

Who Packs Your Parachute?
A Sermon for Rosh HaShanah Eve 2021/5782ⁱ
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Shanah Tovah

I want to tell you a true story about a man named Charles Plumb. He was a Navy pilot during the Vietnam War. After 74 successful missions, he was shot down over Hanoi but was able to parachute safely to the ground. Though captured and held for six long years as a POW, he lived and eventually was able to return home, marry, and have a family.

Years later, Plumb and his wife were eating in a restaurant when a man came up to him and said, “You’re Plumb! You flew jet fighters in Vietnam from the aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk. You were shot down!” ‘How do you know that?’ Plumb asked. ‘I packed your parachute,’ the man replied, “I guess it worked!” Plumb assured him it did. “If your chute hadn’t worked, I wouldn’t be here today.”

The story doesn’t end there. Plumb couldn’t sleep that night, thinking about the man, how many times he might have seen him and not even said a ‘good morning’ because the man was just a sailor and he was a fighter pilot. Plumb thought about the hours that man had put in carefully folding those chutes, literally holding in his hands the life of someone he didn’t even know.

When Plumb tells his story to audiences he asks, “Who is packing your parachute?” Do you recognize who packs your parachutes? Acknowledge and appreciate them? Plumb notes that we all need different parachutes. His was physical. But we also need mental, emotional, and spiritual parachutes.

Who does packs our parachutes? Who helps us be mindful? Who energizes us? Who challenges us to be our best selves? Who has our backs and helps us get through things when things get tough? ⁱⁱ Each of us have people who help us make it through the great and small challenges of life. Often, all too often, as with Plumb and the man who packed his parachute, those individuals are metaphorically, if not actually, invisible to us.

On reading Plumb’s story, I thought about all the people who have packed my parachute over the years. Some are in this sanctuary or are online tonight or will be tomorrow. Some are in the mezzanine section reserved for our guests from the next world. Family and friends. Teachers, mentors, congregants, staff, and colleagues. Then there are all the people whose names I don’t know, whose countless acts of reliability, and often kindness, I rely on so others can rely on me – from receptionists and med techs to delivery people.

Like many couples, David and I have our assigned household tasks. He does the laundry and most of the cooking. I do the bills, mending, and taxes. This year, working online at home Sundays instead of physically being in the building for Religious School, I began to notice all the work that went into David’s battle on my behalf against the dust mites that trigger my allergies. Sunday is laundry day, the day David gathers our sheets and blankets, shleps them down to the

laundry room to wash them, and shleps them back upstairs to our hand driers to reduce our carbon footprint. If they don't completely dry, he then shleps them back downstairs to finish them in the drier before remaking the bed that evening. There's a lot of love in all that effort. I am sad to confess it was an effort that went unacknowledged for years. This year, having witnessed the effort rather than taking for granted the result, I've tried to create a new habit. Each Sunday night, I try to remember to thank David for washing the sheets and blankets. I miss some weeks, but I'm getting better at it. That's how we change, with practice. I hope my shout out helps him know I appreciate all he does packing my parachute. I know it helps me be more grateful for all the other parachutes he packs for me.

How often do we really see all that our loved ones do for us? Do we take them for granted, as Plumb did the man who packed his chute? What would it be like to thank them more often for packing our parachutes? How might our relationships be enriched, transformed?

In Judaism, expressing thankfulness is a daily spiritual exercise. There are prayers of gratitude to be recited before and after we eat, to thank God for having made us free, being able to see and stand (something we appreciate more with age), and a host of other things we tend to take for granted each day. If we recited these and the full prayer service three times a day, we would get to the 100 daily prayers of thankfulness tradition prescribes as the foundation of a spiritual life. That's a lot of praying. And a lot of thanking.

We all too often forget that God is the ultimate parachute packer for each and all of us. We generally fail to notice or credit God for any of the good in our lives, except maybe the most amazing events like the birth of a child. We tend to deny God any credit for getting us through the most challenging moments in our lives, things we could not have gotten through on our own without an invisible hand packing our parachutes for us or sending those who could.

Maimonides, among other ancient Jewish scholars, explains that God, being perfect, has no needs. That means God doesn't need our prayers. We need them. It is not only the comfort we derive from recognizing God is in our corner, packing our parachutes, giving us the strength and courage to tackle or navigate that which might seem impossible on our own. (Yes, God is the ultimate multi-tasker) It is also that *we* need to learn how to be thankful, not to just to God but to everyone for everything. The very act of becoming aware of what we have to be thankful for and actually expressing it – to God and our fellow human beings -- changes us. Being aware of and articulating gratitude opens our eyes, expands our hearts, and uplifts our souls. And it changes our relationship with those we appreciate and thank. That can be especially true with those we hold dearest but take the most for granted.

Who packs our parachutes, indeed?

We live in such an instant gratification, transactional society. All too often we ask ourselves, what has someone, or some organization, done for us recently. If we can't think of anything, we are done with them. We stop answering their calls. We drop our membership. What happened to loyalty? Appreciation for warm memories and past service? Or the commitment to see others benefit the way we have?

I was thinking about this the other day when I received a card from Ballet Mobile. They are a group of student and adult dancers who bring ballet performances to assisted living

facilities. Years ago, one of our Beth Shalom students was a member and told me they were performing at Harmony Hall, where my father was a resident. I attended that and each following year's performance with my father, appreciating not just their dancing but their graceful interactions with the residents. Each year I followed the performance with a note of appreciation and a small donation. Even though my father has been gone for more years than he got to enjoy those performances, I still donate each year, so others can enjoy the gift of their performances as my dad had.

If that is true of a yearly performance, how much more so for our support of and membership in a congregation that educated our children, supported us through births, *bnai mitzvah*, illness, and the loss of loved ones. During all that time, others in this congregation packed our parachutes. Even if we have moved on with our lives, don't we have an obligation to help pack the parachutes of those who need the same support we once did?

There is a famous Barbara Streisand song, "People, people who need people, are the luckiest people in the world..." The reality is we all need people. The luckiest people are those who know it.

That has been one of the great takeaways from our pandemic experience. We are social beings who need each other. That's what made the social isolation we and our children experienced during the worst of COVID so difficult. That's what frustrates us when we consider steps to limit in person contact as the Delta variant spreads with dangerous effect, especially among the unvaccinated.

We are people who need people. That is especially true for Jews. Community lies at the heart, historically, of what it means to be a Jew. It is not only that we need ten to make a minyan, the minimum prayer quorum. We are also collectively obligated to comfort the mourner, support the ill, educate our children, care for our synagogue, and keep the candles burning here.

We are to pack each other's parachutes. That is why we have a Bereavement Committee and weekday evening minyans coordinated by our Religious Committee to support our mourners; a Hesed Committee to coordinate meals and other support for those ill or in need; Religious School and Youth Committees to help educate the next generation of Jewish children, our own and others'; Building, Tech, Fundraising and Executive Committees to keep our candles burning and our facility shining; a Social Committee, Sisterhood and Men's Club to bring us together, and a Social Action Committee to make sure we fulfill our communal obligation to love our neighbors and remember the stranger.

The individuals on these committees, as well as our staff and countless others, pack our parachutes, parachutes we may not think about, or think we need, until we do. They all need more help packing those parachutes. Then, like Christopher Plump, those parachutes help us land safely no matter the danger, challenge, or crises we face. But as with Plumps' parachute, each of our parachutes rely on someone being willing to pack them. How will we pack each other's parachutes in the coming year?

That is how community works. It's not only that people need people. It's that people need other people willing to pack other people's parachutes. I have found over and over again in life that what we give of our time and resources comes back to us, though each of us may give

differently according to our capability. It's like the ten-minute massage circles my college roommates organized during finals: we each massaged the shoulders of the person in front of us, so everyone got a massage to better get on with our work. That's how packing someone else's parachute works. We get back as much as, if not more than, we give. I certainly have.

I want to thank God and all of you for helping pack my parachute these last 25 years with your generosity of time, effort, patience, courage and curiosity; your embrace of me and my family; and your trust in sharing with me your struggles with parenting, aging and aging parents, life and faith. I hope I have packed at least some of the parachutes you needed over the years. I tried my best to do so.

We all need someone, many someones through life to pack our parachutes. We also need to pack others' parachutes. A New Year begins tonight. Whose parachutes will you pack in the coming year? Who will pack yours? And how will you thank them?

Shanah Tovah.

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ⁱⁱ Jacob Morgan, "This is the true story of Charles Plumb," *The Future of Work*. Nov. 19, 2020. Medium.com. (Accessed Aug. 18, 2021).