

TREE IN TREE

Rabbi Randy Fleisher

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When I was a boy, I had a terrible sense of directions. I say 'directions' purposely, because it wasn't so much a lack of knowledge of how to get 'there' from 'here' but a difficulty in orientating myself to the cardinal directions. I would have my dad quiz me: 'O.K. Randy, we've been going north, and I took a right turn, now what direction are we traveling in?' " _____ " was my typical reply. Unless we were headed directly into the setting sun, or straight into Lake Michigan (in Chicago, the 'lake is always east. '), I was unmoored.

I am pleased to report that today I am no longer directionally challenged. (point out directions) Certainly settling in St. Louis has helped. After moving around a great deal until my late 30's, I have now lived here for nearly a decade, and immersion into a place and all that makes it 'home' for me and my family has helped me to finally internalize the compass. I take great pleasure in knowing for sure that from my home in University City: to the east is the LOOP Drum Circle, CRC and the Arch; to the north are Cornerstone Baptist and Cote Brillante churches, and then onto the wonderful Confluence State Park; to the west are the JCCs and Creve Coeur Lake, and to the south is.....no, I know that to the south is the Focal Point in Maplewood and eventually to my favorite swimmin' hole, Johnston' Shut-Ins!

Still, I cannot attribute this new found expertise to a sense of geographic belonging alone; a deeper grounding in Jewish spirituality has helped draw this new, more accurate map in my heart. Based on a verse in the book of Isaiah, Jewish mystics called the cardinal directions the *arbah ruchot*, or the 4 winds. Awareness of these winds, write the teachers of the Zohar, is an awakening to the entirety of Creation. All four winds are considered sacred, highlighted most prominently during the next full moon on Sukkot when Jews around the world, will wave lulavs and etrogs purposely to each of the four directions, then to earth and sky. According to our texts, each direction is identified with its own unique qualities, color, animal symbol and shield.

But, even here in the 'gateway to the west,' it is the east wind that attracts most attention in our tradition. The Talmud directs worshippers, wherever they live, to direct prayers towards the Land of Israel. Because so many Jews live west of Israel, our spiritual focus is became eastward; the word *mizrach*, one of the Hebrew words for 'east', is also the term to describe the direction to be faced during prayer. Those who live to the east, north, and south of Israel, are said to pray towards *mizrach* though they are actually facing west, south or north in shul. Hence, east for Jews can be said to be a 'first among equals', directionally speaking.

Yet there is a more universal reason for the east wind to carry a special place in our souls. Beyond Israel, east is the direction of the rising sun; the word *mizrach* itself literally means *mezarah* - 'from the place of shining.' East is where we experience the first light of each day, bringing us clarity, renewal, and a visual sense of the diversity inherent in life. This direction, where the new day begins, signifies new beginnings, hope, and the possibility of change.

One day, some years ago, I was taking a walk through Kennedy Forest, the most heavily wooded area in Forest Park. At one point on the trail there was a small clearing with a simple

sign announcing that there was something to see-‘Tree in Tree, New Grows from Old.’ I looked over and there it was, a large hollowed out trunk of a red oak with a sapling growing inside, the younger tree visible through an oval shaped natural doorway in the older tree’s trunk. The limbs of the sapling had begun to extend through the top and sides of the old trunk, and one branch had been slightly bent so that it would grow out of the eastern side of the trunk. This branch was tied with a string that was staked on the ground and looked like a long finger pointing eastward.

This ‘environmental, site-specific sculpture,’ I have come to discover, was commissioned by the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Artsplan in 2004. It symbolizes the re-rooting of the Osage Native American tribal culture and values in Missouri, where the tribe was long based before they were forced to relocate to an out-of-state reservation. The sapling, you see, is a young Osage Orange tree, and the tethering renews an ancient Indian practice of manipulating trees by bending branches or trunks as they were growing. These marker, or guide trees, pointed the way homeward, to water, or to sacred places. The ‘Tree in Tree’ in Forest Park has a branch that will forever point to the east because the Osage had the same spiritual understanding of the shining place as did the Jewish mystics. The tree will be a guide to traveling in an easterly direction, a conceptual journey towards hope that the Osage believed we all should take each day.

This area has become for me a temple. I have held Hebrew naming ceremonies there, and I led a couple through a renewal of their marriage vows and then joyously danced with them around the ‘Tree in Tree.’ Most often, I come alone in the morning, let the tethered branch direct me to the eastern light (even though I know the way myself!) and I chant Modeh Ani, the morning prayer of awakening with gratitude, or a ‘great attitude.’ Then, I breathe in the quiet and calm, yet ecstatic sense of clarity, awe and humility; the sensory revivification I feel when I am surrounded by the natural world before I go on with the day.

This summer, I was visiting ‘Tree in Tree’ and there was a lone woman pulling weeds around the sculpture. She was none other than Karen McCoy, the lead artist on the project. Karen teaches at the Kansas City Art Institute, and returns to the Kennedy Forest a few times a year to make sure that the native plants that were part of the can design grow and thrive. Karen described the ceremony that occurred when the ‘Tree in Tree’ was completed. She said that Osage leaders had spoken powerfully about this new spirit that the sculpture embodied, allowing the tribe to re-connect to their ancestral homeland and enabling their teachings and values to inspire those who, like me, would have an encounter with ‘Tree in Tree.’

The Hebrew word for ‘tree,’ ‘eitz’ is at the root of ‘eitzha,’ which means guidance and advice, as it is written in Torah, “A person is most like a tree in the field.” I believe that the natural sculpture ‘Tree in Tree’ contains wisdom for the new year. Clearly, the concept of teshuvah belongs in the Osage and Jewish symbolism surrounding the east; the branch of the sapling that has been directed to grow eastward epitomizes the optimistic of these High Holidays-that as long as we have breath, changing for the better is always an option. There is also a subtle, though no less powerful message in its subtitle-‘New Grows from Old.’ Despite the fact that it is human nature to sometimes hope for wholesale, immediate, and even magical transformation, the reality is that our changes can only occur in the context of ‘new from old’- within the parameters of who we are and who we have always been. This is why the work of teshuvah is so hard-WE, with all of our gifts, but also with all of our flaws, this is the material to work with!

Maybe this is the reason that the Hebrew phrase we repeat throughout the Days of Awe is *shaarei teshuvah*, the 'gates' of teshuvah plural and never *shaar teshuvah*, the singular 'gate.' Isn't it experientially true that we must go through many gates, lots of gates, a series of gates over time to achieve real change? It's like, well, it's like rings on a tree. We are a collection of all our experiences, acts of goodness, mistakes, relationships, passions, that which we are ashamed of and that of which we are most proud-some right there near the surface, and others hidden but still making an impact. The old tree in Kennedy Forest which currently shelters the new one will someday decay and disappear from sight, but the old oak will still be present, its elements transforming and enriching the soil, unseen, but still part of the osage as it grows ever more sure and strong.

Rabbi Gershon Winkler uses the four directions to explain this phenomenon. "We begin our lives in the North, the place of mystery, with no clue of where we came from. Then we move into the blending place of the west, where we are acculturated, but still unaware of who we are. Then we move into the south, the place of clarity, where we begin our quest for self-identity. Finally, we move into the east, where we find an aspect of our unique selfhood. Only the catch is that no longer have you settled into this version of yourself when the wheel spins you back to the north baffling you with further mysteries about life and yourself." The wheel creates a spiral, as each discovery, every incarnation adds to the whole without erasing what came before. The novelist Jim Fergus wrote that, "My most recent revelation is that I go to my grave as the boy I once was and still am."

Change, even the teshuvah we pray for during these Days of Awe, is then necessarily slow and incremental; layered upon decisions, convictions and attempts made previously. I believe we can better withstand this somewhat deflating knowledge and frustrating pace when we remember the overall vision which is to be sure our changes are at least pointing us in the right way, as the Hasidim teach: in order to change direction entirely, one must still start with one small turn. Is the turning we hope to make this year designed to point us 'eastward', toward the promise of our greatest potential renewed? Toward increased capacity for generosity, compassion, righteousness? Perhaps we could all use a product I found on the internet called a 'Jerusalem compass, in which 'E' is at the top instead of the 'N!' Though our 'new' can only come from our 'old,' we still have a tremendous pull, as Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik taught, to make our lives and make life itself better, living with ever more love, compassion and integrity.

I have long believed that the single most important message in Judaism is 'Love your Neighbor.' I take this to mean that it is a core human task, in each individual's own way, to make a caring, helpful and life-affirming impact on as many people in our lifetimes as is possible. Until recently, I have not been terribly effective in terms of truly reaching passers-by, people with whom I only have fleeting contact. It might sound funny coming from a person who chose the clergy as a career, but I have never been comfortable with the saying, 'God bless you' as a greeting. It never felt natural; too fundamentalist or archaic, something that belonged in a synagogue or church maybe, but not out and about. However, in yet another attempt to communicate concern and love to strangers, I tried it a few times. Honestly, I was completely unprepared for how moved people became: eyes welled up with tears, I was profusely thanked (and blessed right back), and the general energy in the space we inhabited shifted palpably to the good. This was too good to turn back, and I began to use 'God Bless You' almost every day. Nobody has taken offence-people, it seems, are gracious about translating the phrase into their own religious or secular language-and I finally feel as though I am making a true positive

difference when it comes to these brief encounters. Just last week, I rode my bicycle east on Delmar to CRC, freely offering dozens of 'God bless yous' on the way, and the whole street seemed to smile back. This is a change of behavior for me, though it evolved in a way that was organic and consistent with my core self, and I believe this teshuvah is leading me in the right direction.

Sometimes, we are blessed to guide a fellow traveler in a significant way. Here I am moved to read just a few excerpts from an essay by LaTwanne Troupe, now a young woman who was mentored while she was at Cote Brillante Elementary by our member Maris Berg:

"Maris pushed me to be a better student through her encouragement and belief in me. At that time, I just thought, 'wow, this lady really cares. Maris' actions were inspirational and they helped me to keep pursuing my goals. At the time I was so young and amazed by all I was experiencing with Maris-it made me wonder what else there was to be explored. She took me out of my comfort zone and made me eager to know more. Maris' initiative and will power started a path to success in my life. Through this experience I was exposed to the sensation of life through Maris' eyes and what I saw was beauty, selflessness and caring. Just by being connected to her I became enlightened and began to take on some of her qualities. I am now hopeful and confident of how I want my life to be."

Of course, as always, when we are a compass for another, we move forward as well.

This works on a societal level as well. In the midst of this holy season, I believe it is possible to momentarily put aside our deepest political affiliations and ideological convictions and simply marvel at the fact that no matter what, come January, one of the two most high profile positions in our nation's leadership will be held by either a person of color or a woman. Certainly, this will be a sea change in terms of breaking the hold white males have held on the most powerful positions in the land. Yet, we know this moment of collective teshuvah has not come to us out of nowhere. Years of struggle, activism and consciousness-raising are obvious antecedents, rings on the tree. We are watching seeds that were planted at the beginning of this nation's history finally flower without distortion or exclusion. And, while this is a change in the right direction, even after the inauguration there will be far more distance to travel when it comes to erasing discrimination, bias and unmerited privilege.

'Tree in Tree' artist Karen McCoy told me that Osage prayer practice was to face the rising sun each morning and chant, an act that provided a living metaphor for optimism, a key to their survival as a people. The ritual reminded me of one of my favorite stories of Reb Zalman in which he tells of being at a symposium on mysticism in Calgary, Canada. On the first morning, he woke up and went to the roof of the hotel where on one end the Canadian Rockies soared into the sky, and on the other, the prairie stretched for miles. The sky was still dark in the west, but in the east there were streaks of light. Reb Zalman faced east and began getting into his prayers. After a few minutes, Brother Rufus, a Native American medicine man also attending the conference, stepped onto the roof. He also took up a position facing east and began to perform his own morning ritual. Picture the two of them: facing the same direction with their arms raised, swaying back in forth, each chanting in a language that the other could not understand. At the moment of sunrise, the medicine man placed a small whist made of an eagle bone to his lips and blew a sharp note in every direction and the rabbi blew the shofar, made from the horn of a ram, saying to their sleeping souls, "Hey there, wake up! Pay attention!

Both men, now buoyed by their witness of the new day, were ready to say to move forward and make a positive difference.

I understand as I say all of this that there are moments for all of us that it all seems to be heading south. Many of you have faced or are facing loss, illness and other personal challenges. We are far from perfect and at times we find ourselves going the wrong way. Ecological disaster, economic disaster, and human suffering are almost too overwhelming to contemplate.

Yet I can't help allow all of that knowledge to be tempered by vision of that osage tree branch guiding us to mizrach, the place where hope shines each day anew. These days are meant for regret, but only regret for the sake of turning. I believe deeply that the teshuvah, the positive changes we make now on behalf of ourselves, our families, our communities and our planet will allow the goodness that already exists in the heart of the world to re-emerge like a sapling sprouting from the shell of an ancient tree. May position ourselves on the path and in the direction of the new day; the new year; a year of goodness and a year of peace.

Amen, and God bless you!