

Your Inner Hero
Rosh Hashana Day 2 5772
Temple Beth-El
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You better run. You have just swindled your brother, and he is angry. He's a wild man with a bad temper, a hunter, skillful with the tools of his trade, which draw blood.

You are different. You prefer staying home, close to your mama, who coddles you. But you cannot stay home now. It wouldn't be safe. It's time for you to run.

This is our patriarch, Jacob, as a young man, and his brother Esau. But imagine it's you. At home, you're a fortunate child. Now you must go out on your own, a complete unknown, with no direction home. How does it feel?

Do you feel possibility? Or oppressed? Do you feel exhilarated? Or petrified?

That Torah portion begins, "Va'Yetze Yaakov. Jacob went forth." He headed north, forsaking the security, comfort and even wealth of his childhood.

That first night on the road, this boy of privilege, slept under the stars, a stone for his pillow. And he dreams. Angels ascend and descend a ladder.

This is sulam Yaakov, Jacob's ladder. There are many interpretations of Jacob's dream – of the ladder and the angels. But I like this one: Perhaps those angels were Jacob's vision of himself. Don't dream-images often reflect the dreamer? When Jacob felt courageous and unburdened by the gravity that would pull him back home, the angels climbed.

And when Jacob felt timid, when he wanted to return to the comfort of his mother, the angels descended.

Imagine that this dream is your dream, that this ladder is your ladder. Do your angels ascend or descend? Are you more courageous or careful? Confident or conservative?

In a book called Daniel, Martin Buber wrote about two wanderers. The first wanderer enters a city at night. He is anxious; he wants to find the nearest, safest hotel, and hunker down for the night. Buber writes, "In the anxious heart of the wanderer," Buber writes, "his longing [for security] is powerful." For this wanderer, security is paramount in this unknown place.

He would be like Isaac, Jacob's father. Isaac didn't travel much, unlike his father Abraham and Jacob. One of the highlights of Isaac's story was when he re-dug the wells his father had dug a generation before. Isaac didn't venture forth to dig new wells. He unclogged old ones. Isaac's adult existence was stable.

The second wanderer enters the same city, also at night. This one, unlike the first, is not overly concerned about figuring out where he is. He embraces the uncertain moment and enters the city, in Buber's words, "with wide-open senses, with opened spirit, willing and firm....He knows no security, yet is never unsure."

Of the two wanderers, which do you think Buber preferred? He favored the second wanderer, the one with wide-open senses. I find it hard to take sides. I am the first to admit: I crave stability. I crave it as a father, financially, in my career and community. Sure, I once imagined myself conquering the country like Kerouac, on the road and running on empty, if you will.

But, you know, priorities change as the color of one's hair changes. And the desire for stability seems to be in direct proportion to the perceived lack of stability in the world. And instability abounds. Markets convulse. Buildings fall. People get sick. Fortunes change. In such a world, what's wrong with grabbing stability and holding on tight?

But sometimes, I wonder, does the pursuit of stability, in a sense, become its own end? And: when is our need for stability based not on rational fears but on "dark imaginings." And: do we ever lose something – sacrifice other possibilities in our lives – by invoking the need for stability.

And: has the desire for security and comfort made us a little lazy, or boring?

And: do we ever play the security card as a convenient excuse not to take a risk, not to climb the ladder, not to strive?

Strivers fill the Torah's parchment.

Consider Abraham. Abraham, who lived in a world of endlessly repeating cycles of idol worship, heard those words: lech lecha, go forth! Was it God's command from without or Abraham's compulsion from within? Either way, it was clear to him and it fueled his flight. "Go forth," explains a midrash, "is how all great tests begin." Go forth, Buber may add, with wide-open senses.

Consider Moses. Moses could have remained in Pharaoh's court, a pampered royal who never left Egypt, or, after he first fled Egypt, he could have remained a humble desert shepherd. There may be nothing wrong with that. But: when God called his name, Moses, *fearful*, still said, "Hineini. Here I am." And there were miracles, redemption from Egypt, revelation at Sinai, and a national journey to a homeland.

Now, consider Jonah, whose book we will read next week. God extended to Jonah the prophetic opportunity of a lifetime: go, preach atonement to a huge city, Nineveh in Assyria. An exciting, thrilling opportunity. But Jonah took off *in the opposite direction*? Why? Maybe it

was fear. Perhaps fear fueled his flight. Perhaps he didn't want to go to Nineveh because he was scared of success.

There's a name for this. The psychologist Abraham Maslow called this the Jonah Complex: the flight from one's own best potential. Jonah was scared of success, stultified into inaction, by his own potential greatness.

What about us? Do we run to Nineveh, or away from it? Do we hide among the steerage, or stride with wide-open senses into that foreign city? Do we retreat and hide? Or do take a little risk on occasion, imagining a great future, and psyching ourselves up by thinking, "This is my destiny; this is my greatness"?

In The King's Speech, the stuttering prince, Bertie, needed to believe he could be king. He needed to realize his own greatness. A king resided inside him somewhere, but he was stymied by a feeling a unfitness for the throne. He was second in line; he stuttered. The movie traces the evolution of Bertie's embrace of his own destiny, that heroic aspect of himself. And at a climactic moment when he yelled, "I have a voice," we knew he would not merely sit upon the throne, but that he would own it. And when he did, he achieved his greatness.

Each one of us possesses greatness and we all have dreams for ourselves. And yes, for sure, many impediments may stand in the way.

They must be acknowledged and reckoned with. Lack of aptitude, sometimes. Lack of luck. Lack of money. Lack of support. We will not always achieve what we had hoped; sometimes we must adapt our lives to something else.

But there are also times when we don't even get far enough to find out. Sometimes we stop, stand still, stultified into stinking thinking that we can't do it. Simply put, many of us are in a rut, perceiving ourselves as descending angels, fearing the climb.

I like officiating at funerals. It's one of my favorite things to do. I sit with a family after their loved one has died, and I listen to stories. Some of these stories, some of these lives, inspire me, for so many of us – our relatives, neighbors – do great things. Occasionally great things in public ways; most often great things, real successes, in quiet, private ways. These are people who, at one time, convinced themselves they could do it, whatever it was. Go back to school. Get that degree. Change that job. Open that business. Marry that woman. Marry that man. Play that instrument. Write that book. Learn that language. Do that reckoning.

I listen to these stories, and I wonder – as we all would, I think – I wonder about myself. Someday, my family will sit around a living room with a rabbi, not me; I won't be present. What will they say about me?

Fearful, frustrated? Unnecessary restraint? Or courageous, with a wide-open spirit? I wonder: what will they say about me?

The Days of Awe teach us: we do not know what the next year will bring. “Who will live and who will die?” This is a time of reckoning in all sorts of ways. So take advantage of your own strong wide-open spirit, and go forth.

Before Abraham smashed idols, there was an idol-smasher within him. Before Jacob was a patriarch, there was a patriarch within him. Before Moses headed down to Egypt-land, there was a liberator within him. There was a prophet within Jonah. There was a king within Bertie.

Friends, there is a hero within me. There is a hero within you.

L'shana tova.