

Taking a Walk on the Spiritual Side

Shabbat shalom. A few Shir Tikvah-ites have recently asked me about the decidedly spiritual turn my Facebook postings have taken of late. Their observations have been astute, although the turn would not have been predictable. For while I have always been a proud and involved Jew--engaged in studying Torah, making music, and engaging in *tikkun olam* and synagogue governance, I have not always been a deeply spiritual Jew.

But nearly two years ago, I found myself stopped in my tracks by the paralyzing immobility of depression, something that has surfaced periodically in my life. During each of these moments, I have grappled with a personal *mitzrayim*, a narrow place in which my usual sense of possibility and optimism is replaced by the black of hopelessness, uncertainty, and self-imposed isolation. But after this episode, I found myself in a new place—one filled with profound gratitude and a sense of the miraculous all around me.

As I've thought about what was different this time, I have a few ideas. First, while I have often experienced a surge of energy and curiosity after I emerged from a bout of depression, I would use that energy to get back on my horse and ride as quickly as I could away from the dark place. I was determined, largely unconsciously, to show that the depression was finally behind me, that I was just fine and now able to rejoin the important world of what my father refers to as the "productive."

But this time, I did not get back on the same old horse and gallop in the same direction. When fall arrived, I found myself substitute teaching, part-time. I had a welcome chance to slow down and live more deeply into an understanding that my job is not the measure of my value—a rather radical thought for one raised in an upwardly mobile middle class Jewish family. I have also developed what I hope will be a permanent new perspective that experiencing an episode is not some kind of failure on my part, an event that could have been prevented with better

planning or more self-care. Rather, those dark nights of the soul are just a part of the way things are in the ebb and flow of my particular life. The episodes come, but they have always gone, too—just as Tu B'Shevat and the hints of spring reliably follow the darkness that surrounds Chanukah.

Emerging from this episode of depression in my early 50's rather than my 30's or 40's was a second factor that led to a spiritual opening. I have become increasingly aware of what folksinger Carrie Newcomer describes as “the curious promise of limited time” and the consequent need to answer the question, “What really matters to me?” Meaning and connection assumed primacy over the quest for accomplishment and “success” in the way my family had defined it.

I found myself drawn to a host of opportunities, many of which appeared in my life in a way that felt completely *bashert* and more than coincidental. I attended the URJ Biennial with a Shir Tikvah delegation, found my heart cracked open by the workshops and worship I experienced there, and returned with a deepened sense of my place in the centuries-long Jewish project. I became part of an online spiritual community with a group of positive, generous women unafraid to talk about the world beyond what we can see. I began to attend the morning minyan at Shir Tikvah, reacquainted myself with the work of Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron, attended a loving-kindness meditation retreat with Sharon Salzberg, and participated in a teacher renewal program based on the work of Parker Palmer which included plenty of time for walks in the woods.

These experiences led me to a growing sense of being connected to the forces of love and light in this world--and beyond. They deepened my sense of gratitude--for my renewed health, for the unending support of my husband, and for the acts of *gemilut chasidim* extended in my direction while I was in the dark. For the members of the Shir Tikvah community, staff and lay,

who showed up in a variety of ways when I was largely locked away in my home. For the friends who kept sending notes and invitations to be with them after I'd declined multiple times. For the person who brought a lasagna when I couldn't be bothered to cook or eat. For the one who rejected my attempts to cancel her visit, arrived with lunch, and got me to take a walk around the block. For those who supported David during this difficult time, many of whom were part of his Team Shalom chavurah. And while I have been a member of Shir Tikvah for more than 22 years, it is only in the last few years that my relationships here have deepened considerably, and that depth is what I wish for all members of this community.

Deepening our relationships inside this holy community, in the context of the moral lessons of our tradition, fertilizes the soil in which our capacity for kindness—both towards ourselves and towards others-- can grow. I believe we must continue to take advantage of each chance to make our classrooms, committee meetings, Onegs, and service projects places where we get to know people more deeply. So that when those most joyous and difficult times inevitably come, all Shir Tikvah members have a community of people with whom to celebrate joyously and lean on profoundly.

And because members of all ages have different things to teach us, we must deliberately build relationships across the generations. I really didn't understand how much richer my Shir Tikvah life would become through the chance to build relationships with my 12-year-old b'nei mitzvah students. And it's also why I love catching sight of Sarah and Ben Malakoff's daughter, Nora, in person or via Facebook. And why I treasure my relationships with those who are further along the way on the path of aging than I.

There's really no way to experience this human life without losing things and people that matter deeply—whether those losses come in the form of a temporary episode of depression or the loss of loved ones or our own mobility or cognition. But those losses, if we are lucky, also

create a backdrop against which we can grow in our ability to give and receive acts of loving-kindness. As poet Naomi Shahib Nye has keenly observed:

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.