

Live Life Urgently
Temple B'nai Shalom
Braintree, Massachusetts

May 13, 2017

Rabbi Van Lanckton

The story I am about to tell you is true.

Only the names and dates have been changed.

On a Thursday afternoon last January, I headed out from Manhattan to LaGuardia Airport.

I was scheduled to depart for Charlotte, North Carolina, at 5:00 p.m. I managed to get a seat on the three o'clock instead.

I remember wondering later if maybe by changing planes I had placed myself on a flight bound for danger that I could have avoided.

When I walked onto the plane I saw a fellow with grey hair seated in the cockpit. I thought to myself, "That's a good thing. I like to see a pilot with grey hair!"

The plane took off north over the Bronx. The flight plan called for us to turn west over the Hudson River and then head south. This flight plan gives a great view of Yankee Stadium and the George Washington Bridge.

I was watching this view unfold when suddenly we all heard a terrible crash. Immediately, the engines wound down to a screeching halt. Ten seconds later, there was a strong smell of jet fuel.

I knew we would have to land right away, but I thought we would go to Newark Airport.

As we turned south, I noticed the pilot lining up on the river. I still thought we were heading for Newark.

Next thing we heard was "Brace for impact!"

Everyone looked around in shock.

It all happened so fast.

We were astonished!

We began to descend rapidly. It started to sink in. This is my last flight. I'm going to die today. This is it.

I recited the Sh'ma. I asked God to take care of my wife, my family, my friends. I prayed for courage, to control my fear, and to help if able.

One of two things was going to happen. Either would be disastrous.

We could hit by the nose, flip and break up, leaving few if any survivors: bodies, cold water, jet fuel. Or we could hit one of the wings and roll and flip with the same result.

I tightened my seat belt as tight as I could.

As we came in for the landing, I looked out the windows. I saw the buildings in New Jersey and then the piers at the river's edge. The water would surely be freezing cold.

The flight attendants were yelling in unison: "Brace! Brace! Brace!"

It was a violent hit - the water flew up over my window - but we bobbed up. We were all amazed that we remained intact.

There was some panic. People jumped over seats and ran toward doors. But we soon got everyone straightened out.

Many people took leadership roles in little ways. Those sitting at the doors over the wing did a fantastic job. They were opened in a New York second!

Everyone worked together. We teamed up in groups and figured out how to help each other.

I got out of the plane through a door over the wing. When we got outside we were standing on the wing in eight inches of water. It was freezing cold. One woman slipped off. We pulled her back up. We were totally soaked and absolutely frozen.

The ferries were the first to arrive. They are not made for rescue, but they did an amazing job.

The first ferry boat pulled up to the tip of the wing. The first mate lowered a ladder down to us. We got a couple of people up the ladder safely, but the current was too strong. The ferry had to pull away.

As more ferries arrived, we managed to get a few people up at a time. The fellow in front of me fell off the ladder into the water. When we got him back on the ladder he could not move his legs to climb.

I climbed up the ladder to the ferry deck. The first mate and I hoisted the ladder up with him on it. When he got close enough, we grabbed his trouser belt and hauled him on deck.

We were all safely off the wing.

We could not stop shaking. Uncontrollable shaking.

Our rescue was a miracle. If this crash had happened a few hours later, it would have been pitch dark and much harder to land. Ferries would no longer have been running because it would have been after rush hour. Our story would not have been the same uplifting story. There would have been hypothermia, fatalities, an absolute disaster!

I witnessed the best of humanity that day. I and everyone on that plane survived. We had all been given a second chance.

My experience left me with deep questions. Why did this happen to me? Why have I survived? What am I supposed to do with this gift?

I expect that some answers to these questions will come over time. Right now, I have four lessons to share:

1. Cherish our families as never before and go to great lengths to keep our promises.
2. Be thankful and grateful for everything we have and don't worry about the things we don't have.
3. Keep in shape. We never know when we'll be called upon to save our own life, or help someone else save theirs.
4. When we fly, wear practical clothing. We never know when we'll end up in an emergency or on an icy wing. Anyone who is wearing flip flops, or skimpy or flimsy clothing, will be of absolutely no use to anyone.

* * * *

The story I have just told you is a true story, except for three details: one very important, two not so important.

The very important detail is that this did NOT happen to me. Rather, this is the first-person account of Gerry McNamara, a New York business executive. He was one of the 155 people on board US Airways Flight 1549. They all survived that landing in the Hudson River, the one pictured in the movie "Sully" with Tom Hanks that Alice and I saw recently.

The other details in the story as I retold it that were not true were the date and the prayer Mr. McNamara said. The date was not last January; this miraculous landing and rescue happened in January, 2009. The prayer that Mr. McNamara said of course was not the Sh'ma. It was the Lord's Prayer.

* * * *

I want to highlight three of Mr. McNamara's lessons from his brush with death:

1. Cherish our families.
2. Keep our promises.
3. Be grateful for everything we have.

Gerry McNamara learned these three lessons after nearly dying in that plane crash. We don't need a brush with death to know and live these values.

Everyone who comes to the Torah for an aliyah blesses God as "asher bachar banu mi kol ha'amim" This means, "The One Who has chosen us from among all people."

This formula does not imply that we are better than anyone else. God has chosen all peoples who recognize God's oneness.

But God has chosen us in a unique way. As the blessing continues, "v'natan lanu et Torato," "and Who has given us the Torah."

Having the Torah, and therefore having its commandments, are blessings for us. That is the sense in which we are chosen; we are chosen to fulfill the Torah commandments.

Embedded in this great gift of Torah are rules like the three that Gerry McNamara learned when he almost died. We have access to these every day, simply by turning to our tradition and reading our texts.

* * * *

Cherish our families. This value has a broader reference than just our relatives. Cherish not only our parents and siblings, our spouses and children. Cherish also our dear friends and every person who is in our intimate circle.

Mark Twain, the great American writer, described this value in an essay that Harper's magazine published in 1898. Someone wrote to Mark Twain about the absence of any anti-Semitism in Twain's writings. Here is how Twain's essay describes the question:

A few years ago, a Jew observed to me that there was no uncourteous reference to his people in my books, and asked how it happened.

Twain explained that he had not written anything negative about Jews because he saw no reason to do so since he had no negative opinion of Jews. His essay goes on to praise Jewish values. Here is what he said about Jewish family life:

That the Jewish home is a home in the truest sense is a fact which no one will dispute. The family is knitted together by the strongest affections; its members show each other every due respect; and reverence for the elders is an inviolate law of the house.

* * * *

As Jews, we are also very familiar with Gerry McNamara's second lesson: Keep our promises.

We read in Deuteronomy, "That which has gone out of your mouth, you shall observe and do." In other words, keep all your promises.

Our tradition warns us against making promises lightly. The most solemn ceremony of the Jewish liturgical year is the service of Kol Nidre. In that service, we convene the equivalent of a Jewish court. We nullify rash vows we have made to God. We also reaffirm that there is no escape from the promises we have made to each other. We must keep those promises. We are not absolved from them in the Kol Nidre service.

* * * *

Cherish our families. Keep our promises. And be grateful for what we have.

An ancient scholar named Ben Zoma described this last value this way. "Eizehu ashir?" "Who is rich?" "Hasameach b'khelko." "The one who is happy with his portion."

* * * *

We must cherish our family, keep our promises, and be grateful for what we have. We honor these values in our lives by daily attention, not just by a sudden awakening in the aftermath of a violent accident. Every single day we can rededicate ourselves to observing these values in our lives.

When should we start on this project? That I can summarize in a single teaching. It is from the section of our Mishnah called *Pirkei Avot*, Ethics of the Fathers. Rabbi Eliezer said, "***Shuv yom echad lifnei mitat'cha.***"

The Hebrew word "shuv" means to turn or to turn back. Rabbi Eliezer's advice tells us when to return to cherishing our families, keeping our promises and being grateful for all we have. Rabbi Eliezer tells us, "Do all this no later than one day before we die."

When Rabbi Eliezer said, "***Shuv yom echad lifnei mitat'cha,***" "Make these changes part of your life one day before you die," his students asked him, "But Master, how can we take your advice? How shall we know the day of our death?"

Rabbi Eliezer responded, “Exactly. We do not know the day of our death. So, we must conduct ourselves every day with the urgent realization that life is not infinite.”

We cannot wait forever to enjoy the company of a parent or sibling or friend we have not seen enough. If we keep putting off spending time with the ones we love, we may find we have run out of time. If we have not yet fulfilled a promise, we never know how much longer we will have in which to do so. If we are envious of others, if we strive jealously to have what they have, we deprive ourselves of the enjoyment of what we already have in the here and now.

Rabbi Eliezer said that life is not infinite. Life can be short for some of us. More importantly, life is uncertain for all of us. Each day could be our last. Each day we must do our best.

The prophet Isaiah asks God to teach us that same lesson. Isaiah says to God, “So teach us to number our days, that we may gain us a heart of wisdom.”

* * * *

Concluding prayer at the end of the service

Ribono shel olam:¹

Because the length of our days is uncertain, may we learn to live urgently.

Cherish our families.

Keep our promises.

Be grateful for everything we have.

And let us say, Amen.

Shabbat shalom.

¹ Master of the Universe.