



LeoBaeckTemple

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“Strange Road”

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To be here – at this moment on Yom Kippur – is to be one among a community of journeyers along a strange road.

It is a road one yearns to leave, while needing even more desperately to remain. Caught are we, who grieve – caught between clutching our grief firmly, loyally, in an unrelenting hand, and longing just to open our palm and feel once again the lightness of liberation. We wish it could end. And we wish for it never to end. A strange road, we walk.

Here, today, we are surrounded by those who know the landmarks along this road. The final weeks of clinging to hope, and then tearfully abandoning it. The wistful final days in which every breath, every movement, every touch was bursting with forever significance. The stunning moment of parting, for which there is no preparation, no matter how inevitable its arrival may be. The surreal first weeks of aloneness, when it seemed like he would surely walk back through that door sooner or later. The long march of the months, awakening to her absence. The slow learning to live without. And then, at last, with the passing of years, a longing for the end – of the pain which had become an unremitting ache, of the emotional torment, refueled by every *simcha* missed, every story unshared, every embrace craved but undelivered. Every return visit to this moment on this day.

A strange road. Walk it long enough, and you discover that whatever fantasies you’ve held about reaching its end are illusory. There isn’t an end to this road, and in truth, you’re not really seeking one.

After all, we know, in a place so deep inside us that only our grieving can truly unearth it, that the only way to reach the end of this road is to avoid ever starting down it in the first place... and the only way to do that is to sequester ourselves from the risks and the transcendent beauty of love.

A legendary Boston rabbi of a generation ago, Roland Gittelsohn, once made that incisively clear in his book, *Man's Best Hope*. He recounts the story of a visit he and his wife paid to some dear friends, Caroline and Alexander, in southern New Hampshire, where they were grieving the death of their thirty-year-old son. He writes: "Our second afternoon with Caroline and Alexander we had come in from an invigorating walk in the snow and were sitting around a blazing fire.

We listened to uplifting music while Alexander read us paragraphs from the eulogy he had written for his son's funeral. We shed tears as we listened, all of us without inhibition or shame. We tasted the full tragedy and beauty of life together. We were drawn closer than ever to each other and to God by the bonds of ineffable love." And then, almost parenthetically, the rabbi adds: "I almost forgot, there was a fifth member of our circle, Caroline's cat was on her lap. The cat played with a piece of string all the while we were there. It shed no tears, suffered no pain and was aware of no evil, but it was also the only one of us which heard no music and was uplifted by no inspiration and felt no love."

We surely never wanted to live without the music, the inspiration, the love. Even if someone had been able to explain to us back then just how much heartbreak there would be now... here... we would never have chosen to shield ourselves from that heartbreak. And so here we are, walking this strange road together, looking in new and unfamiliar places for inspiration.

On Rosh Hashanah morning, I mentioned that before this past year, the last time a Jew was shot while praying in an American synagogue was fifty-three years ago, when a rabbi in Detroit lost his life at the hands of a mentally ill young man whom he had been counseling. One Shabbat, that young man stepped up onto the bima at services with a gun, and the rabbi calmly emptied the bima, believing this troubled soul would surely never shoot him. Tragically, he was wrong about that.

I have always wondered about how that congregation learned to live with having witnessed that kind of unthinkable event while gathered just to celebrate our tradition's day of rest and renewal. It had to plague them for years, contaminating the very sweetness of Shabbat itself for such a long time. Certainly, they must have wanted to escape that road of mourning – and then found, as we do, that such an escape is impossible.

They needed inspiration to carry on, wisdom to harvest the fruits that hide amid the tall grasses of our grief. I wonder if they might have found it in these words, written by Rabbi Morris Adler, the rabbi who lost his life on that bima in Detroit... their own rabbi. Rabbi Adler left them – and us – the legacy of this lesson. He taught: “Our sorrow can bring understanding as well as pain, breadth as well as the contraction... Out of love and sorrow can come a compassion that endures... for our sorrow has opened our life to the needs of others. A bereavement that brings us into the lives of our fellow (humans) writes a fitting epilogue to a love that had taught us kindness and forbearance, and had given us so much joy.

“Sorrow can (actually) enlarge the domain of our life,” he urged us to see, “(and) out of that vision will come a sense of obligation. A duty, solemn, sacred and significant, rests upon us. To spread the love we have known to others. To share the joy which has been ours. To ease the pains which (humankind's) thoughtlessness or malice inflicts. We have a task to perform. There is work to be done, and in work, there is consolation.

“Out of love may come sorrow, but out of sorrow can come light for others who dwell in darkness. And out of the light we bring to others will come light for ourselves – the light of solace, of strength, of transfiguring and consecrating purpose.”

I have seen so many of you... loved seeing so many of you... find your way to that light – receiving it, giving it. Refusing to buckle at the weight of your sorrow, you have chosen not to surrender the music, the inspiration, the love in your life. Even though it means there will be new hurts to join the longstanding ones.

You have chosen to join this community of journeyers, discovering you are not alone as you keep on walking this strange road we all yearn to leave, but need even more desperately to persist in traversing.

The only way to reach the end is to have avoided starting down this road in the first place. We are here because we were brave enough to love. For them... for us... and for each other, with each other – let's walk on.