



CONGREGATION EMANU-EL
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“Sailing”

The summer breeze on Menemsha Pond kicks up most afternoons about two o’clock. The prevailing winds blow out of Herring Creek toward Menemsha Bight, famous for its sword-fishing boats and its docks known as Squid Row.

For as long as I can remember, I have been racing sailboats on Menemsha Pond: first in my parents’ seventeen-foot day-sailor, and then in my Sunfish, a single-sailed thirteen-footer that puts you right in the water. My parents gave it to me as a gift at my Confirmation.

Humorist and children’s author E.B. White was a passionate sailor: “Waking or sleeping, I dream of boats,” he wrote, “usually of rather small boats under a slight press of sail.”¹

On autumn days, when warm summer afternoons are a fading memory, I imagine myself in my little boat—“Just Joshing” we named it—jockeying for position at the starting line as the commodore calls out “one minute for the Sunfish fleet.” I want to be at the windward end of the line so no boats will steal the breeze from my sail, and I want to be there just as the starting gun goes off.

As I cross, I turn the bow of the boat, the front, toward the first mark, but not right at it. For those unacquainted with sailboat racing, the first mark almost always lies into the wind, so if you point your boat directly at it, you’ll go nowhere.

That doesn’t mean you can’t reach the mark; only that it will take some time and some work, altering course, tacking back and forth far enough off the wind to fill your sail. Getting there can be exhausting, but it can be done.

Rounding the first buoy, I ease the sheet letting the sail out for a run. Now with the wind behind me I can’t even feel it, and I speed along enjoying the ride. Still, I must not lose focus or I’ll sail off course. And the wind can always shift on me, jibing the sail, swinging it across the boat from one side to the other. On particularly windy days, the boom can slam over taking the rest of the boat with it.

¹ E.B. White, *The Sea and the Wind That Blows* excerpted in *The Greatest Sailing Stories Ever Told*, ed. Christopher Caswell, p. 134.

When I was in college, I taught sailing on Menemsha Pond. But I would certainly have to acknowledge that sailing has taught me more.

Sailing teaches the limits of the wind: there are certain directions a boat will not sail. But sailing also teaches that within those limits, we do have the power to navigate, to alter course. And finally sailing teaches that with the wind at our backs, we sail more swiftly than we realize, so we best keep our eyes on the mark.

The limits of the wind

There are certain directions a boat will not sail. Sailing teaches the limits of the wind, much as Yom Kippur reminds us of the limits of our lives. “Who shall live and who shall die, who shall see ripe age and who shall not” *Unetaneh Tokef*² concedes rests beyond our control. Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria, the devastation in Mexico, all laid bare life’s fragility. “Who shall perish by fire and who by water...who by earthquake and who by plague...who shall be secure and who shall be driven” we cannot foretell.

Yet there are two threads that run through that most gripping Holy Day prayer we offer tomorrow/we offered this morning: one asserts that God authors our fate, “setting the bounds of every creature’s life, and decreeing its destiny;” but the other declares that in the “book of our days,” the record of our deeds, the entries appear in our own hand.

What might this mean?

Clearly, we do not control much of what befalls us. Life’s harsh winds and rains will beat against us. Each of us comes into this world with particular gifts and vulnerabilities, predisposed to certain talents, prone to certain illnesses. Still, much of what happens to us results from our own decisions. We may not choose the cards we’re dealt, but we do decide how we play them.³

Holocaust survivor and pioneering psychotherapist Viktor Frankl explained that while “our freedom is a finite freedom...that is to say a human being is never fully free from conditions, be they...biological...psychological or sociological in nature...the ultimate freedom...remains always reserved to [us].... If we cannot change a situation we have always the last freedom to change our attitude to that situation.”

Understood thus, *Unetaneh Tokef*’s two threads do not pull in theological tension; rather they weave a message of hope in the face of disappointment and despair.

The courses we chart for our lives do not always lead us where we hope or intend. Life can bring bitter disappointments, personally and professionally. At any moment, illness or loss can strike us or those we love. And when that happens, we can reel like a sailor locked in irons, blown backwards. It is not easy regaining forward momentum when the waves are crashing against the bow of your boat. It can be terrifying.

In 1953, after devastating business reversals and her husband’s tragic drowning, Ann Davison (no relation) attempted to begin life again by setting sail alone across the Atlantic Ocean on a twenty-three-foot sloop named *Felicity Ann*. In her memoir entitled *My Ship is So Small*, she wrote of her fears:

² Translation from *Gates of Repentance*, Ed. Chaim Stern, pp. 312-315.

³ Rabbi Gregory S. Marx, “The Book of Life,” Yom Kippur Eve 2001.

Before setting out, I thought I had no illusions about the voyage or sailing alone. I expected to be lonely. I expected to be frightened. What I did not expect was the positive panic of emotion that swamped me....I was not only afraid of the wind and the sea. I was afraid of the ship. I was afraid of reefing the sails, or putting them up or changing them in any way. I was afraid of stopping the engine, and having stopped it, afraid of starting it again....⁴

It is easy to stare into teeth of the wind and feel afraid, overwhelmed; to believe that sickness, past disappointments or mistakes cannot be overcome; to presume that our efforts are without worth so there is no point in going any further. But we must not allow paralysis, fear to prevent us from continuing the voyage or beginning the journey toward healing and hope.

Fighting upwind

Davison did not. With the wind howling fiercely against her, she writes of the decision to alter course and fight upwind: “The course I was trying to steer was sou’-westerly but this was hampered by a head wind, so I made in a general southerly direction.”⁵

We can alter course and sail on. I have witnessed people do it. In sailing and in living, some destinations are gained only by hard-won tack upon tack. On the water and in life, the shortest distance between two points is rarely a straight line. In his book *The Road to Character*, David Brooks describes the journey as u-shaped. “You are living your life and then you get knocked off course...by failure, illness, loss of employment, or twist of fate. The shape is advance-retreat-advance.”⁶

“I am a long-term [cancer] survivor,” a parent writes. “I’ve been dealing with this illness for thirty-five years.... Curiously enough, I don’t think of myself as someone who has cancer...because I don’t want to let my health interfere with the things I want to do....As [my children] have grown up...it’s been paramount to me that their lives be...normal....The time spent dealing with cancer has been like hurricane season in the Caribbean. You know there are going to be major disruptions; you just don’t know when.... [So] I carry on.”

Nothing in those words suggests bitterness, only resolve.

After Harvey’s floodwaters began to recede, Houstonian Cort McMurray wrote: “You can’t prepare for something so aberrant, something so immense.... This is a remarkable [city].... We will rebuild.... We are united.... We have a stronger work ethic than any other city.... We will get back up.”⁷

⁴ Ann Davison, *My Ship is So Small* excerpted in *The Greatest Sailing Stories Ever Told*, Ed. Christopher Caswell, p. 196.

⁵ Ann Davison, *My Ship is So Small* excerpted in *The Greatest Sailing Stories Ever Told*, Ed. Christopher Caswell, p. 196.

⁶ David Brooks, *The Road to Character*, p. 265.

⁷ <http://www.houstonchronicle.com/local/gray-matters/article/The-city-Houston-is-And-the-city-it-s-going-to-12169804.php>.

No hint of resignation, only determination.

The late entertainer Gertrude Lawrence routinely placed a note on the mirror in her dressing room: “Anyone can carry his burden, however heavy, till nightfall. Anyone can do his work, however hard, for one day. Short horizons make life easier and give us one of the blessed secrets of brave, true, holy living.”⁸

No self-pity, only strength.

In the book of Numbers, when Moses learned to his profound disappointment that he would not be permitted to enter the Promised Land, “he took Joshua and placed him before Eleazar the priest and before the whole community. And he laid his hands upon him and commissioned him”⁹ —not with one hand, as God commanded him, but with both hands: with the fullness of his energy and devotion to Israel’s future.¹⁰

No resentment, only commitment.

So I made in a southerly direction.

So I carry on.

We will get back up.

Anyone can do his work, however hard, for one day.

He blessed him with both hands.

I have seen people disillusioned with a first career, make in a new direction, courageously returning to the starting line to set out again. I have witnessed others carry on despite shattering business reversals, get back up and do the work, however hard, of rebuilding. I have watched so many, braving illness or tragic loss or failed relationships, find within themselves a mettle they did not know they possessed – the fortitude to bend down and pick up the broken pieces of their lives with both hands, and journey on. Each one of us has that strength.¹¹

Running downwind

When the wind blows in your face and the waves are crashing against your bow, the voyage through the storm lasts forever. But when the clouds break and the sunlight dances on the water, when the sky is blue and the wind is at your back, you sail more swiftly than you realize.

Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav taught that each of us rides a carriage drawn by two horses, one called Day and the other Night. How swiftly they fly! *Kol Nidrei* sings to us of another year gone by.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev once met a young woman hurrying along the street, looking neither right nor left. “Why are you rushing so much?” he asked the woman.

⁸ Rabbi Jacob Philip Rudin, “From There We Went On,” *Very Truly Yours*, p. 64.

⁹ Numbers 27:22-23.

¹⁰ Rashi on Numbers 27:23.

¹¹ Rabbi Jacob Philip Rudin, “From There We Went On,” *Very Truly Yours*, p. 65; Rabbi Jack Stern, “When Bad Things Happen to Good People,” *The Right Not to Remain Silent*, p. 25.

“I’m rushing after my livelihood,” she answered.

“And how do you know,” continued the rabbi, “that your livelihood is running on before you so that you have to chase after it? Perhaps it’s behind you, and all you need to do is stand still.”

So many of us are that young woman. We live our days at a wearying pace, up and out early, dashing from one appointment to the next. Our children too. And the Yom Kippur liturgy acknowledges how easily we get swept along in society’s acquisitive currents: “The eye is never satisfied with seeing; endless are the desires of the heart.”¹² We hurry after what we believe we’re missing, and as a result often miss what we have.

When the wind is at our backs and those we love surround us, seldom do we bother to count the treasures already ours. All the while, “time, like a river, rolls on,” wrote Rabbi Chaim Stern, “flowing year after year into the sea of eternity. Its passing leaves bitter memories of hours misspent. Now they come back to accuse us, and we tremble to think of them.”¹³ The family dinners missed; the ballet recitals; the school plays.

Bear Bryant, the late coach of the University of Alabama, was once asked to film a television commercial for Southern Bell Telephone. His role in the commercial was simple. At the conclusion of the ad, Coach Bryant was supposed to say, “Call your Momma” – as if he were barking an order to his players. But at the filming of the commercial something happened. As Coach Bryant faced the camera, tears welled in his eyes and instead he said, “Call your Momma; I sure wish I could call mine.”¹⁴

The wind is a tricky thing: it shifts. And when it’s at your back and it shifts, it can catch you unprepared. The sail can jibe and slam across the boat. You don’t know it’s coming until it happens, and when it does it can knock the boat over and you with it.

Rabbi Harold Kushner recalls: “I was sitting on a beach one summer day, watching two children, a boy and a girl, playing in the sand. They were hard at work building an elaborate sandcastle by the water’s edge, with gates and towers and moats and internal passages. Just when they had nearly finished their project, a big wave came along and knocked it down, reducing it to a heap of wet sand. I expected the children to burst into tears, devastated by what had happened to all their hard work. But they surprised me. Instead, they ran up the shore away from the water, laughing and holding hands, and sat down to build another castle. I realized that they had taught me an important lesson. All the things in our lives, all the complicated structures we spend so much time and energy creating, are built on sand. Only our relationships to other people endure. Sooner or later, the wave will come along and knock down what we have worked so hard to build up. When that happens, only the person who has somebody’s hand to hold will be able to laugh.”¹⁵

Yom Kippur speaks of what endures – our love for those precious to us, even when they are gone; the strength that abides in a community of fellow travelers along life’s u-shaped, complicated course; the ideals of honesty and decency, commitment and

¹² *Union Prayer Book II*, p. 295.

¹³ *Gates of Repentance*, Ed. Chaim Stern, p. 294.

¹⁴ Story from Rabbi Jerome K. Davidson.

¹⁵ Rabbi Harold Kushner, “The Power of Holding Hands” in *Chicken Soup for the Jewish Soul*, p. 106.

compassion. These give us meaning, purpose and hope for tomorrow. When we build our lives upon them, our foundations rest secure.

Like a tiller in the hand of a sailor

In the midst of her valiant battle with cancer, Gilda Radner wrote in her autobiography: “I wanted a perfect ending, so I sat down to write the book with the ending in place before there even *was* an ending. Now I’ve learned, the hard way, that some poems don’t rhyme, and some stories don’t have a clear beginning, middle and end. Like my life, this book has ambiguity. Like my life, this book is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what’s going to happen next.”¹⁶

The limits of our lives lie beyond our control; Yom Kippur reminds us of that. But acknowledging those limits, if not understanding them, we learn this day that we do have the power to set a course and to navigate within them.

A *piyyut*, a poem, now a part of the day’s liturgy conveys the message most beautifully: “Like a tiller in the hand of a sailor, who can grasp it tightly or let it go, thus are we in Your hands, O good and forgiving God.” The moment will come when God’s hand will close upon the tiller, but until that moment arrives, we are the navigators of our life’s journey.

May our voyage into this New Year be one of joy and health. In the face of disappointment may we realize the courage that abides in each of us. As time sails by, may we never forget the treasures we already have. May we take hold of life and those we love with both hands, and journey into a year of goodness and blessing.

“When does a man quit the sea?” mused E.B. White. “The old yearning is still in me.... There [lies] the sloop, there [blows] the wind, once more I...get under way.... And with the tiller in my hand, I...feel again the wind imparting life....”¹⁷

¹⁶ Gilda Radner, *It's Always Something*, p. 254.

¹⁷ E.B. White, *The Sea and the Wind That Blows* excerpted in *The Greatest Sailing Stories Ever Told*, ed. Christopher Caswell, pp. 136-137.