

A Visit to Yellowstone: Lessons for a New Year

It was her very first day on the job so we were trying to be extra understanding and forgiving about her apparent lack of knowledge. This friendly soul had been tasked with orienting our family to the RV we were renting – the mobile home where we would be residing for the next ten days of our summer sabbatical adventures this past July. She was filled with dire warnings, each of which was clearly a reflection of previous folly and misery suffered by unsuspecting RV renters. “Check the oil every 1,000 miles, and if it’s low, add more to avoid engine fire.” “Be sure to retract the awning on the side exactly like I showed you. If a little air bubble gets in there, the wind on the highway will rip the whole thing right off the side.” And our favorite cautionary note: “When emptying the waste tank, never ever pull on this handle until you’ve securely connected the RV to the disposal unit.” “Why not?” asked our 7-year-old. “You won’t like it,” she replied.

And with that auspicious and wholly incomplete introduction to our new circumstances, our journey began. We stepped into the RV and set off for Grand Teton and Yellowstone National Parks where we would be spending the next several days. In many regards that moment of embarkation for the Markley family is not unlike the moment in which we all now find ourselves as we begin this new year together. For in this time of transition we are filled with excitement – eager anticipation for the adventures, experiences, and joys that lie ahead. Yet, our trepidations give us pause. We know that there is much we do not yet know about what the year of 5777 will hold in store for us. What circumstances will befall us in spite of our best efforts, and how will we respond to them? What mistakes will we make that – a year from now – will leave us filled with regret?

The *Uneh Taneh Tokef* prayer of our High Holy Day liturgy is a stark reminder that we cannot control what the year-to-come will bring. We can, nevertheless, determine how we prepare for the months ahead. In that spirit, I offer to you on this *Erev Rosh Hashanah* some of the lessons from our family’s travels - such that we might all benefit from them as we ready ourselves for 5777.

Lesson #1: Determine what is most precious to you and make it holy. In Jewish tradition, to make something holy is, to a certain degree, about setting it apart...making it distinct from others like it. That is why our *Kiddush* cup – derived from the Hebrew word *kadosh*, meaning “holy” – is not used for having some Gatorade following a good workout...because that cup is set aside for special use. It is holy.

This summer marked the 100th anniversary of our National Park system, and throughout our time in the parks, I felt truly blessed that our forebears in this nation saw fit to set aside these absolutely breathtaking swaths of land for future generations to enjoy in their pristine and unadulterated beauty. What foresight, courage, and tenacity they demonstrated in recognizing that these natural wonders are national treasures worthy of being treated differently than the rest of our lands.

As this new year now arrives, then, we might each ask ourselves, “What is it that is most precious to me in the world? Who is most dear to me? What times and places are most meaningful to me? Have I done enough to make these blessings distinct, to lift them up, to make them holy? How will I do so anew in the year ahead?”

Lesson #2: Once you’ve made it holy...nurture it...protect it from harm. The foresight of leaders like President Teddy Roosevelt, known as one of the fathers of our National Park system, allowed those lands to be set aside for special use. But that is only the first step. What is readily apparent to any visitor in these extraordinary spaces is that unbelievable effort has been put into preserving the wild in these wildernesses. Hikers are carefully instructed about how to leave minimal footprint where they tread. Vehicles are limited to designated areas so as not to unnecessarily disturb the flora and fauna. Nature is allowed to be natural, and we are invited to take in its wonders with respectful admiration and awe. This does not happen accidentally or without forethought. Guides, rangers, park employees...every one of them trained in how to conserve and preserve that which has been entrusted to their care. In Roosevelt’s own words, *“We have fallen heirs to the most glorious heritage a people ever received, and each one must do [our] part [to protect it] if we wish to show that the nation is worthy of its good fortune.”*¹

What did you think of when I asked you to consider what is most precious to you in the world? How will you safeguard those hours in the year ahead? How will you recommit yourself to nurturing and preserving those relationships in the year ahead? How will you leave those sacred places and spaces in even better shape than you found them? We have fallen heirs to so many glorious blessings...they are ours to safeguard. Will we rise to the occasion?

Lesson #3: Identify where change is needed and – even though challenging – take first steps towards correcting past errors. In the early 1900’s, there were no protections for the wildlife found in Yellowstone. Park administrators, hunters, and tourists were essentially allowed to kill the wildlife as they saw fit, and the wolves who made their home in those open spaces suffered greatly. Understanding this species to be a vicious predator with no particular benefit to be seen, park overseers engaged in a systematic process of ridding Yellowstone of its wolves, and by 1926 they had achieved that goal. Decades later, however, the rangers recognized their unwitting error. See, without wolves to hunt them, the elk population exploded, and as it did, the plants upon which they fed were overgrazed, and land erosion began. Rangers tried moving the elk, even hunting them, which only led to further environmental problems. Finally, in 1995, wolves were intentionally reintroduced into Yellowstone, and today they are once again a critical component of a vibrant and healthy ecosystem. A new litter of pups was born not long before our visit this summer, and these animals which were once feared and even exterminated were now the most sought after attraction in the park.

¹ Adapted from Theodore Roosevelt’s Address to Citizens of Dickinson, July 4, 1886 Dickinson, Dakota Territory

For the park rangers – for all of us – recognizing our past mistakes is not easy, and making the needed changes to rectify them is even more challenging. This process requires a willingness to be vulnerable – to ourselves and those around us – to admit our failings and commit to getting it right – or at least better - next time. That is why our tradition sets aside this time of year for us to focus on who we've been, who we desire to be, and what changes we need to make in order to continue growing as a person.

And so...when we look back on the year gone by, what can we see that – at the time seemed like a good and right idea but, in retrospect, was a mistake? What habits have we gotten into that have served us and those we love poorly? How will we take active steps to make good on wrongs done...to replace unhealthy routines with habits that will enrich our lives and the lives of those around us?

Lesson #4 for this new year: There is a call of the wild, and it beckons us towards freedom. Yellowstone National Park has mountains, plains, rivers and lakes. Its landscape features geothermal elements in varieties and concentrations known nowhere else in the world...geysers, mud pots, and hot springs numbering 10,000+. The park's wildlife is astounding in its variety and magnificent in its beauty. You know what Yellowstone doesn't have? Wi-fi. There is not a Dunkin Donuts anywhere to be found. There is no climate control for maximum comfort...just plain old climate and its hardly predictable whims. Needless to say, this took some getting used to for our – perhaps overly coddled – suburban Boston family.

Yet, there was so much blessing in letting loose our hold on these modern conveniences. As my friend, Rabbi Larry Kushner teaches, “The wilderness is not just a desert through which we wandered for forty years. It is a way of being. A place that demands being open to the flow of life around you. A place that demands being honest with yourself without regard to the cost in personal anxiety. A place that demands being present with all of yourself. In the wilderness your possessions cannot surround you. Your preconceptions cannot protect you. Your logic cannot promise you the future. Your guilt can no longer place you safely in the past. You are left alone each day with an immediacy that astonishes, chastens, and exults. You see the world as if for the first time.”²

In this year ahead, what do we each need to let go of in order to see our world anew? How will we each rid ourselves of the ultimately trivial distractions which prevent us from being fully present in each moment? What steps might we take away from the bondage of our stuff and towards the uncomfortable freedom of true living?

Lesson #5: We cannot grow into our best selves without the support of others. “Look out at this hillside,” our tour guide instructed as we all peered through the tour bus window. “The trees you see are all Douglas Firs. What do you notice about them?” We sat in silence. They looked like any other evergreen. What was he driving at? Finally, someone spoke up: “The rocks?” “Yes!” replied our eager educator. “Notice

² Eyes Remade for Wonder, by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, essay entitled “The Wilderness of Preparation”

that every one of those trees is growing beside a very large stone. Those stones were deposited here by glaciers when the ice melted away over 12,000 years ago, and each one of them creates the perfect microclimate for a Douglas Fir seedling to take root and grow. No rocks...no trees. They are called 'buddy trees,' and the stones are called 'nurse rocks' as they allow life to take hold and thrive."

Many of the other trees in Yellowstone have had their bark rubbed clean off by elk and bison who rub back and forth against the trees to help them shed their thick winter coats. The result is often significant damage to the trees they are using as back scratchers. But not these Douglas Firs. As writer Jerry George notes, "[F]or reasons no one has been able to sort out, Yellowstone's buddy trees show no signs of having been victimized by elk or bison. Somehow, big brother rock has protected them from the beasts as well as the weather."³

We aren't so dissimilar from those Douglas Fir seedlings. As we read in the very first chapters of Torah, once God has created Adam and placed him in the Garden of Eden, God looks down upon him and realizes, "It is not good for the human to be alone." Whatever the new year may have in store for us, one thing is certain...none of us can make it on our own. So it would serve each of us well to consider: Who are my "nurse rocks?" – those souls who create the very climate in which I am able to live and thrive? The Douglas Fir owes its life to its stone, but it need utter no words of thanks...need not reciprocate in any way, but not so for us. How are we tending to those most precious relationships? How are we assuring that we are a rock to others in need of shelter from life's storms? The Douglas Fir appears to literally embrace its "nurse rock." In what ways ought we be embracing anew those who make a sometimes harsh world livable for each of us?

Lesson #6: We ought not lose sight of the fact that we are part of something much larger than ourselves. Each night of our travels I tried to take a few minutes before bed to go outside and gaze up at the stars. With no urban centers to be found for hundreds of miles and, thus, almost no ambient light to wash out the starlight – the views were spectacular. It was easy to imagine my ancestors from centuries ago looking up at these same constellations and – in them – finding meaning, guidance, a reflection of God.

My nightly practice reminded me of an old Calvin and Hobbes cartoon in which Calvin, engaged in his own stargazing – is moved to exclaim: "If people sat outside and looked at the stars each night, I'll bet they'd live a lot differently."⁴ Indeed, when we place our lives in the context of the seemingly infinite universe – our inconsequential annoyances and fleeting frustrations from day-to-day living can melt away as we experience the awe and mystery of life itself. As Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan reminds us in these words of prayer: "Our ancestors acclaimed the God Whose handiwork they read in the mysterious heavens above, And in the varied scene of earth below, In the orderly march

³ <http://www.sfgate.com/homeandgarden/article/Like-a-rock-trees-and-their-buddy-boulders-2653742.php>

⁴ <https://quotesthatkeepmegoing.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/ch0703.gif>

of days and nights, Lift your eyes, look up; Who made these stars?... God is the mystery of life, Enkindling inert matter with inner drive and purpose.”⁵

In this year ahead, what will we do to place our challenges in proper perspective? How will each of us more fully seek out light, and in so doing create a greater awareness of our connections to our world, to one another, and to God?

Since we are entering the year of 5777, I will conclude with Lesson #7: Even on the most glorious journey, there is great blessing to be found in finally coming home. This, in fact, is the entire point of these High Holy Days. After a year of journeying together upon this earth we take an opportunity to pause, to take stock, to return here to our brand new communal home, yet even more importantly – to take steps towards return to our true selves. My friend Rabbi Kushner again: “In the family album or in one of those little frames that stands upright on an end table in your mother’s apartment is a photograph of you when you were a child. You have come a long way since those days in many beautiful ways and in a few shameful ones. If you were given a time machine, what would you tell the child in the photo who was once you? Just looking at who you were seems to awaken the possibility that you could go back to that time and, if not relive your life, at least begin again. Just this is the beginning of the return.” We call this *teshuvah*. “Through apology, repair, and attempting to heal damage done, we effectively re-write the past. What was once some thoughtless or wicked act, when set within the present context of meaning, becomes the commencement of a greater healing.”⁶

In this year of 5777, may our journeys take us into the wild in ways that help us to recognize and embrace that which is most holy and precious to us. May we grow in support – and with support – of those with whom we share life’s path. And, ultimately, may our travels enable us to return home once again in a year’s time a little better, wiser, and more whole for having made this journey with purpose and conviction.

⁵ Mordecai M. Kaplan, Kol Haneshamah Machzor, pp. 68-70

⁶ **Teshuvah: Coming Home** As found in Rosh Hashanah Readings: Inspiration, Information, Contemplation, ed. By Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2006, p. 237.