

Rosh HaShanah I 5785 - The High Wire Life

Rabbi Lina Zerbarini

50 years ago, on August 7th, along with thousands, perhaps millions of others, I watched Phillipe Petit walk the wire between the Twin Towers. Shortly after 7 am, Petit stepped out on the wire and started to perform. He performed for 45 minutes, making eight passes along the wire, during which he walked, danced, lay down on the wire, knelt to salute watchers, and waved hello to birds.

In college, I worked in the After-School and Summer programs at the neighborhood Cathedral of St. John the Divine where Petit was then and still is artist-in-residence. I saw him perform in front of the Cathedral above Amsterdam Avenue and inside the Cathedral in a concert entitled Ascent, with piano and wire.

In August, he commemorated the Twin Towers walk in a performance called "Towering!!", walking a tightrope about 20 feet above an audience seated in the nave of the Cathedral.

We, too, walk a challenging path – moving forward and back – dancing and wobbling, with what sometimes feels like the possibility of falling.

The wire brings to mind the song from Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav's words: Kol haolam kulo gesher tzar me'od – the whole world is a very narrow bridge. We walk through life as if on a bridge – from birth to death. The bridge, being narrow, very, very narrow, says Rebbe Nachman, is frightening and also, it holds us up.

Life is lived on this wire, this bridge.

There's always risk – it makes sense to walk slowly and carefully, but Petit danced, he acknowledged the sky and the birds and the people. He enjoyed his experience.

The text continues: v'haikar lo lefached call – and the essential thing is not to fear.

Petit says: "there is no fear...I know that my last step will be victorious and that I'm not risking my life."

I'm not sure how he can be so confident, but he manifests the actual text from Likutei Moharan, which does not read: the main thing is not to fear, but the main thing is not to frighten yourself. Fear is natural, but we shouldn't build it up in ourselves.

There's a new film out that just played the Toronto Film Festival about another risk-taker. It's called *Maya and the Wave* and is about Maya Gabeira, the world champion and record-holding Brazilian big wave surfer. She said: "People often ask if I'm afraid, if I don't feel fear, and I do it because I'm afraid. I mean, it would not be exhilarating if I wasn't really scared. And there's a power that comes from fear, and I try to really utilize that...."

A student once said to me, discussing this text: "trust your feet." Both Petit and Gabeira trust their feet.

How do they do that? What enables them to do it?

In addition to talent and passion, and practice, they have tools. Petit's essential tool is a long balancing pole. The one he used for the Twin Towers walk was 30 feet across and weighed 55 lbs. – significantly longer and heavier than I imagined. This tool for balancing itself must be balanced. He must hold it so that it extends straight out each side. If it dips too far to one side, he could lose his balance and fall.

I imagine the pole stretching out to touch the edges of our life: one end: the joy and the laughter and the appreciation and the hope; the other: the pain and fear and the suffering and the despair. In touching both extremes, it holds everything.

It is easy, even normal, to lose our balance. When things seem to be going well, we find ourselves caught off guard when something challenging happens. Like what's easy is normal, and what's painful – loss, illness,

death – is out of the ordinary. But those things are the most normal things in the world. They come to all of us.

So, too, when we are in pain, we can lose the sense of beauty and goodness in the world. We feel isolated, lost, separate from all of life.

And we know – this has been a terribly difficult and painful year: On Sunday evening, we will commemorate the heinous attacks of October 7, in which Hamas slaughtered 1200 Israelis and took 250 hostage.

Expressions of anti-Zionism and antisemitism have had many of us feeling betrayed by our allies and isolated, if not unsafe.

Israel continues to be subject to rockets from the Hezbollah on a daily basis, with 80,000 people still displaced in the north and 2 million in danger from rockets every moment. And less than 48 hours ago, 180 missiles were launched from Iran at Israel.

Many heart, including Jewish hearts, hurt for the destruction and loss of life in Gaza as well.

The Israeli government is not inspiring trust in many Israelis and American Jews – which is particularly challenging in wartime.

Political rhetoric in this country uncovers and exacerbates terrible fractures.

These are only some of the public, communal sufferings. Most of us have experienced personal losses and challenges over the past year.

And, there is beauty and hope.

I was in the Norwegian fjords in August. They were so spectacular that at one time I called them “otherworldly.” But they’re not. We live in a miraculous, gorgeous, amazing universe.

And I was appreciating these even in the midst of all of the above.

But beauty does not only come from nature – people also can be amazing. Drawing upon my own experience (and I'll speak more about this on Yom Kippur), the love and care you all showed me after the death of my parents last winter was so beautiful. In those moments, I felt great sadness and also deep comfort and appreciation.

How are all these things true at the same time? Our tradition recognizes this human experience, so much so that, according to the Hasidic masters, it is acknowledged in the very order of creation.

The *Zohar* (1:12a, 26b) quotes the verse from Deuteronomy “**Know this day** and set it upon your heart, that Adonai is Elohim...” (Deut. 4:39). We come to know that they are one, the name *elohim* [“God,” signifying judgment, contraction] and the name Y-H-W-H/Adonai [signifying compassion, expansion]. There is no separation between them. You may come to know this from the day itself, since each full day includes both night and daytime, as we read just moments ago:

וַיְהִי עֶרֶב וַיְהִי בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד :

“evening and morning, **one day**” (Gen. 1:5).

This is the meaning of “Know this day.” Know it from the day itself.

What is it teaching us?

That evening and morning are the wholeness of the day. “Though you go weeping into the night, joy will wake you in the morning” – both a part of the day; they are inseparable. The duality of night and morning disappear into the oneness of the whole.

Beyond the metaphor of the day built into creation, the *Zohar*, the foundational text of Jewish mysticism, tells us this is true about God, which means it is true about the reality of all existence itself. The *Zohar* says that the two names of God which represent all binaries – judgment and love, rigidity and openness, inward-looking and outward-facing, left and right, male and female, upper and lower – there is no separation between them. This is the truth of our lives – we live all of it, all the time.

In the words of poet William Blake (1803, the Auguries of Innocence):

It is right it should be so
Man was made for joy and woe
And when this we rightly know
Thro' the world we safely go
Joy and woe are woven fine,
A clothing for the soul divine
Under every grief and pine
Runs a joy with silken twine.

It's one rope, there's just one pole. So how do we hold it?

Philippe Petit's practice enables him to hold the pole. Despite more than 55 years of wire walking, he still practices 20 hours a week. His practice is physical – keeping his body fit and limber - and also mental – supporting his focus.

We, too, must practice to keep our balance and become expansive enough to hold all that life brings us. We're not going in the backyard and walking a wire, but there are so many ways that we can support our openness:

Like Petit, we need to care for our bodies. They are not separate from our hearts and minds. Exercise, nutritious food, rest, provide a foundation for our abilities to do anything.

And:

You could go out in your backyard and look at the trees or the sky. Just take a few breaths and take in the awesomeness of nature. Connecting to something larger than ourselves by definition is expanding.

Breathing – quieting the mind, attention to the breath, the present moment, calms the nervous system and enables us to be looser – limber, like Petit.

Relationship – the support of friends, family, and community nurture us, steady us, and hold us up when we cannot hold ourselves.

These four things: care for the body, awe, quiet reflection, and connection enable us to hold whatever comes, without toppling over or contracting into ourselves.

I think about Philippe Petit's balancing pole extending out so far and pray for a heart, a soul, that does the same – enabling me to keep walking, dancing, resting, waving. And weeping, hoping, loving, mourning.

This poem by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer expresses some of this hope:
For When People Ask

I want a word that means
okay and not okay,
more than that: a word that means
devastated and stunned with joy.
I want the word that says
I feel it all all at once.
The heart is not like a songbird
singing only one note at a time,
more like a Tuvan throat singer
able to sing both a drone
and simultaneously
two or three harmonics high above it—
a sound, the Tuvans say,
that gives the impression
of wind swirling among rocks.
The heart understands swirl,
how the churning of opposite feelings
weaves through us like an insistent breeze
leads us wordlessly deeper into ourselves,
blesses us with paradox
so we might walk more openly
into this world so rife with devastation,
this world so ripe with joy.

Kol Ha'Olam Kulo/The Whole World

Words by Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav

כל העולם כולו גשר צר מאד

והעקר לא לפחד כלל

Kol ha'olam kulo geshher tzar me'od Vecha'ikar lo lifached k'lal.

The whole world is a very narrow bridge and the main thing is not to fear at all.

