

Rabbi Jon Roos
Surviving the Shipwrecks of 5787: Torah Guidance for the New Year
Temple Sinai – BCC morning services, Yom Kippur 5787

Shanah Tovah, Happy New Year! There is a story in the Talmud, the collection of Jewish commentaries, stories, and laws, about one of the great sages in all of Jewish history, Rabbi Akiva. We quoted him earlier in the service. Akiva lived and taught about 2,000 years ago. The story says that at one point, he survived a terrible shipwreck, surprising all of his colleagues and friends who had seen the terrible wreckage in the sea. He explained how he survived:

“He said, ‘a plank (*daf*) of the ship came to me and when each and every wave came upon me, I bent my head to it.”¹

אָמַר לִי: דָּף שֶׁל סִפִּינָה נִדְּמָן לִי, וְכָל גֵּל וְגֵל שָׁבָא עָלַי — נִעֲנַעְתִּי לוֹ רֹאשִׁי

The word for “plank” in Hebrew, this plank of the ship, is *daf shel sefina*. A *daf* is also the Hebrew word for a page, like a page of a book or a sheet of paper or a page of the Talmud. Some of you might be familiar with the practice of *daf yomi*, the daily reading of the Talmud page.

So, our tradition sees that word and says, “Aha! This is really a story about how a *daf*, a page of Torah, a nugget of Jewish wisdom, can help you through the difficult experiences - the shipwrecks - that come into your life.” We use this image a lot. We just used it in the song we sang about rains and floods coming into our lives (“Gesher”). We say “I’m swamped” or “I’m drowning” or “I’m over my head.” Maybe you’ve been listening to Sarah Bareilles’s album and turning to her new song, “Capsize Me,” to help you get through things when times get rough. She offers encouragement by saying, “Nothing’s going to capsize me, and rough waters make strong sailors.”

Strong sailors know, however, that the ocean ultimately will always win, and our life is like an ocean. You can’t control the waves that will come at you. You can’t control the flood that will sometimes come. I could list all the bad things going on in our world, things from the news that make this a difficult and anxious time, but that would diminish the fact that some of the hardest things you faced in this past year were not in anyone’s news feed or posted publicly. The hardest things that come into our lives are usually the personal difficulties and challenges that are just in *our* life, and the way that those things settle into our minds and

¹ Yevamot 121a, from Sefaria. Here -

<https://www.sefaria.org/Yevamot.121a.18?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en> The Gemara here continues with an allegorical lesson from Akiva: “From here the Sages stated: if bad people come upon a person, he/she/they should bend their head before them [the wicked ones, and temporarily restrain themselves and not fight the bad ones].”

<https://www.sefaria.org/Yevamot.121a.19?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

replay over and over again, even long after the event has passed. That kind of trouble is coming in this new year for sure.

So, here's a little *daf*, a nugget of Jewish wisdom - three nuggets, in fact - to help you cultivate spiritual resilience and to be prepared for those waves, and maybe, God forbid, the shipwrecks that will come your way in this year. I learned these from my teacher, Rabbi Sam Feinsmith and some of these words are directly from his teachings.² I've shortened them and added a hook for each one to help you remember.

The first one is: (“*fuhgettaboutit*”) Forget about it.

The second one is: Mind the gap.

And the third one is: Shake it off.

And there are Torah nuggets for each one.

The first, "Forget about it," comes from *Simchat Torah*. That holiday is just under two weeks away on Friday, October 2. Mark your calendars. This is the holiday when we end, we finish the cycle of reading the Torah, and then we start over immediately from the beginning. We take the Torah scrolls out. We dance around with them. We celebrate. It's a big deal.

Now, for anyone who likes to read, and maybe even more so for those who don't like to read, this seems like an ill-advised practice. As soon as you get to the end of the book, you immediately go back to the beginning and start it all over again?! Our sages teach that this is meant to help us practice something called sacred forgetting, *shi-chechah*. This *shi-chechah*, this holy practice, comes from Moses. The tradition says it comes from the scene in the Torah when Moses is up on the top of Mount Sinai. He receives the Torah, the two big tablets, and God says to him, "The people at the base of the mountain are making all kinds of trouble. You must go down there and stop them." Moses comes down the mountain, sees all the trouble, and he shatters the two tablets on the ground. It's a lot ofchutzpah. These are Torah tablets that God had written with God's own finger! And yet the Midrash, the commentary, tells us that God says to Moses, "I'm really happy that you broke those tablets," because this is the root of *shi-chechah*.

It's important for you to have a Torah, or a story, or a cycle like an entire year that you can bring to its completion and, one of the most important things you can learn how to do is to smash those tablets, to make yourself forget, or at least to act as if you forgot your "Torah." This sets you up so that as soon as you come to the end of the period or activity, you can start that thing all over again. This is what *Simchat Torah* is meant to teach us: that we can conclude, we can finish something, even something difficult, and the best thing that we can do is to begin all over again, as if everything was anew.

² Rabbi Sam Feinsmith, "Awareness in All Things: Rebbe Nachman of Breslov on the Weekly Torah Portion." Institute for Jewish Spirituality, Text Study 5786 (online class).

<https://www.jewishspirituality.org>

Forgetting here does not mean denial. It doesn't mean pretending that bad things never happened to you or that you did wrong. Rather, it is a compassionate clearing away of what no longer serves our spiritual growth and our personal evolution.

So, just as the old year ends with Rosh Hashanah and we start the new one, so too we must learn to release our outdated ways of thinking about ourselves. That is what *Simchat Torah* can teach us. That is what *shichechah*, sacred forgetting, reminds us as we enter this new year.

The second teaching, "Mind the gap," is really about keeping space between the flocks, even if you might not actually have any flocks in your life. I'm not talking about Flock cameras; that's a different thing. I'm talking about a seemingly unimportant detail in the Torah story of Jacob reuniting with Esau.

Jacob has been away for many, many, many years. When the brothers last had seen each other, Jacob had stolen the birthright; he had tricked Esau out of it, and Esau was furious and wanted to kill Jacob. Jacob knows that and has been looking over his shoulder ever since. Years go by and they're going to reunite. Jacob, the Torah tells us, is deeply afraid. His mind ruminates over all the terrible things that he has done - what a bad person he had been, the ways he had grown - and he hopes that Esau might forgive him, but he's not sure. So, he sends gifts ahead of him, and he tells his servants very explicitly, "I'm going to keep sending flocks of sheep and herds of animals to Esau so that he just gets richer and richer, and maybe that'll help. Most important, you must remember," he tells his servants, "you must keep space between one flock and the next." The story goes on to tell about the reunion.

If we were studying that section of Torah, we would probably pass over that point about "keeping space between the flocks," but that is where the Hasidic masters focus. They say that's the most important part of the entire story. One of those rabbis, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, says there are two things going on here. First, you shouldn't mix the flocks because sometimes the animals start to "get into it" with each other. If Jacob had sent them all at once, it would just make a giant mess. So, there is a practical thing here.

The deeper point, Rabbi Nachman says, is that we shouldn't mix the various troubles that we have in our minds and in our life; that the flocks symbolize the things we have in our life that we need to keep separated. Sometimes we have the experience of one thing leading to another thing, leading to another thing, leading to another thing, and soon you just feel like you're overwhelmed. Everything is hitting you all at once, and you are over your head, drowning in it, being crashed by the waves.

So, this tradition tells us that we must work to keep some space between "the flocks." We need to find some expansiveness, even within moments of trouble - cultivating gratitude, finding ways to just be quiet with ourselves - so that we don't have the experience of one bad thing feeling like it leads to another, until they have all piled up on us. You may have

read that scene in the Torah, and you think, “Bo-ring!” This is just a small detail of Jacob sending the flocks. But it is about minding the gap in your own life.

My teacher, Rabbi Sam Feinsmith, had some advice about this. One, he says, don't catastrophize. You have one thing happen to you, and it seems like a disaster, but don't immediately go there. Your mind is a storyteller that will quickly escalate the things that you're experiencing. I promise you, if the thing that's happened to you is a catastrophe, it will make itself known to you as such soon enough. Start instead with a gentler story about your own experiences.

Second, he says, focus on the breaks. Even when you feel like you're drowning in your daily tasks and bigger challenges, there are always moments when you get to breathe, and even if it's for a second, you should strive to hold on to those moments and cultivate resilience for the next one. Third, don't internalize the voice of hopelessness. It is so easy to feel like you have no power, and you should just give up. Keep making space between the flocks.

The third one, "Shake it off," comes from the holiday of *Shavuot*, when we celebrate the anniversary of God giving the Torah to us at Mount Sinai. In the Torah's own description of this holiday, however, it doesn't say anything about that. The biblical description is entirely an agricultural holiday that comes 50 days after Passover, and it celebrates the barley harvest.

Few things could be less relevant to your life than the barley harvest. But again, our teachers say this is where the secrets lie. The ritual of this holiday is that every day between Passover and Shavuot, the people would take a bundle of barley, an *omer*, it's called (this is observed today as ‘the counting of the *omer*’). They would take the barley, come to the Temple, and they would wave the bunch of barley before they offered upon the altar. They did this every day until the holiday came, ultimately the giving of Torah.

The sages say there's two things going on here. First, at least in their day, barley was the feed for the animals. So, they taught, the barley represents our more animalistic side, our baser appetites, and the ways in which we might just let ourselves go and follow some instinct without thinking about it. The second thing about barley is that it has a thicker, coarser husk than wheat and some of the other grains offered in the Temple. It's particularly difficult to crack open, and in that sense, barley represents the coarser parts of ourselves.

The tradition teaches that for 49 days, while preparing to receive Torah, we should lift up this coarser part of ourselves, the part of us that's a little bit more animalistic and not as thoughtful all the time, and that's actually what we should be celebrating and centering in our ritual. We should be presenting our coarser parts before God as an offering. We do that as one of the sages says, because it's the ultimate sign of our faith that the whole world is filled with God's glorious presence. God's presence is in those coarser, animalistic parts of yourself. If you really want to receive Torah, you shouldn't just focus on your best parts. You

should understand, whatever it is you believe about God, that God's presence is in even those worst things.

You might remember the song by John Legend, "All of Me." In that song, he sings about loving all of you, your imperfections, your curves, and your edges. The barley ritual reminds us to identify those coarser parts of ourselves, to be able to know what's the barley within us. To know, not just that all of me loves all of you, but that all of me can love all of me. When we can do that and acknowledge our own "barley" and shake it around in front of God, then we can receive Torah and enter this new year in peace and in love.

We are ten days into 5787, and one thing I can promise you about the coming year is that there will be waves that crash over you, and maybe even some capsizing and some shipwrecks, and a lot of it is out of your control. I can also assure you that with a little bit of spiritual resilience; you can withstand those waves. You can right the ship and make it into a better year. You have three nuggets of wisdom, a *daf* each: forget about it, mind the gap, and shake it off. With those to hold on to, *G'mar Tov*, we can seal this year for good.