

On Resourcefulness

Talk by Pam Goldman

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At 7:23 this evening, as the sun set, we exited the month of Elul and entered Tishrei, the first ten days of which are the Days of Awe. "Awe." The very word overwhelms. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel tells us, "[a]we enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine, to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple...." So, let's start thinking about the awe of the days of awe as it is inherent in the everyday.

My father, of blessed memory, could fix anything. He would take apart an inoperative washing machine or radio or cheap dime store toy to diagnose the problem. What he loved best was the challenge of discovering an impossible problem. The machine was so old replacement parts were no longer available. The broken element was a plastic piece of junk for which no replacement existed. He'd head for the hardware store. He'd spend most of his time in the hardware department studying the contents of those specialized wide but shallow drawers containing all kinds of screws and bolts, nuts and washers, and other doohickies too esoteric for me to name. After a while, inspiration would strike. He'd buy his parts, often quite cheaply. A dollar's worth might do the trick. Then, he'd head home to fix whatever, concentrating hard, taking as much time as necessary, all without any fuss. My father's repairs always worked, often better than before.

When I was a young legal services lawyer in Eastern Kentucky, I had a client named Tildy. She was poor, very poor, and like my father, supremely resourceful. She used food stamp money to buy seeds and planted a large garden. The first time I traveled to her home, she showed me an outbuilding filled with jars of home-canned tomatoes, corn, chow-chow, and green beans. Across the rafters, hung strings of apple slices and shucky beans drying for winter. That outbuilding was a thing of beauty: its contents and their arrangement.

In 1966, Tildy had given birth to a little boy who she adored from the first and then ever after. The father was not on the scene and would not be. The child needed financial support.

Tildy had been raised by her beloved grandfather. They lived in cabins side by side up a little hollow off Mud Creek.

It was Grandpa who came up with the idea. He was receiving Social Security which he already shared with Tildy. He adopted the child and the child received dependent's benefits. Nothing else changed. Tildy raised her son as her son for ten years and all was well until Grandpa fell ill, very ill, fatally ill.

Tildy's grandfather died. He had been suffering from pneumoconiosis, black lung disease. A program to compensate coal miners had recently begun and he had applied for benefits early on. Coal companies challenged almost every claims and Grandpa's was no exception. As claims wended their way through appeals, the amount owed to the miner, should he win, tallied from the day he first applied. Back payments could amount to thousands of dollars, enough to seriously change the lives of people who lived dollar by dollar. There was only one unimpeachable way to

prove the existence of black lung disease: autopsy. Every moment he lay dying, Grandpa was closer to the autopsy, to the evidence, and to that lump sum back payment but for his beneficiary rather than for himself—and the beneficiary was Tildy's son. That's when Tildy's cousin from Cincinnati came to town with his wife. They hadn't been around much before but swooped in to care for Grandpa. They blocked Tildy's entrance to his home. After he died, Tildy learned Grandpa had written a will shortly before death, naming the cousin as her son's guardian. Absent the ability to prove undue influence, the will stood valid. The cousins took custody of Tildy's son.

That's when I came in. I can't exactly remember how I litigated this hopeless case all those years ago. Somehow, I even obtained a restraining order that kept the boy in Floyd County for a while. Mostly, I held on like a strong-jawed terrier clamped to an ankle. Sometimes, sheer persistence wins. We got Tildy's boy back but not before the cousins collected the lump sum payment. They drove him home in a fancy new pick-up truck. Then, they relinquished custody.

Listening to this story, one may feel uncomfortable. One might wonder why Tildy gave up the legal right to her son. Or whether she and Grandpa committed some kind of welfare fraud. Let's think about what would have been available to Tildy in 1966 when her son was born. There was no ongoing governmental system to track down fathers and seek financial support (and there was no DNA testing to prove paternity, only a partially reliable blood test). Welfare was paltry and administered by state and local governments. In rural Kentucky, government administration was tainted by favoritism and corruption. There was no guarantee that someone entitled to benefits would get or keep them. One might think, Tildy could simply get a job. But, there were almost no jobs to be had except for coal mining and those jobs were closed to women. Appalachia was one of the poorest parts of the US. In 1964 LBJ inaugurated his war on poverty there, the next county over from Tildy's. Even if a job were available, Tildy lived in a remote area, had no car, and, like many women in her community, didn't know how to drive. The kind of arrangement Tildy and Grandpa made was not uncommon in that place at that time. Like others in similar emergency situations, they did what they needed to do to support, and thereby protect, the boy they loved. I think of Tildy often these days when I worry about how people in our communities who are sick, face eviction, and do not have enough food are getting by. I know some aren't but I also know there are incredible stories of resourcefulness to be told.

Chances are, since the pandemic and shut-down, you've found yourself improvising and being resourceful in one way or another. Maybe you concocted a recipe with a can of something or other that's been sitting around in your cupboard. Maybe, with the help of a YouTube video, you repaired something you would have ordinarily replaced. Maybe you figured out some clever work-around for a home office or home schoolroom. Maybe you sewed some masks. Your workarounds might have been pretty like Tildy's out building or utilitarian and frankly ugly like my father's. I hope you derived satisfaction from your humble accomplishments, from your little repairs to the world.

These resourceful triumphs are not inconsequential. In them, as Rabbi Heschel tells us, we sense the beginning of infinite significance. Yet, as much as I appreciate, even love, the small

fixes, the little hacks, in these times I find that narrow focus inadequate to the job we, as Jews, are called to do: to repair the world.

On this birthday of the world, we can note that the origin of our duty to repair the world is embedded in the world's very creation. The Ari, Isaac Luria, of the sixteenth century taught the myth of The Shattering of the Vessels and The Gathering of the Sparks. It's a foundational concept of Kabbalah.

And when God said, Let there be light (Gen. 1:3), the light that came into being entered the dark mass, and ten vessels came forth, each filled with primordial light. In this way God sent forth these ten vessels, like a fleet of ships, each carrying its cargo of light. Had they arrived intact, the world would have been perfect. But somehow the frail vessels broke open, split asunder, and all the holy sparks were scattered, like sand, like seeds, like stars.

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That is why we were created—to gather the sparks, no matter where they are hidden.... And when enough holy sparks have been gathered, the vessels will be restored, and the repair of the world, awaiting so long, will finally take place. (Schwartz, Howard, *The Palace of Pearls: The Stories of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav*)

As we ushered in the holidays one year ago, the vessels of our own community were broken. Not quite one year had passed since the October 27 shooting. Many of us were tapped out physically, emotionally, and spiritually. For some of us the shock was finally wearing off and we were starting to think about how we might move forward from shock to grief to healing. In peace. And then, so much else happened.

A poem by Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav appears in our machzor. I've always loved it. It's always bewildered me.

All the world before us
Is a very narrow bridge,
And the main thing
Is not to fear at all.

These days, that bridge feels very narrow and quite precarious. We grope for a handhold to keep us steady. What we see below can be terrifying. A pandemic has taken almost 200,000 lives in the United States and almost a million across the globe. To lesser and greater extents, we have been locked in our homes since March. Western states burn and southern states flood. White Supremacists are on the rise as are conspiracy theories making use of old anti-Semitic tropes. We have seen ICE, an agency of our own government, lock children in cages and force women to have hysterectomies. We are more aware of the frequent and perhaps casual killing of Black people at the hands of police. And, as you sit there, you are probably thinking of other terrible human events from this last year. When I was a young child with Holocaust survivors in my life, I wondered over and over how people could be so mean to each other. I've never stopped wondering but recent events have brought these thoughts back with the raw emotions of my childhood.

So, what does Reb Nachman mean when he tells us that the main thing is not to fear at all? How can we interpret that advice in light of what we have witnessed? I suspect what it meant to

Rabbi Nachman was something very different and more traditionally God-connected than what it means to me. To me, it means, find ways to act beyond the fear. Improvise if you have to. Be resourceful.

Much of what we face is unprecedented. Also unprecedented is the energy with which individuals and organizations are gearing up to repair the world. They invent new methods. They use old methods that seemed to work before. I observe them the way I observed Grandpa's adoption of Tildy's son all those years ago: without judgment and with cool logic.

Just now, I'm approaching the new year with a sense of awe (and gratitude) for resourcefulness and human inventiveness, with joy for the moments repair happens, and with respect for what our individual and joint resourcefulness can achieve. I hope in the coming year we open that wide and shallow drawer like my father did, we pull out nuts and bolts and esoteric doohickies, we use this or that gadget, all whether physical or emotional or spiritual to make impossible repairs. I hope we make repairs that work for us as individuals, as a community, as a nation. What we make may be beautiful or get-it-done homely. Nevertheless, the great beauty is to walk across that bridge without fear and to get the job done. The beauty will be the light we gather from the shattered vessels. We will be awesome.

L'shana tova.