



“THINGS ARE NOT AS THEY SHOULD BE”

Roz is sitting in a reclaimed school bus with a bunch of strangers bumping down the road to the Kennebec River for her first ever white-water rafting trip.

She tells this story:

The guide stood swaying in the aisle of the bus, coaching us on what to expect:

‘If you fall out of the boat,’ she said, ‘it is very important that you pull your feet up so that you don’t get a foot caught in the rocks below. Think toes to nose.’

Balancing on one foot in the middle of the bus she attempted a demonstration. ‘Toes to nose and then look for the boat and reach for the oar.’

Most of us had been on the road since 4 AM. We were sleepy and mesmerized by the swaying of the bus. “Toes to nose,” I heard as I dozed. And then, “look for the boat”

By the time we arrived at the river’s edge I had heard the two phrases so many times I felt slightly crazed. We gathered our equipment and stood in a circle for our final instructions.

“If you fall out of the boat what do you say to yourself?”

“Toes to nose and look for the boat.” We chimed

Someone here is mentally challenged, I thought, as we climbed into the boat.

Not long into the trip, we surged into some CLASS 5 rapids. A wall of water rose up at the stern of the raft and I vanished as into a black hole. Roiling about underwater there was no up and down, neither water nor air nor land. There had never been a boat. There was no anywhere, there was nothing at all.

Toes to nose...the words emerged from a void. I pulled together into a ball. Floated toward the surface. **Look for the boat...**did that come from my head or was someone calling? The boat came into view and then an oar...**reach for the oar...**I did and found myself back in the boat, gratefully traveling down the Kennebec with a bunch of strangers in a spew of foam.

In *The Art of Possibility*, the book she co-wrote with her husband Ben Zander, conductor of the Boston philharmonic, psychologist Roz Zander says that when things are not as they should be, when it is hard or even impossible to feel the ground beneath you, when you are “out of the boat, you cannot THINK your way back in; you have no point of reference. You must call” she says, “on something that has been established in advance.”

I think we’re out of the boat. Things are not as they should be and it is hard to find the ground beneath us.

There is enormous injustice and greed and willful ignorance in

our world today. Young people have cancer and old people are abandoned by their families and black lives don’t really seem to matter, and children can be ripped from the arms of their parents if those parents don’t possess the right pieces of paper and a winner of the Nobel peace prize heads a country engaged in genocide and two different peoples claim that they were promised the Promised Land and how can their claims ever be settled now with all that’s gone on? And the people we thought we could count on suddenly can’t be trusted and the people we love with all our hearts struggle with addiction or mental illness and on and on and on.

Things are not as they should be.

How do we get back to the boat? Tonight I want to offer one oar we might look for when the waters threaten to submerge us – whatever the source of our drowning might be. And at the risk of stretching the metaphor thin, I want to tell you about the boat.

Yivarechecha Adonai v’yishmerecha – May you feel blessed and may you feel safe. While those waters churn around us, we have something established not just in advance, but from thousands of years of Jewish life, an oar to grab onto. The phrase may be familiar. It comes from the Birkat haCohanim, the priestly blessing. *Yivarechecha Adonai v’yishmerecha* – may you feel blessed and may you feel safe.

More about the oar in a minute. First, let me first tell you about the boat. The boat is a place inside ourselves that enables us to live fully in the world outside ourselves.

In their book the Zanders argue that there are two mindsets in which it is possible to live – one is characterized by scarcity the other by abundance, by enough. A mindset of scarcity says that there are only so many resources, some people succeed and others fail. “The assumption is that life is about staying alive and making it through – surviving in a world of scarcity and peril. Even when life is at its best...this assumption is the backdrop for the play and...it keeps the universe of possibility out of view.” (p18) It turns out that almost all of us live from this mindset almost all the time. Doesn’t matter if you are rich and actually have more than you need or you are poor and have less than you need. It’s not about any external reality. It’s about how we approach the world.

I imagine that some of you, good smart people will say, ‘Yes, Rabbi, this is how the world works. There are winners and losers. And there are finite resources. You can’t change that reality.’

But the Zanders propose and our ancient wisdom affirms that it need not be so.

The other mindset, the one that can enable us to ride through the choppy waters of a world in chaos is called abundance. In this mindset, the universe is a bountiful place of ever-renewing resource. Say the Zanders, “Life appears as variety, pattern, and shimmering movement, inviting us in every moment to engage.... [it] may be characterized as generative, or giving, in all senses of

that word – producing new life, creating new ideas, consciously endowing with meaning, contributing... Emotions that are often relegated to the special category of spirituality are abundant here: joy, grace, awe, wholeness, passion and compassion” (p20)

We know this to be true of our world, even if we don't live from this truth – new life is constantly coming into being, new plants, new animals, new people. New ideas are always blossoming and as the ancient Greek philosopher said, “change is the only constant in life.” If we were able to move away from the mindset that everything we do is for the sake of survival in a world of scarcity, then our imagination could be unleashed and we could embrace all sorts of possibilities. This boat of abundance can keep us floating in river of chaos.

But here's the maddening part of being human. Even if we accept this idea and decide, yes, I will live in the boat of abundance, we will still fall out of the boat over and over and over again. So, toes to nose, we need an oar to reach for. *Yivarechecha Adonai yishmerecha*. May you feel blessed. May you feel safe.

Since we're always doing something radical out here under the stars, I want to invite you to do something inherently Jewish but certainly unexpected in our modern synagogues. Let's meditate together for a moment. Close your eyes if you can, feel the ground under your feet and tush. Feel the breath come in and the breath go out. If it wasn't going to be dark soon, we'd sit this way for longer, but for now, just for a minute or two. Let the breath coming in and out; invite a softening of your muscles.

As you sit here, I want you to call to mind a moment in which you have known yourself to be truly truly blessed. It could be an hour, a week or a split second of your life story, but hold that moment. It could be from another person, someone who loves you; or a place that is sacred; something you did or something someone did for you. Feel it in your body, feel how knowing you are blessed, if even for a moment is warm and comforting, like being held in a simple, loving way, a way that lets you soften – *yivarechecha Adonai vyishmerecha* may you feel blessed. May you feel safe.

These words, – may you feel blessed; may you feel safe – and when I say them to myself, May I feel blessed, May I feel safe, are the oar I have learned to reach for when the waters are roiling around me. They are the mantra I recite like 'toes to nose and reach for the oar.'

I have written them on sticky notes that hang on my refrigerator. I have to put them where I can see them, because like the incessant repetition of toes to nose, I need them to come someplace beyond my conscious thinking when I need them. And when they do come, they remind me of who I am and who I want to be.

The oar itself doesn't save us from drowning in the turbulent waters, but it does point us toward the boat and give us something to hang on to. May I feel blessed. May I feel safe – is an oar that offers itself to our outstretched hands from thousands of years ago and from a divine place beyond my conscious understanding. It says, you can get back to the boat of abundance when you fall out. You don't have to give yourself over to fear and scarcity. I didn't invent these words of blessing – they are as ancient as any our Torah contains. I did have to learn them this way, for which I am grateful to my teacher Rabbi Jordan Bendat-Appel and the other teachers at Institute for Jewish Spirituality.

Yivarechecha Adonai v'yishmerecha – May you feel blessed and

may you feel safe doesn't mean that you will have everything you want and it doesn't fix the problems of the world. It also doesn't mean sit back and relax. The opposite in fact, is the true quality of feeling blessed. When God chooses Abraham and says *Lech Lecha* – Go forth, God promises *va-avarechecha* – I will bless you... *vheyeh bracha* – and you shall be a blessing...and a little later... *v'nivrechu vecha* – through you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Genesis 12:2-4)

If I do not myself feel blessed, my very human instinct is to try and gather all the resources I can for ME, not for anyone else. But if I do feel blessed, then I will be motivated to share my blessings because that is the very essence of blessing. It longs to be shared and acknowledged. It thrives and grows in community. Blessing, an orientation to abundance, brings more blessing in the world. Toes to nose, my friends and reach for the oar.

This New Year, as we all strive to navigate the rapids of our world, *Yivarechecha v'yishmerecha* May YOU feel blessed, May YOU feel safe so that we may all one day come to live in a world of abundance outside ourselves as well as within. Shana Tova