

Yom Kippur 10 Tishri 5760 (September 20, 1999)

Rabbi Robert Scheinberg
United Synagogue of Hoboken

Many of us are probably familiar with the music of the great Israeli violinist Itzhak Perlman. He is one of the most widely respected violinists alive today – his achievements are all the more notable considering that he suffered from polio as a child – he has braces on both legs and walks with two crutches.

As my colleague Rabbi Ed Feinstein relates the story, a couple of years ago, Perlman was performing together with an orchestra at Avery Fischer Hall at Lincoln Center. Like most performances, the evening began with him walking slowly out to the center of the stage, and taking his seat, and then he reached down and unhinged the clasps on his legs, then laid down his crutches and began to play.

But – suddenly at the end of one movement of a particular piece – the audience heard a loud "pling!!" – because one of his violin strings broke. And according to the reviews, the audience began to applaud – first softly, then louder, as they expected him to get up and leave the stage. I don't know – maybe to put on another string, or use another violin

But Perlman did not get up to leave. In fact, he signaled to the conductor to continue. I guess when you're conducting Itzhak Perlman, you don't argue with him. So incredibly, the conductor began to conduct the next movement of the piece.. And Perlman continued to play as well – despite the fact that his violin had only three strings. The reviews indicated that he was playing with his typical power and intensity – but - on the fly – he was changing fingerings, almost re-composing the piece in his head so that it could be played as well as possible on just three strings. Some people in the audience said that he actually adjusted the tuning pegs – in the middle of the performance – to expand the range that he could get from the three strings he had to work with.

And at the end of the piece, as one might expect, the audience gave him a standing ovation for several minutes. From a musical perspective, it was not Perlman's most extraordinary performance. But - from every other perspective - it was Perlman's MOST extraordinary performance. And when the applause died down, Perlman said to the audience, "It is my genius as well as my heart to make music with what remains."

It is my genius as well as my heart to make music with what remains.

I think of this story this year as we approach the Yizkor memorial prayers. And as happens every year, my mind turns to my memories of those I have known who have died over the past year. I think of their families as they struggle to cope with their losses – as they struggle to make music with what remains. And I think – what guidance can be offered to them in their efforts to persevere despite the tragedies they have endured?

The Itzhak Perlman story, while beautiful, is seductively dangerous as a model for dealing with loss. "Making music with what remains" is a beautiful metaphor. But in the story, within seconds of the "loss," Perlman had found a way to recover. And it seldom happens that way in real life.

Maybe some of you know the story from the Talmud about the rabbi who was known as Nachum Ish Gamzo – Nachum the man of Gamzo. And the talmud asks: why was he known as Nahum the man of Gamzo? We searched our maps of the ancient middle east and we couldn't find any place called Gamzo!

And they answer: Gamzo isn't the PHYSICAL place he came from – Gamzo was the THEOLOGICAL place he came from. Whenever anything bad or upsetting would happen to Nahum, he would respond – "*Gam Zo Letovah*." "This too is for the good."

And this was all the more poignant because Nahum Ish Gamzo was like a magnet for every kind of misfortune you could imagine. Various stories in the Talmud tell us that he was in poor health, his home collapsed, destroying all his possessions, once he even got imprisoned by the Roman emperor – and whatever happened, Nahum would always respond, *Gam Zo Letovah*. This too is for the good. And indeed Nahum was always right. Something good always developed out of his apparent misfortune. He said, "*Gam Zo Letovah*." This too is for the good. And it was. Even when things looked most bleak, Rabbi Nahum maintained his faith.

The message of the stories is clear. What looks initially like tragedy and utter disaster is very often for the best.

I have never liked these stories.

Maybe because Nahum Ish Gamzo becomes one of the primary models in Rabbinic literature for dealing with tragedy. And thus for generations, down to the present day, there have been well-meaning Jews attempting to comfort victims of tragedy by taking the approach of Nahum Ish Gamzo. Saying, "It must be for the best. It must fit into God's plan somehow. We just don't understand it. Just try to find something good in it."

How would YOU want to respond if someone gave you this advice at a time of tragedy? "How can you say "God had a reason"? Does that mean it's not a tragedy? Does that mean it was supposed to happen? And why would I want to believe in a God who is sadistic enough to be able to find some REASON to do such unspeakable things to me, to my family?"

So what words CAN one offer to one confronting tragedy?

The secret is that there are no magic words. The operative concept is what I learned in training in hospital chaplaincy: Don't just say something -- stand there. or just sit there. just BE there. At a time of tragedy, words are not nearly as helpful as the gift of one's presence and undivided attention. And the theological explanations can wait for later.

But surprisingly enough, over the last couple of years I have come to a new appreciation of Nahum Ish Gamzo and one portion of his theological perspective. I can't agree with Nahum's statement in its entirety. Nahum would have said, "Whatever happens to me -- whether I am tempted to interpret it as good or bad, is actually for the best. It's all according to God's plan." That – I'm not willing to say. To myself or to anyone else.

But there's another way to interpret Nahum's words *Gam Zo Letovah* – this too is for the good. "When tragedy strikes -- when I face challenging times -- a successful spiritual and emotional recovery demands that I confront the question: what aspect of this is *le-tovah*? What aspect of this is for the good? I need not deal with this issue immediately -- It usually takes months or even years. But if I can find some aspect of it that is "*letovah*," I am more likely to get through this tragedy without it derailing my life.

One of the most powerful stories I know about the healing that can come from taking this "*letovah*" perspective is the one told by Dr. Rachel Remen, a physician who has written extensively about the experiences of people facing life-threatening illnesses. She writes: (adapted)

I once worked with a young man with osteogenic sarcoma of the right leg. He had been a high school and college athlete and until the time of his diagnosis his life had been good. Beautiful

women, fast cars, personal recognition. Two weeks after his diagnosis, they had removed his right leg above the knee. This surgery, which saved his life, also ended his life. Playing ball was a thing of the past.

He refused to return to school. he began to drink heavily, to use drugs, and to have one automobile accident after another. He was a powerfully built and handsome young man, profoundly self-oriented and isolated, filled with a sense of injustice and self-pity. In our second meeting, I gave him a drawing pad and asked him to draw a picture of his body. He drew a crude sketch of a vase, just an outline. Running through the center of it he drew a deep crack. He went over and over the crack with a black crayon, gritting his teeth and ripping the paper, tears of rage in his eyes. After he left, I folded the picture up and saved it. It seemed too important to throw away.

Over the next month, he would bring in clippings from our local newspaper about young people who had survived accidents or who had severe medical difficulties: His reactions were always the same – a harsh judgment of the well-meaning efforts of doctors and parents. A feeling that no one really understood the young people, no one really knew how to help. He was still enraged, but underneath this anger a concern for others was growing. Later, he asked me if I thought he could meet some of these others who suffered injuries like his. Within a few weeks, we arranged for him to visit young people on the surgical wards of a local hospital. He came back from these visits full of stories, delighted to find that he could reach young people. He was often able to be of help when no one else could.

Once he visited a young woman with breast cancer who, at age 21, had just had both of her breasts removed surgically. He visited her on a hot midsummer day, wearing shorts, his artificial leg in full view. Deeply depressed, she lay in bed with her eyes closed, refusing to look at him. He tried everything he knew to reach her, but without success. He said things to her that only another person with an altered body would dare to say. He made jokes. He even got angry. She did not respond. All the while, a radio was softly playing rock music.

Frustrated, he finally stood, and in a last effort to get her attention, he unstrapped the harness of his artificial leg and let it drop to the floor with a loud thump. Startled, she opened her eyes and saw him for the first time. Encouraged, he began to hop around the room snapping his fingers in time to the music and laughing out loud.

After a moment, she burst out laughing too, saying, "Well, if you can dance, maybe I can sing!"

This young woman became his friend and began to visit people in the hospital with him. She encouraged him to return to college to study psychology. Eventually she became his wife, a very different sort of person from the models and cheerleaders he had dated in the past.

But long before this, we ended our sessions together. In our final meeting, I opened his chart and found the picture of the broken vase he had drawn two years before. Unfolding it, I asked him if he remembered the drawing he made of his body. He took it in his hands and looked at it for some time. "You know," he said, "it's really not finished." Taking a yellow crayon, he began to draw thick, yellow lines radiating from the crack in the vase to the very edges of the paper. I watched, puzzled. He was smiling.

Finally, he put his finger on the crack, looked at me, and said softly, "This is where the light comes through."

=====

One of the emotional high points of every High Holiday service is the prayer called *Unetaneh Tokef* –the prayer that uses the metaphor of the Book of Life in which all our deeds are recorded

– and in which it is written: who will live, and who will die, who will be at peace, and who will be tormented during the coming year. It's a terrifying image. But then we turn the page and we are greeted with words of comfort -- words that assert that there IS something we can do to affect our fate. *Utshuvah utefilah utzedakah ma'avirin et ro'a hag'zerah*. But penitence, prayer and good deeds can annul the severity of the decree.

I think the author of this prayer chose the words in this line very carefully – But penitence, prayer and good deeds can annul the severity of the decree. The prayer does NOT say that our actions will avert our decree. Sometimes, for reasons inexplicable to us, the decree - what happens in the world - is not favorable. However, our actions have the power to avert the SEVERITY of any decree. Repentance, prayer and good deeds --- These have the power to change the way we conceive of our crises - to give us the tools to weather our crises and emerge whole again - to give us a caring community to soften our pain - to give us a glimpse at the eternity of our own soul. And all of these things can truly affect the SEVERITY of our decree, even if they can't affect the decree itself. Sometimes, a positive outlook, a source of inner strength, the presence of a caring community, CAN make ALL the difference - the difference between life and death, between health and illness, between recovery and despair, between wholeness and emptiness.

I think of a friend of mine who tragically lost his wife at an early age. And of course he spent much of the year following the loss coming to terms with the devastating hole this left in his life -- And I was so overcome with emotion when he told me: I'm surprised to say it, but there are some good things to come out of this tragedy. Like my closeness to my wife's family -- we are now bonded for life. I have learned so much about myself this year - things I never would have known. My life priorities are so different now. I'm pledging to live more deeply because now I know what's truly important in my life.

And I thought: so many people would be paralyzed by such a tragedy as losing your beloved -- especially at such a young age -- so many people would be paralyzed for the rest of their lives. So many people would not be able to take a single purposeful step. So many people would be so convinced of the cruelty and meaninglessness of the universe that they would stop trying to look for beauty in the world, that they would resign themselves to inertia. And who could possibly blame them? Anyone who experiences that much pain deserves the right to determine how that pain will be expressed. It would be completely understandable -- no one would hold it against him. In fact, it would have been a normal reaction.

But despite all the reasons to despair.... he managed to call upon every ounce of creative energy and to "make music with what remains."

And after speaking with him, I thought to myself: here's a person who will remember this tragedy for the rest of his life -who will think of it every day ---it will never become less painful than it is today. But -- he's going to make it. he's going to move on.

=====

During these High Holidays, my remarks have had a common theme: I have addressed ways that Jewish tradition says we can bring our world closer to the world of peace of the Messianic era. The first day of Rosh Hashanah, I discussed Shabbat as an oasis of inner peace in our overconnected world. The second day of Rosh Hashanah, I discussed forgiveness and reconciliation as a means to achieving inner peace, and peace with our adversaries. And last night, I referred to the prophesy from the book of Malachi that when Elijah comes to herald the Messianic era, he will turn the hearts of the parents to the children and the hearts of the children to the parents. And these are all steps we can take over the coming year to increase the peace quotient in our lives and in the world.

But there is one more step. While we work towards a perfect world, and while we wait for a perfect world, we have an obligation to ourselves and to God to appreciate all the blessings that

already exist here for us in our IMPERFECT world. We have an obligation to do our best to make music with what remains.

Let me conclude with a story that comes from Eastern European Jewish folklore. It's the story of a man in a small shtetl – a Jewish town in Eastern Europe - who had lost his zeal for life. Finally he decided: there is really no point in remaining in such an upsetting and imperfect world. So he thought to himself: whenever we recite the Yizkor memorial prayers, we always say, referring to our loved ones who have died: *began eden tehei menuchatam*. And may the Garden of Eden be their resting place." God, enough is enough. I want the Gan Eden to be my resting place right now."

God asked him, "Are you sure that's what you want?"

And the man replied, I am sure with all my heart.

And surprisingly enough, God responds, "Okay. You're in luck. Gan Eden happens to be very close to your village."

And God gave detailed directions for how to walk to Gan Eden from his village. After the city gates, take the first right, then bear left at the mountain, go straight through the forest, bear right at the next mountain, and go through the big gates on your left. That's the Garden of Eden. It should take you about 4 days to walk there.

The man can hardly believe it. He leaves his city, following all the directions carefully. And towards nightfall on the second day, he arrives in the forest and prepares to spend the night there. But before going to sleep, he decides that just in case he should forget which direction he was headed, he should point his shoes in the direction he had been going.

And in the morning, he wakes up and continues on his journey. Just one problem. During the night – somehow – no one knows how – his shoes got turned around. They were now facing the direction from which he had come. And so he follows these directions for two more days

...and as he approaches the final hill, he feels such tremendous excitement,

...and as he looks over the hill, and sees the Garden of Eden gleaming in the distance, he KNOWS he had reached the perfect place – paradise! A place where everything was perfect! And breathlessly he runs to this beautiful city of Gan Eden.

"Interesting," he thought to himself as he got closer. I never knew that Gan Eden would look so much like my city! He had arrived early in the morning and sat in the town square as the sunrise bathed the town in light. He saw the adults heading to work, he saw the children heading to school, and was overcome with the beauty of this small town, the vitality and love that characterized its people. All day he just sat there and watched the people. So this is Gan Eden, he thought. What a contrast to his own village, which was so run-down, so ordinary.

But he could not get over all the architectural similarities between the Garden of Eden and his own village. He said to himself, "I wonder if there's a street in Gan Eden that looks just like my street!" So he wandered around Gan Eden, and sure enough, he found a street that looked exactly like his own street.

Wow! Perhaps there is a house in Gan Eden that looks exactly like my house! And sure enough he found one. But there were differences. His house had always been so noisy and crowded. But this house was cozy, and bustling with activity.

And at that moment, a woman came out of the house who bore a striking resemblance to his wife. He might have thought it WAS his wife, except of course that he knew that he was in Gan Eden and his wife was back in the village. And also that there was a glimmer of love in this woman's eyes that he never remembered seeing in his wife's eyes. And she greeted him by name, saying, "We're so glad you're here. We were getting worried about you. Come in and wash up, it's almost time for dinner." How extraordinary! They were expecting him in Gan Eden! They even knew his name in Gan Eden!

And then in the morning, the woman who looked like his wife woke him up and told him it was time to get ready for work.

Work? He was a little surprised to hear about that – but come to think of it, it makes sense that there would be tasks to perform in Gan Eden. But work was different – this work was purposeful, enjoyable. And at the end of the day, this man would return to the cozy home. Every day brought new excitement, new wonder, new beautiful things to appreciate, wonders of nature, smells and tastes, books to read, wisdom to accumulate, a family to love, a community to nurture.

He soon discovered that there was sadness and suffering in Gan Eden. But as bitter as it was, it was always bitter-sweet, because it was experienced together with the love of the family and the love of the community.

And every so often, when he would take a bite of his wife's delicious rugelach, or when he would see an exquisite sunset, or he would hear the exuberance of the children playing in the yard, he would smile and say, "Ah! Dos iz gan Eden!" "This is Gan Eden!" And everyone around him would smile and say, "Yo, dos iz Gan Eden." Yes, this is Gan Eden.

And would you believe that for the rest of his life this man believed that he actually was in Gan Eden. And perhaps he was.

=====

Dear God, our greatest desire is a life free of suffering, a life free of tragedy and loss. But we know that no matter how much we pray, this dream, this desire will not be granted. We don't know why - but you seem to have built suffering and tragedy into the fabric of our lives. To think we can escape it entirely is to delude ourselves.

Dear God, you may not help us to avert the decree. But we know that you WILL help us *le-ha'avir et ro'a hag'zerah* -- to avert the severity of any decree – even the worst decree. Dear God, you have planted within us Teshuvah – the ability to improve ourselves and the world, Tefillah -- the ability to hope and to yearn, Tzedakah – the ability to heal each other through the embrace of the community.

Dear God, As we stand here as we prepare for the Yizkor memorial prayers, our thoughts now turn to those loved ones who are no longer with us. Some whose lives were long and full... and some who were cut down far too young... there were some whose deaths came as a blessing to them and to their families, and some whose deaths continue to seem like a horrible curse.

Dear God, help us to avert the severity of the decree. Help us to turn our shoes around. Help us to find a way to make music with what remains.

As we prepare for the Yizkor memorial prayers, let us spend a few moments in silent meditation as we call to mind our memories of those we remember this day.