

The Rebbe Nachman of Braslav is famous for saying: ‘The whole world is a narrow bridge, the key is not to be afraid’

KOL HA’OLAM KULO GESHER TZAR ME’OD, VE’HA’IKAR LO LEFACHED CLAL

I have often wondered what this famous Chasidic master, the grandson of the Ba’al Shem Tov, understood about bridges. What bridge did he have in mind when he spoke about a “Gesher Tzar Meod”? And how can we possibly cross over that bridge without being afraid?

As to the bridge, perhaps, it was the bridge over the Southern Buh or Buzhok, rivers that intersected by his birthtown of Medzhybizh (MEDEZIBIZ).

Or, perhaps, it was the floating bridge of Kiev. Originally built with wooden planks resting over boats lined from one shore to the other. It was both narrow and treacherous to the many soldiers and wayfarers who had been crossing it for six hundred years before Reb Nachman was even born.

Or, further still, maybe he was inspired by a picture of the famed Carrick-a-Rede rope bridge of Northern Ireland. Swaying between the crevice of two cliffs, this bridge is still in use today. But in Nachman’s time, there were no guardrails protecting travelers from the jagged rocks below.

But, perhaps, he was imagining an even narrower bridge – one so thin and fragile you could grasp it in one hand. And, one that a family just up the road from the Famous Rebbe in the Austro Hungarian Empire would use as part of their newly formed circus act. A bridge that would serve that same family for the next seven generations, all the way to today.

You may know this family. Their great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandson is called Nik. And, on June 15<sup>th</sup> of this past year, he stayed true to his families legacy, using the narrowest of all possible bridges, a Gesher Tzaaaar Me’od, to cross the border between the United States and Canada, along the way taking time to admire the falls, some two hundred feet below his body.

Nik, of course is Nik Wallenda, and his family started performing their aerial acrobatics in the 1780's, almost exactly at the same time the Breslover Rebbe was penning his famous saying.

The bridge in question – a tightrope – an 1800-foot steel cable, two inches in diameter, weighing seven tons. For Nik, who began to prepare for this type of activity when he was two years old, climbing to the top of his family's swing-set and doing a summersault, and who has been walking tightrope in public since he was the age of a Bar Mitzvah, it was as crossing the Rainbow Bridge by car.

But, for those of us who watched (almost a half-a-million in person, and over 13 million on TV), our stomachs in our mouths, what Nik Wallenda did at 10:30 on a Friday Night (only an hour or so after services let out) was a feat of unimaginable courage and, thankfully, in the end triumph.

Wearing a red jacket, black sweat pants, and holding a 30-foot pole weighing 40 pounds, of course tethered, at the insistence of both governments, Wallenda mouthed the words of prayers as he deliberately put one foot before the next.

When he arrived at just before 11 PM, stepping down into Canadian soil, he was greeted by a custom's officer.

“Do you have anything to declare?” he was asked.

“I am not carrying anything,” he assured the officer.

And, then the officer asked, “what is the purpose of your trip?”

“To inspire people to follow their dreams and to never give up,” he replied. A pertinent message here on Yom Kippur.

In addition to a strong body, hand eye coordination, good balance, and years of training, tightrope walking requires a strong mind, the ability to eliminate all distractions and concentrate fully on the task at hand.

But, to walk that narrowest of bridges without fear, it does not hurt to have a guardian angel or two looking over your shoulder. For Nik, that angel would be his grandfather, Karl.

Nik's zhede Karl was born in Magdeburg, Germany in 1905. He too began his acrobatics from an early age, already performing at the age of six. After much success in Europe, he and his *mishpachah* (the Wallendas were not Jewish, but I kind of adopted them this High Holidays) traveled across the ocean to New York City, debuting at Madison Square Garden in 1928 as part of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Baily Circus.

The Flying Wallendas were famous for a four-person chair pyramid, performed on tightrope, that later was converted to a seven person pyramid.

Their act was not without risks. In Akron, Ohio the entire group fell off the wire, luckily only suffering minor injuries. Over the years, others were not as lucky. His sister-in Rietta, his son-in-law Chico, were killed during the act, and even, Karl badly injured his pelvis.

But still he continued to perform, all the way until he was 73-years old. And, at an age when many of us have trouble walking at all, Karl Wallenda attempted to walk between the two towers of the ten-story Candado Plaza Hotel in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

This was supposed to be a promotional stunt for the hotel. No biggie. But, in the world of tightrope walking there are no safe stunts. It was windy that day, but more importantly guide ropes were not attached properly.

Just a month after ABC television broadcast a made-for-TV movie special about the famous family, Karl Wallenda, the heart and soul of the family, met his end.

A little less than a year later, Nik was born. His walk over the falls was dedicated to his grandfather, a man he never met, but whose memory has been at the forefront of everything he has ever accomplished.

We too have guardian angel's present here in the room today. We see them in the lights of the memorial boards and we see them in each and every one of our eyes. We call these lights the *Malachai Hasharet*, our guardian angels, and every Shabbat we invite them in to our homes during *Shalom Aleichem*. These are the individuals whose memories hold us and support us, allowing us to walk the narrow bridge of life without fear.

For our first Yom Kippur together as a Shir Shalom family, I would like to invite three of these Malachai Hasharet into the room with us today. Each of these individuals was part of the lifeblood of our legacy congregations, Temple Beth Am and Temple Sinai, and, while each of them met an untimely death, the strength they exhibited in their too short life times continues to nurture us and sustain us today.

The first of these individuals came to Buffalo in the early 1950s. He was young, energetic, and believed strongly in a new form of Judaism, a Judaism that would be inclusive, egalitarian, creative and dynamic. A protégé of Mordecai Kaplan, he was willing to take a chance on something that while small at first, had a chance to be truly special and unique.

He made Judaism come alive, with a down to earth, people oriented approach. He was not afraid to challenge, Gaynor once wrote: “A mature religion looks at the world with open eyes. It affirms there are no shortcuts to a better tomorrow.”

For eleven year he served as the sole Rabbi of Temple Sinai, and in that capacity Nathan Gaynor helped nurture it from its days spent sharing space in a church, into a beautiful new home on 50 Alberta Drive. In Buffalo, he raised a family, his twin daughters and son, and he raised a community.

When he left in 1965 to pursue a Hillel position, he left a gaping whole in our hearts. But, that was nothing compared to the feeling when seven years later, the news came back of his untimely death at the age of 53. What a loss to Buffalo, what a loss to the world.

A portrait of our second Malachai Hasharet currently sits outside of our Temple office; his warm smile illuminating a room all these years later. Rabbi Daniel E. Kerman was an exceptional individual. The son of an Orthodox rabbi, he knew Judaism backwards and forwards. But, more importantly he knew people. He knew the job of rabbi was much more than giving sermons. It was about being there in happy times and in sad. Everyone knew that Rabbi Kerman would give his right hand if it helped a congregant in need.

He worked hard, sometimes too hard, and, on a warm July day, he was leaving the parking lot here at 4660 Sheridan Drive and while turning onto

Indian Trail drive had a stroke. For seven days the community sat in vigil, hoping, praying, but, to no avail. On July 18<sup>th</sup>, 1982, exactly 30 years ago, we lost our friend, our support.

And, then there was Susan, our beautiful, smiling, Malchai Hasharet. Dearest beloved Susan Wehle, whose loss, even four years later this February, feels surreal.

The first time I ever set forth in this room was for a Sukkot celebration in 2008. Joining me on the bima that day were the clergy teams from Temple Beth Am and Temple Beth Zion. I was representing Temple Sinai. This was my first time using the prayer book *Mishkan Tefilah*, and the first time I would pray together with my colleagues. Cantor Susan greeted me before the service, telling how much she was looking forward to working together. Throughout the service I felt her joyous spirit uplifting the community and leading us, in joy, to greater and greater heights.

Little did I know that the next time I would be in this room would be at a memorial service in her honor. On that horrific day, there were almost a thousand people present. All of us here, to support the memory of our beloved Susan, to cry, to be comforted, and to rejoice in all that she gave us in her all too short life. She was 55 years-old when she died.

How we miss our beloved Cantor, her voice, her smile, how grateful we are to Cantor Sharon for continuing Susan's legacy, allowing music to once again flourish at Shir Shalom.

Rabbi Nathan Gaynor, Rabbi Daniel Kerman, Cantor Susan Wehle, our supports, our loves, all stolen from us in their fifties. During their lives they helped us walk the narrow bridge, and they continue to do so in their deaths.

When Nik Wallenda walked the falls, he felt his grandfather Karl's presence right beside him. So, too with our Malchai Hasharet. They come to us with a message. It is the message of their lives and it is the message of Yom Kippur, it is a message everyone in this room needs to hear and absorb: "Be there for one another, Be there for one another, Be there for one another, because we were there for you."

That is how you walk the narrow bridge of life, with no fear at all. A good fast, an easy fast, a meaningful fast. G'mar Chatimah Tovah.