding box covered in leather and painted with flying red-crowned cranes – a real creature with mythical import. Legend has it that these cranes live a thousand years...and they mate for life – hence their popularity on wedding gifts.

Some of you might remember that when Tracy and I got married – right here in this sanctuary almost 13 years ago (on our 10th anniversary) – we sent out origami paper in the wedding invitations, along with instructions for folding a crane. One Japanese custom is to accumulate a thousand origami cranes – a symbol of peace and also of long life. We asked you to write messages to us on the paper and then fold those delicate squares into intricate cranes.

With the paper cranes you sent back to us Jerry Hanson created an art installation – right over there – hanging over the entry to this room were hundreds of origami cranes. Of course some of you had more success at folding these cranes for us than others – Steve Schneider, as I recall, mailed his origami paper back to us all crumpled up with a note on it that read, “fold your own damn crane.” But Amanda Bender really got into it and folded hundreds herself. Becky Weinreich side stepped the issue and gave us a metal toy construction crane to go with our collection.

In Israel, as we were told on our April BCC trip there, there is so much building going on right now that you see huge construction cranes looming everywhere. So many that there is a joke that the new national bird of Israel is the crane!

My parents were at our wedding here in this sanctuary – it was the last plane trip either of them took. Their memories are such a blessing in our lives, and their wedding box, decorated with the red-crowned cranes, sits in my study in front of my desk on an antique table that also belonged to them. I look at it everyday. Inside it is photo of me and Tracy breaking the glass at our wedding, and in the box also is one of the paper cranes that one of you sent back to us – I’m not sure who sent that particular crane (I only know it wasn’t Steve Schneider!).

In April when 16 BCC folks – including Tracy and I – went to Israel for two weeks, we visited the remarkable Hula Nature Preserve, a beautiful sanctuary for birds and fish. Cranes winter there – and although they arrive in November, and so weren’t there in April when we were, still my heart pounded to imagine the open marsh before us filled, as it is every winter, with about 20,000 Common Cranes.

Even before I knew cranes head for Israel in the 10s of 1,000s those graceful birds with the spindly legs reminded me of Jews. I'm not sure why.

\*\*\*Maybe because the crowns on red-crowned cranes look like kippot (yarmulkes).

\*\*\*Maybe because cranes live in community – migrating together from place to place – including wintering in Israel. I think lots of them also live in Miami! but not so much Palm Springs.

\*\*\*Or maybe just because for 15 years my parents' 50th anniversary Japanese wedding box decorated with red-crowned flying cranes sat in my parents' dining room between the Hanukah menorah and the Shabbat candle holders. And now that box sits in the room with my Jewish library, rests in front of me every day when I sit at my desk studying and writing, preparing things to come and talk with you about.

Whatever the reason I link the two together, I like the connection. I like the lessons I am learning from these birds, and the memories they invoke in me daily – of my parents, and their 65 years of marriage, of Tracy's and my wedding – we won't make it to 65 years of marriage, but not for lack of desire. I like to think of my parents sitting here amidst you, a dozen years ago, still alive and well and happy to meet you all.

When we come together for these Days of Awe, we do so in part with a communal and in part with a personal intent of deciding how to proceed with our lives. What a gift we give one another – a few days in a year to actually be introspective and reflective, to look inward.

Last night I invited you to engage whole-heartedly this Yom Kippur in such reflection. This morning I would add to that invitation by suggesting that one can't really be self-reflective only by looking within – it also takes looking around. For despite the independent nature of tshuvah -- of re-turning to the self we know and can love, the one we may have strayed from more than once through the vagaries of life, there are reasons why we are - by tradition - invited to be in community while doing this work. Why we are invited to see others do it too, and to take part in one another's tshuvah – in any ways we can be helpful to each other.

The traditional Hebrew term for the High Holy Days, Yamim Noraim, means not just "Days of Awe," it can also be translated: "Days of Fear." The fact that Jews come together in large numbers for the scary times (and that we gather in smaller numbers for the joyful ones – Pesach, Sukkot) is significant, don't you think? We live in community no matter what, but especially when we have changes to make, work to do, especially when we deliberately acknowledge – as we do during the Days of Awe – that we live always in a state of uncertainty, of change, of unpredictability – that is when we need strengthening, that is when we need to be able to look around at numbers of people and say, oh yeah, together we can do this.

Last night I spoke to you about the lost and found stone that once graced the ground outside the Temple in Jerusalem. It was a legendary meeting place – where people brought objects and animals they had found so that people who had lost them might come and reclaim them.

And I mentioned that the Talmud also tells us that after the Temple was destroyed, this kind of gathering to return and reclaim lost objects was to happen instead at synagogues and houses of study, and then some time later just among neighbors and acquaintances. [Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia, 28B]

The Talmud's discussion of how to restore lost objects to their original owners goes on for many, many pages. Even by Talmud standards, I'd call it an obsession. And it all comes from their desire to understand exactly what was meant by just a couple of verses in Torah – verses that instruct us to return lost things to their owner. You must help, Torah tells us, “you may not not hide yourself,” –lo too-khal l'hitaleim [Deuteronomy 22:1,3,4]. The word hitalem comes to us again in the Haftarah portion from Isaiah that Joe will be chanting for us in a little while: “Surely you should divide your bread with the hungry, and bring the moaning poor to your home; when you see the naked, cover them; and lo tit-alem do not hide yourself mi-b'sar-cha from your own flesh (your own kin) - [Isaiah 57:14-58:14, YK morning haftarah].

How easy it would be – how easy it is – I do it all the time, I'm sorry to say – to hide oneself – instead of stepping forward to help. Simpler to walk the other way if you see a lost puppy or a stranger in need of food. Easier to let your kin – your own flesh and blood, your spouse, even your children – find their own way than take them with you or just pay them some attention. If it weren't easier to hide oneself when you see that someone could use a hand the Torah & Isaiah wouldn't bother telling us don't do that – don't hide when your brother, your kin 1 needs help.

Earlier in the same volume [tractate] of Talmud the Rabbis begin their discussion of what to do with lost objects, or more importantly, what to do about the owner of the lost object. In this earlier passage they offer a new term – ye-ush – “despair” – which refers to one's despair of recovering an article that was lost or stolen. Ye-ush – is the giving up of hope. And the Rabbis even go so far as to devise a secondary category – ye-ush shelo mi-da-at -- unconscious despair, despair without knowing one despairs, as when someone has lost something unrecoverable but that person doesn't even yet know it is gone. For me the concept gets interesting when I take it away from lost objects and apply the theory to relationships and emotions.

I'm a person who learned many wonderful things from my parents, BUT this phrase I learned from was NOT one of the good ones:

“Don't get your hopes up.”

“Don't get your hopes up.”

My parents may simply have wanted to protect me from disappointment. But that instruction doesn't serve us well. It brings one too quickly to ye-ush – to the giving up of

hope, and therefore giving up relationship. Once you give up equal ownership in a relationship, for example, you no longer play an active role, you're no longer an equal partner in the unending dance of the relationship, you're just the person leaving (whether or not you actually physically leave, or you push the other one out, or whether you leave only in your mind).

Here's where the reasoning of the Rabbis about lost objects helps me think about relationships. Once I engage in ye-ush – once I give up hope (consciously or shelo mi-da-at unconsciously) I am lost to that relationship. I see it in couples a lot – We expect the worst. We're always afraid the other will leave. If I commit, she won't want me – If I say yes, he'll say no. It's a dance I suspect all of us have danced at one time or another – if not every day. If you want it too much, you're setting yourself up for disappointment. But the Rabbis made it into a metaphor (or I am making it into a metaphor?). If you give up hope, if you let it go (whatever "it" is), you're out of the equation. The object is now hefker – ownerless – another Talmud term -- and thus free to be in relationship with someone else. Remember that old hippy era poster? "if you love something let it go, if it's meant to be yours it will come back to you"...was that it?  
The Rabbis want us to work a little harder than that.

So here's a stretch. A little mental/emotional yoga before the real yoga during the break this afternoon. I think many of us are too quick to ye-ush– too quick to despair, to lose hope – we never even go to the stone of losses to see if our stuff is there. We're too quick to sever relationships, too quick to walk away , too quick to hide ourselves from relationships – Think about it – a person starts to fall in love with someone, but you don't want to get your hopes up. Unconsciously you withdraw a bit, you're a little less present, less loving, seem less happy to see the other person. Until, also unconsciously, the other person begins to withdraw, and before you know it you both give up – still perhaps unconsciously – you assume it won't work. You have entered ye-ush – despair, loss of hope. And without hope – what are the chances it will work?

I wonder how many of us have tapes in our heads that play at the push of a button (a button installed by parents or ex's or whomever) – or should I say I-tunes that play in the I-pods of our minds? Tapes that instruct us – unintentionally - to walk away too soon, NOT to get our hopes up, to expect the worst -- tapes that inadvertently incline us to self-sabotage.

I don't mean just love relationships.

Also friendships

Family relationships

Work relationships

Relationships to a group . . . to a congregation, for example. Most of you in this room today are members of BCC – bless you, thank you. Many of you are not members, but BCC is where you choose to come to the Days of Awe year after year, bless you, thank you. Some of you are new to us – testing us out perhaps, or testing yourself, or this is just where you ended up today for any of a myriad of reasons – bless you too, and thank you - you are always welcome to be with us. Are you waiting to find out if there is a category of

people here I'm not going to bless and thank? There isn't – I'm happy to have all of you here – I hope you will always feel welcome.

But those of you who are not members – whether you once were and dropped your membership, or have never joined – I do want to ask you a couple of questions – don't worry I'm not going to single you out or anything. But Why aren't you a member? I doubt it's the \$3.30 a day it would cost. And if it is, then know that we'll happily work with you to make it financially doable.

The answer I often receive when I ask people if they'd think about joining BCC is “thanks, but I'm not a joiner.” If that's you, then a second question: why aren't you a joiner? What does being a joiner mean to you? You care about BCC – you're here – you probably care about BCC's place in lgbt history, You care that you or the next person have a safe haven to go to if a safe haven is needed. You care that at BCC the next generation of children will grow up free of the homophobia & racism & sexism & all the –isms. You care that BCC exists and gets better and better – and your membership would help us do all of those things. So what's the problem?

I wonder if it isn't a form of ye-ush shelo mi-da-at – unconscious ye-ush – an unconscious loss of hope – we prefer to go without, it helps avoid disappointment. If we keep our distance then we don't have to learn to dance, don't have to learn to lead or to follow, don't have to apologize if we step on someone's toes, don't have to embarrass ourselves if we forget a step or if our sense of rhythm is off a bit. If we're not in the relationship, we can hide our self from others, and not risk hurt or criticism or other forms of embarrassment or nuisance that relationships always bring with them.

What I love the most about the stone of losses, and the subsequent lost and founds at the synagogues and in neighborhoods is that people took risks and went out of their way, and -- the Rabbi's nailed it – people had hope – the finders and the losers – anyone who showed up whether to deliver a lost object or re-claim it – those people GOT their hopes up. Of course the finders may have only had hope that they would get to keep the lost object! but surely some of them just hoped they'd have the pleasure of re-uniting someone else with their treasured possession. Giving up hope – having ye-ush – nullifies one's ownership of a lost object. Giving up hope – withholding ourselves, hiding ourselves – not being fully there - nullifies relationships. This congregation would be a better community if we all were members of it. All the work some of us do to keep BCC going and growing would be easier if we were all part of it. And this world would be a better world if we would stop hiding ourselves or parts of ourselves and just be here, be fully in it. I hope you'll join us.

Personally I blame Woody Allen for people not being members of BCC. He revived Groucho Marx's old joke, the one Groucho revived from Freud. You know the one? I sent the club a wire stating, "PLEASE ACCEPT MY RESIGNATION. I DON'T WANT TO BELONG TO ANY CLUB THAT WILL ACCEPT ME AS A MEMBER".

- [Telegram to the [Friar's Club of Beverly Hills](#) to which he belonged, as recounted in Groucho and Me (1959), p. 321]

If our lack of willingness to join is Woody Allen's fault, perhaps I can use him to bring it back around.

- There's another old joke he tells: two elderly women are at a Catskill mountain resort, and one of 'em says: "Boy, the food at this place is really terrible." The other one says: "Yeah, I know; and such small portions." Well, says Woody, "that's essentially how I feel about life — full of loneliness, and misery, and suffering, and unhappiness — and it's all over much too quickly."

Yom Kippur rolls around once in a year in part to remind us how quickly things are over, how fast time passes, how little we really get to do. But Jews come together at Yom Kippur to remind ourselves that it's not all loneliness and misery and suffering and unhappiness — it's community praying with and for one another, it's individuals saying no to ye-ush — no to despair — and yes to each other, and yes to hope. At Yom Kippur we come together — we stop hiding ourselves — we see the strength and the beauty and the comfort of numbers and of community.

[Hold up the box] Look at these cranes on the box — look how close together they fly. In a photo I have of the cranes at the nature preserve in Israel they stand even closer together — in a big crowd — they look like us standing for the al cheyt - our communal confession. I choose to take my lesson from the cranes. I'm going to winter in Israel!...(kidding). The lesson I take from the cranes is also from my parents: I'm opting to mate for life and also to live the rest of my life in community. I'm opting not to hide myself, but instead to stand with the crowd — this crowd in particular — to stand right here — at our stone of losses — for right here -- where people come together in search of what they've lost — I've found what I am looking for.

Shabbat shalom — g'mar hatimah tovah u'vracha v'reiut v'shalom — may we as a congregation be sealed into the book of life for good, for blessing, for friendship and for peace.

#1 In Deuteronomy 22:1-4 it's achicha — your brother — that you are not to hide from. In Isaiah it is b'sar'cha — your flesh.