

A Person Goes on a Journey / A Stranger Comes to Town

Rosh Hashanah Morning 2010

Rabbi Jeffrey A. Summit

There are only two stories in all the world. They're told in many different ways but there are still only two stories. The first story is "A person goes on a journey" and the second story is "a stranger comes to town." For you who are just beginning at Tufts, both of those stories are your story. You are both the person going on a journey and the stranger who has come to town. But even for those of you returning to campus after being away for the summer, you are also the person on a journey, maybe even more so than when you first came to campus, because your journey is now taking shape. And you are still, in many places, in a new class, in new social situations, the unexpected stranger, the newcomer entering places where people already know one another and you are the new person in town. I learned this truth about the two stories from a wonderful Tufts professor, writer and poet Deborah Digges, who passed away last year. Her observation about these two stories, and how they intersect, has been with me for years, ever since I heard her speak about this with incoming freshman, maybe fifteen years ago. And every Rosh Hashanah since, I've thought about her words and these two stories re-echo as I think about how to enter this new year and make sense of my life, and what I need to do and how I think about the people around me. So I first want to thank and acknowledge Deborah Digges and say out loud that we miss her at Tufts. On this Rosh Hashanah, inspired by her words, I want to take her truth about two stories and go off in my own

Rosh Hashanah direction.

Deborah Digges spoke about how the first of these stories, a person goes on a journey, is one of the oldest poem/stories that we have, Gilgamesh, where the hero sets out on a journey that takes him under the sea where he finds the secret to life. Odysseus leaves on a journey that was full of adventure and danger until his Odyssey concludes and he finally returns home to his loving wife Penelope. And then there is the journey of the pilgrims in the Canterbury Tales, where Chaucer is much more interested in the stories of each traveler than in their eventual destination. In Dante's Inferno, the journey takes readers through the netherworld and then in his Paradiso, the journey goes through heaven. I think of the story in the Torah of Abraham and Sarah who leave everything familiar to them, and in the course of their travels, come to understand the oneness of God, a truth that will become the very basis for Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Thinking of more recent literature, Ann Frank goes on a journey of observation and growth even as she is confined, hidden in an attic with her family. In Three Cups of Tea, Greg Mortenson almost dies in his journey attempting to scale the mountain K2. He is saved by local villagers and in gratitude, his journey continues as he returns to Pakistan to build schools for girls who had little chance of receiving an education. But of course, when Mortenson travels back to Pakistan, he is also the stranger who comes to town, struggling to learn a language, understand a culture even as he hopes to give these villagers a gift, the gift of education.

Deborah Digges told how the stranger who comes to town often brings a gift, or knowledge, from another world. She spoke about the opening words of Hamlet? “Who’s there? Who’s there?” The stranger we meet at the beginning of the play is the ghost of Hamlet’s father, who sets the whole story to action. In the Torah, Moses is a stranger in a strange land who is neither at home in the house of Pharaoh where he grew up or with his people, the Jews held in Egyptian captivity. The stranger Moses transforms history as he unwillingly becomes God’s instrument, leading his people on a journey to liberation.

As we gather on Rosh Hashanah, another new year is beginning. Perhaps you are both the person on a journey and the stranger who has come to town. What wisdom might our tradition offer as we live out these stories as the year begins? Both of these stories reverberate strongly in the Jewish tradition and this morning, I want to see what a Jewish approach to these stories might teach us about our lives as we enter the new year. Let me first go back to the journey of Abraham and Sarah when God tells Abraham, “Leave your home, the place that you were born, your parents’ house to the land where I will show you.” (Lech lecha me'artsecha umimoladetecha umibeyt avicha el-ha'arets asher ar'eka) There’s a lot to be learned in this one verse of Torah about the process of setting off and living through a successful journey.

The first truth we learn from this verse might appear self evident: A journey begins with leaving, that is, you actually have to leave your home to begin your journey. And I’m not talking about packing the car

and doing a road trip where you eventually pull up to your dorm or apartment or a new city. I'm really talking about leaving. This is hard these days when we are so wired and connected. When I was in college, maybe I spoke to my parents once a week. (I talk to them a lot more now). I know lots of sane, good people in school who actually talk, or text or email their parents several times every day. Now, I'm not telling you that you shouldn't talk to your parents (wow, would this rabbi get in trouble) but I am suggesting that a successful life journey means that you begin to leave home when it comes to making the decisions that will direct your life. You have to learn for yourself what subjects excite you intellectually, what commitments bring you satisfaction and which people are going to be your closest friends. In every journey, there comes a point where you actually have to push off and leave.

Allow me to share a personal story: I remember vividly when my son was 19 and he would come back from college and I'd keep trying to make plans with him while he was running off to see his friends and at one point he just looked at me and said, "Dad, I know this is hard but right now you want to spend more time with me than I want to spend with you." "Ouch," I said but in fact, that was exactly what he needed to do then, be out of the house, be with friends, explore the world on his own. This summer we spent weeks together—he's 24 now—and while we will always be father and son, it's wonderful to have a relationship where we relate much more as adults. He's really his own person now and that makes it easier for him to be with his parents. And ultimately, this is what all healthy parents want for their children, that they can

make their own good decisions about how to live an engaged and meaningful life. When a child grows up, and is able to leave home, that means that a parent has done a good enough job. But leaving is the first step in the journey.

We learn something else from this verse as well. When God tells Abraham to begin his journey, Abraham doesn't even know exactly where he is going. God says you're going "el-ha'arets asher ar'eka" "to a place that I will show you" but in truth, it's quite a while before Abraham and Sarah find the place where they will settle and be at peace. And a real journey is like that, or as the Zen proverb goes, on a significant journey, you need to push off in your boat and be willing to lose sight of the familiar shore before your destination comes into view. You need the courage to become untethered. "But how do I know if this is the right major for me? How do I know if she's the right girlfriend? How do I know if I want to get involved in doing more Jewish things?" Well, you'll never know, until you take a leap and commit to the journey. The goal, the truth, the end, the destination becomes clearer as you travel, and I should add, as you travel well: with a open heart and mind, with attentive eyes and listening ears. Here's a food metaphor: You know, I've met people who have traveled through Israel complaining the whole way that they couldn't get a good steak or hamburger and they we so focused on what they were missing that they never learned about swarma or falafel or real humus. A good traveler has an appetite for new experiences. But, you ask, what if I commit to the journey and it's not what I wanted? Ah, there lies that path to wisdom because we only

learn how to make good decisions by actually making, for ourselves, bad decisions, and then having the courage to start another journey.

And third, what's the point of our journey anyway? For our own amusement and entertainment? To be able to brag about the places we've been and the sights we've seen? To buy chochkelas to put in our dorm rooms or apartments, posters from Paris or carvings from Africa. No, that's not the point. God tells Abraham and Sarah the point of their journey when God sends them out: "veheye baracha" "You shall be a blessing." You go on a journey not only for your self but to find out what blessing you can bring to the world, to the people you meet, to the places that you touch. This is what Greg Mortenson does in "Three Cups of Tea." He struggles to go back to Pakistan, where villagers saved his life, and he builds schools. That's what it means to be a blessing. Let me share another very personal story and I don't share this to show off, Tufts is a place where students, staff and faculty do amazing social justice work but this is my story and one of the first times I really understood the importance of trying to "be a blessing" on my life journey.

Many people here know that my recent work as an ethnomusicologist has been in East Africa, with the Abayudaya, the Jewish people of Uganda. After I finished my first research and recording trip there ten years ago, I was really excited about all the great music I recorded and was bringing back with me from the community. And as I was leaving, a couple of members of the community spoke to me and said that they

really wanted to go to college. They had passed all their entrance exams but the cost of tuition was totally beyond them, about \$3500 a year: a lot cheaper than Tufts but totally outside of what a subsistence farmer in Uganda could afford. So I thought: Wow, I could probably raise that money and I when I returned I spoke to friends and talk about this project when I lectured about their music and people were wonderfully generous and with their help, we raised the money to send two students to college in Uganda. Well, good things spread and now more leaders have joined this project and we're raising money to support about 18 Jewish students in college in Uganda. I share this personal example because I can't even begin to explain the satisfaction and happiness this project has brought me. I think we have a responsibility to figure out how we are each positioned to be a blessing in the journey of our lives.

So those are some thoughts about what it means when a person goes on a journey. First, you actually have to leave home. Second, you have to be comfortable with the fact that your final destination might only become clear in the course of your journey. Third, I would say, it's important to figure out how you can be a blessing in the course of your travels. But what about the other story, a stranger comes to town? Here we are, in the middle of a perfectly good journey, trying to get a handle on our lives, and a stranger waltzes in shakes up everything. Maybe he is exotic and distracting and is sitting behind you in Chemistry class. Or she has lived for years in places you've only visited in your dreams. Or a new person comes into your sorority or apartment or seminar and he or she is annoyingly intelligent and socially awkward. Many of us

here at Tufts are conscious that our wonderful president, Larry Bacow, is beginning his last year on campus and we both wish him well on his continuing journey and are also very aware that an important stranger will come to town next year that will have an impact on us all. And that will be challenging and disturbing and exciting, all at once. What does our tradition have to say about strangers and how we think about them, how we relate to them, how we treat them?

It's fairly amazing that the most repeated commandment in the Torah, and one of the defining tenets of Judaism, is built around how we treat the stranger. The commandment is: "When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him.... You shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt (vv. 33,34). This is a very difficult piece of Torah to understand. It's hard enough to love other Jews. How do we understand the commandment to love the stranger who comes to live among us?

Perhaps the love that the Torah is talking about here is different than the love we have towards a close friend or the love parents and children have for one another. Dr. Judith Hauptman, a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary, tries to make sense of this commandment "to love the stranger" by examining the verses in the Torah that lead up to this commandment. And in fact, these verses are quite specific in setting a context for what it means to "love" the stranger. The Torah commands "do not render unfair decisions by favoring either the poor or the rich but judge fairly (v. 15); do not deal basely with your

countryman and do not profit from his blood (v. 16); do not hate him but rather talk with him, if he does wrong (v. 17); do not take vengeance or bear a grudge against him (v. 18). From these verses, Hauptman concludes that the kind of “love” the Torah is requiring here means when a stranger comes to town, don’t treat that person unfairly. Don’t abuse, exploit or take advantage of that person. Instead, actively be concerned about another’s welfare and make sure that person isn’t mistreated. So when the Torah commands us to “love” the stranger, the text means that we should protect an outsider from abuse by insiders (v. 34). As Jews, we have to remember what it was like to be pre-judged, type-cast, stereotyped, oppressed and persecuted for being the outsider. Ultimately, we didn’t care if the Egyptians or the Romans or Crusaders or Christian Germans “loved” us: we only wanted to be treated fairly, justly, with human dignity and respect. And that, the Torah teaches, is how we should treat the stranger.

As a sidebar, I want to comment that in general, I don’t give “political” sermons. But the issue of how we treat the stranger should resonate strongly with many discussions happening in our county now. I don’t know about you but my grandparents were immigrants to this county. Oh wait, at some point, someone in every one of our families was a stranger, an immigrant, here. And I also think about people who want to burn the holy books of others’ religion. How does that fit with our tradition’s directive to treat the stranger with dignity and respect?

As we begin this year, little around us remains static. Strangers will

come to town with messages from other worlds. The new philosophy professor who makes you rethink how you understand good and evil, the awkward freshman who turns out to be the kindest, most grounded person you've met so far in your life, the supervisor in a new internship who calls you on things no-one has bothered or had the courage to call you on before. But if you never give the stranger a chance, if you enter every class, or social situation or job or meeting with the idea set ideas of who you like, what they should look like, how they should talk, what should or should not be said, then you are shutting yourself off from new ways of experiencing and understanding the world. As Jews, we've been strangers and the Torah teaches that we should sandpaper our sensitivity, so we are acutely aware of the stranger's experience, so when a stranger comes to town, we look and listen to that person with an open heart and an open mind. Perhaps the stranger has a gift, something to teach us, a truth that can transform how we understand the world and ourselves.

It's good to be together on Rosh Hashanah. We come to celebrate and to think and to plan in our hearts and minds the way we hope our lives will unfold in the coming year. You are the person on a journey. Safe travels! You are the stranger who has come to town. Welcome! Wishes for a new year filled with health and growth and happiness. Shanah tovah!