

The Bridge of Love
 A Sermon for Yom Kippur Yizkor
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Shanah Tovah

David and I spent a week in Great Smoky Mountains National Park this summer. It rained almost every day, not just the brief thunderstorm common in the mountains but downpours that lasted for hours. The rain made for some fantastic waterfalls. It also turned streams into torrents, which we discovered when we confronted a particularly swift stream cutting across the trail on one of our hikes. There was a bridge, of sorts. A log would be a better description, flat on top and just wide enough to put one foot in front of the other. A rickety guide rail made of thin branches was attached to one side, but only on one side.

I'm generally not afraid of heights, and truth to be told, it wasn't all that high up. It was just that the crashing water below us and the narrow and rickety nature of the bridge before us gave David and I pause. We decided to cross one at a time. David went first. When he reached the other side, he turned to wait for me.

Looking at David on the other side of the bridge, I couldn't help but think of the song by Rebbe Nahman, *kol haolam kulo gesher tzar meod*, "the whole world is like a very narrow bridge," *v'haikar lo l'fahed*, "and the main thing is not to fear."

I stepped up on the bridge, and then continued, putting one foot in front of the other, careful not to trip on my hiking stick. As I got to the end, David reached up to take my hand as I stepped down. We continued down the trail together.

Life *is* a narrow bridge. Often what swirls around us is daunting. There are times when the best we can do is put one foot in front of the other, careful not to trip, in order to cross over whatever confronts us, whether pain and loss, trials and challenges, or even the inevitable stress of celebrations and transitions.

The main thing, Rebbe Nachman taught, is not to fear. Not to be afraid to live fully, to love deeply, and to follow one's dreams. Not to be afraid to take the next step, despite the unknowns.

We may feel alone on that bridge, very alone. We may feel afraid and unsure how we will ever get across on our own. But we are never really alone. Ready hands are there to steady us. The hand of God, Who guides and strengthens us when we know not how to find a way to put one foot in front of the other. The hands of family, friends, and community, who help us not trip up. The hands of loved ones who preceded us to the other side, who will reach out to welcome us when our time comes to step from the narrow bridge of this life to the everlasting life of the world to come.

Sometimes, just sometimes, our loved ones may reach out their hand from across the bridge linking this life to the next to steady us in *this* world.

Let me tell you a story:

My mother of blessed memory was very ill as a young girl. This was before there were antibiotics. The doctor did not expect her to make it through the night. That night, my mother opened her eyes and saw standing at the foot of her bed her own grandmother, her mother's mother, who had died in Europe many years before. My mother had never met this grandmother but recognized her because there was a photograph of her hanging on a wall in their apartment. Her grandmother stood there looking at her and then said to her in Yiddish, "Do not fear, all will be well." That night my mother's fever broke. By the next morning, she was on her way to recovery.

Our Talmudic Sages taught that those in the next world continue to see and hear those in this world. They continue to care about the loved ones they left behind. They watch over us and advocate for us before God's holy throne.

In the transition from this world to the next, only good deeds and love make it across. Everything else turns to dust when our loved ones step off the bridge of this life into the next. Their brokenness and pain, their *kvetches* and anger, all their "stuff" - the things that got in the way of them loving us as much as we wished or of them being the people they wished to be, the pure and holy souls God created - all that stays *here* in this world. It all turns to dust as their earthly remains return to the earth from which it was made. Their spirit, their soul, though, returns to God. When that happens, they leave a little bit of themselves behind: their love, their wisdom, their legacy of good deeds. These remain as a link between us, a link between this world and the next.

Thornton Wilder is not Jewish but he got it right when he wrote, at the end of his book *The Bridge of St. Louis Re*, "There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge between them is love."

In a few minutes we will be reciting Yizkor for those we loved, our parents, our spouses, our siblings, tragically sometimes our children. For most of us, their absence leaves a gaping and painful hole in our lives. Especially during the first raw year of mourning, we may not know how we can go on putting one foot in front of the other.

Rabbi Sidney Greenberg once wrote, "A bitter truth is that every love story has an unhappy ending, and the greater the love, the greater the unhappiness when it ends...What then is our choice? Never to permit ourselves to love anyone?"

All of life is a narrow bridge. The main thing is not to fear. Not to be afraid to love. Not to be afraid of losing those we love, for they are never really lost. They are waiting for us on the other side of the bridge. Their love stretches across it to steady us along our own journey.

There is another song I love, this one by country singer Collin Raye, "If You Get There Before I Do." It tells the story of a grandson who reads, just hours before his grandmother passes away, a note she wrote to his grandfather when they were young. Her father did not approve of the match and they made a plan to elope. They were to meet by a tree. When his grandfather got there he found a note nailed to the tree. It read:

"If you get there before I do
Don't give up on me
I'll meet you when my chores are through.
I don't know how long I'll be

But I'm not gonna let you down
 Darling wait and see
 And between now and then 'til I see you again,
 I'll be loving you, love, me."

That was in 1923. The grandfather had carried that note in his pocket all through the years of their courtship, marriage, and raising a family. Now, as he prayed for his wife lying on her deathbed, his eyes filled with tears, he shows the note with these words to his grandson:

"If you get there before I do
 Don't give up on me
 I'll meet you when my chores are through.
 I don't know how long I'll be
 But I'm not gonna let you down
 Darling wait and see
 And between now and then 'til I see you again.
 I'll be loving you, love, me,

And between now and then 'til I see you again
 I'll be loving you, love, me."

Our loved ones wait for us on the other side and between now and then, till we see them again, they continue to love us just as we continue to love them.

Let me tell you another story:

My mother battled cancer for decades. She was a survivor. Then her cancer metastasized into her bones. The pain was excruciating. Yet she soldiered on through chemo and radiation. But the time finally came when there was no more hope, no more protocols to battle the cancer that now riddled her body. Her doctor broke the news to her and discussed hospice. She agreed. We thought she had weeks, maybe months. By the next morning, though, we knew differently. The nurse called to tell me she had only 24, maybe 48, hours. I should come.

I took the next train to Penn Station and transferred to the Long Island Rail Road. My dad met me at the station and we went straight to the hospital. My brothers, who live down south, were still in transit.

My mother was awake and clear headed. We spoke about the things she most wanted me and my brothers to know, about how much she loved us and how proud she was of us. When she got tired, the nurse sent my father and me home to sleep, assuring us she would call if my mother took a turn for the worse.

By the time I returned the next morning, my mother could no longer speak. She seemed to have tears in her eyes, so I wiped her eyes and took her hand as I sat down beside her where she could see me. I told her I loved her. I promised we would take care of Dad and that it was OK for her to go, that her mother, who she loved so dearly, and her grandmother, who had watched over her, were waiting for her on the other side. I felt her squeeze my hand a little to indicate she had heard. She looked at me and gave a little smile. She closed her eyes and sighed. Her breathing slowed. Time seemed to stand still as I sat there, I don't know how long, witness to the journey my mother was taking. One breath. Another. Then another until there were no more breaths. Her hand grew cool. She was gone, yet so peaceful. I could not help but believe

she had indeed found her mother and grandmother waiting for her on the other side, reaching up to take her hand as she stepped off the bridge of this life into the next.

We cannot all be there at the end when our loved ones complete their journey. We don't have to be. Our loved ones understand. They know they are not alone. They know that someone is waiting for them on the other side, with a hand to steady their last step off the bridge of this life into the next.

This life is a narrow bridge. All of us gathered here this morning still have chores yet to fulfill. We are not yet through with what we need to do in this world. And if sometimes we find it takes all we have within us just to put one foot in front of the other and not trip up, that is all right. The most important thing is not to fear. We will make it, for we are not alone. We have God. We have each other. And we have those who have completed this journey before us. They are waiting patiently for us and will never give up on us. Between now and then, until we see them again, their love will continue to steady us, comfort us, and strengthen us along our own journey.

And when our own time comes to step off the narrow bridge that is this life (please God not for many years yet) our loved ones will be waiting to take our hand to ease our step into the next world, just as surely as David was waiting to help me as I stepped off the narrow bridge across the flooded stream in the Smokys.

Life is challenging. Love everlasting. The main thing is not to fear.

Shanah Tovah