



A Small Gift
9/24/04
Rabbi Tara's Yom Kippur 2004 Sermon

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Like so many great encounters, it was really only by chance, accident, miraculous coincidence that I met her, that she found her way into my life. Her daughter, Valentina, had called me, saying that her family was interested in joining the synagogue where I worked in Brooklyn. It was a snowy morning last winter when Valentina and her mother made their way up the four flights to my office. Valentina introduced her mother, Ingrid a woman in her mid-fifties, and they sat down on my couch, breathing heavily from the stairs, brushing snow off their coats. We spoke about the religious school, the synagogue community, and then they began to tell me about their lives. Seated there in the safety of my little office, I listened to stories from another world, from Chile. It was Ingrid, Valentina's mother, who did most of the talking. I remember the grey sky outside my window. And, while she spoke softly, I remember Ingrid's fire as she told me about her life.

She had been raised in Concepcion, in Chile, the daughter of an aristocratic family, a family without any political activist leanings. But Ingrid was different. By time she was a young woman, she had taken to the street singing for students and union workers, protesting the brutality and injustice of the Pinoche regime under which she lived, a dictatorship based upon fear and silence. Ingrid knew the consequences, the risks of activism. After the military coup, fear pervaded the entire society. Those who went out after the curfew were shot. Those who spoke up disappeared, were tortured and often killed. In a simple, straightforward manner, Ingrid told me of her multiple imprisonments, the time she was blindfolded and her three month old baby, Valentina was taken from her arms. To where? She did not know. She told me about her exile to England, her journey to Brooklyn, and her desire to pass on Judaism to Emiliano, her grandson. At this point, I knew only the bare outlines of her story, but I was sure that seated across from me was a woman who, in seeking to affirm life, had looked death in the face. This was her choice, a choice, based on principles and on faith.

At the end of our meeting, I showed Ingrid and Valentina around the main sanctuary. Of course, I told them, Emiliano, their little boy, was welcome at our religious school.

As my friendship with Ingrid and her two daughters, Valentina and Tatiana grew, I learned more about her life. During her exile to England, Ingrid's mother from Chile came to visit, took her to a Jewish cemetery in York and told Ingrid, for the first time, that their ancestors were buried there and that she, Ingrid, was a Jew. Ingrid's mother then gave her two fragile *haggada's*—their aged yellow pages speckled with wine. Now, as a thirty-one year old woman, Ingrid's journey of resistance and her fight for freedom began to fall into place. *This* was why she had been fighting. *This* was why she had put her life on the line. She was a Jew, part of a people who struggle for *tikkun olam*, the healing of our broken world, our struggle against dictatorships and fads, our struggle to assert the dignity of human life.



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Spring arrived. Ingrid became more involved in my community. I invited her to share her story with families in our religious school, and we spent this past *Shavuot* together, studying. Just after midnight, I decided to catch a cab and go home. Before I left the synagogue, Ingrid pulled me aside and gave me a little plastic bag- in it was a silver *Magen David*, a Star of David. "It's yours," she told me.

The next morning I received an e mail from her. Here's is what her letter said:

Tara, I want to tell you more about the Star of David I gave you last night... It was made during my long painful days after solitary confinement in 1986. A friend had taught me to work different kinds of handicrafts in silver. One of the guards (a woman who tortured me) found out about my skill and wanted me to make her a ring. I agreed on the condition that she would allow me to make something for myself.... and so came this Magen David to be... I worked on it at the times of day when we are to say our prayers, speaking the words of the Shema softly so that no one could hear me. I put in it all my love for God, all my hopes for freedom, for redemption, for revelation too. When I met you and now coming to know you, I felt deep in my soul that it belongs to you...

I could hardly believe that I had been given such a gift. To help explain its true significance, I will share with you, one last part of Ingrid's story.

In prison, when she first began to make the Star, Ingrid's face had been so badly beaten, that it was difficult for her to open her eyes. Soldiers had stepped on her hands with their boots and her fingers were so swollen she could barely move them. Still, as Ingrid describes it, a kind of tranquil dream came over her as she worked on the Star. Her soul felt lighter. The physical pain, the hunger bothered her less and less. The other women prisoners smiled as they watched her work. They could see that she was happy. In five days, the star was completed. Ingrid cleaned it with a piece of cloth, placed it in her hands, and said the *Shehechyanu*. "Blessed are you *Adonai*, Who has kept me alive, Who has sustained me, and enabled me to reach this moment."

As she spoke, Ingrid's guard was standing near by. She had been Ingrid's most cruel torturer, the one who had injected her with truth serum, the one who had known how to cause the most intense pain. After hearing the Hebrew words of blessing, the guard began to cry. "Will you ever forgive me?" she asked. Ingrid answered, "No, but I will always be grateful that you gave me the chance to make this Star." Ingrid told me that when looked down at the *Magen David* in her hands, it shone. And somehow, her hands looked beautiful to her, – in only five days- almost healed. Ingrid knew that God had been there with her guiding her at every step.

Two days after she finished the Star of David, Ingrid was released and was left naked and abandoned by the side of the road. Her only possession was this Star that she held in her



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fist. Three women from a shanty town near by came and covered her with blankets. They gave her water and food and put her in a taxi to take her home to her two daughters. Ingrid ended her story, by telling me that the taxi driver did not ask her for any money.

I hold this Star of David now, as I speak to you, having carried this **small gift** from Brooklyn to Memphis. I hold it before you as an offering for the New Year. How do I live up to such a gift? What teaching does it hold?

God willing, none of us here will ever have to face a fraction of Ingrid's political struggle and the brutality that accompanied it. We, most of us at least, live within much safer boundaries. So how can I, how can *we* take something from her story and make a bridge to our lives?

It is essential to remember that Ingrid, *chose* her path. She could have stayed, as did the rest of her family, in the safe confines of her comfortable Chilean home. Yet, because of her political beliefs, because of her desire to live in a free and just society, she put herself on the line, she pushed herself to the edge. Her story of faith and courage challenges me to do the same, to leave the boundaries of my own comfort.

The entire history of our people is one that speaks of leaving the familiar, the safe. *Lech'cha!* God said, to Avraham. "Get out. Leave home. Leave everything you know. Follow Me to a place you do not know." And Jacob, Abraham's grandson, also left home, running away from his brother Esau. It was not back at home in the safety of his mother's tent that Jacob found God. No, it was in the dead of night, lying with nothing but a hard stone pillow under his head that Jacob envisioned God's ladder, laced with angels. And Moses too, when did *he* hear God's voice? Not in Pharaoh's palace. No, it was not until he was kicked out of Egypt-not until he was a humble shepherd wandering in Midian. Only then did the Voice emerge from the bush, calling him to lead his people to freedom.

These are not just cute out-dated stories. Again and again, our tradition beckons us to enter the wilderness. "You'll find me there," promises God.

So what am I suggesting? Should we all go on an Outward Bound expedition? Sit under a tarp on the mountain side. Set off with banners waving, risking our lives for political cause? Where *is* the wilderness in which God's presence can be so palpably felt?

I believe that wilderness looks different for each and every one of us. And only we, in the silence of our own hearts, know where that wilderness lies. For *all* of us, entering the unknown means pushing ourselves to the point of vulnerability. Always, there is an element of fear.



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For some of us, leaving our zone of safety, might mean initiating a difficult conversation, one that we have avoided, challenging ourselves to explore a disagreement, and to break the silence with words.

For others, going to the edge, entering the wilderness might entail making a long awaited life change. A change of a job, a move to another home, or making a change in our intimate connections—ending a relationship, beginning one a new.

For an athlete, the risk might be found in stretching to achieve a new, more intense physical challenge. For the artist, daring to try a new mode of self expression.

Seeking God at the edge might mean facing and breaking an addiction. Or it could be the seemingly simple, yet endlessly challenging work of breaking a bad habit.

How many times has each of us, over the past year, avoided walking into the wilderness, avoided taking on a task that we fear? Throughout the ages, human nature keeps us clinging to the familiar. Look at the prophet Jonah, about whom we will read in this afternoon's *haftarah* portion.

God calls Jonah to tell the people of *Nineveh* that they must repent. Hardly the obedient prophet, Jonah runs in the opposite direction and boards a ship, that he hopes will take him away from God's chosen task. Why? What's Jonah so afraid of? Some interpret that he is afraid that the people of *Nineveh* will actually listen to his warning and repent. Then, the onus will be back on Jonah, who will have to examine himself and enter his own process of *teshuvah*, repentance. The risk of facing himself, honestly, is just too much for Jonah, so he takes to the sea. A storm comes up, and Jonah, as if to seal his denial, crawls below deck and falls asleep. Jonah does not respond to God's call until he is thrown overboard and swallowed by a huge fish.

In his book, *God at the Edge*, Rabbi Niles Goldstein writes. "It sometimes takes a journey to the edge, into a territory that is not always comfortable, to discover the spiritual sustenance we so often crave. The dark forest of the inner spirit may be murky... but buried in its soil are the seeds of our salvation."(xiii) So it is with Jonah. He immerses from the fish, ready to go to *Nineveh* and to embrace his destiny as a prophet. Upon hearing God's warning, the people repent, and the decree of punishment is annulled. But Jonah, still unwilling to do his own *t'shuvah*, runs off into the desert where he pouts under the shade provided by a gourd. As Jonah's story attests, facing our selves and fears honestly, may be one of life's hardest tasks.

A day at Temple will leave us dry and, hopefully, smelling better than did Jonah, after his tangle with the fish... Yet, just like the prophet's plunge into the ocean, Yom Kippur is here to wake us



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up with a splash of cold water, to push us to that edge. By sitting here, reciting prayers throughout the day, not eating, we are led outside the predictable places where we dwell. The afternoon rolls around. Our stomach grumbles. We wrestle with the meaning of a prayer, a sermon... If we allow ourselves to enter into the heart of Yom Kippur, we enter a wilderness, a land unclaimed by the safe structure of our daily routines. We are pushed to exist, as Rabbi Niles Goldstein might put it, "with the nakedness of our own souls." (God at the Edge p.53)

Throughout the ages, God has sought to meet our people at the edge. We did not, after all, receive Torah in Israel, the Promised Land. No, Mount Sinai stood in the desert, against the stark backdrop of rock and sky. Only there, awaiting the next ration of *mannah*, knowing the water might run out at any minute, only there were we able to hear the Voice, to receive God's Teaching. Leaving the familiar, tasting fear, causes us to open ourselves in new ways, and our covenant with God grows deeper.

I have to tell you that, living in Brooklyn, Meir and I often felt we lived against a backdrop of fear, out of our comfort zone. You could see the twin towers from our living room window or at least where they used to be. I didn't like Meir traveling on the subway every day. Life was just so complicated: living in a fourth floor walk up, trying to find a parking place, the press of people from every walk of life, every background. We are both so ready to be here, in a safer neighborhood, a place where our son can have a big green yard, where people are so friendly. But I must share with you that, at moments, I worry. Will I get too comfortable? In Brooklyn, I knew the names of the homeless people on 7th Avenue. I didn't like looking at them or making the choice *not* to look at them, to cross the street, to keep talking on my cell phone. I didn't like the guilt, seeing the poverty, the trash. But living in Brooklyn, I was constantly reminded that I *have* so much. Here in this beautiful community, a community with such abundance...

I am afraid that I am going to forget, grow too comfortable, numb.

I hold Ingrid's Star to remind myself- Go to the wilderness, to the edge, whether in my personal relationships or in my relationship with the larger community. Speaking with members and leaders here at Temple, I have learned how this community has struggled to know the pain of others. All the way back to the civil rights era, Temple Israel has reached out to the broader community. On Mitzvah Day for the past eight years, Temple has sent as many as 800 volunteers into the city, engaging in 50 projects and assisting 30 agencies. As you leave today, look at white banner just above the main sanctuary entrance to see all the community agencies that acknowledged Temple's support during our 150th anniversary celebration. Whether publicly or privately, through supporting the Church Health Center, or Bridges, or God's Unfinished Business (and the list goes on and on), you have striven to reach beyond yourselves.



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On this Yom Kippur, I urge you: Don't stop. Continue find the place of risk and challenge that calls to you. It's not fair for me to preach from the pulpit with out committing to a project myself. Not as "Rabbi Feldman," but as Tara, how can I push myself? While I was writing this sermon, I learned about the many initiatives to improve public school education in Memphis. As the mother of Gabriel, a young boy who is surrounded by gifted and loving teachers, the issue of education tugs at my conscience. This year, I'm going to try to leave the boundaries of our Jewish community once a week to tutor Hispanic children at the Wells Station Elementary School. I urge each of you, in your own personal way, to affirm Temple Israel's long-standing commitment to entering the wilderness that exists so close and yet also so far from our homes and families.

The Torah portion we read this morning tells us: *vacharta bachayim* "choose life." Let us not forget that choosing life may mean, at moments, stepping forward into the unknown, going to the place, to the places, we fear. That is where the pulse of our lives is found. Dear God, as we face the challenges and risks of the coming year, enable us to know, to trust that You will be walking with us, that You will be holding us, every step of the way.