

Among the many treasured books in my library is an old, but in terrific condition copy of *The Little Engine That Could*. On the inside cover, written in ink: *To Sharon for your 5th birthday. I love you, Mommy June, 1967*. Quick liner note - Once upon a time, Sharona was Sharon. I'm opening this Yom Kippur drash with a mention of this classic child's book because - as we know - there's a powerful piece of Torah in those pages. The unlikely hero musters the resolve to face the steep odds, and we cheer that hero on, knowing that it is so terribly difficult to climb the mountain, to outmuscle the pain, to rescue ourselves from the chaos and the brokenness. Those brave words: *I think I can, I think I can*, are actually a big deal - not only for 5 year olds.

In 2009, Tracy Kidder, author of a very important book called *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, wrote another riveting narrative, a true story called *Strength in what Remains*. Highly recommended. The central character of this book is a Burundian man named Deogratia, Deo for short. How to sum up this overwhelming, harrowing, and also uplifting story? Well, a well-educated young man destined for medical school finds himself engulfed in the surreal madness which incinerated much of Burundi and Rwanda. His flight from the carnage, the burning villages, the loudspeakers booming the singing of the killers: *God is just, God is never unjust. And we will finish them soon. Keep working, keep working. We will finish them, they are about to vanish! Don't get tired, you are about to be done!*, the machetes, the checkpoints, the mass graves, the birds circling the freshly massacred, the abyss feels akin to heart-rending stories of survivors from the Shoah, from Cambodia's killing fields, from Kosovo, from Syria. Deo is beyond lucky - to find himself in Manhattan with two hundred dollars in cash, and not much else.

Perhaps that isn't quite true. Do you remember the scene in Genesis when Joseph's brothers cast him into a pit after they tore away his technicolor dream-coat? The Torah says: *And the pit was empty, there was no water in it*. Rashi, one of our most famous commentators, jumps into the story and exclaims: *empty?! There was no water in it, but there were snakes and scorpions*. As for Deo, with the \$200 in his pocket, what else did he have? He was psychologically devastated, most of his family was butchered. His English speaking skills weren't much beyond charades and the new words he eagerly hunted down each day, so he appeared to most onlookers be stupid. He slept in Central Park, and found much less-than-desirable facilities for washing himself whenever he could. He was alive, though.

He worked as a delivery man for a grocery. A few very low-key remarkable human beings encounter Deo at just the right times and places - personally, I believe that they were manifestations of Elijah. **Fast forward** to Deo studying at Columbia and at Dartmouth - a penniless war refugee from the apocalypse. Later still, Deo is delivering a scholarly public health talk about Rwanda, and a person in the audience asked him what had happened to him during the genocide. He took a deep breath, then delivered a three-minute summary of his escape. By the time he finished, the room was hushed. He made a small, pained smile and said, *"Maybe you are wondering, 'Why did I ask?'"* Deo returned to Burundi, and from 2006 through 2008 he oversaw the building of a health clinic in the village of Kigutu. A puzzled Hutu truck driver approached Deo: *"99% of Kigutu is Hutu, but aren't you a Tutsi? Yes, I am."* The trucker walked away scratching his head. Next time he returned, he volunteered to do planting at the clinic site. One day a woman approached Deo with her head bowed. *"You don't know me but I want to say I am so sorry for what happened."* He worried that she was confessing some offense against his family during the war. Still, it seemed to Deo that Kigutu was becoming neutral ground, a place where Tutsi from the mountains and Hutus from the lakeside could reconcile, and he hoped he wasn't dreaming. *"What happened happened. Let's work on the clinic. Let's put the tragedy behind us, because remembering is not going to benefit anyone."*

"The moment you can visualize being free from the things that hold you back, you have indeed begun to set yourself free." From *Burundi to Greenwich, Connecticut*, courtesy of Danielle Gelfand, printed this week in the NYT, titled *Years of Atonement*.

For the last 18 years, my mother and I have spent Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, at Tod's Point beach in Old Greenwich, Conn., near where I grew up and where my mother still lives. I'm a TV producer living in Brooklyn now, but I still go back every year. My mom reads my father's old prayer book while I order lunch for us from the greasy concession stand that stays open into the fall, double hamburgers with grilled onions and French fries. To those who fast during the holiday, our version of a High Holy Happy Meal might seem sacrilegious, but we didn't always spend it this way. We used to go to temple like everyone else. But when I was 17, my father, who had just turned 59 and had suffered from depression for many years, shot himself in the head. The police found his body two days later, on the eve of Yom Kippur.

He was always a quiet, introspective man. But in the two years following my 9th birthday, his mother, brother and nephew died, and his business went under.

He went to many doctors to try to understand his deep, unshakable sadness. A series of new medications silenced him even more. One day, coming home from school, I saw him through the living room window. He had tears running down his cheeks and he was pounding his fist against the glass. After that he went to live in Florida. He was a lifelong sun worshiper, and my mother and I hoped that it would help. I visited him there once, when I was 14. He had rented a room in an old man's house and drove a clunker. He was very, very tan. He was doing sales and dropped me off at the beach in the morning. I got so burnt he had to take me to the doctor. He sat next to me on the couch and rubbed aloe on my arms to ease the soreness. It was the last time I felt close to him. When I was leaving to go back to Connecticut, I overheard his landlord mention the late rent. I offered my dad 20 bucks that I had saved in my purse. *The look on his face made me wish I hadn't.*

He came to visit us twice — but he didn't seem to be getting any better. He and my mother had an on-again, off-again relationship and it became a difficult triangle for me to navigate. I didn't know whether to love him or hate him and I certainly didn't understand him, or my mother's anger. I took a job working after school and saved to go to college far away.

My last conversation with my father was right before I left to go to the University of Wisconsin in Madison. We hadn't spoken in months, and even then, only briefly and with much tension. When he called, I had just read through my new student packet and was bursting with excitement about the future I was trying so hard to create for myself. But he just asked for the phone number at my mom's new office. As was so often the case, he was distracted; he wasn't really listening. And that's when I told him that I hated him. Before I hung up, he cried into the phone: *"Why are you doing this to me?"* Three weeks later, on Yom Kippur, my mother called to say he was dead. *Yom Kippur flashback...The rabbi warned us that it was time for our final prayers, before the ark closed and sealed our fates for the following year.*

In some way, I thought I understood. In Jewish tradition, each person's fate is written for the coming year on Rosh Hashana and sealed on Yom Kippur after the 10 days of repentance, prayer and requests for a good new year. I had always been spooked by the final service, Ne'ilah — "as the doors close", "as the gates of heaven close."

I remembered the ark in our synagogue when I was a kid, how it was kept open during the prayer, and how serious it felt when the rabbi warned us that it was time for our final prayers, before the ark closed and sealed our fates for the following year.

What happens if you are in a terribly sad place when the gates of heaven close? I've always wondered if my father, who grew up in a Jewish home in the Bronx, found the thought of living in that kind of pain until the next Yom Kippur unbearable. And of course, I blamed my own last words, which were also sealed in the past, and which I could never take back. My mother still loved temple and found solace in it. But I was never quite comfortable there again. That's why we chose to honor my father at the beach, one of the only places that gave him peace. My family had swum in the Long Island Sound every summer when I was a kid and eaten many a hamburger at Tod's Point. My father never had a boat, but he always wore a sailor hat.

One Yom Kippur a few years ago, my mother and I were driving home from the beach. We crossed the Mianus River Bridge on I-95, which had famously collapsed in the '80s. Ever since I always held my breath when we crossed it. This time, I heard a loud pop and turned behind me to see an enormous oil tanker up against our tiny Nissan Sentra. Our car spun onto a grassy patch on the side of the highway. My mother and I, both in shock, stared at each other. "Are you O.K.?" I said, taking her hand. "I'm fine," she said, though she was sobbing as she opened the door and we both got out. "**He hit my car!**" she yelled. "**I'm going to sue him!**" "Do you think this is because I ate a hamburger on Yom Kippur?" [I whispered.] "I think there was cheese on it." The truck driver had parked and now, leading an enormous German shepherd, came over to talk to us. "Do you know how lucky you are? You just missed going over the bridge," he said gruffly, but truthfully. As my mother and I rode home in the cab of the tow truck, I wondered if my father had been watching over us, keeping us safe.

This year, when I asked my mom if she wanted to go to the beach again for the holiday on Saturday, she said no, that instead she wanted to go to temple to hear the shofar. She'd always loved the sound of the ram's horn being blown to mark the beginning of the Jewish New Year. "I've thought about him all this week," she admitted. "This year, I want to ask forgiveness for myself." For all the conversations I've had with my mother about my father, this was the first time I had heard her speak about the guilt of not being able to save him, and of her need to heal and be free.

After so many years of holding my breath through the months of September and October, I was also ready. The High Holy Days, after all, celebrate forgiveness, which, like everything else, starts with the self. *I said I would go with her. "The moment you can visualize being free from the things that hold you back, you have indeed begun to set yourself free."*

PS You'll recall that last night I introduced you Luca Ciraldo, currently ensconced on the 10th floor at La Bonheur. I asked you to pray for him and his family, and I hope you'll keep them in your hearts. As I've been sharing words about resolve, about what it means to reclaim our focus, to stoke the fires of persistence, to refuse to fold our cards - even in the face of an uncertain outlook, of a bleak world around us - here's a bit of Luca's one step forward one step back, stay on course life, from Caring Bridge, this past Wednesday night...*written by Nicholas Ciraldo*

Rachel and I painstakingly fed a very reluctant Luca what turned out to be a good breakfast, and then he threw it all up. The rest of the morning Luca's mood was so-so, and we trudged through until his nap. After that, we tried again. The same thing happened, but, this time, surprisingly, Luca was in much better spirits afterward. He played and he played, happy as can be, the rest of the day. Rachel and I scratched our heads but welcomed the change of pace.

Our doctor then came in early this evening. He thinks there could be any reason why Luca is not eating, from the excess fluid that remains in his abdomen, a result of the surgeries, to a potential irritation of a vein on the stomach near the area where they operated, to any of the other reasons we mentioned in previous posts. So he does not really have a good model to use to resolve the eating issue other than to insert a feeding tube. This solution seems inevitable. He also is doubtful we would be able to leave this week. "Probably Monday," his safest bet, was not what we wanted to hear.

We then tried to feed Luca a third time this evening, and, finally, he kept his little meal down. His rejuvenated mood and successful dinner made our day.

I think I can! I think I can! I think I can! I think I can! I think I can! I think I can!

Oh, and by the way, today I am compelled to fix something Danielle Gelfand's rabbi once said. The ark doors will close after Ne'ila, but the Gates of Heaven *never, ever* close. קרוב ה לכל קוראיו – God is close by to everyone who calls. The gates stay open.

Robert Frost gets the last word today: *First thing I do in the morning is make up my bed. Then I make up my mind.*

שנה טובה