

Rabbi Alex Kress
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One of the joys of parenthood is an excuse to watch Disney movies. I love them. I love cuddling on the couch, under blankets, and getting lost in the worlds of animated films.

Aria knows I'm a sucker for Disney movies too because at all the moments when she shouldn't be watching TV she's started asking me to watch with her - "I'll even let you choose the movie, Daddy!" she says with a beautiful blend of sweetness and manipulation.

Like any kid, her Disney obsessions ebb and flow, but in recent weeks, she's started asking to listen to the Frozen music again - and if you're a Frozen fan - this sermon is for you. On one of our recent rides to school, the song "When I Am Older" came on, an Olaf song performed by Josh Gad. I sang the words, mindlessly:

[Sing / Rhythmically say]

This will all make sense when I am older
Someday, I will see that this makes sense
One day, when I'm old and wise
I'll think back and realize
That these were all completely normal events
Ah!

"Oh my god," I thought - relating deeply to Olaf's AHHHH! - "I'm supposed to be older and wiser, the one guiding these beautiful kids through the "completely normal events" that have disrupted our lives and upended everything we knew, and I don't know about you, but I don't think I'll ever look back and think on this moment and think - "that made sense."

The older we get, the more we come to live with the uncertainty of life. Olaf later sings in the most Jewish verse of the song:

Growing up means adapting, Puzzling at your world and your place.

And that is exactly what we're doing during the High Holy Days - trying to understand the world, trying to understand our place in it, and trying to find inner peace while our outer world is so uncertain.

There's a quip that "Life is like driving a car with an opaque windshield. All you have to go by are your rear view mirrors." And while I appreciate the perspective of those mirrors, it's still terrifying to be in the driver's seat.

And once you hit a certain stage of life, you're permanently in that driver's seat. So how do we deal with the fear, the insecurity, the uncertainty, that comes with traveling [sing] "into the unknown."

We can't see the potholes or bumps; we can't see the accidents ahead or the bend in the road.

It seems like our natural reaction should be to stop the car immediately. But that isn't a luxury we have in life.

In fact, according to Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, Judaism regards a person "who has stopped [moving]...as someone who has lost their way."

So instead of arresting our lives for the fear of what's to come, instead of stopping everything, our tradition actually suggests an alternative approach.

No, we don't know what's ahead, but we can cultivate within ourselves *Menuchat Hanefesh* - an equanimity or a calmness of our inner soul. It starts by accepting that we can't control the world around us and that we shouldn't expect life to be a smooth and tranquil ride.

In fact, Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, the great 19th century mussar rabbi writes that "one [who] lives a life of calmness and tranquility in the service of God, is...[actually] remote from true service."

And the Mussar master Alan Morinis asks, in response to that, "Isn't spiritual practice supposed to make us more calm?"

What's the point of cultivating an inner life if it doesn't result in greater tranquility?"

But what Salanter is hinting at is that the human experience ebbs and flows with externalities.

"From [Salanter's] perspective," Morinis continues, "if you have come to a place in your life where all the waters [are calm] and the waves [still], there is a very good chance that you are in a coma..."

Life is choppy, and the waves hit hard, and the rip current might pull you under and take you for a ride. But Judaism isn't about avoiding the sea, it's about learning to surf.

Judaism is about leaning into the human experience - and all that it comes with - to live a full life by equipping ourselves with the tools and guideposts to find meaning and overcome adversity. And cultivating *menuchat hanefesh* is about an inner peace - not what's happening to us but how we react.

A famous teaching in this vein is by Rebbe Nachman of Breslav, made famous in our world by a folk version of his words: "Kol haolam kulo, gesher tzar m'od, v'haikar, lo lfahed klal. The whole world is a very narrow bridge, and I said the most important part is not to be afraid."

But the song writers took some liberties and changed the words a little bit. The original text teaches us that every person crosses an exceedingly narrow bridge - it's part of life, every single one of us crosses many narrow bridges - but the most important thing to get through it is not to scare oneself - *she lo yitpached* - the Hebrew is in the reflexive.

It's not about external factors, it's about internal ones. We're all driving with an opaque windshield - every single one of us.

But when we face adversity - when we have to cross that narrow bridge, the thing that gets us into trouble, Rebbe Nahman says, is our own temperament.

In Frozen, we find this message embedded in the storyline. The thing that wreaks havoc on the Kingdom of Arendelle isn't Elsa's magic exactly, so much as her fear.

She didn't choose how she was born, she didn't choose to discover her magical powers and have a host of trolls riding shotgun giving her directions. But that's where she is, and she's in control of her destiny.

When Elsa hits adversity, when her fear leads her magic astray and turns summer into winter in Arendelle, Elsa's reaction is to run away and build an ice palace where she can't hurt anyone, but where she also avoids life, where she sees no one, where, to quote the words of Alan Morinis, her "serenity was nothing but a velvet lined jail cell."

Judaism provides us with the spiritual tools to withstand adversity, to meet it head on.

The goal of our spiritual life isn't enlightenment, it isn't a place where we no longer wrestle and have found ultimate peace. To Judaism, that is not truth, nor does it reflect the reality of the human experience.

Our lives are roller coasters, much like the lives of generations of Jews before us, and Judaism knows that. Our spiritual task year-round, but particularly right now during these Yamim Noraim (the days of awe), is to reflect on our experiences and hone the skills & resilience needed to move through another year with more meaning, more purpose, and more fulfillment.

There is a metaphor in the Talmud, that compares the Jewish people to a reed: "The reed stands in water, and its shoots replenish themselves when cut...and even if all the winds in the world came and blew against it, they could not move it from its place, [it just] sways with them until the winds subside, and the reed remains its place."

There is something about this image - particularly this year - that I find so beautiful, so powerful, so inspiring, in the face of everything that we have been through.

The flexibility of the reed is its strength. Its gentleness absorbs so much of its surroundings. It goes with the flow. And that is - for me - a roadmap to *menuchat hanefesh* - to finding equanimity in a world that is so uncertain.

Life throws so much at us, but when we bend like a reed we - in fact - do not break, we don't uproot, we don't change who we are. We deal with the adversity. We learn to live with who we are, we grow and evolve. And that which we can't control - we [sing] "let it go."

Gmar chatimah tovah - may we be inscribed for a good year and may we face whatever challenges lay ahead like a reed.