

*Back on the Bike and Regaining Our Balance:
Longing for Closeness In the Wake of Distance*
Rabbi Claudia Kreiman
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5783

I have a confession to make: I have never learned how to ride a bike.

It is a long story, which I will not share now. But that means that any time someone says, “Don’t worry, it’s just like riding a bike!” referring to our capacity to re-learn something we used to know, or do something we haven’t done in a while, I cannot relate. And I don’t feel much better.

For many of us, this past year has been a year of slowly re-entering back to life as it was before the Pandemic started. Some of us went back to work or school in-person, some of us are still staying mostly home and most of us have been navigating a combination of those.

We are desperately trying to find balance.

We are trying to glide through the world with ease.

I found this past year to be very challenging in a different way than the year before. Perhaps because of all the ups and downs. Last fall, we thought that maybe we were out of the woods from this Pandemic. But then Omicron hit and once again, we had to change plans, put on our masks, and go back to behaviors and practices that we thought were behind us.

For some of us going back to whatever we call normal was easy, perhaps just like riding a bike. But I believe that for most of us, re-entering society brought anxiety, fear, and the realization that it is not as easy to return to life as it was before.

For the past two and a half years, many of our relationships and interactions have centered on social distance. Although we found creative ways to stay spiritually connected, it was hard. It was long. It was filled with uncertainty.

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As humans, we are not supposed to be distanced from each other. We are meant to be connected. We crave closeness. That is part of our social DNA.

Last High Holidays, we were here together in person and on-line, but there was still so much fear, hesitation, and not knowing. Although some of that fear, hesitation, and uncertainty remains present today, it feels in a way that we are re-entering a new phase of physical closeness—not just at TBZ and High Holidays services, but in other aspects of our lives: our kids are going to school and, for the first time in three years, we can see their faces and their beautiful smiles.

I know we need to continue to be cautious, but I am ready to be close, to be close to you, and to invite closeness in our community.

And how do we do that? How do we come closer to each other? Some say it is like riding a bike. But in many conversations with people, I have learned that re-entering the world and showing up in our relationships has had its challenges; it isn't as easy as it was before.

Through these High Holidays, I hope to take you through a journey of thinking about the following questions: **How do we come close again? How do we show up? How do you show up? How do we learn to be connected and to be in community, in ways that are different; in ways that are new.**

The verse that will be guiding us this High Holidays is from Psalm 145, verse 18:

קָרוֹב ה' לְכֹל קוֹרְאָיו לְכֹל אֲשֶׁר יִקְרְאוּהוּ בְאֵמֶת
Karov Adonai l'chol korav, l'chol asher yikrau'hu v'emet
Adonai is near to all who call, to all who call sincerely.

God is close and near to those who call.

The word קָרוֹב *karov*, which means near or close, is from the same root as the word קָרְבָן *korban*, which means sacrifice or offering.

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There are different definitions to the word sacrifice:

A sacrifice is an act of slaughtering an animal or person or surrendering a possession as an offering to God or to a divine or supernatural figure.

A sacrifice is also defined as an act of giving up something valued for the sake of something else regarded as more important or worthy.

The origin of the word is from Latin *sacrificium* ; related to *sacrificus* ‘sacrificial,’ from *sacer* ‘holy.’

We can understand this to mean that an act of giving up, and an act of offering, are both holy acts.

Sacrifices then were an act of giving something valued, usually an animal and as the words of *קרוב* and *קרובן* are related, we can say that. to make a sacrifice is to become closer, and to become closer is an act of holiness.

In the book of Leviticus (9:7) we read:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־אַהֲרֹן קָרֵב אֶל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וַעֲשֵׂה אֶת־חַטָּאתְךָ וְאֶת־עֹלֹתְךָ...

Then Moses said to Aaron: “Come forward to the altar and sacrifice your sin offering and your burnt offering...”

Aaron is called to approach the altar. The word for approach is *Krav*.

Aaron is about to offer the sacrifice, so he is clearly approaching the altar. Why then does Moshe remind him to approach, to get close? Why does he need a reminder?

Rashi, the medieval commentator explains:

שָׁהָיָה אַהֲרֹן בּוֹשׁ וַיֵּרָא לְגִשְׁתּוֹ,

Aaron was hesitant, unsure, even embarrassed to come forward and present the offering.

In Rashi’s imagination of the scene, Moses then asks:

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אָמַר לוֹ מֹשֶׁה, לָמָּה אַתָּה בּוֹשׁ?
What are you embarrassed about?!

To which Moshe answers:
For this you have been chosen.

לְכֹד נִבְחַרְתָּ.

This is your purpose.

Thirteen century Spanish mystic Rabbi Bahya ben Asher, imagine Aaron seeing the altar in the shape of an ox -- which reminds him of the sin he committed by helping the people of Israel to make the golden calf. As Aaron is about to get closer to the Divine and bring his offering, he is reminded of his own sin, his own weakness. He is suddenly faced with his vulnerabilities and so he holds back.¹

A more modern image familiar to Harry Potter² lovers, is a Boggart — an a-mortal shape-shifting non-being that takes on the form of its observer's worst fear. We learn about the Boggart in Harry Potter Book 3 from a character named Professor Lupin. To get rid of the Boggart, Professor Lupin teaches his students the spell *Riddikulus* — a spell that combines our deepest fear with a funny or ridiculous characteristic. The character Neville, for example, imagines his greatest fear, Professor Snape, dressed up with his grandmother's clothes, which makes the spell work and causes the Boggart to disappear.³

Both the Biblical Aaron and the imaginary students of Hogwarts need to face their worst fears and confront what it is that holds them back. Only then can they truly be transformed; only *then* can they truly show up for themselves and for others.

At this moment, many of us might be feeling hesitant and afraid and vulnerable to bring ourselves back into the world, and I don't mean just physically, but spiritually.

¹ Rabbeinu Bahya to the Torah, Shmini 9:7

² By quoting Harry Potter I am not endorsing the transphobic views of J.K. Rowling. I separate and differentiate the creation from the writer.

³ Harry Potter, Book 3, Chapter seven: "The Boggart in the wardrobe"

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For many of us, getting back onto the bike feels overwhelming. But I think for all of us, even for those who find it easier, we know that there is an opportunity — a possibility — to face our own selves, our learnings, or our experiences from the past year a bit differently; perhaps with more intention, perhaps with a new perspective, perhaps with more clarity of our priorities, perhaps transforming the vulnerabilities into new sources of strength.

קרוב ה' לכל קראיו לכל אשר יקראהו באמת
Karov Adonai l'chol korav, l'chol asher yikrau'hu v'emet
Adonai is near to all who call, to all who call sincerely.

In our relationship to God, we offer part of ourselves to be in a relationship of intimacy. It is very similar to how we relate to other human beings, with our loved ones, and with the world in general. To be close, to be connected, is to offer others something and to receive their offering in return.

As we strive to be close to one another this season, may we also learn how to bring offerings to our communities — not only when it feels easy, but especially when it feels hard.

We may not always be gliding peacefully on our bikes this year. That would be too easy. But I hope that when our wheels are wobbling, when the road feels bumpy and long, we can trust that someone will offer us their hand or their heart to keep us balanced; and help us feel whole.

May it be a sweet and healthy new year. A year when each and every one of us can show up in the best ways possible — we love, with generosity, and with tenderness — as we strive to make this world a better place.

Shanah Tovah!

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