

Sermon Parashat Bo 5767
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Several times a day I am asked the same question that I often ask in return. How are you doing? It's a question that's just a conversation starter. No one really expects an answer and if the answer of "Fine." or "Good." isn't immediately forthcoming, then most of us start trying to figure out how to get out of the conversation. "How are you doing?" is not a sincere question, it is a conversation starter. "How are you doing?" is like "Some weather we're having." Or "How about them Phillies?" So - now I respond to the question "How are you doing?" with the answer "Great." or "Terrific."

The other day I answered the question with "Never been better." Then I started thinking, I'm not sure that is actually true. However, it worked, and the conversation got started although I am not quite sure what we were talking about because all I could think about was - Is it true I've never been better? When I was a younger man I was in better shape, but that doesn't mean I was better. There are a lot of things I can do now that I couldn't do before so maybe I am better now than I was. Then I started thinking, "Maybe I have never been better." Maybe a better answer would've been "Couldn't be better." Now, that is a better answer. Of course, it's better to be better than I can ever imagine being. I think that's a better answer, "Couldn't be better."

Now, the next thing I knew was I had no idea what this conversation was about. I was trapped in a vortex of "Never been better." and "Couldn't be better." from which I could not extricate myself. After all, I was trying to be truthful. I didn't want to give the impression that I wasn't really responding to the question but just giving a pat answer. When someone asks, "How are you doing?" You should be truthful but not become a burden. So, I started thinking "Never been better." is better because how could I honestly say "Couldn't be better." How can I know now how I am going to be? Are you still with me? I think the best answer is probably "Not as good as I hope to be." Unfortunately, that sounds so negative. What I really mean is "Things are pretty good but I imagine they're going to get better." I realize the underlying meaning is that things aren't so great right now, which I know will get people to roll their eyes thinking that I am going to complain - and no one wants to listen to complaints. When they ask, "How are you doing?" people really want to hear "Fine." or "Good." So, I think I'll stay with "Couldn't be better." Now, that is positive thinking. "Never been better." There couldn't be any better answer and maybe if I say it enough times, I'll answer the question, "How are you doing?" with the answer "Couldn't be better," and life will actually get better. I believe that. That I can say. "Couldn't be better" is a prayer not a statement of fact, it is a mindset. I don't think anyone who hears me say "Couldn't be better," is going to question me on that. No one is going to say, "How do you know what is going to be?"

I wish I could figure out how I'm going to feel in any given circumstance. Even though I often get this question, I never have a really good answer. My daughter asks me "What is the vaccine going to feel like?" I try to describe it, but this only makes her more nervous. So I say, "Don't worry about it, you'll be fine." Similarly, the young little leaguer looks to his coach at the bottom of the ninth with two outs, the game is tied and there's a man on third base. He looks to

his coach and says, "I don't think I can do this." Like the diver looking over the edge of the 15-foot diving board thinking to himself, "I can't do this," to which we all must, at some point in our lives, say to ourselves, "Yes, I can." Even though I'm not exactly sure what will be required of me. Even though I have no experience, and even though I am insecure and filled with doubt, each of us has to say to ourselves, "I can do this." We have to say it about our relationships, our belief in God and we most certainly have to say it about our belief in ourselves. Yes, we can do this, even though we might not know what will be required of us. Sometimes it takes more than what we actually have to give.

In this morning's reading there is a moment when Pharaoh says to Moses, "Fine, take the people out to worship in the wilderness but make sure you come back. In fact, just to make sure you return, you must leave collateral." To which Moses responds, "*V'anachnu lo neidah mah na'avod et adonai, ad ba'anu shama.*" "We don't know what we are going to worship God with until we arrive." (Exodus 10:26) Moses says, "I am not making a deal with you. It isn't just because the process of believing in God is a personal one, one that Pharaoh needs to come to grips with, but because the Israelites need to get there as well." Just as the plagues have been about convincing Pharaoh of the awesome power of God, they have also been about convincing the Israelites. Moses, in speaking to Pharaoh, is also speaking to the Israelites who, too, are asking, "What is this new life going to require of us?" To the uninitiated, Moses is honest and says, "I don't know what to tell you but I do know it is going to take everything you have and the only alternative is that you have nothing in the first place. The life of a slave is empty so there's really nothing to lose." Moses proclaims loud and clear – "I don't know, but we can do this. We don't have to go it alone because we have each other. I don't have all the details, but I do know we can do this." I say the same to you today.

I realize there is a difference between not knowing how we will feel in any given circumstance and not knowing how we will behave. I have heard people say that if they were forced into a certain circumstance they just don't know what they would do. There's a difference between what we will do and how we will feel. We must be clear, at least in our own minds. The statement, "I just don't know what I will do," is disingenuous. We know exactly what we'll do and that declaration is a threat - and it's usually one that carries little weight. In our lives we should always anticipate that we would know exactly how to respond, and then determine to react appropriately. However, we must never become paralyzed by the unknown. This can also be applied to anything in our lives. Whether it is a new job, or staying with an old one, a new relationship, the purchase of a home, or even health care. We must be careful and we must never be immobile.

I wish the practice of Judaism was an exact science with specific answers to every question. There are those who claim that certainty but I tell you from my life's experience it is not how life really works. I add to that "But we can do it." In his extraordinary work, "God in Search of Man", Heschel teaches that we must take a leap of action. He also says quite remarkably "Through the ecstasy of deeds he learns to be certain of the presence of God. Right living is a way to right thinking." (A.J.Heschel; God in Search of Man; page 283)

Like the Boy Scout who packs for any eventuality, Moses says, "No, we have to bring it all." Sometimes it takes everything we have and it's hard. That's why Rashi says, "*Kama tichabed*

ha'avodah. How heavy will the service be?" Perhaps he will ask more than what we have." (Rashi ad locum) - and this is true today and why so many stay away. They don't come to worship because the little experience they have with formal worship is at times and in circumstances not the best. Worship is hard. We are uncomfortable. The language is foreign. The context is alien and we feel out of place. We don't know what to do, so many stay away because they say to themselves, "Maybe I won't be able to do it. Maybe I'll get there and what is asked of me will be too much. I may disappoint those around me and also disappoint myself." Again, asking the same question, posing the same challenge, when do we permit our fear of what will be prevent us from finding out.

So let me help you. Come sit with me and I'll give you all the tools and comfort you could possibly want. Sit with me in my study and I'll teach you to read Hebrew. I'll teach you what each prayer means and when to stand and sit. If you can't get to my study, I have it on CD. I've already given a class on the meaning of the prayers we recite, so stop by and pick it up but I've got to tell you that I've already given hundreds away. I can't get you to believe, but if I can get you to act, the belief is possible. I promise I'll hold your hand the entire time.

Look, we don't know how we are going to be, because we don't know what is going to be, so at least make the optimistic statement, "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

This past summer, a woman joined my wife on her trip to Israel. Before they boarded the plane she said to my wife, "What if I get to the *kotel* and don't feel anything?" Essentially, she has the same fear we all have. What if we get there and nothing happens - no explosions, no fireworks? The best answer is "I'll hold your hand and we'll see it together, but first you have to get on the plane."

Every time I get to the *kotel* I am overwhelmed. It just happens to me. Every emotion that I have been able to bury comes pouring out. As I stand at the holiest place on earth, the prayers of my heart come without words, the greatest expression, and the expression God really wants. I have tried to explain to people how they will feel when they are standing there, but I can't. You just have to go. You know it when you are there and it never disappoints. It is there that I can say the words without hesitation, "Life could never be better." Shabbat Shalom