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Lessons of a Broken Toe

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By: Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch

I broke my toe last spring. It was the darndest thing.

I was on safari in India. My goal was to see the rare Bengal tiger.

My wife and I are not outdoors people. Rather than commune with nature, we prefer to commute through nature on the way to some Alpine resort. So this would be an opportunity to experience the wild and to absorb the awesome power of one of its most fearsome predators. Who knows whether these legendary carnivores will even survive in the wild a generation from now?

We set out into the jungle early in the morning. There were eight of us in the back of an open-air truck, sheltered from the blazing sun by one of those flimsy white canopies.

Within an hour we were in tiger country. The jungle was heaving with primordial energy.

Like all cats, tigers dislike noise. So the motor was shut, and our guide cautioned us not to make a sound. And there, in the middle of the jungle, we waited. And we waited. And we waited.

After what seemed like hours something moved in the trees: some feral stealth that rustled the mighty leaves of the Banyan trees. And then, a slow, deep growl, most fearsome, that roused our breathless anticipation.

Suddenly, I heard a human sob. It was soft, it was feminine but it was unmistakable. No one else heard it but I was so attuned to my surroundings that I was sure. A woman was crying for help. She must have heard the tiger on the prowl, and it was lunchtime for the big cat.

“Did you hear that?” “There is a woman in distress. Someone needs to save her,” I pleaded.

The Indian guide thought I had lost my mind. “Jungle Fever,” he mumbled, commanding that no one leave his truck.

On instinct, sensing that I would be restrained in seconds by the burly guide who considered me a threat to everyone else, I leaped out of the truck to save the damsel:

Well, to make a very long story short, I found the woman cowering behind the Banyan tree: She was blond and beautiful and Scandinavian. We dashed for the truck. The stunned passengers lifted her up and threw her in.

I grabbed the railing and as I pulled myself over: CRUNCH. I heard it before I felt it. It was the middle phalanx of my *digitus pedis quartus IV* – otherwise known as the fourth toe – broken by the incisors of a Bengal tiger.

But at least I broke my toe doing something heroic...

...Now you tell me: what rabbi has time to go to India in the middle of the year?

I stubbed my toe on a chair in my apartment in New York City. It wasn't heroic. It was stupid. There was no damsel in distress. It was for nothing.

But who wants to admit that their suffering is for nothing? If we are condemned to months of pain; if we are reduced to temporary or permanent disability, at least let it be for a heroic cause. Senseless suffering is senseless. Even a skiing crash is for something; although given the number of congregants who return with broken bones, somehow I think that there are better pursuits for Jews.

But I would take even that: If I could say that I crashed in pursuit of the world downhill record for Jewish men over the age of fifty-five: Or you know what – not a competition - just the mental image of gliding downhill, the wind in my face, the mountain at my command, suggests a kind of masculine significance to an otherwise unmanly and meaningless toe fracture, the result of placing the Complete Essays of Montaigne on the bookshelf.

When all is well with us, when everything is working; when we are carefree and unburdened by life; when we are so nonplussed that we don't even think about what needs to happen in our bodies to enable us to walk or breathe, we live in a heroic state of mind. Life yields to the force of our will. We are fearless, capable of heroic acts. If called upon, we will save the damsel in distress.

In this state of mind, we have an insatiable appetite for conquest and pleasure, eating the fat of the wheat and drawing honey from the rock. I mean this in the most positive sense. Our tradition insists that we be productive; that we master our world; that we accomplish and achieve, that we prevail over adversity: Judaism considers this world important and consequential, not merely a rest stop on the highway to heaven. "Whatever is in your power to do, do it with all your might," Ecclesiastes teaches.

And our tradition urges us to enjoy the fruits of our labor. We do not work for nothing. The Talmud cautions that we will be admonished in the world to come for all the legitimate pleasures we denied ourselves in this world.

In the heroic state of mind, living productively and optimizing our potential requires constant self-focus. *Im ein ani li mi li* say the Rabbis: If I am not for myself, who will be for me. They understood that the natural state of human beings is: For me.

Our sages acknowledged that we see the world from the inside out: that we have – and should have – a high estimation of our worth. They encouraged us to view ourselves heroically. I can be a gladiator, slay dragons, save damsels in distress. And when fractures occur in my life, they quickly heal.

The Rabbis actually use the term heroic. Be a hero, they urge.

Eizeh hu gibbor – who is a hero - asks the Mishna. Live like a hero. Conquer, master, produce, enjoy, overcome obstacles on your way to self-realization and self-fulfillment.

Self-realization requires such self-focus that when we are in this heroic state of mind, we view even those who are struggling as somehow about me. Subtly and even subconsciously we consider another's problem a conspiracy against me: That annoying homeless man who accosts me every morning; he may not have had anything to eat since yesterday, but I view him as a hindrance, slowing me down, causing me to be late for my meeting; or that crazed woman who plants herself by my building every night, shrieking at the top of her lungs. She may be schizophrenic, enduring frightful agony, day after day for years on end, but I don't see her in her struggle; I see only me: she's in my way, disrupting my sleep that is so critical for my world shaking history-altering job.

In the heroic state of mind we view the world through our own irrepressible ego. It is what Shakespeare meant when he wrote:

A wretch soul bruised with adversity
We bid be quiet when we hear it cry;
But were we burdened with like weight of pain
As much or more, we should ourselves complain.
(Comedy of Errors)

It dawned on me through these many months of inflammation, how swollen we are with ourselves. My problems are monumental. Your problems are minute. To paraphrase Mel Brooks, who paraphrased Shakespeare: "Tragedy is when I stub my toe. Comedy is when you fall into an open manhole and die."

What a tragedy. Woe is me. I have been limping around town for months, and it has seemed to me that I am the only one hobbling. I look around and everyone else – eight million people – are fine. They are in perfect health. They are running past me; jostling me on the sidewalk in that New York kind of way. I am the only one – the only person in New York City – with problems.

It is absurd. Who even thinks of toes? Have you ever given even a passing thought to your fourth toe – the one that is so obscure that it doesn't even really have a name: we simply call it "the fourth toe – you know – the one near the pinky?"

But at least I saved a damsel in distress. Note the human capacity to veil absurdity with poetic ballads of heroic courage. Our pain must mean something; it must serve a higher cause. Unexplained and underserved suffering is just stupid and meaningless.

When we are moving so effortlessly through life we tend to attribute our buoyancy to our own innate excellence. We do not think of fragility when we are conquering. We are on top because we have worked hard and have terrific qualities. We are smart and disciplined. We stay healthy. We eat right. We exercise.

We attribute our vitality to ourselves. My success is the product of my will. How do presidential candidates put it nowadays: "I'm a winner; you're a loser. You got to see this guy with these physical disabilities. I'm so amazing. I'm so successful." We rarely consider the possibility that fortune has smiled on us or that her wheel will turn.

And, therefore, precisely at these times, when we are most full of ourselves, Jewish sages remind us that strength is itself, a form of spirituality: that we should be spiritually inspired when none of the hundreds of things that could go wrong, in fact, go wrong. The Rabbis ordained that every morning, when Jews wake up, we should recite these words of religious amazement and spiritual gratitude:

Baruch ata Adonai...asher yatzar et ha'adam bechochma...

Praised are you O God, Who has formed the human body with wisdom – an intricate network of channels and vessels – and if even one of them shall falter, we would be unable to exist and to stand before You.

Baruch ata Adonai...hameichin mitzadei gaver.

Praised are you O God, Who gives me the strength to stand up. For if even a tiny bone that no one ever thinks about fractures, I shall be unable to walk.

The Sages constantly remind us that we stand not only because we exercise. The Master has gifted us the strength to stand. *Da lifnei mi ata omed* - the Mishna instructs - know before whom you stand. It is written above our ark and atop hundreds of other synagogue arks.

Our sages realized that our problem is not that we have a sense of self – that is a good and necessary thing, but that we have an overestimation of our self. We value ourselves too much and value others not enough. We tend to assign our strength exclusively to the force of our marvelous qualities.

It is the reason for the book of Job. We must be stripped of what we have to appreciate our gifts. It is impossible to appreciate the gift of beauty, until we have been stripped of radiance, boils covering us from head to toe. It is impossible to appreciate the gift of prosperity until we have been stripped of house and home, sitting on the dung heap of town. It is impossible to appreciate the gift of family until we have been stripped of their loving presence.

It is impossible to appreciate the ethereal splendor of life, until we have endured emotional anguish. It is impossible to appreciate the gift of mobility until mobility becomes the painful focus of our every step rather than its effortless byproduct.

And so Judaism urges us to step out of ourselves even when we are at full strength. How difficult this is. We are not designed to empathize with others.

To paraphrase David Foster Wallace: It takes effort to envision that the annoying guy who whizzed by me on the sidewalk might be rushing to his fiftieth job interview. Or that the woman who was too absorbed in her phone call to move aside as I hobbled by, might be speaking with her doctor, receiving a difficult diagnosis. Or that the parents who coo over their baby disrupting the natural flow of pedestrian traffic, might have been trying to conceive for ten years.

It takes effort to see that, actually, there are many physically disabled and emotionally challenged people on the street, and many more who are not on the street. I am not the only one limping. In fact, if I am honest with myself, I have it better than many.

If we really look, we will discover that everything is broken. We are all infirm. We might look whole from the outside, but we are a collection of broken pieces coarsely glued together. God alone is perfect.

The Bible describes how Moses carried the two tablets of stone down the mountain. They were whole and complete, inscribed by the finger of God. As Moses observed the people dancing around the Golden Calf, he flung the tablets, shattering them into many pieces. Moses then ascended Mount Sinai a second time and returned forty days later with a second set of tablets that he placed in the Ark of the Covenant. The Tablets of the Covenant eventually found their home in the Holy of Holies, the most sacred spot on earth, in the Temple in Jerusalem.

But some sages asked: what happened to the original tablets, those pieces that Moses shattered? Where did they go?

There is a fascinating passage in the Talmud that asserts that the shards of the broken tablets were also placed in the Ark of the Covenant. Rabbi Joseph taught that both sets of Tablets were there – the perfect second set as well as the shattered pieces of the first set. The sage felt that the shattered tablets also contained holiness; they too bore the imprint of the divine word. They did not lose their sanctity simply because they were broken. For this reason, he argued, Moses placed the pieces alongside the unbroken tablets in the Ark of the Covenant.

And from this, R. Joseph teaches a profound lesson. “From Moses,” he writes, “we learn that we are forbidden to be disrespectful to” those, who have been broken by life.

The Talmud states that a person who does not have suffering in his family for even forty days should consider himself blessed. Gradually we learn that we are most happy in the unexceptional moments of no real drama; the forty days between crises: moments of

ordinariness, embracing our partner, a family gathering, an evening with a friend who alone understands us, or casually walking our children to school.

Even for the most fortunate, our strength will diminish and our power will fade. If we are blessed with fullness of years, we will become frail. The challenge, then, is to learn how to live when we are empowered, conquerors and dragon slayers, and to learn how to live when we are disempowered.

As Shakespeare writes in King Lear, a man who experienced both domination and dependency: “Men must endure their going hence, even as their coming hither: Ripeness is all.”

Everything is incomplete. We never see the world whole. And therefore, all of us are religious. Everyone believes. Sometimes I think that unbelievers are the most religious of all. Science tells us that we are nothing, and yet even the one who professes no sense of transcendence - soldiers on purposefully, hopefully and courageously.

Look at all the people who are in wheelchairs and have nurses and aids with them. Men and women bent over by infirmity. Look at those who endure emotional pain. Look at the dispossessed, the struggling, the chronically ill: And still they push on. This is humanity at its best!

What is more human than to see a person struggling to take the next step; grappling with infirmity of mind or body, mourning loss and brokenness, knowing that there will be no complete reconciliation, but pushing on? She continues to plan for the future. He continues to love, knowing that his love will be broken one day.

This is the epitome of faith! To know that the struggle will eventually be lost, and yet to persist, is the essence of human courage. It is nobility. It is spirituality. What is more spiritual than the human struggle to reconcile with loss – loss of loved ones, loss of physical and emotional capacities?

Reconciliation is not resignation. Limping through life, wrestling with our angels, retaining our passions and convictions even during the dark hours of night, confident that the sun will rise, is victory, not defeat. It is meaningful, not meaningless, purposeful not purposeless. It is spiritual, not spiritless.

Eizeh hu gibbor – who is a hero? Rabbi Ben Zoma answers: *hakovesh* - the one who conquers. A hero is a conqueror.

But what exactly does he conquer? *Yitzro* – Ben Zoma teaches. He conquers himself; his urges, his negative impulses; his propensity for despair. There are plenty of reasons for a person to despair. A hero is the one who is not broken by brokenness. A hero is the one who soldiers on, heroically, even when not cured. A hero is the one who lives purposefully with incompleteness.

A hero is the one who knows that the trumpet of life always wavers; that the *tekiah* – the unbroken blast, is followed by *shevarim* – broken sounds.

A hero is the one who, in the face of all the senseless absurdities and sufferings of life, keeps on keeping on, not giving in to disillusion and despair.

Just to have lived, leaving no mark on the world, no sign that we were here; no reason to have paid attention, seems to us a squandered life. To see ourselves simply as highly evolved animals, perpetually hunted by tigers, ever on guard as we tensely lap the shrinking waterhole of life, is to succumb to existential despair.

Why do I live? If you have sought an answer to this question you have found the wellspring of spirituality, the pure, life-giving waters of meaning that inspired the poets, writers, humanists, religionists, mystics, philosophers, musicians, artists, and even many of the great scientists of the human species.

Why do I live? What is my purpose? Let life be for a heroic cause.

This is why we are here today: to render our lives more meaningful, to gain perspective, a sense of what could be. We do not expect radical change. It is not the way of the world. Tomorrow we will be as full of ourselves as today. The High Holy Days liturgy understands our predicament. The Kol Nidre prayer asks for forgiveness for future transgressions, the ones we have yet to commit. The Rabbis simply assume that we will go on being who we are – consumed and driven by the predisposition, hard-wired into our very being, that I am the center of the universe.

And thus, what we seek in repentance is not to become a new person, the one we always dreamed we could be. People do not change that much. Rather, we seek a sense of change; some reverberation that suggests the possibility of change.

When the prince slays the dragon and saves the damsel, we, ourselves, do not become heroic, but we acquire a sense of the heroic. The courage of another does not cure us of our cowardice. Her decency does not expel our indecency. His generosity does not remove our stinginess. But we are inspired, nonetheless, because these acts suggest to us the possibility of change.

A fracture that has healed does not cure our brokenness, but gives us a sense that we can be cured. That in some distant land or undiscovered country, human redemption is possible.

This is what religion means when we speak of redemptive suffering. We would rather not suffer. But when suffering inevitably comes, it gives us a sense of redemption; that faint glimmer of the fundamental oneness of all creation, that suggests the possibility that in the distant horizons of time and space, we shall finally understand why we live.