

09/29/16

Dvar Torah for Parshat Ki Tavo

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Trapezes and Transitions

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In 2003, even before Carrie Bradshaw made it famous on *Sex and the City*, I flew on a trapeze on a gorgeous spring evening in New York City. I was in my 30's, in my first year of a PhD program, my first year living in New York, my first year dating the man who would become my husband. Seeing all the people down on the ground stopping to smile and point, I tucked away my self-consciousness and imagined I was strong and graceful and belonged on that trapeze.

Climbing the ladder, buckling up on the platform, looking out over the Hudson River at the Statue of Liberty on one side and the skyline of lower Manhattan on the other, and stepping forward off the platform, I experienced all the emotions you'd expect: excitement, terror, pride, disorientation.

In popular culture, the trapeze experience like the one I had is often used as a stand in for life lived fearlessly. In this trope, the trapeze represents taking a leap and soaring beyond self-imposed limitations. Recently, though, I've been thinking about the trapeze as a stand in for transitions, liminal spaces and moments. The stomach churning moments when we have let go of the past and not yet grabbed

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the future show up in our lives in all kinds of ways. What makes these moments bearable is the net below.

In Parashat Vayelekh, the Israelites are having one of these moments. They learn that Moses's life is near its end and that they will have to go into the land of Israel without him. The change they will experience is concrete and fairly quick: one day Moses will be their leader, and the next day it will be Joshua. The transition they will go through will be messier, slower, and harder to spot. We aren't told in the text which individuals accept Joshua right away, and which take more time. We don't know how ready different men and women feel to leave behind their status as wanderers and to fully embrace their new, emerging identity in the land of Israel.

When compared with change, which is concrete and situational, with transition, the shifts are more internal, more psychological, less visible. What's more, transition takes a long time. It's a process of reorienting oneself to a new way of being. It involves letting go of the old reality and going through what William Bridges, a well-known expert on transitions and transition management, calls "the neutral zone" on the way to embracing the new reality. Where the first phase of transition is marked by the experience of loss and the accompanying anger and grief, and the final phase is characterized by acceptance and embrace, the neutral zone – in between the two – can be a time of ambivalence and self-doubt, vulnerability, and skepticism. When managed well, though, it can also be a time of great creativity, possibility, even renewal.

Toward the end of his life, Moses does a few things that provide an important safety net for the Israelites as they prepare to let go of one trapeze and get ready to grab the next. First, Moses calls Joshua to stand before all the Israelites, where Moses gives him a public charge, calling for Joshua's strength and tenacity, and promising that God will be with him. This symbolic and powerful moment of passing the mantle of leadership is one that moves the Israelites further along their transition journey. Then, when Moses writes down his teachings and gives them to the elders and priests to carry in the ark of the covenant, he is literally letting the people take a piece of the past along with them. With this act, Moses further strengthens the Israelites' safety net, putting into place the support they will need to continue to build their emerging identity and grab on to their new reality.

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At this moment, with both the High Holy Days and the upcoming presidential election looming, I genuinely feel as if I am in between the two trapezes, with an uncertain future ahead. For me, the safety net metaphor is one that allows me to be present in the moment, nervous where appropriate but not paralyzed with fear. To move forward and through this transition requires that we notice when the net is fraying and do the work to repair it, for ourselves and for others.

Continue the conversation. Send Michelle your thoughts:
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