

"Dismounting Grace-fully"
Thanksgiving Service 2011
Rabbi Greg Harris

I grew up on the same street as our synagogue - Arguello Drive in Burlingame, California. Living so close to the synagogue allowed my sisters and I to walk to religious school and services. I used to love to ride my bike there too. The parking lot was wide open. I remember using the concrete tire stops in each parking space as a slalom course weaving in and out of the stops with my bike.

One day as I was coming home, I rode out the driveway of the synagogue and right into the street. That was the first time I got into a serious bicycle accident. I did not break anything but I remember recovering on the couch.

The second time I got into a serious bike accident was about 33 years later. It was actually two and a half weeks ago.

My mom always told me to wear my helmet so of course I had mine on. She never told me to wear elbow pads though.

So as I was riding, I hit a rock or pothole or branch or... who knows what and I ended up flipping up and over the handle bars. I broke my elbow but I am well on the road to recovery now. I appreciated the phone call from my friend Rev. Ron. After he was assured I was ok, he wanted to know who got it worse – me or the bike. I am sorry to say that the bike does not have a scratch on it. I took the brunt of the fall.

I would not recommend dismounting a bike over the handlebars. There are many better ways to dismount more gracefully.

It has been amazing to think about how quickly our fortunes can change. Literally, I was riding along and enjoying a beautiful day when suddenly I was visiting Suburban Hospital.

It is funny to think how closely we plan our lives using Outlook or iCalendar or even an old fashion paper notebook. And despite the best orchestrated carpools, bus schedules or planned bridge games, life seems to have other plans some times. When things go from good to bad, we have many descriptive phrases.

A wrench in the works; a bump in the road; a zig instead of a zag. In military slang it may be FUBAR – Fouled Up Beyond All Repair. On our side of the street we say: *Mentsch tracht, Gott lacht*. ‘Man plans, God laughs.’

We all understand those moments when we realize that things have taken an unexpected turn. These are not easy moments. It causes me to feel anxious, surprised, scared, out of control, or maybe even helpless at a time of sudden change. You might have felt something similar at some point.

Whereas when things seem good we may have a broad perspective on the world. We see options, opportunities, and possibilities. But when “stuff hits the fan”, it is natural for our vision to suddenly narrow. We may become hyper-focused on the immediate. We may shift into a defensive mode in

order to care for ourselves, to protect ourselves. This applies to many situations whether it is a sudden change for our physical, emotional or spiritual state.

What I have been thinking about lately is that moments of unexpected change do not have to be a moments of isolation though. They can be moments of embrace. They can be moments of grace. While anyone who saw me would not say that I was graceful flying over the handlebars, I have learned that I certainly did dismount *grace-fully*.

To be honest, “grace” is not a term Jews use often. Maybe these surrounding have inspired me to borrow the term. To a Jewish ear, it sounds Christian and for good reason. So first we need to define terms here. So, where else should I go to define this but the always informative and sometimes accurate resource of Wikipedia.

The entry for ‘Christian Grace’ claims that ‘Strong's Concordance gives this definition; "Grace, the state of kindness and favor towards someone....” This is God’s kindness given to people without reason or specific merit. It is a gift of kindness and compassion. Now if I have butchered this basic tenant of Christian theology, Ron or Jenny will let me know later.

Within Judaism, the closest thing we have may be *Chen*. It is often translated as favor. It can be from God extending favor to people as in Genesis 6:8: *Noach matza chen b'aynay Hashem - Noah found favor with the Lord*. It can also be between people as in Genesis 18:3 when Abraham runs from his tent to meet the three strangers walking by and he says:

VaOmar, Adoni, Eem Na, Matzati chen, And he said, Gentlemen, please, if you have found favor with me, do not go pass by your servant.

Little did Abraham realize that he was speaking with angels and not just any travelers.

However it is derived, being in a moment of grace, being in a moment favor is truly a sacred moment... but it is not always easy to recognize.

Divine grace or favor does not present itself in the form of miracles as obvious as they seem to be in the bible. Both the Hebrew and Christian Bibles are full of miracles – the Red Sea, Revelation at Mt. Sinai, walking on water, healing. I am not sure if there are less miracles today or if we are just too cynical, too logical to appreciate them.

But while high power Hollywood miracle seem to be taking a back seat today, I continually feel the grace, feel the favor of being cared for by my community of faith. Whether it is here at Bethesda United or across the street at Beth El, we all work very hard to nurture an environment which allows people to feel the embrace of favor, the embrace of grace.

Taking soup to someone who is sick is not as dramatic as manna from heaven for the complaining Israelites... but it is a kindness that happens without fan fare in a community of caring.

Writing a note or a quick call to let someone know that you are thinking of them is a small thing that will be profoundly appreciated – especially when something sudden happens.

Do not let people stumble through change alone. While you can not fix whatever is happening, you can help them realize this moment grace-fully. Because I believe that we can each find favor with each other. We can create moments of *chen* within our communities. We can prepare ourselves to recognize moments of grace.

That is what Thanksgiving is all about. It is a time to for gratitude. It is a time to appreciate despite the changes we may have faced this past year that we are not alone. Within a community, we are never alone. We can feel *grace-fully*.

For decades, we have been coming together before Thanksgiving for this service. It is a highlight of the year for me. The choirs sing. One of the clergy offers words. We do a collection - which is always interesting to see the Beth El people react to this since we do not do this on Shabbat. But I wonder if we really have any impact beyond a momentary nice feeling. Are we truly more thankful? Does this service bring to focus a sense of favor or grace that transfers to how we conduct our Thanksgiving meal or even beyond that – how we live our lives?

I want to leave us with this challenge. I pray that this year, should we face a sudden change, that we open ourselves up to others to let them support us as we get our sure footing. And I pray that when we see others in need, within

our own communities, that we do not hesitate to appropriately reach out to them and let them know they are not alone.

When you do this, let the clergy know. When you feel this, let us know that our sense of community, our sense of favor is not only in a nice service but it is how we live our lives.

When that happens, then we will know we are on the right path. Then we will know that we are living up to the moral standards which our respective faiths expect of us. And then, we will gather next year at Beth El to celebrate a year of favor, a year of gratitude and a year of living gracefully.

AMEN.