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5768 YK Kol Nidre Sermon

“Transforming Our Gates Into Bridges”

In the tiny town of Chelm, everyone believed they were all wise, all knowing, all powerful, and most of all, all famous. Those of you who have heard stories from this infamous Jewish shtetl, know that quite the opposite was true. For the Chachamim (wise men) who lived there, were complete, to put it bluntly, imbeciles.

That is true, except in one case. For, in fact, in Chelm lived one wise and famous individual. Known simply as Chayim of Chelm, he traveled the world over bestowing his wisdom and doing what he did best, which was to build gates. He was an expert craftsman and made gates for everyone who could afford his services and many who could not. A gate simply was not a gate, unless it was made by Chayim.

Of course, in Chelm, Chayim was not the least bit famous, nor wise. People knew that he left on long journeys and was often absent from his home, however they assumed he had simply gotten lost. “Poor Chayim,” they would say as they passed by his small one story home, with barely a furnishing.

This was true largely because no one in Chelm liked to travel. They had everything they could ever want in their home town, so why bother seeing anything beyond it.

However, as was bound to happen one time or another, one resident of Chelm actually decided to visit a relative in a nearby city. Her name was Sarah-Rebeca-Rachel-Leah (after all four of our matriarchs) and her husband was the celebrated Butcher of Chelm. In leaving,

they packed up nearly all of their possessions, for fear they might leave something vital behind, and hired a coach to take them the nearly ten miles to her cousins' house. Of course, while small, the town her cousin lived in was still considerably bigger than Chelm, and even had a railroad station and a paved thoroughfare.

Sarah-Rebaca-Rachel-Leah and her husband, the Butcher, went around this town with their cousin completely disinterested in anything they were shown. Chelm was, after all, the perfect city and everything else was beneath it. They did notice several gates, something they had never seen before in their whole lives. When they inquired as to what the gates were, they were told that they protected the property. This they got a huge laugh out of, for who needed protection in Chelm. But, when they asked who had made the gates, they received the strangest reply. "Chayim of Chelm." "The Chayim? Our Chayim?" they said to themselves, "Impossible, how on earth could our Chayim have made such things."

"Oh, Chayim of Chelm is famous," they were told. So famous that he had made the gates of the Polish king and had been knighted several times over. In fact, Chayim was the only person that anyone knew in Chelm and whenever they would say they were from Chelm, everyone would ask them to say "hi" to Chayim.

When they returned to Chelm a week or two later, after wearing out their cousin, they decided they simply had to have a gate of their own. They knocked on Chayim's door, who happened to be home that day, quietly reading his Yiddish paper, and insisted that he make them a gate that very instant. They simply would not take "no" for an answer. Chayim, bewildered at being found out (he actually enjoyed the anonymity of his home town), reluctantly agreed, on condition that they not reveal a single thing to the rest of the townspeople. And, over the course of the next few days he built them a shiny black gate around their property.

Afterward, he was called to a place several hundred miles away and did not return for several months. When he did come back he found the entire town covered in gates. What was once a peaceful village where everyone was free to wander as they so choose with nothing impeding their paths, now was a place impossible to navigate. Every house had a gate, each one higher than the next. More than this though, there were actual moats around many of the properties, creating tiny islands across Chelm.

“How could this had happened! How could this be?” Chayim thought to himself and went immediately over to the house of Sarah-Rebeca-Rachel-Leah (well, not so instantaneously, as it took hours to walk a distance that used to take a few minutes).

When he arrived he collapsed in their nearly empty house (all of their possessions still packed up outside). Sara-Rebeca-Rachel-Leah came over to greet him.

“Welcome back,” she said. “Why you are out of breath. What on earth is the problem.”

“Sara-Rebeca-Rachel-Leah, you swore not to tell anyone and I come back after being away and find my town completely different than how I left it.”

“Well, people asked,” she said. “What was I supposed to do? And after I explained it to them, they simply had to have one of their own.”

“What are we to do,” Chayim moaned. “I cannot possibly live in a place like this.”

Completely exhausted Chayim went home to sleep on the matter. That night he dreamed of heaven. He was surrounded by angels who were each in their own areas protected by gates. “This is heaven?” Chayim thought. After walking around for a few minutes, he caught the eye of one of th angels and began a conversation.

“Why are you all behind these heavy gates?” he asked the angel.

“We are very timid creatures. This is the only way we could feel protected.”

“But how can you possibly get around.”

“Oh,” the angel said, “We don't need to get around up here. We only need to get around on earth where we are needed. And, for that we have these wonderful bridges.”

The angel pointed through the clouds and suddenly, Chayim saw them, thousands of bridges, each one beautiful and unique, leading directly to the earth.

“On earth we are protected by God and we have complete freedom to wander around taking souls up and down our bridges,” the angel told Chayim.

In watching this scene, Chayim knew exactly what to do.

The next morning when he woke up he began to build. He spent the entire day and the next day and the day after that building bridges, exactly like he saw in heaven. The whole town marveled and joined in, following Chayim's lead even though they knew he was just a simpleton. Within no time at all Chelm was back to a place where people were free to wander as they so choose.

And, Chayim had a new profession, he was now a bridge builder.

On Yom Kippur we spend a lot of time thinking about gates. Above us, in Heaven, we picture a giant gate, open to our cries; the normal separation between God and human beings all but eliminated. With our lives in the balance, we hope enough of our pleas make it through and allow us to be written in the Book of Life. Tomorrow night, we will almost be able to hear the sound of the gates closing during the Ne'ilah service. The Shofar blast, the final cry to complete the holiday.

But, heaven is not a gated community. And, neither should B'nai Abraham.

As Chayim learned in Chelm, entering into relationships with human beings requires bridges, not gates. We spend our lives in our various gated communities. At home we are one way, at work another, with our friends and family a third way. In other words, we

compartmentalize. In this way, our gates can be a healthy way of functioning in multiple places. However, over the course of the year the boundaries begin to blur between these many communities, and it may become difficult to figure out which one of the many incarnations of yourself is your “true” self.

I say this as a person who wears many hats: rabbi, chaplain, husband, father-to-be, friend, co-worker, brother, son, son-in-law, teacher, student, etc., etc. Yet, all of these various me's out in the world, share one thing in common. For they are all part of the same human being.

We come to Yom Kippur to build bridges: bridges between the many different parts of our life, bridges between ourselves and the people around us, and, hopefully, bridges to the divine in the world and beyond. These bridges require us first to let down our gates, removing all false pretenses and unhealthy parts of ourself. We reveal our strengths, together with our weaknesses, recognizing that who we are is a compilation of both things we are proud of and things we wish to improve upon. Then, when we are ready, we reconnect with those around us, through our eyes and through our words, recognizing both the human and the divine built into each of us.

This can be a scary proposition, almost as scary as a real life a bridge. For, as we learned all too recently, bridges built by human hands, no matter how beautiful, are also fragile. More than most images from 9/11, the picture of crumpled metal and cars spilled like toys in the water on a Minnesota highway will reverberate. Lives changed in mere seconds and a nation of people suddenly afraid to go to work.

I think of the bridge I take in coming to Bordentown, that connects the no man's land between the Pennsylvania and New Jersey turnpikes. I love driving over it, not only because

it means I'm almost in Bordentown, but also because it is the most beautiful part of my journey here. During the minute or two it takes to cross, I feel like I have just entered a portion of the sky and in the spires a hundred feet above my Prius, I see the birds soaring in the fading light.

Indeed, bridges are some of humanities most glorious creations. From the Golden Gate bridge in San Francisco to the Bristol Burlington bridge eight miles from here, they are so different than the rest of the highway system they connect into. And, yet, they too are flawed. They too will inevitably decay, perhaps dangerously.

How can we continue to utilize bridges when we know their fragility? Perhaps, this is exactly why we continue to climb both our metaphorical and our real-life bridges. We must climb even if we do not know where the bridges will take us. It is about the trust in both the human and the divine.

In Dara Horn's wonderful book *The World to Come*, she tells the following parable in the voice of the famous Yiddish writer Yud Lamed Peretz:

“When the hour arrives for us to proceed to the next world, there will be two bridges to it, one made of iron and one made of paper. The wicked will run to the iron bridge, but it will collapse under their weight. The righteous will cross the paper bridge, and it will support them all. Paper is the only eternal bridge.”

For Jews, whose central resource has always been its writing, the story is a way of saying there are things that are stronger than iron and steel. The Torah being the paper here, its words and the words of our tradition, leading us toward the next world.

I love the image of a paper bridge. We stand blowing in the wind, trying not to fall through, but still climbing. The bridge, shiny and translucent in the Heavenly light.

In the words of the famous Rebbe, Nachman of Brazlav, “Kol Ha'Olam Kulo Gesher Tzar M'od, V'Ha'Ikar Lo Lefached Klal.” “All the world is a very narrow bridge, but the main thing is to have no fear at all.”

Come let us climb the bridge of Yom Kippur together. And when we get to the top tomorrow night, we will blow the Shofar at full blast, appreciating the moment for just a minute or two, before we head off down the other side into a new year.

May we all have a safe and easy fast and feel comfortable enough with each other to let down our gates to build a bridge.