

"THE LESSON OF THE E-BIKE"

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Congregation B'nai Jehudah — Overland Park, Kansas

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A friend calls them "God-jobs."

I call them "aha moments," moments when our eyes are opened to a reality that we had been blind to before.

I had such a moment this summer.

Let me begin with a bit of background.

My wife, Leslie, got into cycling about a decade ago. The spandex. The gear. The carbon fiber bike. The whole nine yards. She wanted me to join her, so we could enjoy this sport together.

Slowly, she convinced me. I started with a bike our daughter won in a raffle. I graduated to a hybrid and took the first tentative steps of riding on the road. I will admit. It was scary, at first, cycling alongside of cars that were going significantly faster than me. But, I came to appreciate the feel of the wind against my face, riding 10-15 miles per hour on the open road.

Back to this summer.

We were on vacation and we decided to rent bicycles. When we got to the shop, they had e-bikes for rent...electric bicycles. Not motor scooters. But bikes that gave an assist as one pedals. One was still required to pedal. Skeptical but intrigued, we rented them.

Oh my goodness. Within two minutes of being on this bike, my entire outlook on cycling changed. Where I used to be able to go 10 to 15 miles per hour, now I could ride 20 to 25 miles per hour. And while I still got a good workout, I wasn't

struggling whenever I went up a hill. Yes, it was strenuous. But I knew I could make it. And my attitude was completely different. It is hard to say that riding a bike is life-changing...but getting on that e-bike the first time...it really was.

I wish I could bring out the bike (yes, I went and bought one) and have everyone here get on and see what I mean. It is remarkable.

Getting on that e-bike on vacation... I discovered my Kol Nidrei sermon.

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Friends, each of us struggles in life. Even those of us who believe we have a quote-unquote "blessed life," have moments of conflict...perhaps external...perhaps internal. Sometimes it sneaks up upon us like a panther in the night. Sometimes, we see it coming weeks, months, even years in advance. However, whatever its guise, none of us escapes this reality. Some of us struggle with addiction. Maybe alcohol. Maybe food. Maybe pills. Some of us contend with difficult relationships...with parents, with siblings, with children, with spouse or partner. Some of us battle inner demons of insecurity, depression, anxiety, commitment. Some are afflicted with physical ailments. Perhaps acute. Perhaps chronic. And some...well, the list goes on. It is, as it states in our Yom Kippur liturgy, an alphabet of woe.

To some extent, isn't that why we are here tonight, on this Kol Nidrei? We

hope, we pray – even though we don't always know to whom or what we hope or pray – that we will find solace from our pain, that somewhere – somehow – we will discover that secret ingredient to lift whatever burdens we carry so that our load for the coming year will be lighter.

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Remember my adventure with the e-bike?

Here's the "God-job" that transpired.

We found ourselves talking to a woman who owned an e-bike as we were renting ours. We hadn't taken off yet on our excursion, so we were still unsure what we would feel. She described the experience in the following manner: "Imagine that you are riding along, and you have this invisible guy with his hand at your back, just giving you an assist whenever you need it. The higher the hill, the more the assist. He's just there, with his hand at your back."

With apologies to the gender reference, it sounds like she was talking about God.

And that was my aha moment.

Isn't that what God – or our inner karma – or whatever we call "it" – does for us? Doesn't God have God's hand at our back and just helps us get up that hill of life a little easier?

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Let's be honest. Some here tonight don't believe in God.

If we are representative of the Pew Research Center study from 2018, 10% in this room don't believe in God. 89% of us do. However, only 33% here tonight believe in a God who acts within history. The rest believe – and I quote from the Pew study – "in some other

higher power or spiritual force in the universe."

So, let's just assume that instead of "God," as we normally understand that word to be, instead of the God who judges us, who determines our destiny, who is the One to whom we ask for forgiveness, the God who is the focus of our prayers tonight and tomorrow, we just accept what almost 60% of American Jews use as their definition, namely "some other higher power or spiritual force in the universe."

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A parenthetical story.

When I was in fourth grade, we had three dads come in one day to talk about their careers. The first dad was a police officer. He came in his uniform and had a gun. The second dad was a fire fighter. He came in his blue work clothes, but wore his boots and carried an axe. So far, pretty impressive, albeit not unexpected.

The third parent was wearing a regular suit. He carried nothing with him. He stood up and said the following, "Boys and girls, I am a brain scientist. I study the brain." He had my attention. He then said, "Do you know that human beings only use 3% of their brains?" He paused. And then he said something that I have never forgotten, "Can you imagine what we could do if we could harness the other 97%?"

That was probably my very first aha moment. Because – over the years – it filled in the questions I had about the nature of God. We only use 3% of our God.

On this Kol Nidrei eve, I stand before you and cannot tell you what God is. But I can tell you what I believe God does. God is that "higher power or spiritual force in the universe" that

permits us to tap into the other 97% of the brain with which we are endowed.

Such a definition allows for the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Moses and Miriam, the God of King David and Queen Esther. And such a definition allows for the God of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the God of Rosa Parks and the God of Albert Einstein and Madame Curie.

And such a definition allows for the God whose hand – so to speak – is at our back and helping us get up the hills of life.

Interestingly, seven of the 12 steps in all of the addiction recovery programs speak about God's role in supporting us in these kinds of struggles. Specifically, Step #11 states: "We seek through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, praying only for knowledge of [God's] will for us and the power to carry that out."²

We want God – however we understand God to be – to give us the power to overcome the struggles each of us confronts. That is the extra muscle, the assist we get, having God's hand at our back giving us that extra help to make the climb possible, enduring, achievable.

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I've had my e-bike for about three weeks now. In the 200 miles or so that I have ridden, I've learned a few lessons, all of which apply to the work of healing we do tonight, tomorrow, and each day in the year to come. Let me share those lessons.

First, the battery only assists. It doesn't do the work for me.

We may believe in Noah's God or Moses' God...a God who reaches down into this world and intervenes. But even with Noah or Moses, they had to do

something...they had to act. Each of us is ultimately responsible for our own selves...our own destinies. I referenced earlier the Twelve Steps of addiction recovery. The one step that – in my opinion – is counter to Jewish belief is Step #3: "We make a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God." I believe we cannot lie down and let God, alone, "do" for us.

We need to do the heavy lifting. Remember what our tradition says: "For transgressions against God, this Day of Atonement atones. But for transgressions that we commit against other human beings, this Day of Atonement does not atone, does not make it right, until they have made peace with one another."

Whether it is a relationship that needs healing, an attitude that needs changing, or a wrong that needs to be righted, God can be there to help...but we have to start the process. We have to get on the bike. We have to start pedaling. We have to head in the right direction. We do the work.

The second lesson? An e-bike is heavier than other bikes...50 lbs. vs. 15 lbs. That weight is burdensome if the battery dies or if I don't engage it.

A week ago, I rode my bike from home to the congregation. I planned it out. I left my car here the night before, so I could get home the next evening. At 6:45 am that next morning, I headed out from our house...20 miles to go. I got on the road, headed down the hill, and – about two miles in – came to the first hill. I hit the assist button. Nothing happened. I pushed it to level two. Nothing. I jammed it into the highest assist. Nada. Something was wrong. The battery assist was not working. The ride took 30 minutes longer than I planned. It was brutal trying to ride a 50 lb. bike up those hills by myself, with no help.

When we say we believe in God...especially the God we talk about during Yom Kippur – the one who judges, the one who intervenes – then when God is not present for us, the burden is almost unbearable. We struggle even more. We challenge God. We even deny God. How can God permit the Holocaust to happen? Why would God allow my child to suffer? Where is God now that I need God?

Sound familiar?

That's the equivalent of not having the electric assist. It's kind of like a bad connection with God. We expect something but nothing occurs. It's there. God is there. We just need to fix our connections, to realign the spiritual contacts which permit our souls – some might say the other 97% of our God – to open and begin to do the work of healing for which each of us yearns. God may not be able to save a life or stop a natural disaster or reduce immediate pain. God can help us in the aftermath, giving us strength to cope along the way. Alone – without God – it's so very tough.

The third and final lesson from my e-bike is very important to remember – and really applies to any type of exercise: No matter how good the assist might be, it won't matter a whole lot if we don't stay in shape, if we don't keep exercising and pedaling on a regular basis. Anyone who has worked out – swam, walked, ran, lifted – and then stopped for a few weeks...well, you know how hard it is to start up again.

For you and me, the lesson is similar. God – whatever we understand that to be – isn't going to be there with the assist (or, perhaps, we won't recognize it) if we don't keep God in our lives on a regular basis. It requires an openness, an awareness to God-jobs or aha moments that occur. It takes an attitude of gratitude, of recognizing that all that happens is not just because **we** have

caused it to be. It is reminding ourselves constantly that the 97% of our God – that we barely comprehend – acts in ways unexpected. When we have God in our lives – when we are “plugged in” – then God can act with and for us, giving us that boost when we most need it.

One final story. I was riding my e-bike early one morning and came up to a train crossing, just as the gates came down and the lights started flashing. I stopped on the right side. On my left, a motorcyclist pulled up. Now, I say “motorcyclist.” But, in truth, he was a biker. His leather jacket said, “Hell's Angels,” and he looked every bit the part. He was big. He was hairy. And he was ugly. His bike was – of course – a Harley. And it was big. And loud.

He looked at me. He looked at my e-bike, my spandex. He looked back at me. He said, what the **#&*\$** is that? I said, it's an electric bike. He looked at it, again. He looked back at me, and asked, “How fast can it go?” I answered it can assist me up to 20 mph. He looked at me again. And just as the train gate lifted, and he started his bike up, he said, “God is my co-pilot. Whose yours?” And he took off.

God is my co-pilot, as well. God is with me, especially when I need to go up the mountains of life...and there are plenty of mountains. Tonight, I see before me my own road. And it is not a simple incline. It is high and it is hard...and I will need all the help I can get. And, **I** have to do the work. God can help. But the work...the work is mine.

On this Yom Kippur, I invite you to take your soul's e-bike out, turn it on, hit that power assist, and join me as we climb from our struggles to our successes, from the pain of our failures to the pinnacle of healing and hope.

When I hit that assist button on my bike, I feel that push – that proverbial hand

on my back – giving me a boost. It lifts me emotionally. For in that moment, I know I can make it up that next hill. God can be – if we want – our co-pilot, the hand at our back, along this journey we call life. We just need to have that connection, keep it charged, and when we need it...hit that assist button. And God will be there with God's hand at our back.

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<http://www.pewforum.org/2018/04/25/when-americans-say-they-believe-in-god-what-do-they-mean/>

² https://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/smf-121_en.pdf