

Holy Interruptions and Distractions?  
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It's Thursday morning in Jerusalem. My wife, Debbie and I are walking from our hotel to *ha ir ha atika*, the Old City to experience some of the holy sights and to pray at the Western Wall. It is the beginning of our second week in Israel and what a glorious time it's been. We've traveled, met family and friends, and spent our first Shabbat in Safed, one of the important cities in Jewish mystical tradition. We're blessed to be here on the eve of Israel's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, which will be in May of 2008. And, I am able to speak some Hebrew as well. It's a nice change of pace to be able to converse with people, ask for directions and negotiate with cab drivers, all in Hebrew. After all, you can't very far in Israel with, "*Va yidaber Adonai, el Moshe laymor*, And God spoke to Moses saying...." That works in Torah Study, but not so well in the streets of Jerusalem.

We enter the Old City, and as we approach the Wall, we're greeted with the sounds of *David Melech Yisrael* and other Jewish melodies, as boys sing and dance with the Torah -- part of the many *B'nei Mitzvah* celebrations on that day. Just imagine all the energy of Shabbat morning at CRC - lots of singing and dancing, percussion, and high energy, but magnified many times. And there are also a few differences. First, men and women are praying separately. Also, there are many very observant Jews praying here which adds to the richness of the experience. And, most of all, we are standing in the places that we mention in our prayers. When we say, at the end of the *Hashkivienu* prayer, "O Blessed are you Adonai, who spreads the shelter of peace over us and over Israel and over Jerusalem," we realize that we're in Israel and in Jerusalem. We're in the very places of our prayers. We're not just reading about these places. We're in the midst of these places.

And, what a place it is, especially the Western Wall or Wailing Wall as it is sometimes referred. The Western Wall is part of the actual wall, which surrounded the Second Temple that was destroyed in the year 70 C.E. And, the Western Wall is a melting pot – within a few yards of each other are hundreds of men ranging from tourists with cameras to the most Orthodox Jews, wearing black hats and long coats. There are rabbis from local yeshivot and women praying and schmoozing together. There is a group from Nigeria huddled together about to pray at the Wall and a group of Israeli soldiers having their own prayer experience together. It's a kind of a spiritual Grand Central Station, and yet, it's one of the holiest places in all of Israel. I say goodbye to Debbie, who's on her way to pray on the women's side, and I begin to make my way to the Wall. It's crowded. I'm looking for a place.

I find my spot at the wall, take a few minutes to breathe, and center myself to be ready to pray. I have in my hands the notes people have given to me to place inside the wall and my list of names of people for whom to pray. I begin, as we often do, with a

*niggun*. *Shalom u'vracha, shalom u'vracha*, peace and blessing. I feel myself descending into prayer, and I move to the heart of my prayers – my dialogue with God. I'm praying for the health and well being of my family and friends. I'm praying for all of you, members of CRC, your families, and friends. I'm praying for your health and well-being -- that we can turn to each other as a caring community, and truly being there to support each other. As I'm praying, I'm placing the notes I received into the cracks and crevices in the wall. And then..... And then.... A most amazing thing happens. A man taps me on the shoulder, and asks me for money! Imagine this. I'm getting deeper and deeper into prayer, and a man is asking me for money. "*Ani m'vakesh kesef l'shabbat, b'vakasha*", he says. I would like some money for Shabbat, please. First of all, it's Thursday! Second of all, I'm a little busy! I'm not just schmoozing with a friend over a *felafel*. And third, could you at least wait until I finish praying, and ask me while I am walking away from the Wall? I'm happy to give money to you then. As a matter of fact, we have lots of *tzedakah* money that we brought with us -- some of which was given to us, by some of you, for these very moments. I am stunned. So stunned that I don't say any of these things. All I can do is shake my head, "No." He leaves.

I go back to praying, but it's different. The mood is changed. I'm annoyed and distracted. Back to my *niggun - Shalom u vracha. shalom u vracha*. I'm getting back into my prayers. I pray for my clients that they may find good ways to get unstuck and find the healing they need. I pray that I can, with God's help, be a nourishing soul for them on their journeys. And I pray for my students that they can learn what they need to learn and that I may teach them with skill and kindness. *Ivdu et Hashem b'simcha*, emerges from the Psalms. Serve God with gladness – how to do this, am I on the right path? Help me to know what to do to serve You? What else do I need to do, to learn, so I can continue to be a vessel for Your work? I'm quiet now. Listening for God's voice.

And then..... a second man taps me on the shoulder, and asks me for money! This man, wearing a tallit, doesn't even speak. He just taps me. I open my eyes and he gestures me to give him some money. It's like he doesn't want to disturb my prayers by talking. Again, I'm stunned and just shake my head, "No." He leaves. What is this about? There must be a lesson in this for me. What am I to learn from these interruptions? I'm distracted and again, and I'm annoyed. I want to be able to pray for peace, in peace. Back to my *niggun. Shalom u'vracha, shalom u'vracha*. I'm back in my prayers. I'm praying for peace, now. Peace and blessing. Peace inside ourselves, for all of us, peace in our families, peace in our communities and in our cities. I want there to be peace in this very complicated part of the world -- Israel and the Middle East. I feel so safe here. It's hard to believe that there isn't true and lasting peace in this region. I even open to the possibility of praying for the peace of my two prayer intruders. As I envision peace, I feel my annoyance diminishing and I'm feeling a sense of calm. I place a few more notes in the wall. I'm envisioning the people who gave me notes and envisioning the people I'm praying for, and envisioning a more a peaceful world. I'm getting quiet now. Almost at the end of my prayers.

And then..... a third man taps me on the shoulder. I avoid him, thinking, "If I don't answer, he'll go away." I don't answer, and he doesn't go away. "*Atah m'daber*

*ivrit*, he says. “Do you speak Hebrew?” Now most of the time that I am asked this question, I’m excited to respond, “*Ken, ani m’daber katzat Ivrit*. Yes, I speak a little Hebrew.” In this moment, I just want just to shake my head, ‘No’ and be done with it. But, I know there is something for me to learn, *Hayom*, today, right here, *Ba makom hazeh*, in this place. I’m angry now. How am I going to respond to him?..... I slowly open my eyes and turn to him. A very religious man is looking at me. I look at him. What do I say? What to do in this difficult and awkward moment?

*Shanah Tovah*. I bring you blessings from the land of Israel and my sincerest prayers for a happy, healthy, peaceful, and sweet New Year. This story, although incomplete, offers us a way to look toward the New Year and, perhaps, a way to begin the New Year. Interruptions and distractions. How do we deal with our interruptions and our distractions? You’re reading a terrific book and just at a critical time in the story, the phone rings. The last thing you want to do is talk on the phone. You’re watching your favorite television program or a crucial time in a sporting event and the doorbell rings. You think, “Who could possibly be calling on me now? Don’t they know that is isn’t a good time? Or, you’re working diligently on a project and your boss wants to speak with you, right now, and asks you to do something totally different. Or, you receive some scary medical news; hear of a friend’s painful divorce, illness, or even death. These High Holidays may even feel like an interruption or a distraction to you. “I’ve got so much to do at work. I don’t know if I can spend all that time at services.” We all know what it’s like to be interrupted and distracted.

Maybe, too, we know what it’s like on the other side - to be the one who interrupts or distracts the other person. But, chances are, we don’t know as much when we’re doing the interrupting or distracting. Just a few days ago, when I was so excited about an idea for this sermon, I ran downstairs to the living room where Debbie was reading and I said, “Hey, I just got an idea to write about how we get distracted or interrupted. She said, “I know exactly what you’re talking about.

In Hebrew, the word for interruption, *haph sa kah*, comes from the verb, *l’haf sik*, to interrupt, and has as its root letters, *pe, samech, koof*. The same root letters also form the verb, *lif sok* which has four other meanings, all which hint at how we can respond to our interruptions. First, *lif sok* can mean to stop or cease. One way to deal with being distracted is just to stop it, ignore it, say no to it. I won’t pay attention to this now. It’s a kind of spiritual denial. I’m being distracted but I’m not going to deal with it. I considered this strategy in my third interruption at the Western Wall. I thought that if I could ignore the interruption it would go away. Sometimes it works. In this example, it didn’t.

*Lif sok* can also mean to give or pass judgment. This was easy for me to do with all three of my interruptions. The judgment was, “I don’t like these men, what they’re doing is wrong, they shouldn’t be doing it etc. The judgment of the one who interrupts is almost always negative and doesn’t really help me to feel better or empowered at all. We’ve probably all made judgments like this about the people who interrupt us. The third meaning of *lif sok* is amazing to me. *Lif sok* can also mean, “to allocate money.”

Unbelievable. The Hebrew language is actually informing us that we can deal with the distraction of being asked for money by giving money. The last meaning of *Lif sok* can mean to read from the scriptures. As a matter of fact, the word *pasuk* or verse comes from this root *pe samech, koof*. We can go to Torah and find a *pasuk*, a verse, as another way to deal with our interruptions. So, I went to Torah.

I found two sections of Torah that illuminate something about our interruptions and distractions. The first is the story of the Red Heifer, found in Numbers 19-22. In this story, the ashes of a pure, unblemished, red cow are mixed with water in order to purify those that come in contact with the dead. And, for those who are already pure, if they touch this mixture they become impure. So, the mixture makes the impure, pure, and makes the pure impure. Uh,...We need Moses to help us with this one, because it's one of the most difficult portions to understand in all of Torah. And, as you would guess, there is much commentary about what these verses mean, including that there are just some things that we cannot understand. Interestingly enough, after 22 verses of description of the Red Heifer, the next line reads, "*V' tamot sham Miryam v'tikaver sham*, And Miriam died there and was buried there." Nothing else is said about Miriam's death. Nothing -- twenty-two verses about the Red Heifer and one verse about the death of Moses' sister. Perhaps the rabbis are teaching us something important here. The 22 verses of the Red Heifer are designed to distract us from what might be more important -- namely the death of Miriam. What better way to teach us about distractions than by actually distracting us in the text?

The next section of Torah is the portion we typically read on the second Day of Rosh Hashanah. It's the Akeidah, the binding of Isaac. In this difficult story, Abraham is just about to sacrifice his son Isaac when the Angel of God cries, out Avraham, Avraham!! That cry from the Angel distracts Abraham away from what he is about to do. In the Red Heifer example, the distraction takes us away from what is important. In the Akeidah example, the distraction is what's important.

So think for a moment about the interruptions and distractions in your life. At first glance, the interruptions and distractions will probably seem like "Red Heifer" distractions; they take us **away** from what's important. But if we look a little deeper, we may find that some of the interruptions and distractions are "Akeidah" distractions -- they are what's important. Responding to the longing look of a child, the spouse who wants more of your time, or the friend who calls you in need, may be the very distractions that can transform us in this New Year. I want to invite you to see your interruptions and distractions, not just as annoyances, but as possible opportunities for spiritual growth. Attend to them, find out about them, and where they can lead you. Paying attention to our interruptions and distractions can also strengthen our ability to distinguish between an ordinary, bothersome diversion and a truly important and possible life changing moment. There's only one risk in getting to know our interruptions and distractions -- that we will overly focus on them and thereby develop a kind of Spiritual Attention Deficit Disorder. But the benefit, the benefit, can be *teshuvah*, a transformation inside ourselves, and in our relationships with our families, our friends and maybe even in our relationship with God.

*Shalom u'vracha shalom u'vracha* I'm back at the Western Wall, interrupted and distracted for the third time, and feeling angry. I open my eyes and turn to him. The man looking at me and I look at him. How am I going to respond? "*Ma she atah oseh, lo tov,*" I say to him. "What you are doing is not good." "*Ani po l'hitpaleil.* I'm here to pray. I look at him. He looks at me. And he leaves. At the time, I feel good and empowered. I finally stand up for myself and say what I need to say. Now, .....tonight,..... I don't feel so good or empowered. Because, I missed the very opportunity I just spoke about, to all of you. I missed a possible moment of transformation -- that attending a little more to my interruptions and distractions, may have provided.

You know, I can't wait to return to Israel, not just to see our cousins, not just to revisit the land, and not just to see the places we didn't see this time. I want to go back to Israel, so I can go back to the Old City, find my spot at the Western Wall, and get back to my praying. And what will I pray for there? I will pray for an interruption, .....that I might have one more opportunity to make a different response. And that's the *kavanah*, the intention, of these High Holy days. *Teshuvah*. To be able to see it through a new lens, a way that helps us to get unstuck, so we can respond in a new and more holy way. May we be able to pay a little more attention to our interruptions and distractions in this New Year and perhaps respond to them with a little more patience, a little less judgment, and a little more Torah. And that, may open the door for us to have a happy, healthy, and more peaceful New Year. *Ken y'hi ratzon*. May this be God's will. Amen.