

Not in Control

Yom Kippur 5779

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In memory of my teacher, Rabbi Allan Schranz, z"l, who loved poetry and language and learning.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

“The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost is one of the most influential works ever written. Words from the poem have been used in advertisements for dozens of companies – including an ad for Monsters.com at the Super Bowl. It has been used in songs by Bruce Hornsby, Melissa Etheridge and George Strait. It has provided episode titles for more than a dozen television series, including *Taxi*, *The Twilight Zone*, and *Battlestar Galactica*, and at least one video game title. In the past forty years, it’s been mentioned in nearly two thousand news stories, which yields a rate of more than once per week.

Most readers consider “The Road Not Taken” an ode to triumphant self-assertion (“I took the one less traveled by”)—I didn’t follow the crowd! I was my own person! I listened to my own voice and that made all the difference! That is why I am who I am today! But according to David Orr, author of *The Road Not Taken: Finding America in the Poem Everyone Loves and Almost Everyone Gets Wrong*, that’s not what it is. Orr explains,

The poem’s speaker tells us [in the poem’s *last* stanza] he “shall be telling,” at some point in the future, of how he took the road less traveled by, yet he has already admitted [earlier in the poem] that the two paths “equally lay / In leaves” and “the passing there / Had worn them really about the same.” So the road he will later *call* less traveled is actually the road *equally* traveled. The two roads are interchangeable.

According to this reading, then, the speaker will be claiming “ages and ages hence” that his decision made “all the difference” only because we want to believe – and others to believe – that who we are, that what we have, is the product of our own choices (as opposed to what was chosen for us or allotted to us by chance). But, according to Orr, “the poem isn’t a salute to can-do individualism; it’s a commentary on the self-deception we practice when constructing the story of our own lives.”

Orr’s insight into our misreading tells us a lot about ourselves.

When things are good, we convince ourselves that the reason things went well is because of a choice we made! There is a vast literary market for books about “success,” convinced that there exists a recipe out there for the perfect life. We valorize our experience and tell ourselves, and others, how we blazed a trail, how we beat the odds, how we took a deep breath and plunged ahead into uncharted woods — when really we got where we are by putting one foot in front of the other trying to make it through another day. We fear not being the authors of our own stories, so we take Frost’s poem and make it mean what we need it to mean.

On the other hand, when things are bad, when we suffer, we are far worse critics of ourselves than we are of others. What mistakes we forgive in others, we hold ourselves responsible for, convinced that our failures are our own fault; believing that, in the end, our suffering is a product of our own making, that if only we had made a different choice, things would have been better.

On this Yom Kippur, I’d like to offer us a category from Jewish law to serve as a corrective to our need to believe that everything is up to us: *Ye’ush* or “despair.” In Jewish law, *ye’ush* comes up in the laws of lost objects. The Torah says, “Do not see your brother’s ox or sheep straying and ignore them; return them” – meaning that if you find a lost object, it is not “finders keepers,” but rather, if there is a name on it, or it has identifying markers or some means by which the owner might be found, we have an obligation to keep the object safe and in good condition and to try and find its owner. But...there are situations in which Jewish law permits us to give up, to lose hope of ever finding the owner, in which case we may keep the object. There are objects that are of such small value, or that are found in places and with nothing distinctive such that

Jewish law assumes that a person cannot reasonably be expected to hope for the object's return. That object has *ye'ush*, and may be kept. The same concept holds true for a person who dies in an attack or in an earthquake, but the body can't be found – when do we allow mourning begin? When the search is called off.

Ye'ush may sound harsh and cruel because it sounds like surrendering to desperation, but it is also a moment of liberation from anguish and uncertainty. It is good to dream, good to hope – but to hold on to one dream forecloses the possibility that another dream may await us; that not every choice makes all the difference, but rather that both paths that diverge in a wood may contain a journey meant for us, if only we open our eyes and hearts.

Last night, we sang *Kol Nidrei*, we stood with the Torah and canceled the vows that bind us. What if we do that on Yom Kippur to free ourselves from the vows we made to ourselves, from the dreams we had, the things we swore we'd do, and allow ourselves to stop trying to achieve everything we told ourselves we would? Yom Kippur is a space between the year before and the year to come, a time in which one dream may die so that another one might emerge. *Ye'ush* might mean despair, but allowing ourselves to despair affirms that we are alive and that, despite our loss, a new path may be opening for us to follow.

In just a minute, we'll do a meditation and chant the Yizkor prayers to remember those who meant so much to us. It's a bittersweet moment. Sweet because it feels so good, if only for a moment, to remember; bitter because it hurts to let go again. When I counsel people struggling with grief, one of the things we talk about is how tempting it is to hold on, about how forgetting can feel like a sin, how moving forward can seem like an act of disloyalty, but about how, in the end, we do our loved ones no service by dying with them, by withdrawing from the world and living no more. We remember today, but we remember them best by forgiving ourselves and letting them go. By remembering that not every failure is our fault; that few successes are entirely of our own making; that one path or another may not make "all the difference," but rather, by giving up on a finding what was lost, we can move forward into the life God has waiting for us.