

The Treasure We Seekⁱ
A Sermon for First Night Rosh Hashanah 2020/5781
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Shanah Tovah.

Usually I start getting THE question around March. “Rabbi, which National Park are you going to this summer?” Not this year. None of us knew what to expect this summer as COVID raged across the nation. David and I, like many, decided the safest course would be to staycation this year. We got a lot done working on our house and grounds. But my soul yearned for the mountains. So, David and I decided to visit Catoctin Mountain National Park.

Though only a short hour’s drive west, we never really visited Catoctin. To be honest, it seemed too small, its “mountain” too modest for any serious hike, let alone the revelations that can be discovered when surrounded by nature. The highest overlook is Hog Rock, at 1610 feet. Nothing like the grand vistas of Yosemite, the Tetons or the Rockies. Yet we wound up visiting three times. Each time, we discovered little things that enchanted us: a fairy like nature trail of spongy moss, a pita looking powdered ruffle lichen growing out of a tree trunk, and a boulder on the Hog Rock trail that looked like a sleeping dragon straight out of *Game of Thrones*.

Those hikes taught me something incredibly important about how we don’t need to undertake a great journey to find joy. Satisfaction can be found in the little details of life when we focus on, and really see, what is around us and who is around us. As we hiked up hill, David was always behind me, backing me up if I had any trouble. On our down hills, he was always in front of me to catch me if I stumbled. The Catoctin trails were not really a challenge. But David’s presence besides me reminded me how thankful I am he is there beside me wherever we are, even stuck at home trying to navigate shared work space.

We so often don’t pay attention to what we are accustomed to seeing that we stop really seeing what -- and who -- is around us, the blessings that surround us, the little joys that make life worth living.

I think this is particularly true as COVID has turned all of our lives and our expectations upside down. There is so much we feel we *don't* have right now: We miss in person contact with family and friends, gathering physically in prayer and fellowship, going to the office and sending the kids out of the house to school rather than being all together, all the time. We missed traveling, visiting family, enjoying the break and change of pace, the relaxation summer usually brings. We may have felt a bit stir crazy, stuck at home, however comfortable or even spacious.

And yet, if we think about it, perhaps there were things that we would not have otherwise seen in such detail: How precious time is with family and friends, even if only over Zoom or through a window or from behind a mask. How lucky we are to have a dry roof over our heads during this rainy summer and food on our tables, even if we had to order it from Instacart and cook it ourselves. How much our kids have grown. How much we relied on others and how strong we ourselves can be.

Returning from our final summer foray into Catoctin, I was reminded of a Yiddish folktale about an impoverished man who dreamed he found a treasure under a bridge in Warsaw.

He thought nothing of the dream until it repeated the next night and the next. You may know the Jewish tradition that when a dream comes three nights in a row, it is a message. After the third night, the man told his wife about the dream. Finding such a treasure could change their lives. They didn't have enough to feed and clothe their children, let alone give something to the less fortunate. So they decided the man should set off for Warsaw. He tied his only pair of shoes to a pole along with a sack that contained some bread and cheese. He walked and walked until a kind waggoneer offered him a lift. When he finally reached Warsaw, he saw a bridge that looked exactly as in his dreams! But there were also guards on the bridge, which meant he couldn't just start digging. He returned to the bridge day after day, watching the guards, trying to think of some way to dig up the treasure he was sure was there.

One day, a guard, having seen him hanging around, asked him what he was looking for. The man, feeling he had nothing left to lose, told the guard his dream. The guard laughed, "You think dreams come true? I dreamt the other night a treasure sat under the stove in a broken down cottage right next to a gnarled and bent tree." The description sounded like the man's own house! Keeping his wits, the man thanked the guard and headed home, where he found a treasure under his

stove just as the guard had dreamed. With it, he was able to feed and clothe his family and give generously to the poor for the rest of his life.

Sometimes all we have eyes for is what we don't have, so much so that we fail to see what we do have. Sometimes that treasure is right at home, under our very noses. Thankfully, most of us are not in dire need of enough money to feed our families and pay our bills, though there are more and more people in that situation in Howard County, which is why our Social Action Committee has been running food drives and why we have a Beth Shalom COVID 19 Emergency Fund. Thankfully for most of us, though, the treasure we seek, is of a different sort.

That is what I learned this summer from our forays into Catoctin Mountain, a National Park we always considered too modest and close to home to warrant our attention until this summer. Surprisingly, we discovered our own treasure, right in our own backyard, not just in Catoctin, but in our home, our family, our congregation, and our community. And that is something for which to be truly thankful for and to treasure.

Shanah Tovah

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