

Of the many things I love about being a rabbi, one of the greatest perks is the ability to spend just a little bit of time each summer on faculty at Camp Harlam in the Poconos. I am truly grateful to the congregation for the opportunity afforded me to recharge my batteries, and to participate in the experiment in Jewish living that is Jewish summer camp. We know that by sending kids to Jewish summer camp, we can often engage them in deep Jewish learning without them even realizing it! And in the last few years, the number of TI kids at Reform movement summer camps — both Camp Harlam and the URJ's specialty camps, Six-Points Creative Arts, where Rabbi Plotkin has served on faculty, and our specialty Sci-Tech and Sports camps have all had increased interest. And, clearly, our students love their time at Airy and Louise, at Capital Camps and a host of other regional Jewish summer camps.

Over the last few years, we have tried at Harlam to be deliberate about the role of faculty — rabbis, cantors and educators who come from connected congregations and spend some of our time teaching Jewish content courses, being a counselling resource to staff and campers alike, and pitching in a hand wherever needed. One thing we've been working towards is finding (in camp lingo) "JTMs — Jewish Teachable Moments" in all of the different areas of camp. I found one that I'd like to share.

I was walking from the Art Shack to the *Sifria* — the Library, where some of the Jewish programming is held. The path took me along the side of the baseball field. The specialty counsellor who was running a baseball clinic at the time was a student of mine at Beth Or, my former congregation. Over my nine years at the congregation, I had watched Lindsay grow up. I helped officiate at her bat mitzvah, was at camp with her each summer, and rejoiced to see her return the last few summers on staff. She is really one of the more joy-filled young people I know, now in her sophomore year of college. A die-hard baseball fan, and a committed Phillies Phanatic, I could kind of fake being able to talk home-town sports with her. But mostly, I was able to admire from a distance what a great counselor she had become, and a truly excellent teacher of all sports.

I stood, admiring her work with Carmel, the youngest unit. Noticing me, Lindsay called out, "Rabbi Axler, want to have an at-bat?" My heart stopped in my chest. I played it off cool. "Nah. I'm okay. Looks great!!!" I watched a few more minutes, which was probably my fatal error! "Rabbi Axler. Come on, have a turn!" Deer. In. The. Headlights. Okay, I really don't have any exit strategy. Now the kids are chanting "Ra-bi. Ra-bi. Ra-bi." Sure.

I stepped up to the plate. An 8-year-old handed me a batting helmet. One that might have fit me when I was eight. But I squeeze it on. Another handed me a bat. A little bat.

But how would I know??? Did I mention that the last time I held a bat, I'm pretty sure, was when I was about ten years old?

So, I stood there at the plate. Lindsay clearly saw my discomfort and pitched a nice, slow, steady underhand pitch to me.

Swinggggg. And a miss! I mean, a welcome breeze on a hot summer day. But there was

nothing but air!

Lindsay called to me. “Okay, get your hands a little closer together. Put your elbow down. And just try to connect.”

Pitch number two. Slow, steady, underhanded...

Swingggg. CRACK! Made such a connection, I was surprised the bat didn't crack in half!!! I smashed that ball.... right. at. Lindsay's head. Oh, my God, no! Don't let me hit the ball right into her face!!!

One slight sweep of her glove, the ball stopped, and was pocketed. You're out!

And all of the 8- and 9-year-old Carmel campers cheered for me. “Ra-bi! Ra-bi! Ra-bi!”

The Jewish Teachable Moment???

I did something that was uncomfortable, unfamiliar, hard. Something I wasn't totally sure I could do; and for which I had lots of emotional baggage. But, for some reason, I trusted a voice of experience. “Come on, Rabbi, have an at-bat.”

And, it felt great. I even got the adoring chants of the Carmel campers despite my having been caught out immediately. I guess I earned their chants by connecting with the ball? Or maybe by just stepping up to the plate? Or just because 8- and 9-year-olds really like to chant?

Whatever the case, I also realized that, as a congregational rabbi, much of what I do is ask people to do things that they are not expert at; things they may not have done in a very long time, if ever before; things that they may have some emotional baggage attached to; things that might even be hard.

And, on a pretty consistent basis, you are willing to do these things. Come up for an *aliyah*; hold the *lulav* and *etrog*; say a Hebrew prayer; sing in front of others; try on an element of Jewish prayer garb, *tallit*, *kippah*, even *tefillin*.

Really, the folks who are most likely to be asked to step out of their comfort zones are our amazing *b'nei mitzvah*, who stand up here virtually every week — usually in intensely unfamiliar and uncomfortable clothing — and chant in an ancient, foreign language in front of a room filled with their family and peers, and often half-full of people they don't even know, but who have come for their partner. Shabbat after Shabbat, I am impressed by the confidence and courage shown by 12- and 13-year-olds who rise to this challenge. How many of the adults in their lives would put themselves in the position of standing on the *bimah* and similarly leading the congregation in *V'Ahavta*?

In my conversations with *b'nei mitzvah* and their families, I often mention that I really have just two primary goals for them on the day of their *simcha*: that they feel fantastic about being Jewish and their accomplishments; and that they stretch a bit to get there.

It is the second part that I think is a relevant lesson here as we begin *Yom Kippur*. What does it mean to stretch ourselves, to put ourselves consciously and willingly into a place of unfamiliar territory, challenge, even discomfort? And how might those experiences be among the most spiritually productive we can have?

The very term “comfort zone” seems to derive from the literal temperature of the room — the range between 68–72 degrees where the physical body is likely to feel neither cold nor hot. Although, as I discovered after I asked the thermostat be lowered at *Rosh HaShannah* services last week, comfort zones are an intensely personal and relative thing! How’s everyone feeling right now?

But our metaphoric comfort zones are not necessarily the blessing that they seem to be. When we stay in a place of absolute familiarity, when we surround ourselves with people who hold identical opinions to ours, whose experience mirrors our own; when we stay inside a protective bubble, we are far less likely to grow. It is the experience of the new and the challenging that forces us to consider, and perhaps modify our outlook. Most in this room have had to walk into a new experience: a shift in work environments or even new career altogether; travel that involved spending time in a place where truly no one spoke your language; relocation from a long-time community which forced you to build a new social network; a transfer of status of any kind along life’s path. Change is uncomfortable — of this we can be sure! But that discomfort is often among the most productive of experiences.

Social scientists point out that, rather than pose the duality between a “comfort zone” of safety versus a “danger zone” of fear, there is something that mediates the two, the place where growth occurs — the “learning zone.” Along the continuum, it is in this zone that the optimum mix of attention and interest are coupled with a moderate amount of anxiety in order to produce significant growth. The danger-zone is filled with too much anxiety or intensity, and more often than not causes less growth, more chances for destructive failure. The comfort zone is the place where both performance and interest stay low, and so does energy and productivity. Finding a balance — the spot where healthy anxiety is joined with appropriate challenge — stretching, as I like to call it — is the sweet spot of the learning zone.¹

This desire to remain in a world of personal safety is reflected in the story we will read tomorrow afternoon, the ancient tale of the prophet Jonah. Called to take care of a mission on behalf of God, to proclaim judgement against the city of Nineveh, Jonah runs the other way, boarding a ship headed for Tarshish — as far in the other direction as the ancient world could imagine. The seas roil up around the boat, and Jonah retreats down into the hull of the ship, even further, into the protective delusion of sleep! In the belly of the great fish, he shifts from the comfort zone to the danger zone and finds himself even less effective — his prayer at that time essentially says “I give over all control to you, God!” But his mission can’t be accomplished by giving up any sense of being active or engaged in the task — with apologies to Carrie Underwood, there is no Jewish country song that says “Adonai, Take the Wheel.”

1. based on Gustavo Razzetti, “How to Leave Your Comfort Zone”
liberationist.org/how-to-leave-your-comfort-zone-for-the-better/

Once he gets to Nineveh, he enters the learning zone — he discovers that his delivery of an uncomfortable message: “Forty more days and the town will be destroyed [on account of your sins]”, while difficult to bring yields the intended result. The people repent, from the king on down the line, and God’s anger and judgement is removed from the city — they have proven Jonah’s mission successful. But he is more focused on the idea that he was required to leave the comfort of home, travel far, and all so that God could forgive???

The conclusion of the story is instructive here. We find Jonah sitting in a little shelter to the east of the city, with the comfort of God’s vine that has grown up over his head to provide shade and protection — back into the comfort zone, or so Jonah would think. The next morning, the sun rose — hot and strong — the vine is attacked by a worm sent by God, and Jonah bemoans the sudden shift from pleasure to pain. Only at this point does God make Jonah aware of the purpose of this mission — the growth he has achieved... perhaps. God questions Jonah, “You were so concerned with the vine that grew up over your head, but for which you didn’t even labor! Should not I be concerned for the whole town of Nineveh, which contains so many of My own creations, 120,000 people — not to mention all of the beasts???”

The learning that happens through the discomfort of Jonah’s mission is that his self-perceived “failure” was actually success — to convince a people who were headed in the wrong direction to turn around. To teach this story is to remind countless generations of the power and the possibility of *Teshuvah*, Return, Repentance and Change — not only the possibility, but the idea that this is exactly what God wants most from us. The prayers we will say repeatedly over the course of this day: “You do not wish the death of sinners, but urge them to return from their ways and live. Until the day of death, You wait for them; You accept them at once if they return.”²

Yes, we each have the potential for change, to return to our highest selves, or even discover new heights we didn’t know about before. But change never comes as a result of remaining in the comfort zone. To a degree, the very act of coming to wrestle with these ancient prayers and melodies is an attempt to jar us from the easy-chair of life. To struggle to follow along with the chanted Hebrew, to confront images of God that might be at odds with our assumptions — yes, I have heard from many of you over the last week who asked “If you feel that way about God, how do you continue to say some of these prayers???” My response — and, again, it’s only my response — it is helpful for me to read both prayers that feel comfortable, and to wrestle with the ones that cause me some distress — to question and nudge, to try to figure out how to deal with a tradition that is not an echo-chamber where I hear only my own thoughts coming back at me.

The very essence of *Yom Kippur* involves consciously putting ourselves in uncomfortable positions — choosing to wear clothing that is less easy on the body; abstaining from the things we so often retreat into for solace, like Jonah going down below into sleep, or any of us standing for far too long in front of an open refrigerator, contemplating what we will soothe ourselves with now; reading a litany of sins we think we know we are not guilty, let alone capable of — or are we???

Yom Kippur is a learning zone.

2. As translated in *Mishkan HaNefesh*, p. 214 and elsewhere

Among my favorite readings in the many images of this period on the Jewish calendar is a 12th century *piyyut*, a liturgical poem that is familiar to many in its English version. On page 103 of the *machzor*, we read “כִּיהֵנָּה בְּחֶמְרֵךְ Consider the clay in the potter’s hand, stretched and rolled as the artist desires; so are we in Your hand, our loving Protector. Look to the covenant, not our imperfection.” The poet extends the metaphor travelling through the realms of art: “As stone in the mason’s hand, broken or kept whole as the stonecutter sees fit...” and on. In all of the examples, the raw materials being turned in to some improved work of art go through a process that is not easy or comfortable, but which elevates their function, from a lump of clay to a beautiful vase, perhaps even to human form, the pinnacle of creation.

Our lives are works of art in need of consistent improvement. Essays in a state of constant revision. Paintings, where just another brush-stroke seems necessary. Songs whose final verse seems yet undiscovered.

There is value in seeking the learning zone. Now, I am absolutely not saying that anyone ought to live there all the time! There is also room for comfort, and it is sometimes not in our control to avoid danger.

But this day, *Yom Kippur*, I would argue, might serve as an ideal learning zone, an opportunity to search and find, to question and wrestle, to chip away at the layers of bubble wrap we may have put around the spot where the real work takes place, to roll out and stretch the clay of our hearts.

So, what did I learn standing at home plate at Camp Harlam?

It’s never too late to try something, even if you’re pretty sure you are terrible at it.

You’d do well to listen to a voice of authority, regardless of where that voice comes from — since “get your hands a bit closer together and put your elbow down” made all the difference.

Sometimes seeking to connect is all it takes; the seeking brings the connection.

And, I am so grateful that Lindsay is as good with her glove as she is — because I would have felt terrible if I had given such a special person a broken nose!

Oh, and also it feels really, really good to have 8- and 9-year-olds chant “Ra-bi! Ra-bi! Ra-bi!”

Turns out, we can all use a little encouragement every once in a while.

Wishing you *G’mar Chatimah Tovah* — May you and yours be sealed for goodness in the year ahead!