Rabbi Jessica Spitalnic Mates

Yom Kippur 5781

The two stupidest things I've ever done in my life were to sell E-trade stock too early and to return a box of masks to CVS in February.

Yes, I returned a box of 50 masks that cost $6.99 in February. I had brought them in January because I had the flu and needed to go to New York to get my brother to Sloane Kettering in what turned out to be the last days of his life. We knew his cancer was bad and things moved too quickly that I never even opened the box of masks. Perhaps out of intense sadness and just wanting to be rid of the vestiges of these awful few weeks I returned that box of masks when I got back to Florida after his funeral. I have beat myself up about this. But just recently I have come to understand this action not as an act of ignorance but a sign of hope. How?

British Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks talks of journalist Patrick Gordon Walker who was sent to do a broadcast, from the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen just five days after it had been liberated in 1945. It was a Friday and he found the surviving Jewish inmates, gathered with a British army chaplain saying aloud prayers without fear for the first time in years. And then they broke out into Hatikvah, the Jewish national anthem whose name means hope. "What kind of people stands at the Gate of Hell and sings about hope?" asks Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. (https://tim.blog/2020/08/29/rabbi-lord-jonathan-sacks-transcript/)

What kind of people stands at the Gates of Hell and sings about hope? Rabbi Sacks rhetorical question is of course referring to us. The Jewish people. The hope lies not in a blind ignorance of the world around us. Hope lies in the knowledge that even in the face of the greatest evil, or the most difficult challenge, there is some small thread of hope. Literally. And the thread is the color red.

In the Book of Joshua, a pair of Joshua's spies are assisted by a prostitute from Jericho. Her name is Rachav and she protects the spies by hiding them from enemies. For her kindness in protecting them, the spies tell her to let a red thread hang out her window when the city is attacked. She is instructed to bring all her family to her home and as long as that red thread is there, she and her family will be protected. As the walls of her city of Jericho come tumbling down, that displayed red string with give protection to her family. The Hebrew word for that string? *Tikvah*. Yes. The Hebrew word for the string that will protect Rachav's family as her city is destroyed around her is *Tikvah*. The Hebrew word for this small piece of thread is the same Hebrew word for hope. Hatikvah, The Hope, that song the prisoners at Bergen Belsen were singing, that three years later would become the anthem of the new Jewish state gets its name from this minute piece of string. Rabbi Michael Marmur teaches that this can be understood to say hope exists, even if it as small as a thread, it exists. In a moment of despair and destruction, the literal red thread and its name of tikvah lays out for us that hope found even in the minutiae is still hope.

Even if we are unaware of this internal hope at the time of trouble, we can surprise ourselves it is there. Oscar nominated Polish Filmmaker Wanda Jakubowska, a survivor

of Auschwitz, teaches us that. Sent to Auschwitz for political activities, Wanda survived and returned to Auschwitz just one year after WWII ended. Why would she return to the Gates of Hell that is Auschwitz? To make a film in the very camp she had been imprisoned, now as a free woman. Her film, The Last Stage, made so quickly after WWII, was the story of female inmates in Auschwitz. Local citizens, German POW's and the camp's former inmates made up much of the cast and crew.

This pioneering film that paved the way for subsequent films about the Shoah, was born from a hope Jakubowska was completely oblivious to at the time. It was only in filming a scene where the gates of Auschwitz opened that she had a moment of epiphany. "This grinding sound needs to be recorded separately." I remember [saying] loudly to my friend during filming the gate[s of Auscwitz] clos[ing] behind our transport. I said it without thinking, and at the same time I realized that I made a decision to make a film about Auschwitz at the very moment of arriving there." Without even aware at the time of her imprisonment, deep down inside of her, there was a small shred of hope, one that she may not have even been conscious of at the time, that she saw herself returning to filmmaking and making a film at the Gates of Hell, Auschwitz. With her fellow prisoners and not from a positon of weakness, but a place of strength. It was only in the act of making the movie that she was able to look backwards at the awful, record it and yet simultaneously see the hope that had been inside of her even if not apparent at the time. Only in filming those gates closing, a sound she heard many times as a prisoner, did she realize that hope that lay inside in the unconscious decision to make film as soon as she was released. Even with no guarantee she would be released. (Haltof, Marek. Screening Auschwitz: Wanda

Jakubowska's The Last Stage and the Politics of Commemoration. Northwestern University Press, 2018)

To stand at the Gates of Hell and sing about hope articulates the complicated perspective that Judaism has asked us to have since our ancient slavery in Egypt. What is that? In our freedom, in our best times, to relive the worst moments, the Gates of Hell Jewish history has known. We do it on Passover as we recline in freedom remembering a Pharaoh who enslaved us and sought to kill our sons. We do it on Purim – the giddiness of the holiday betrays Haman's near destruction of our people. We do it on Holocaust Remembrance day – so awful and so close and far too painful to forget. We do it each Shabbat when we sing of the Red Sea parting and our escape from Egypt's thundering army to freedom. But in singing Hatkivah and and even in returning masks in February we learn that our tradition creates this push and pull that brings us to the gates of hell and even there puts words of hope again and again in our mouth.

Furthermore, this perspective that is the bedrock of our faith is not experienced alone, in solitude.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik says, "The obligation to love one another stems from the consciousness of this people of fate, this lonely people that inquires into the meaning of its own uniqueness. It is this obligation of love that stands at the very heart of the covenant made in Egypt…If boiling water is poured upon the head of the Jew in Morocco, the fashionably attired Jew in Paris or London has to scream at the top of his voice, and

through feeling the pain he will remain faithful to his people…" (Kol Dodi Dofek: Listen, My Beloved Knocks
by Joseph B. Soloveitchik)

We can't ignore that figurative Jew in Morocco. If he stands at the Gates of Hell we are there with him. We are not single-mindedly concerned with maintaining our hope in solitude. With collective history comes collective hope. The high holidays make sure we see that. Twice in two weeks we read the Torah portion, Nitzavim, near the end of Deuteronomy that declares "Behold, I have placed before you this day life and good, death and evil." We are told in the same breath that it is life that Gd wants us to choose and in choosing life we are showing our love for Gd. Not by carrying out this mitzvah or that. Moses leaves the realm of the particular commandments and instead asks the Children of Israel, inspires, them "to go beyond their heads, into their hearts where their key destiny lies". (Rav Ezra Bick)

And how to we do that? By returning to Gd in directing our hearts towards Gd, even when evil seems close, temptation lies nearby and the Gates of Hell are within earshot. I am a returner – not just of masks in February, but part of a people that returns again and again. We are returners. As much as the forces of history or this awful virus or tragic losses or just the pressures of day to day life pull at us, we are returners. We utter words of praise for Gd in the kaddish prayer, when curses would so much more easily come. We sing HaTikvah at the gates of Bergen Belsen. When the world sucks us in to the hopeless,

Judaism says find the most miniscule spark of hope and return to Gd in love and do it together.

Our returning is not an act of despair but an act of hope epitomized in Teshuvah, the word of return that punctuates the sentiment of the New Year. Every new year. Like the filmmaker Wanda Jakubowska, like the optimist I was in February that the world had got to get better, like the prisoners in Bergen-Belsen like us now, we are asked to return to life and living, to have the smallest thread of hope that we will know a better future.

For some this pandemic has been their own personal gates of hell. Losses have been real and concrete with funerals from afar, sickness, sadness and loneliness. Just knowing others are suffering, means we suffer. Henry Nouwen in the The Wounded Healer asks, "Who can take away suffering without entering it?" Caring about one another as they experience the gates of hell happens side by side with a heightened good instinct that in helping, hope is possible, even if unimaginable at the time.

So I came to understand in returning those masks in February some tiny speck of hope lay inside of me, the grieving sister, that I did not imagine a worse world than the one I had been in, but a better one. That returning the masks was more than just erasing remnants of the painful weeks before. It was doing what Judaism asks us, even pushes us to do. Go back to the living. To a vibrant, alive, healthy world, to sing of hope.

May this be Gd's will. Shana tova.