

Look Beyond Yourself
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I taught my daughter, Mia, to ride a two-wheel bicycle this summer. It was a pretty warm Sunday afternoon and there was no one in the parking lot at Har Zion so we came over here to practice. When we began I made just three rules.

1. You can't say the words, "I can't"
2. Keep peddling and no matter what happens **don't stop peddling.**
3. Look up, don't look down.

In many ways these three rules could be general rules for life. I could have constructed an entire High Holiday message on those three themes. Have a "can do attitude;" keep working, towards your goal, and always look forward; keep your head up. As usual, the teacher on this Sunday was not me but my daughter and together we were learning. Anyway, back to the bicycle lesson.

I knew it was hot outside, but I also knew she was going to fall at some point. So, before we left I told her to put on long pants, long sleeves and gloves. She fought me on the gloves but I knew all it took was one good spill and her hands were going to get all scraped up. I knew it because I learned how to ride a two-wheeler when I was her age and I'm still pulling gravel out of my palms. I just wanted her to be as protected as possible when the inevitable fall would come. I had complete confidence that she would eventually learn how to ride, but getting there might be painful.

My older brother taught me how to ride a two-wheeler and I remember him saying to me, "If you want to stop, just head for a bush." It was good advice, choosing between the asphalt and a bush...a bush is way better. However, there are no bushes in our parking lot so I had to run alongside Mia and all the while I had the same conversation with her that we have had with each child while teaching them to ride without training wheels. I'm sure all of you know the feeling of running alongside the bicycle and then letting go. You remember the conversation. "You promised not to let go." "But I didn't." "You did, I felt you let go." "I didn't let go." "You're lying, you let go." "But you were doing it on your own."

So, I ran and ran and ran until I couldn't run any more and she was off on her own. What a great moment. There was no sentimentality that she was off on her own now. There was no sense that I had given her the tools to peddle through life, that I had given her the confidence to make it on her own, like all of the commercials tell us. No, I was just exhausted and there she went. I was proud, don't get me wrong, but more than that, I was tired. So I let go and she peddled and "I yelled, "Keep going"...and she peddled more so I yelled more, "You're doing great"... and she peddled more so I yelled, "Don't look down and she peddled more." Then when she was a good 20 yards away she panicked and she stopped peddling, she looked down it was all over.

Splat...she fell onto the pavement. Scraped knees, bleeding hands and I rushed to her but she was a mess. Crying she said, "I can't do this. I quit." I explained she was fine, she was doing great, she was riding on her own – but all she could think about was her knees and hands. All that work out the window. So, we took a break and went inside and got a drink of water. Then we sat in the Isen Hall of Memories. We looked at the pictures and then in another moment of parenting genius I asked, "Do you think your younger sister Yasmin will be able to learn how to ride a two wheeler?" She thought for a minute and then said, "Of course." Then I asked, "Do you think she will learn as quickly as you did?" Another quick response, "Probably not – but she will get it." Then I asked, "Well what should I do differently when I teach her?" To which Mia said, "Don't make her wear a snow suit." We laughed a little and then the next thing you knew we were back out in the parking lot giving it another try. Like waving keys in front of a baby who is crying, the art of distraction worked again. However, it was really much more profound. Mia showed me her pain but it lessened the minute she started thinking about someone else.

This afternoon we're going to read the story of Jonah and the big fish. This story is the last reading of scripture for this High Holiday season...and what a story it is. Simplified, God asks Jonah to save the people of Ninveh. Jonah rejects the idea and opts for his own world. God responds by having him thrown from a ship and then swallowed by an enormous fish. From the belly of the fish, Jonah calls out to God and says, "I give up. You had me thrown from a ship and I began to drown and when things seemed their worst, I was eaten by a fish." Things seemed as bad as they could be and Jonah cries, "When I felt my life ebbing away, *V'ta'al mishahat chaiyai, adonai elohai.* (Jonah 2:7) I called the Lord to mind. For the first time, Jonah is forced to look beyond himself. He needs help because he can't save himself, so he turns to God.

God's response, after spitting him back onto dry land, is not to say, "Give me a sacrifice." It is not, "Pray to Me." God says "*koom leich el ninveh*" "Go to Ninveh. Help the people there. I don't care about you and Me. I care that you care about others. Stop being so self absorbed. *Va'yakam el ninveh*"...and Jonah goes.

It's an amazing metaphor. The fish is a metaphor for himself. Jonah is so self-absorbed and so involved in his own little world, that he's unable to see those around him. Jonah is so narcissistic that he's literally consumed by himself. The story is so simple. God's asks him to save the people of Ninveh .. and Jonah just walks away. In the face of the demise of an entire city that can be saved by him, he hops on a boat and tries to make a getaway. We have no details about Ninveh and we have no idea about what God wants Jonah to do except go there and tell them to change their ways. No big commitment, no big responsibility. Just go.

Jonah is consumed by a big fish because he is really only concerned about himself. As the world is literally crashing in around him, God says, "Think of someone else." In the climactic moment near the end of the story, we have the most inane moment. Jonah saved the city but the people hadn't turned back from their evil ways so Jonah becomes

upset. Still asking himself, “What’s in this for me?” God responds with a gift of a gourd tree at Kikayon. As Jonah begins to become attached to the tree, it begins to wither and die. Jonah becomes very upset and now God delivers the real message. “Why are you so worried about a plant but not your fellow human beings? You are quick to judge others but you care deeply for a plant.” God emphatically instructs Jonah, care about others. If you want to be God-like, then be kind to others and forget about the plant. As if that is not enough, the compilers of the liturgy tack on one short phrase from the prophet Micah.

“If you want to be like God, care for others. *Mi el kamoacha*, who is like Go, asks the prophet rhetorically. The one who chooses to act like God and care for others. Be merciful, be kind, be compassionate.”

The impulse to give is natural, the involuntary reflex to give is in-born. We make excuses not to give, but we should not. In the face of tragedy, struggle, or challenge, our inclination to give of ourselves is natural. We just have to let it happen and then we must apply that to the other times of our lives. We must cultivate the skill of giving. We must learn to give even when we are not under pressure. In normal times, we must develop the talent for giving so that in the face of turmoil, our internal desire to give will be met with the ability to give. We must condition ourselves so that we are able. In the dark times, when it is hard to think clearly, we must have an involuntary response that is good and kind. Like the children in school who have fire drills, they know what to do in the face of a real fire.

Ibn Ezra, commenting on the fact that Jonah eventually thinks of the people of Ninveh, remarks, “*Ki halchu anshei sifina el ninveh.*” “because his fellow ship-passengers were going to Ninveh, Jonah knew where to go.” Look, we don’t have to generate the agenda, we don’t even have to initiate the action. Ibn Ezra says that all you have to do is follow the right people. In the face of chaos, look for the people who are doing the right things and follow them and you will find that in the face of personal struggle and challenge, thinking about someone else changes the world.

A voyaging ship was wrecked during a storm at sea and only two of the men on it were able to swim to a small, desert island. The two survivors, not knowing what else to do, agreed that they had no other recourse but to pray to God.

However, to find out whose prayer was more powerful, they agreed to divide the territory between them and stay on opposite sides of the island. The first thing they prayed for was food. The next morning the first man saw a fruit-bearing tree on his side of the land, and he was able to eat its fruit. The other man's parcel of land remained barren.

After a week, the first man was lonely and he decided to pray for a wife. The next day, another ship was wrecked, and the only survivor was a woman who swam to his side of the land. On the other side of the island, there was nothing. Soon the first man prayed for a house, clothes, more food. The next day, like magic, all of these were given to him. However, the second man still had nothing.

Finally, the first man prayed for a ship so that he and his wife could leave the island. In the morning, he found a ship docked at his side of the island. The first man boarded the ship with his wife and decided to leave the second man on the island. He considered the other man unworthy to receive God's blessings, since none of his prayers had been answered.

As the ship was about to leave, the first man heard a voice from heaven booming, "Why are you leaving your companion on the island?" "My blessings are mine alone, since I was the one who prayed for them," the first man answered. "His prayers were all unanswered and so he does not deserve anything." "You are mistaken!" the voice rebuked him. "He had only one prayer, which I answered. If not for that, you would not have received any of my blessings." "Tell me," the first man asked the voice, "What did he pray for that I should owe him anything?" "He prayed that all your prayers be answered."

For all we know, our blessings are not the fruits of our prayers alone, but those of another praying for us.

A colleague of mine wrote to me earlier this year for advice:

Hi Friend. I need some help and thought of you. As I settle in and make it through the rough spots, I am struggling with one of my main challenges in the rabbinate. It is so difficult to know that the job that I feel called to do, and am passionate about, is causing me so much trouble--whether it's headaches, anxiety, exhaustion or spiritual struggle. I know I accomplish things, touch people, and have an impact and although I often forget that I do help others, I also know I am just trudging through, trying to get by, and scrambling to get enough done so as to not have another problem or angry congregant arrive at my door. I am starting the second year of my position. It's a big transition for me and for the shul as well and although I know this; it doesn't make it any easier! This leads me to you. Can you think back to that time in your career and how you coped with the strains of the position, day-to-day, week-to-week...and share some *eitza tovah's* with me? I would really appreciate it. Thank you, Francine.

So I wrote back...

Francine,

First, we all love you--and please remember that.

Second, wake up everyday and say *modeh ani* - meditate on this and realize how blessed we are to do what we do.

Third, when you are really in the dumps visit people in the hospital or in their home if they're elderly and homebound. Read a book to one of your children or give one of them a quiet relaxing bath, where they play in the water and you just listen to them - no distractions. Do something for someone else.

Fourth, own your accomplishments, but really own them.

Finally, know I am praying for you. That is what works for me.

Jay

So, Mia learned how to ride a two-wheeler this summer. However the lessons with Yasi, our youngest, didn't go as well. The day I took Yasi out to learn, Mia came along to show her that she had done it and that it was possible. Mia rode that day better than ever before. I think it was because she was showing her sister how it's done. She wasn't thinking about herself or about her scrapped knees. She was thinking about someone else. I wish I could say the same for Yasi, she didn't really get it. Maybe I was just too tired to teach her or maybe she didn't have someone to teach. I guess I'll have to wait until her younger cousins come over to see her learn how to ride a two-wheeler.

We can't do it on our own. We need others, and in the most bizarre of twists, we need to help others when we are in pain. Then, strangely enough, our pain seems to disappear.