

Yom Kippur sermon 5769/2008
Rabbi Lester Bronstein
Bet Am Shalom Synagogue, White Plains, NY

“Moving Back to Life”

I'd like to begin with a great collective thank-you to the many hundreds of you who made generous contributions to the scholarship fund at Baylor University in Texas in memory of my niece. My brother and I tried to write to everyone, but we probably missed a few people, and I hope you'll be forgiving on this night of forgiveness. Some of you may not know that she was the victim of a car crash last November. She was a college sophomore; a friend to many; a good deed doer; a determined athlete; an enthusiast about art and politics and life itself; a precious daughter.

We can speak in theoretical terms all we want to about life and death; about the frailty and fragility of life; about the ominous words of our Yom Kippur text, “who shall live and who shall die.” But when it happens tragically to one so young, as it did to my dear brother's child, theory goes out the window. The truth surpasses the lofty phrases of the liturgy. It surpasses theology. It boggles the mind, or what's left of the mind after such a blow.

Somehow my brother and his wife, and their remaining daughter and her husband, and the two grandmothers, and her numerous cousins (including our kids), and the rest of us, carry on. But “carry on” suddenly takes on new meaning.

I personally received hundreds of meaningful letters after the accident, as did my brother. I'd like to read one of them to you. It's one my brother found not just comforting, but challenging,

even uplifting. It's from my old theology professor at rabbinical school, Dr. Gene Borowitz. He writes:

“How can one not be moved by hearing of a young life suddenly and so unexpectedly cut short. Even if it is your pain and only mine because I care for you and, having had children of my own, can feel something of your grief, that allows me to join you in your sorrow. May God grant you a deep consolation and be with you both as you seek to move back to this unpredictable thing we call life.”

I read it to my brother. “Unpredictable,” he said, and said it over and over. “‘As you seek to move back to this *unpredictable* thing we call life.’ I never, ever thought about it that way.”

My brother told me he had always thought of life as simply ‘that which is.’ Life was the backdrop for whatever we did or did not do. It didn’t contain its own identity, its own existence separate from whatever reality we were living. It wasn’t some *thing* one could “leave” or “return to.” It simply “was.” “*L’chaim*” – “to life” - was simply an expression, almost an expletive. It was not a statement of core belief in something. Or was it?

What can it mean to “return or ‘move back’ to life?” Of course I’m not talking about *t’chiat hametim*, the doctrine of bodily resurrection, that mysterious belief that crept into Rabbinic Judaism from Babylonian and Hellenistic sources, and which formed the foundational idea of that break-off branch of Judaism called Christianity. I’m asking Dr. Borowitz’s question, which we explored again and again in his class in rabbinical school, and which each person who is

called upon to officiate at a thousand burials over the course of a career stops to ask himself -- at least from time to time. What can it mean to “return to life?”

A certain Rabbinic text has haunted me all year. It’s the one about Rabbi Elisha ben Abuyah, who witnesses a horrible accident and from then on cannot return to any workable level of belief: Belief in anything at all, short of survival itself. I need to relate the brief story of that text to you in order to get to the “back story,” that has helped me with our big question of the evening: How to return to that unpredictable thing we call life.

Elisha ben Abuya lives in the second century of the Common Era. He is the most brilliant, the most inventive, the most imaginative of the Rabbis for five generations in either direction. He is the teacher’s teacher; the rabbi’s rabbi.

Until one day, when he passes a boy doing his father’s bidding, climbing a tree to shoo away the mother bird and take the eggs for his father. The boy will thus fulfill two positive commandments: ‘shoo away the mother bird before taking the eggs,’ and ‘honor your father and your mother.’ Both are commandments for which the Torah promises the reward of long life.

Elisha watches approvingly as the boy ascends the tree. The bough snaps. The boy falls and breaks his neck. Elisha declares: *leyt din, v’leyt dayan*. “There is no justice; there is no judge.”

There is only the dark void, thinks Elisha ben Abuya. The *ayin* – the famous nothingness of God’s mystery, is in fact not mystery. It is truly nothing. “No justice, and no judge.” Only void. No wizard on the screen, and no man behind the curtain. The great artifice of halakhah, of Jewish law, of which he is a leading architect and master, is a human illusion, a sad and complicated joke we have played on ourselves.

Unlike his close colleagues who react to their own crises of faith and doubt by dying or going mad, Elisha moves into low-grade survival mode. There will be nothing for him but survival itself. To everyone in the circle of Rabbis, the circle of believers who practice the religion of an ordered, Godly universe, he will come to be known as *Acher* – “other.” Even to himself, he is no longer Elisha. He is “the other.”

Try as he might, Elisha’s student, the great Rabbi Meir, cannot convince his master to do *t’shuvah*, to return to the circle of belief. On the Sabbath Elisha rides his horse alongside a walking Rabbi Meir. His student weeps while the master reaffirms the irretrievability of his faith, even while he warns his student not to walk too far and violate the Sabbath limit.

Elisha has peeked inside the Pardes, the secret garden of naked truth, looking for the absolute perfection behind his beloved halakhah. Instead, he plucks up the shoots. *Kitzetz ba-n’ti’ot*. He rips up the foundational shrubbery by the roots. Now, survival will be its own goal. “Survival for what? To what purpose?” That will no longer be Acher’s question.

Now the back story. Rabbi Meir, who himself is credited with formulating most of the *mishnayot* that define the parameters of the Rabbis' approach to the world, comes to his teacher and asks why he won't try to repent, to return, to 'move back to life,' as it were. Acher gives a spooky answer. He says, "Each and every day a *bat kol*, a heavenly voice, goes forth from Mount Horeb saying *shuvu shuvu banim shov'vim*, 'Return, return, you backsliding children' – *chutz mi-Acher!* – 'except for Acher!' Except for me!"

As if to say, Heaven is *almost* universally magnanimous. *Nearly* everyone can move back to life, except for me! Only I cannot go in that direction. Only I cannot go that distance. Why? Because only I know the truth. Only I have seen into the pit, into the ravine of existence. Only I know that it is bottomless. The rest of you cannot possibly know. For how else could you continue on your merry way, loving life and doing good, living significantly and striving to make a difference in the world? You want me to return to life? You think you've really returned to life? Not true. You never left in the first place. How else could you go on as you do? There is no true return. At least not for me, not for Acher.

For our ancestors in Antiquity listening to this tale, the pain it evoked must have been great. For Elisha ben Abuyah had been one of their great role models, and they certainly identified with Acher's trembling fear of the void. They had all experienced terrible loss. They must have seen Acher as a sort of tragic hero – even in the most Hellenistic sense – who has reached to the sky and then fallen, unable to regain his foothold, unable to use what for them was the very real power of God's forgiving grace. Acher had blown his chance; woe be unto us if we do the same.

In other words, Acher was wrong. His tale is a cautionary tale. Like Adam and Eve who have caused their own exile, he has forsaken his access to the precious garden of *teshuvah*. Even Heaven won't allow him back in.

Here is Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, as late as the 18th century, giving his own d'rash on the story:

“This voice that comes forth from Horeb every day, saying ‘Return you backsliding children,’ it stimulates the process of teshuvah that everyone experiences each day. This is how the Rabbis came to teach ‘except for Acher’ – this voice does not arouse Acher to teshuvah; he must move himself to do so, and if he does so he will be accepted. But this voice will not arouse him to teshuvah, since he had already ascended to the highest heights, and still did not do teshuvah. Therefore he has to arouse himself. But for all other Jews, the voice has the power to arouse them to teshuvah.”

So Levi Yitzchak, the Berdichever, still believing that our hero had done something to lose touch with a power that was somehow readily available to the rest of us, the power to repent and change every day of our lives.

For us moderns, though, Acher is not some fallen superhero. On the contrary, he is more like us than anyone else in the story. He knows too much. He has seen too much. Better not to get his hopes up. Better to plod along without theology, without faith, without dreams, without even the

stripped-away religious observance we repackage as “cultural heritage.” Rosh Hashanah as “culture.” Yom Kippur as “heritage.”

Look, I agree with the Berdichever on one thing: the power to repent and change our lives is indeed available to each and every one of us. But not *readily* available. Not at our fingertips. Not as easy as simply “listening for the voice that calls each day.”

I think that in our time, with our baggage of disappointments, we hear the voice just fine, but we have developed the survival instinct known as *chutzpah*, and our *chutzpah* makes us talk back to that voice: We say, “Oh yeah? Well, tell me something new. Prove to me that it makes a difference what I do, what I believe. How does it avert the *gezerah*, the “decree” of entropy, the inevitability of everything coming undone, all driven by senseless physical laws, void of any compassionate God swooping down to the rescue?”

We tell Acher’s story, because to us Acher makes a heckuva lot of sense. The “unpredictability” of life my teacher wrote about is perhaps its most predictable feature. Life is impossible to predict, thus impossible to negotiate. So why try?

Because, I would contend, we *must*. We *must* try to negotiate life. We *must* “move back” to life. This is the one and only true commandment. The other ones are merely our own clever creations. That’s why they’re so easy. Keeping kosher? Fasting on Yom Kippur? Visiting the sick? Honoring our parents? Studying Torah? Giving tzedakah? All a piece of cake. All child’s play.

But *teshuvah*? Moving back to life? And letting the One of Being in to guide us back into that life? Now *that's* hard. That's a life's work. That's something we cannot do alone. For this we need every friend and relative and community member we can get our hands on. We need the power of this great gathering tonight. We need the painful memories of our inspiring loved ones, even and especially those who stood for wonderful things, and who were cut down ruthlessly by cancer and car crashes, whom we dare not let down by giving up on the awesome significance of their lives and our own.

I heard Rabbi Avi Weiss quote his teacher, Rabbi Aaron Soloveitchik, giving this startling interpretation of our Talmudic tale. Said Rabbi Soloveitchik, Acher's mistake is that he misunderstands the Heavenly Voice. The voice says, "Return, O backsliding children, except for Acher." What it means is that "Acher" cannot return. Only *Elisha* can return. As long as he understands himself as "Acher," as "other" from the pain we all must share in order to support one another on the road back to life, he will never be able to return. Not until he returns to himself, to his true self. Not until he stops thinking of himself as the only person in the world who suffers, who struggles, who "gets it." Not until he takes back his own name. Not until he reclaims the one true commandment programmed into his very DNA.

And *still* it won't be easy. It will *never* be at his fingertips. He has seen the obedient child fall from the tree. He will never forget it, and he will never be the same. Who could have predicted such a thing! And yet, when he stops standing outside himself – when he returns to himself – he can begin the long journey back to everything that is good and worthwhile. That is where, in my

brother's term, one "lives with significance." That is where he will find the One of Being, waiting for him by the tree of life itself, there in the middle of the Pardes, the garden of life itself.

Hashkivenu a-do-nai elo-heynu l'shalom

Help us to lie down, Dear One, in peace

V'ha'amidenu malkenu l'shalom

And let us rise again, O Sovereign, to life.

Spread over us the *sukkah*, the shelter of your peace.

Decree for us a worthy daily lot;

Enfold us in the wings of your protection.

Guard our going forth each day for life and peace, now and always.

Spread over us the shelter of your peace.

Blessed are you, Compassionate One, who spreads your canopy of peace over all your people Israel, over Jerusalem, over all humankind; over all who live and who yearn to return to this unpredictable and miraculous gift we call life.