

Rabbi Jessica Spitalnic Mates



Yom Kippur 5782

“If you hear this, I’ve been killed.”

With these words the astronaut John Glenn began a never played recording made right before his Friendship 7 flight orbit about the world. The recording was to be played for his family in the case that the first American to orbit the earth was killed during the February 1962 mission.

It went on...

“I made peace with God a long time ago before this happened. Felt good to live with that feeling of not being afraid to die. Didn’t always live like it. Kept trying.

Now let’s get practical and discuss funerals...

[At my funeral] you kids pick the highest tree you can see, point it out, and I want each of you to look at the highest little branch in the tree, and when that little branch waves in the wind, that will be a sign just for us that I’m waving to you, OK? Maybe that sort of symbolizes the fact that we tried hard, and got to a high point. Now it’s up to others to get a little higher.

[A]nytime you feel blue, just ... look at the highest tree around and I know you’ll know I’m having a wonderful time, so smile back at me and forget the tears, OK? I’m proud of each of you, more than you can know[,] and rather than feeling sad at my departure, let’s be thankful we had so much time together and look forward to what’s ahead.”

Glenn survived the flight so the transcript of this never-played recording, shared in Jeff Shesol’s new book Mercury Rising , was never known to Glenn’s family but I am in awe that he created that recording for the uncharted potential of his death in space.

I am in awe of Glenn for his ability to articulate words to his family to face a difficult future in the event of his death in space when their next step might otherwise seem unclear.

So what would John Glenn say to us about the uncharted of our time, this pandemic? At the beginning and again now when the light at the end of the tunnel turned out to be another freight train I, unlike Glenn, often feel at a lack of words for this uncharted time. For weeks I have been schlepping around a book of sermons rabbis gave in times of war – The Civil War, World Wars I and II, Vietnam and so on.

In reading these sermons I have discovered I am in good company of rabbis struggling to articulate a path in the unchartered future.

During WWII Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits who escaped Germany in 1939 wrote in the side notes of his sermon a few years later in WWII, "Very difficult to preach. The world is changing every day. ... before the ink is dry must change." Yeah, tell me about it.

Newscaster Walter Cronkite interviewed John Glenn in the days before launch about the strength his religion provided him and his family religion and dangers of space flight. Glenn's answer more fully expresses how the never played recording came into existence. "We don't look at this flight as a big dangerous thing that we have to suddenly go into all kinds of divine help to accomplish." Glenn told the veteran journalist Cronkite. "We try and live our religion day in and day out. More than just call on it in an emergency."

The tape prepared for his family was only to be played in case there was an emergency but living life as Glenn and his family did meant that if there was an emergency, their father had laid a path to navigate unchartered territory. That path Glenn laid can be of help to us today in our unchartered territory.

As Glenn's answer to Cronkite shows, John Glenn knew his system. He knew his family well and in his recording anticipated the range of emotions they might be going through and how and what he could say that could bring comfort in a language his family would understand. He could do this because he had not shied away from difficult conversations.

So here's what I learn from John Glenn.

Number One – Prepare Well

Preparing well doesn't start in the middle of a crisis. It starts long before deciding for yourself and your loved one what values and ethics and morals will serve as true north for a lifetime. Judaism is full of intentional preparation in the life of a Jew. Just watch one of our preschoolers sing the Shma, or Hatikvah and it is easy to see the God, Torah and Israel that lie in the prep.

In 1964, a few years after the orbit, Glenn reflected "I think any time a person goes through a big, rather dramatic experience..., you tend to sit back occasionally and try to put yourself into relationship with the rest of the world and with God and whatever God may be to you." (Shesol notes) Even though Glenn did tremendous things, G-d was spoken about in the mundane times and the majestic times. It was comfortable to talk about faith at all times in the Glenn family, good and the bad.

When God decided he wanted to Moses to lead the Jewish people it takes several asks before Moses reluctantly said yes. That system of patience that God set up from the very beginning of his relationship with Moses showed Moses that Gd would be patient with him, that there was room to negotiate, as when he convinced Gd to let Aaron be his spokesperson and that God was devoted to the future of the Jewish people. When there were tough times and unchartered waters, because Moses and God had created and reinforced this system of openness and potential for course correction, the Jewish people endured. And if you are not

happy with your prep, the time to begin is always there. God and Moses didn't set up their system til Moses was 80 years old.

Number Two - Even if you are not on the rocket ship you are needed

Two missions went before John Glenn's orbit- with Alan Shepard and Gus Grissom. There was so much jealousy among the first astronauts, the collective group known as Mercury 7, and immense disappointment at times not to be the one chose for the next launch. Nevertheless, they were there for each other. When John Glenn went into space it was Alan Shepard's voice that did the countdown for liftoff. Glenn was fully present for the other's missions and they were fully present for him. No matter where the astronauts were- in rocket or on earth, they were essential.

We have learned this as we map this uncharted territory. This time could frustrate us or silence us or dumbfound us- but if we believe we are as necessary when on the rocket ship or not, the uncharted territory will not push us apart but bring us together. Knowing that means that setbacks like Covid, which prevent us from being together in person do not become barriers from knowing togetherness. Far from feeling powerless and inconsequential, temple reminded us of our essential nature in the same way as Alan Shepard was fully there for Glenn.

Number Three – Don't Neglect the Manual

During the Korean War when Glenn ran out of fuel trying to rescue a downed fellow pilot, he glided home on his low fuel. After he wrote to his son, "It was a funny feeling Davie but I actually was never afraid or scared. I knew what the plane would do and I knew what I could do and that was all there was to it. If you train yourself to do things the way you should then when the whole operation goes haywire your past training and experience takes over and you'll know what to do".

Glenn knew his manual well. The uncharted path is also paved by being familiar with the manual. And the more familiar we are with the manual, the easier it will be to operate under duress.

Brain coach Jim Kwik has studied how our brains learn. Think about when you read an article about, say, rocket science, as interesting as it may be, unless your John Glenn, you are most likely not going to retain much information unless you are a rocket scientist. As Kwik says, "All of learning is connecting something you don't know to something you do know. John Glenn like most of the first astronauts was a test pilot and they say the worst thing for a test pilot is lack of information. So Glenn was always learning and expanding his knowledge.

Torah is our manual. How well do you know it?

You may know there are five books of Moses, or that it starts with creation and ends with the death of Moses. You read Torah if you became b'nai mitzvah and you may know multiple scrolls of Torah in Hebrew sit in the ark behind me. Whatever you know about Torah, you have something to connect to if you want to add to your Torah knowledge. The more you expand your knowledge, as Kwik says, is far easier to do in realms where you have a foundation to build upon. As things become more complex, you have something to build upon as you learn more.

Exactly 2,500 days after Friendship 7's orbit, Apollo 8 became the first human spaceflight to orbit the moon. By that time, John Glenn had entered the political realm, only to return to space in 1998 on the Space Shuttle Discovery. Apollo 8's six-day trip would coincide with Christmas, 1968. But it was not a Merry Christmas. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy had been assassinated earlier that year and with the United States in the Vietnam War, the astronauts of Apollo 8 felt any attempts at a Christmas speech would fall poorly on American ears. So the astronauts turned to the Torah, our manual. To the very beginning of Genesis and read the first 10 verses of the creation story. That ancient text, that became the map of hope and peace that night. The very first words of Torah that gave weight to what the weightless astronauts in space wanted to convey.

Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks said, "Torah is not mere history as a sequence of events. The Torah is about the truths that emerge through time." That means if you know the manual well and engage with it often, it will help you in your time of need. Don't neglect the manual.

Number Four – Find Good and God in the Darkness

Glenn knew that the most dangerous time of the orbit, the time that would bring the most danger and fear were when the boosters fired, propelling him into the darkness of space. The astronauts could go through as many simulations as NASA could create but in the reality of darkness, that is where the uncharted begins. Darkness does not have to be in space to be daunting and overwhelming.

Soccer Star Abby Wambach found herself entering into darkness. Upon retirement she was to receive ESPN's inaugural icon award. As she recounts, "I received my award along with two other incredible athletes: basketball's Kobe Bryant and football's Peyton Manning. We all stood on stage together and watched highlights of our careers with the cameras rolling and the fans cheering—and I looked around and had a moment of awe. ...Then the applause ended and it was time for the three of us to exit stage left. And as I watched those men walk off the stage, it dawned on me that the three of us were stepping away into very different futures.

Each of us...we made the same sacrifices, we shed the same amount of blood, sweat and tears, we'd left it all on the field for decades with the same ferocity, talent and commitment—but ... Kobe and Peyton walked away from their careers with something I didn't have: enormous bank accounts. Because of that they had something else I didn't have: freedom. Their hustling days were over; mine were just beginning."

Ultimately that moment of the uncharted next step evolved into a commitment to demand pay equity for women in her sport. But the realization she came to that she could have a place in making that change only came to her in her dark hotel room when she couldn't sleep that night and had a "This isn't just about me, and this isn't just about soccer" epiphany.

<https://barnard.edu/commencement/archives/2018/abby-wambach-remarks>

The Torah portion we read for Yom Kippur is part of the end of Deuteronomy and all of Torah. Moses will pass off leadership to Joshua. The most significant words Moses says to Joshua as he prepares Joshua for what is ahead after Moses dies is Hazak v'Amatz. Translated as "Be strong and Courageous" it's terse, non-specific resonance is an acknowledgement that the

unchartered path will be long and hard. Not just the immediate battles Joshua will fight but a history of challenges, hardly imagined by the biblical Moses. Unfortunately, Judaism will need a path in unchartered darkness many times after Moses but it is possible to find a way back to that path always as long as we do not abandon our systems, our people and our manuals.

Thank God the Glenn family never had to hear those words recorded by John.

Jeff Sheshol, author of Mercury Rising about Glenn was kind enough to share with me scans of the original legal pad paper Glenn had the transcript for the recording. He had beautiful cursive handwriting and so many words were crossed out, phrases rewritten, erased and written over. There was deep thought and care into what Glenn was going to say to his family and there it showed. It is a reminder that finding our way through difficult times needs to allow room for pivoting, change and recalibration. You saw that from Temple Beth El if you got one of the many emails about High Holidays asking about attendance, tickets, sharing changes from the originally published material and so on.

Our temple system epitomized everything that Glenn tried to do with his family. Because we had a system that communicated clearly before Covid, because each of us, staff, leadership and congregant were as essential as Alan Shepard, because we are guided by Torah, when darkness came in the form of Covid, we were and are there for one another and will continue to be.

And the words that John Glenn ended that never played recording with are the exact words that I want to say to each and every one of you with us today, whether our livestream, on facebook or youtube or sitting here in the room,

That recording ended with "I love you very much and I'll see you later."

And after the darkness he did. And we will too. Shana tova. Tsom Kal.