

Yom Kippur 5779

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Thai Soccer Rescue

A few months ago, Marita and I took our kids to Alaska for a family trip/ that we had dreamed about since they were small. We flew into Anchorage, and then rented a van to experience the outback by road and lodge. When we saw a patch of land that we liked, we got out of the car and just...walked. It was everything that we hoped for: incredible nature, vast mountain ranges, and wildlife right up close.

I'll never forget cresting a particular hill, the sun peeking through the clouds, and seeing a herd of caribou not 50 yards away. Big animals, who eyed us warily, until their grazing took them out of sight.

Marita and I love the outdoors, and in our youth sought out exotic locales, so trekking through the highlands of Alaska was a dream. But on this trip we were parents with kids, responsible for their safety.

Warning signs were posted everywhere to be careful of bear and moose. The locals reminded us that this was nature, not a zoo. Big animals were around. Typically they avoid people, but they could be dangerous if startled. We sang loudly while we hiked so that no bears would be surprised. Turns out that bears don't like KidzBop.

For protective purposes we kept our last resort 'bear pepper spray' handy, and made sure that all three kids walked with us... nobody running ahead, or lagging behind. We wanted adventure, not danger.

One late morning, we ascended a trail through a wood of quaking Aspen. A group of 4 young women, heading in the opposite direction, greeted us with smiles and cheer. They were heading home after having camped-out for the night. They moved with an easy, strong confidence through the trees. This place was good.

And then, unexpectedly, we had a scare. From out of nowhere, came a 'RRRRR'. We all stopped still. My adrenaline went from zero to 60. My face turned white. "My God, This is happening," I thought, and I reached for my bear-spray as Marita stepped forward in front of our kids... And then... our oldest, Maccabee, started laughing. And made the sound again. RRRRR. It was him. Not a bear. And he got us. Big time. It took me a moment to process that it was my son joking around before my reflexes stood down. And I admit, we gave him a piece of our mind before we finally laughed with him, with the very stern warning that he was never to do that again. Ever. In the end, no harm, no foul. We had a great trip, and flew back to Atlanta.

The same day that we arrived home, safe and sound; on the other side of the world another group of kids would trek through the woods near their village and enter a cave.

I'm speaking, of course, about 25 year old Coach Ake and his soccer team in Thailand, their nightmarish ordeal, and the rescue saga that would captivate the world. Perhaps you followed it like we did in our house. Day by day, sometimes hour by hour. Have those kids been found yet? And once found, the clock ticking and the waters rising, would they be rescued in time?

I've thought a lot about what happened in Thailand this summer, about those kids and their coach, and why this story resonates with so many people. I think that we can glean profound spiritual lessons from

their tribulation that are needed now more than ever. From their rescue, we can find sparks of hope for humanity. And from the aftermath, reflected in this Yom Kippur mirror, we ask ourselves some very real questions about faith and doubt, consequence and purpose, guilt and forgiveness.

There was a sign outside the cave warning people not to enter starting in July, the start of Monsoon season. But July was still a week away. They were locals, they were strong, and confident that they would be fine.

What Coach Ake did by ignoring the sign, and the possibility of danger, is what the Talmudⁱ Rabbi Reish Lakish describes as a sin of *'ruach shtu-yot'*, sometimes translated as something done in the 'spirit of folly', or something done because we were just not thinking. It may not be so different than me taking my kids into the Alaskan outback on foot, or any of the other things that most of us do without really thinking about it. Most of the time there are not consequences from *ruach Shtu-yot*, or at least, not consequences that we are aware of.

The difference in Ake's case is that it caused angst, effort, and even a death. *'Ruach shtu-yot'* falls into the category of the *Al Chet* that we beat our chest over for harm we have caused unconsciously, harm caused because we were not mindful of the signs that warned us. *Al Chet shechanatnu l'fanecha... vulo yodim*. Ake's sin was an unintentional mistake. By all reports, Ake is a really good guy. He volunteers at the local temple, does not drink or smoke, and spends his time mentoring kids who are marginalized like he was: kids who are very poor, some orphaned, some having "illegal immigrant" status... in short, kids whom the world would likely eat up and spit out. But Ake made it his business to protect these kids, to teach them, to guide them through sports, and friendship, and example.

That afternoon when Ake led the kids into the cave, the rain became an angry storm, and safe passage became an underground, raging river. How they picked this turn instead of that turn, this narrow passage instead of that one, was not based on a map, but rather on adrenaline and providence to keep ahead of the flooding waters. After hours of running, they found refuge on a narrow patch of rock, just big enough for them to huddle together inches above the water. And there they sat, exhausted, cold, hungry, and in the dark; with no hint if they were being looked for by anyone. Their hope but a faint breeze in an oxygen-starved cave. The kids' lives were now in the hands of 25-year-old Coach Ake.

His story is one that begs to be put in the context of the existential. Ake's parents both died before he was 10 years old. His only brother died soon after that. Like many orphans in Thailand, he was placed in a monastery where he trained as a monk for more than a decade. The monastery taught Ake methods to find grounding, connection, and hope in the face of adversity. Part of his training was in meditation, akin to Jewish concepts of *Kavannah* with *Emet*: 'a discipline of finding balance, even in turbulence.'

Deep in the bowels of the earth, through nine long, dark days of desperation, Coach Ake worked with his boys to teach them the skills of controlled breath, hyper-awareness, and connection to peace. When it counted most, Ake tapped into his core, and gave his charges a crash-course on how to stay sane against despair. This is what we know. What we can only speculate about is what Ake must have been thinking while sitting in the dark, his charges in mortal danger, hope nowhere to be seen?

I don't know if Ake believes in God, but in those nine days on the rock he must have questioned his purpose. Was his whole life a preparation to be the one to help those boys keep hope when there was none? Or, perhaps, was his life designed to take away some of their suffering, as the boys slowly slipped into death...

This Yom Kippur, we too are asked to reflect back on our lives, the choices that brought us to this moment, and to ponder questions of purpose. Like Ake, we each are compelled to ask 'why am I here'?

From that place of darkness the boys prayed, and their prayers were joined by millions from outside in the light. Our liturgy reminds us to ‘pray as if everything depended on God, and act as if everything depended on you.’ⁱⁱ

When the boys did not come home for dinner that first night, their parents knew something was wrong. Within hours, Thai Navy Seal divers began searching the vast maze of unmapped, underground, now flooded caves. Forgoing ego, the Thai government asked for help, and without hesitation, payment, or bargaining... people showed up. Expert divers, military strategists, and scientists from dozens of disciplines came from Finland, Britain, China, Israel, Australia, and America. The very best that humanity had to offer came together for the most noble purpose - to save lives. And it was beautiful to see. In a world that is so fractured by religion, race, and flag, people came together.

One of the spiritual lessons here is that the human race is capable of cooperation and extraordinary collaboration when we share a common goal. We don’t see much of this in the world today, but the Thai Rescue story proves to us that if we can do it once, then we can do it again. Perhaps this time on a bigger scale. After all, there are millions of kids trapped in caves of poverty and war, sex-trafficking and famine. These are big problems, and so we tend to become ‘emotionally numb.’”

The Thai soccer rescue was a shofar blast against this ‘psychic numbing’ⁱⁱⁱ, once again allowing each and every one of us to tap into a deep well of empathy, reminding us that we do care. The challenge was formidable, verging on impossible. A drowned maze under the mountains, elite divers having to contort their bodies to get through narrow passages, sharp bends often choked with debris, and mostly doing it blind.

On the 9th day after the boys went missing, at this point really searching for their bodies, two of the rescue divers took one last stab at a section of tunnel. As a safety precaution, every diver tied a thin rope to their tanks so that they could find their way back. With merely 50 feet of rope left, the divers emerged in a grotto, and, surprised beyond measure, saw 13 sets of eyes staring back at them. The boys had been found! What is miraculous to me is that if their rope had been 49 feet shorter, or the grotto 51 feet further, the divers never would have found them.

You know the rest of this story, how the rescue workers raced against time and incoming storms to get the boys through miles of tunnel before they drowned. Remember, the boys could not swim. So many things could have gone wrong. The actual rescue, prepped over the course of days, had 18 divers bringing out 4 boys per day, one at a time. “Each life saved,” says the Talmud, “its as if we have saved a world.”^{iv}

Part of this story that touches me deeply is seeing men portrayed in a positive way. We often are the cause of issues ranging from Me Too to our borders, from the Environment to the subjugation of innocents. What we hear about the ‘masculine’ these days is often toxic. But here, in the Thai soccer story, we see men at their best. Men who are capable. Men who are courageous. Men who care. Through their efforts, and their sacrifices, we see men of integrity. This is how I want men to be seen. This is the type of man that I want to be. This is the archetype that I want my boys to aspire.

In their efforts, these men provide us with examples of what ‘sacred masculinity’^v really means. Our Rabbis say that we all, men and women alike, have the capacity to soar higher than the angels^{vi}, but also to sink lower than demons. The rescue mission in Thailand showed us again that we are able to soar!

Like my son Maccabee’s bear-roar in Alaska, I wish that I could end this story here, with the boys scared but otherwise fine, and the whole thing a cautionary tale. But that is not the case. One of the Thai divers,

an ex-Navy Seal named Saman Gunan, died while bringing in oxygen to prep the rescue effort. He volunteered to do it, he was well trained and knew the risks, and he died while trying.

I wonder if after the news cameras left and things got quiet, Ake lay awake at night thinking about Saman. Even knowing that his mistake was unintentional, I wonder if he feels ‘regret’...perhaps even ‘guilt’. This is, of course, about much more than Coach Ake, it is about some of us here today who are mired in regret for causing suffering, intentionally or unintentionally, to another. These feelings are even more difficult to bear when that person is no longer alive.

Ake is Buddhist. But what if he *were* Jewish, and sitting here on Yom Kippur with feelings of ‘regret’ and ‘guilt’? What would our Jewish tradition say to him?

We know from our liturgy that God can forgive sins only against God, but for sins against other people we have to approach them directly. For most of us this is our task on Yom Kippur. The stakes are high enough with relationships to mend and families to bring back together. Our sages provide the formula for us to approach one another: admit fault, try to fix it, apologize with sincerity, and vow to change. But this formula is meant for seeking forgiveness from the living.

Ake, in my imagination, is seeking forgiveness from the dead. If I were Ake’s rabbi, I would acknowledge his journey, his struggles, and his soulful yearning to be forgiven. I would tell him of the halakhic custom^{vii} where Ake could go with a group from his community to Saman’s grave, and there, speak to Saman about his regrets, and his mistakes. There, Ake could dedicate his life towards the good, and doing so, says our tradition, he would be forgiven.^{viii} Judaism does not claim that the mistake can be undone, it cannot, but through this type of introspection and *teshuvah*, our mistakes can transcend into something good. Our repentance allows us to heal. It is the essence of redemption.

I would also remind Ake that on Yom Kippur, if we approach with a true yearning to make things ‘right’, we are guaranteed God’s forgiveness. The image in the liturgy is of God having two thrones, one of Justice and the other of Mercy, *Din* and *Rachamim*. On Yom Kippur, we beg *Av HaRachamim* to show us mercy, and in the final shofar blast of *tikiah g’dolah*, it is granted. Justice is essential, for without it the world would tear itself apart. But if God only judged from that throne, none of us would stand a chance.

And finally, as his rabbi, I would guide Ake to forgive himself. If God can forgive him, who is he to drown himself in guilt? Ake’s decisions cannot be undone, but I would remind him that he still has a lifetime of living to do, and it is his obligation to live as beautiful, as worthy, and as meaningful a life as he can.

This is my prayer for Ake, for all those kids, and for each and every one of you here today. May your mistakes transcend into a rededication for peace in your home. May you turn your past pain into paths of peace for the world. And may you have the courage to look within, with compassionate *rachamim*, to forgive one another, and to forgive...yourself.

Gud Yuntif...Shanah tova!

ⁱ B. Sotah 3A

ⁱⁱ Mishkan Tefillah, p 165

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://aleteia.org/2018/07/11/how-christianity-is-like-one-big-thai-cave-rescue/>, term coined by psychologist Paul Slovic

^{iv} b. Sanhedrin 37A

^v From Matthew Fox’s ‘Some Spiritual Lessons from the Rescue of the Soccer Boys from the Thai Cave’

^{vi} Rasag (Emunot ve-de’ot 4:1)

^{vii} Shmuel said: One who sinned toward his fellow should ask the victim for forgiveness and say the following to him: "I have sinned toward you. Please forgive me." If [the fellow] accepts this and says that he forgives him that is good. But if not, the sinner should gather a delegation and placate the of ended party...If the one toward whom he sinned died, he [the sinner] must placate him [the of ended party] at his gravesite and say "I have sinned toward you." (Jerusalem Talmud Yoma Perek Ches Halacha Zayin) and in Halacha in Rambam Hilchos Teshuva Perek Yud Beis Halacha Yud Alef. Kiryat Sefer explains: A person who sins against another who then dies before being asked forgiveness should bring a quorum to his grave and say, in their presence, "I have sinned to the God of Israel and to this person, against whom I have sinned in this way," in order that his heart be humbled, and that visiting his grave will be a substitute for visiting his home while he was alive.

^{viii} Its unclear who is doing the forgiving, whether it is God on Sanam's behalf, or the community.