

We wanted to get away\*  
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We wanted to get away, just the two of us. So after wonderful visits with our families in Los Angeles and Baltimore, we escaped to our favorite beach in Rehoboth, Delaware. Like, so many of you (and tens of thousands of other vacationers), we enjoy the warmth of the bright summer sun, grateful for the low humidity, the fresh air and cool breezes, the cloudless blue skies. There is always so much to see from interesting ships passing by, to dolphins and porpoises frolicking in the mid-afternoon surf, to sea gulls perpetually circling above waiting for their moment to outsmart unsuspecting sunbathers and share in their lunches. And, then, there is the fascinating and entertaining people watching: humanity in its full array of colors, shapes and sizes, drinking in the sunshine and clean air, and answering the refreshing call of the sea.

But Marty and I spend most of our time just staring at the water, transfixed by its vastness, its power and its majesty. As far as we can see, there is ocean - infinite, timeless, constant. Even at its end, the ocean meets the sky in a wondrous horizon of hope. During these hours, time stands still and it makes no difference what else is going on in our lives or the world; for the ocean will always be, a steadfast sign that no matter the limits of our capacity to understand why, God's universe persists, fearless, faithful, forever. "When the storm is over and night falls and the moon is out in all its glory and all you're left with is the rhythm of the sea, of the waves," writes Harold Pinter, "you know what God intended for the human race, you know what paradise is."

Why is this so? Why is it, in the words of undersea explorer Jacques Cousteau, that "when the sea casts its spell, it holds us in its net of wonder forever?" Perhaps it is because of its enormity, its width and depth and breadth, which makes up 3/4 of the earth's surface and contain nearly all of our water. In is no wonder that the poets write: To stick your hand in it, is to feel the cords that bind the earth together into one piece, a cosmic symbol of durability and destiny, awesome, but steadfast (Barry Lopez and Helen Hayes).

We needed to get away, this year - away to someplace beautiful, permanent, and still; away from the heat. Away from the stress. Away from the struggles of our lives and the ugliness of the world. For as the New Year dawns this night, the world overwhelms us with reasons for worry. While the economy has improved and the market rallied slightly, many are still struggling with unemployment and debt and are concerned about their future and that of their families.

Meanwhile, other problems haven't gone away. The massacre of six year olds at the Sandy Hook Elementary School, the shooting of Trayvon Martin, and the bombing of people running the Boston Marathon -- these were all tragic examples of the ills facing our society from mental illness and home-grown terrorism, to deep divisions over race and guns. And these don't even touch the shameful

scourge in our country of bleak poverty and pitiable education that shamefully remind us of places in the third world.

And in addition to the terror and war that plague so many of the nations of our earth, on this very night our own lawmakers debate how to respond to the reality of weapons of mass destruction closer to us than any time in recent memory. Indeed, it has been, and continues to be, a rough and frightening year; and, if we're honest with ourselves, at times like these, it can be very hard to wish one another a *Shana Tova u'Metukah* -- a good, sweet and happy New Year -- let alone to believe it.

So tonight I want to remind us of the some of the wisdom in our tradition that can help us find the strength, not only to say those words, but to believe in them as well. For me, these are fundamental teaching of our faith and provide a powerful antidote to the ugliness of the world. And they begin in the Torah when Moses first encounters God in the wilderness, a bleak and barren place, where God calls to him from the midst of a burning bush. "Why, of all places," our sages ask, "did God choose to appear [to Moses] in a thorn bush? Why not from an oasis? or any other of a number of places of greater beauty and grandeur?" The rabbis answer: "God appears to Moses in a thorn bush to teach us that there is no place devoid of God's presence, not even a lowly thorn bush" [*Sh'mot Rabbah* 2:9]. And to make the point even more clear, right where Moses stands, in that hot, dry, dusty, brown desert, God says to him: "Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground" [*Exodus* 3:5].

Our sages teach us that this verse -- "The place on which you stand is holy ground" -- is not intended for Moses alone in that long ago, far away place. No, with these words, God is speaking to each of us -- the place on which you, each and every one of you gathered here tonight, find yourself, that is holy ground and you are in a holy place. You need never say, never believe that if only you could be different -- thinner, richer, more clever, more accomplished, happier, healthier -- then all your problems would go away. The Torah says the salve for your wounds is right here. All you need to do is to take off your shoes -- take off the fear, the cynicism and the shell of habit-- and rise up right from where you stand" [Quoted in Chaim Stern, *Day by Day*, p.67, based on the *Chafetz Chayim*].

I know that might sound pretty bizarre -- that Holiness exists right here and is available in every place, at every moment. Do we really believe that God spoke to Moses out of a bush? Is there holiness when you're taking out the garbage? Is there holiness when you're shopping at Target? Or when you're driving on the crowded interstate? Is there holiness right here, in the middle of Norfolk, with its inner-city blight and crime, or in the deafening sounds of the fighter jets flying above our Virginia Beach homes?

Whether or not we believe it is literally true, the now thousands-of-year-old story about Moses' encounter with God in the wilderness, remains a part of our tradition in order to teach us something about ourselves and our lives. It's message? Wherever you stand, wherever your footprints rest, and wherever you drive, and wherever you live, alone or with someone else -- that is sacred ground. You don't have to get away to find it. It's not about another world to come. It's not about the past and it is not about the future. It exists in the present and it is as

close as your own breath. There is holiness here because you are here. God is here because you are here. And you carry a spark of the Divine within you– in your own capacity for goodness, creativity and hope.

The world assaults us with its ugliness. Its horrors invade our minds and hearts, but the Torah says a good person can discern God’s voice even in a desolate wilderness. What do these words mean? They mean, first of all, that there is a Jewish way of seeing, and that we can be trained to see the world in that way through distinctive Jewish acts. Jews are taught to look for the presence of the sacred in the simplest, most ordinary moments. We break the shell of habit. We use words to transform our consciousness.

We say a *b’racha*, a blessing, to wake ourselves up, to call attention to beauty and wonder in the midst of the mundane. You know about this, I am sure. You have heard rabbis say that there are Jewish blessings to recite when we eat or drink, when we wake up in the morning or go to sleep or wash our hands; when we behold an ocean or a rainbow, see trees in blossom or a teacher who inspires us, when we inhale sweet spices, put on new clothes or taste a new fruit. We call them *Brachnot Nehinin*, blessings of enjoyment – words we utter before taking pleasure in the world.

Perhaps it sounds exhausting to think about learning and saying all those blessings. So let’s think about something small, instead. What if, every time you sat down to eat – or even once a day --you took a minute to focus your intention, take a deep breath and say *the motzi*, aloud or silently? What if, on Friday night, you lit two candles in a darkened house and focused your thoughts on the people you love -- the ones who are living, the ones who have passed away? How would those moments of stillness and gratitude change your life?

Jewish life is fashioned from a series of these ritual moments, a pattern of ordinary acts uplifted to something more. We call them *mitzvot*– sacred deeds, sacred duties. Writes Dennis Prager: “Judaism is a very physical religion. To be Jewish is to do. It does not suffice to feel Jewish. Feeling Jewish without acting Jewish is like feeling ethical without acting ethically. It doesn’t count. The deeds count, not the feelings. That is the power of Jewish rituals” [“Raising a Jewish Child in a Non-Jewish World,” in *Moment Magazine*, November 1988].

Think about what we say, when performing a *mitzvah*, “*asher kid’shanu b’mitzvotav*” – that we are sanctified through these *mitzvot*; that by doing these *mitzvot*, holiness enters our lives. We are and it does. With each *mitzvah* we create beauty and goodness; we enlarge the presence of God in the world. Through the conscious, thoughtful performance of *mitzvot* we grow ethically and spiritually; we develop strength deep inside, at the core. We resist despair. We teach ourselves, over and over again, to look at a normal situation and find within it a tiny kernel of the miraculous to celebrate. Stillness, gratitude, appreciation – these become habits of mind and heart.

The ability to fill up your day with small moments of pleasure and beauty – this changes the way you see the world. There is more to it, this business of seeing holiness in the place where we stand. Because much of life is not about tasting a good meal or feasting our eyes on flowers. Much of life is spent in tedium and aggravation -- sitting in traffic, or attending to your email, or listening to your

children squabble, or enduring boring meetings, or standing in line or waiting on hold – and Judaism provides no inspiring rituals for moments like these. And some of life, sad to say, is spent in sorrow and pain and worry over someone we love. How can we claim there is holiness to be found at such times?

Here is the point: Judaism cultivates a particular way of approaching reality. It does not say that there is a silver lining to every cloud, or that there is something noble about suffering, or that pain is sent to purify us in some unfathomable way. It does say that in any situation – on whatever ground we stand – there is a way to encounter the Divine. Judaism can teach us how to do it. We have within us all the tools we need to make holiness happen. Our own mind; our own eyes, our own hands, our own voice. We can use all of them to offer the best that is within us – to rise up from where we stand.

So we can sit in traffic seething with rage, or we can find something interesting or even beautiful to look at, or think about. When our children are squabbling or in trouble, when our parents are in need, we can summon up compassion and patience to bring to them. We can stand in line like a *mentsch* -- with courtesy and humor -- and the whole experience becomes more bearable for everyone. Email exchanges and meetings – all those ordinary days on the job – they all bring us into contact with human beings who need our understanding and attention. Even a difficult, aggravating person – and this has taken me a long time to learn – can teach us something useful.

Jewish tradition uses grand words like “salvation” and “redemption.” It speaks of *tikkun olam*, of healing the world by searching for sparks of holy light that lie buried in dark places. Here is what this means to me. There is always a way to add decency and goodness to the harsh reality of what is. There is always a way to make the wilderness more humane, and more Godly. There is always a way to lift things up, if only a little, and to diminish the ugliness of the world. At any moment, in any place, here and now, God can be present. I can do a *mitzvah*; I can help transform the world that is into the world that ought to be.

I am talking about hope – the foundation of a Jewish life. It’s not that we think the world is getting better – we believe that together, we can make things better. It’s hope that allowed generations of Jews, living in times darker than our own, to wish each other a happy new year that would be sweet and full of goodness. Gratitude, appreciation, the power of hope. These gifts help us to grow strong at the core. Physician Jerome Groopman discovered the “biology of hope” through personal experience: “For some 19 years after failed spine surgery, I lived in a labyrinth of relapsing pain and debility. Then, through a series of chance circumstances, I found an exit. I felt I had been given back my life. I recognized that only hope could have made my recovery possible. Rekindled hope gave me the courage to embark on an arduous.... treatment program, and the resilience to endure it. Without hope, I would have been locked forever in that prison of pain.... [Hope] changes us profoundly in spirit and body. “Every day I look for hope, for my patients, for my loved ones, and for myself. It is an ongoing search....” [*The Anatomy of Hope: How People Prevail in the Face of Illness*, 2004].

I went to the ocean to find a place of majesty and beauty. I came back home and realized that I live in such a place, and I know whole oceans of people who

evoke in me respect and awe and even reverence. I see those of you who have a debilitating illness, or who have been crippled by grief get up each morning, shower, dress, put one foot in front of the other to greet the new day. And some even rise to praise the God with whom you are infuriated. I know so many sons and daughters who care for aging parents with devotion and patience even when it is very, very difficult for them to do. I've watched members of our congregation do the same for strangers, offering them hope by starting a soup kitchen, where so many of you come out every month to provide a lonely soul with companionship and a hot meal.

And I see so many of you reach out to others, who struggle with the same challenges you do, to share your experience in order to help them through: a woman, who found out she carried the brca gene mutation, wanting me to let others, who do as well, know that she had a double radical mastectomy and would be willing to talk with them about their fears; and a parent who lost his child to addiction willing to see something good come from their unspeakable pain and loss by helping others whose children are likewise afflicted.

I visit OST members who have suffered devastating accidents and illnesses that left them convalescing for many months and every time I see them they ask me about me and my family and how I am doing; or they tell me about some way in which I have touched their lives or helped them through a difficult time, with a call or bulletin article or sermon; and I am humbled and awed that in the midst of their suffering they are thinking about how to lift me up.

Every day I see men and women who carry crushing personal burdens that are mostly invisible to those around them -- and still they find the wherewithal to smile and face the world with decency and good humor and hope. I am staggered by the fortitude in lives like these, by people who have such strength and substance at the core. Sometimes it shines even on the edge of death. I remember the face of a good man, wasted and gaunt in the final stage of cancer, who leaned forward intently to ask me a question. "Is there anything I can do for you?" he said. "Is there any way I can help the congregation?"

Or another who, unto his last breath, tells jokes and sings songs, bringing laughter to nurses and family members and telling his children not to be afraid when he was gone, and not to be sad. Right here, right now, there is majesty and beauty to be found. I see it close at hand. In ordinary deeds, an extraordinary light sometimes blazes up, like a bush that burns in the wilderness.

When you sit on the beach you can see a miraculous sight: No matter how many times it is sent away, the ocean refuses to stop kissing the shoreline (Sarah Kay, *The Deep Roar of the Ocean*). There are men and women like that: physically ravaged by illness or age -- yet inside them is a soul whose strength is as deep as the ocean; whose courage and holiness emanate from within no matter how desolate they may look on the surface; whose grandeur cannot be diminished. Our being finds its anchor in them. Once seen, once known, they leave a mark and create a vision that stays with us always. From them comes holiness and awe. The most irreverent of us, in the presence of such lives, comes under a spell of wonder and respect.

Marty and I sat on the beach, staring at the ocean in the midst of the laughter and tears around us, in the warmth of a late-summer day. He put his hand in mine and I put mine in his. We could feel one another's hearts pulsing. We were together, sitting in a place where the ugliness of the world could not touch us. At that moment there was no less holiness than the day the Red Sea parted. We rested our heads on the back of our beach chairs, and drank in the wondrous horizon of hope.

\* This sermon is based on "The Heart of the Redwood," Rabbi Janet Marder, Congregation Beth Am, September 29, 2008.