

Holding On
Rabbi Rachel L. Joseph
Rosh Hashana Morning, Congregation Beth Israel, 5782

Rabban Gamliel was traveling by ship and he saw off in the distance that there was the hull of another wrecked vessel. Immediately he became upset and began to grieve because he knew from looking at the wrecked boat that the great Rabbi Akiva had been on board. After sitting shiva, after being in mourning for seven days, he rose from his mourning and returned to the yeshivah, to the study hall. Sitting down to study, Rabban Gamliel looked up and what did he see? None other than Rabbi Akiva—who came, sat down next to him and began to study Torah.

“My son,” said Rabban Gamliel, “who salvaged you from the waters?”

Rabbi Akiva said to me:

“A daf, a plank, a piece of the shipwreck, something to grab ahold of from the boat appeared for me, and to every wave that came my way I bowed my head.”

“A plank appeared to me, and to every wave that came my way I nodded.”¹

This story from the Talmud about two rabbis in the first century is a Jewish version and elaboration of the saying that we’re not all in the same boat but we are all in the same storm.

Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Akiva experience the storm in very different ways. Rabban Gamliel was on a ship that was safe, even though it was tossed around, seeing other ships that are wrecked, and knowing some people have been lost.

Rabbi Akiva was thrown from his ship, and the way he sees it, it’s only by fortune that he finds a plank to hold on to. He says that he nodded his head toward each wave as it came. Some interpret this to mean that he lowered his head, so the wave wouldn’t throw him off his board. Some say he nodded, to acknowledge the wave and its power much greater than any he had – a power to harm him or to bring him ultimately to the shore.

And, when he survives this potentially fatal shipwreck, he starts discussing points of Torah and Jewish law, but Rabban Gamliel stops him, and asks to hear his story. I think Rabban Gamliel was worried about his friend and student.

It’s a hard thing to ask after a storm, when someone seems to want to go back to business as before and pick up with what you used to do together. It’s hard because when Gamliel asks who saved you, Akiva effectively says: It’s not a who. I got lucky. This plank came! Akiva doesn’t say whether he thinks it was God.

¹ Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 121a.

There might be some resentment between the two rabbis, let's be honest. Why did *you* have an easier time through the storm? Why did you worry about me and my ship from afar and not come over to help lift me out of the water?

We have all been in this storm, and I'll speak for myself, some days I feel like I'm walking onto the shore and other days I feel like I am still fully in this storm. I hear from among you each day, who report being on a ship or a plank or on the shore.

Our ships and our planks – what you had, what you found, what you held onto or made into something, what you remembered as a source of hope -- so many ships and planks the past eighteen months. And there have been waves aplenty, and those waves are still coming. I see the waves that Rabbi Akiva nodded at, as representing his realization that in a storm you see what the truly profound forces are, what is deep and powerful. Or maybe you get a glimpse, you feel it – and you talk when you get back to land. What makes up our spiritual inwardness in the face of the storm? And how do we not succumb to exhaustion or despair as we are in the middle of a wide ocean with no shore in sight. What planks do we hold on to?

An important teacher on strengthening the spirit in the face of despair is the Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav, a rabbi living in the 1700s, whose wisdom came from his personal struggles. He taught that the essential thing is not to despair. While it is natural to sometimes feel the emotion of despair, he teaches, we must not give into it. He uses three practices to illustrate his point and, today, I want us to consider these three planks that we might hold onto in this moment as we continue to ride the waves. The planks of Hitbodedut, Sichot haverim, and L'ma'aseh.²

The first plank from Rebbe Nachman is a form of prayer called “hitbodedut,” taking time to be by yourself in direct, spontaneous, and heart-felt conversation with God.³ Hitbodedut is a wonderful practice in that it is accessible to all no matter what one's religious background or experience. It is a simple heart connection between ourselves and the Source of Life. There is no prayer book involved. The place and the time are chosen by each of us. The subject is whatever is on our hearts. We don't have to have any particular theology or even any theology. The discipline is to take time to be alone and open one's heart in conversation with the One that is within and beyond us. It is a daily practice. It's what we do day-in and day-out, how we create rhythms in our lives, how we establish spiritual practices that allow us the opportunity to recharge our spiritual batteries, to find sparks of holiness, to create sanctuaries in time and space, ultimately helping us access the sacred in our everyday lives and find greater meaning day by day.

² Rabbi Ariel Burger on Rebbe Nachman: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxngk4I3NVA>

³ <https://reformjudaism.org/3-steps-hitbodedut-talking-god-your-own-terms>

This Rosh Hashana, I'd like to ask each and every one of us to find some spiritual practice or some mitzvah that you will make your own this coming year. I don't mind if it's a secular spiritual practice (if that doesn't sound like an oxymoron) – maybe this will be the year that you use swimming or running as a spiritual practice, or commit to writing in a journal on a regular basis. Maybe it will be putting a mezuzah on the doorpost of your house or – if you already have one – making a commitment to try to notice it more often as you come and go so that your house feels like a holy place. Or lighting Shabbat candles, or saying Shema as you close your eyes at bedtime or together as you tuck in a child. Mitzvot are fundamentally about connectedness -- to our texts, to our tradition, to Jews around the world. In the same way that young children need routines like bathtime and bedtime to feel secure, we adults do too... but we're less good at implementing them for ourselves. One of my spiritual practices has been making challah every week.

For this year, if we are to be like Rabbi Akiva and weather the stormy sea, let's figure out what planks of ritual, Hitbodedut, spiritual practices, and mitzvot we can each hold fast to.

The second plank of Rabbi Nachman's moves from being solitary to being in relationship. It's called sichot haverim⁴ -- to be in conversation with friends. We have no real tradition in Judaism of asceticism, of total withdraw from the world: being Jewish is being in community. Just as we have study partners for understanding Jewish texts, we need study partners for our lives, Dr. Ariel Burger teaches in the name of Rebbe Nachman. Cultivating and investing in our friendships and relationships should not be considered a leisure time activity but an essential part of a spiritual life.

That's what we do as a congregation: build community, bring people together around the idea of building meaningful Jewish life and positive Jewish identity... in a community context, because you can't do it alone. So during this time between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, I'd like us, I'd like you, to reflect on who is your base or your core of support? Who are the people that you know you can rely on? Who is your plank in the storm? This list changes and shifts over time, and it's helpful to reconsider this question each year. I do hope that your Jewish community, your CBI community, will be part of that base of support as well.

Finally, Reb Nachman's third plank teaches the importance of engaging in action as a way to keep despair at bay. Doing something--l'ma'aseh--even if it is a small thing, is critical for our spiritual life as well as for the world at large. We should not wait to find the cause or the organization that will solve everything. The important thing is that we are moving from thoughts to action. This Rosh Hashana, make a contribution to the RPHHFFFD, sign up for the social action emails, learn more about our CBI racial justice work, work to overturn Texas' anti-abortion law and voter disenfranchisement, volunteer in your own neighborhood. There is no

⁴ <https://breslov.org/it-is-important-that-friends-always-be-there-for-each-other/>

shortage of opportunity in our community, our city, our nation. Engaging in acts of tikkun olam, repairing and fixing the brokenness is our third plank.⁵

And, here is a paradox which I think we can all relate to these days. The more brokenness there is, the more our action is needed. But the more brokenness there is, the more vulnerable we are to despair and inaction. Our ancient tradition teaches, however, that it is exactly in that place of catastrophic brokenness, the shipwreck in the storm, that the possibility exists for something new to be born. Rosh Hashana is known as the birthday of the world and so it is the perfect moment to give way to possibility.

Let us also realize that people experience this storm differently, and also that plenty have not reached the shore yet. Let's be generous with each other – don't make assumptions, about where someone else is at, whether they are ready to come out or come here or give a handshake or a hug.

The purpose of our community is to be the ship and the shore, and the plank, through times that are stormy and, God willing, less so.

So, here's the lesson we may not need to be reminded of this year: we don't know what the year ahead has in store for us. So, we need to ride the waves, clinging to the planks for support. As we face the turbulence of life, let us use this moment to find the planks of our own. The planks hitbodedut, of mitzvot and spiritual practices to keep us grounded, whole, connected, and in touch with what matters. We will hold onto the planks of sichot haverim, people, community, and relationships. These will provide us with the sense that we aren't in it alone. And we will hold onto the planks of l'ma'aseh, of action – engaging in deeds of justice to make our world a better place, even when our brokenness makes it hard to do.

Like Gamliel and Akiva, we are still sailing through a storm which has buffeted us, but it does not have to wreck us. Perhaps we are clinging. But we are not lost, we are not alone. Together may we find our way to solid land, safe and joyful once again.

May this be the year.

Shana Tova!

⁵ Make a donation here: <https://www.bethisrael-pdx.org/cbihighholidays/funds-for-food/>
Contact Tracy@bethisrael-pdx.org to join the SAC email list
Contact susanberniker@gmail.com to join our racial justice work
Get involved with the Reform Movement in Texas <https://rac.org/take-action/rac-your-state/rac-tx>