

***You've Got the Key***  
***Rosh Hashanah Morning 5772***  
***Jericho Jewish Center***  
***Rabbi Marvin Richardson***

I rode my bicycle past your window last night  
I roller skated to your door at daylight  
It almost seems like you're avoiding me  
I'm OK alone but you've got something I need

I've got a brand new pair of roller skates  
You've got a brand new key  
I think we should get together and  
Try them on to see  
I been lookin' around awhile  
You got something for me  
Oh, I got a brand new pair of roller skates  
You got a brand new key

How many of you remember that song? You're older than I thought! I remember when that song first came out, being the testosterone laden individual that I was at that point in my life, I believed that there was some sexual connotation to the words, As I got older, however, I realized that the song had a far more important message – a message that implies that we possibly hold the key for the welfare of others.

Ten years ago on Sept. 11th, Dr. Benjamin Luft thought he had the key. He had prepared his hospital, Stonybrook Medical Center to receive the hundreds if not thousands of casualties he, and many others were expecting, as a result of the terrorist attacks. Unfortunately, no one came through the door. What Dr. Luft didn't realize was that he still had the key. It just wasn't to what he originally thought. Instead months after the tragedy, the people who started walking through his doors were a different kind of casualty. The people who walked through his doors were among the 70,000 people who responded to the terrorist attack, both during the terrible tragedy and for the many weeks, months, and sometimes years following the disaster.

Dr. Luft realized that many of those he saw walking through his doors were not only suffering physically –the smoke and ash that enveloped the area after the towers collapsed had caused them serious respiratory problems – but also suffering emotionally. Most of the 6000 responders Dr. Luft treated in the special clinic he created for them had never told the story of what they had witnessed. It was too painful. As Stacey Goodman, who worked at the emergency morgue set up at ground zero related, "I had a fireman come in at some point holding a blanket covering something. He opened the blanket and cried, 'these are the bones of my son.' What do say to that? Stacey asked. What can you possibly say?

As a result of their experience, most of the responders said nothing. As Kristine Fermaleti expressed it, when you experienced what she experienced, seeing people jump out of buildings and then be pulverized when they reach the ground – those memories don't allow you to speak." , "You try to bury 9/11, not relive it.

And yet, of those 6000 responders Dr. Luft treated, 137 agreed to be interviewed and have their stories recorded. Those recordings served as a basis for a program that many of you may have seen on 60 Minutes just a few weeks ago on the Tenth anniversary of 9/11. It was the basis of the preview Dr. Luft shared with the audience at the 9/11 observance held at the Mid-Island Y. Like Stacey Goodman and Kristine Fermaleti, their experiences at ground zero changed their lives forever. Whether it was the high school student who knew he had to go down there to help regardless of what was asked of him to do, or the massage therapist who knew exactly what she could do to help, all these individuals also had held the key, so to speak, to try to make order out of chaos, bring normalcy to a situation of intense horror.

When listening to Dr. Luft, both at the 9/11 ceremony and on 60 Minutes, I was struck by his reasoning for starting his clinic and more importantly, why he felt it necessary to interview these individuals. Aside from a doctor's innate desire to help, Dr. Luft wanted to understand what other values these people possessed that caused them to risk it all, to reach beyond themselves and become and do something greater than might be expected. It's almost as if he were looking for the how and why these individuals had bought into the mentality of that old Army recruitment slogan – Be all that you can be!

Of all those interviewed the person whose story resonated the most with me, is that of Carol Faulkner. A transit cop, who like so many others, ran to the site after the planes flew into the World Trade Center, Faulkner related that when the first tower imploded, it blew her out with it. That the only way she managed to avoid being swept out of the building totally was to hold on to something with her left hand. How she managed to do that I can't begin to fathom. What's more, after the building collapsed, she couldn't see, she couldn't breathe. All there was was this eerie silence. All she heard were all the alarm patches that firemen wear and which go off when they aren't moving. There was death all around her, and yet, Carol Faulkner found life. There is a picture she held up at some point during the interview in which she is seen, despite being covered in soot and ash, escorting a woman to safety. That is being all you can be! That is holding the key. So is the decision she made even before the towers imploded when she first arrived on the scene. A big burly FBI agent looked at her and the rest of the group assembled and told them, "If you want to live, you might as well leave now because most likely we are all going to die." The group looked at one another and almost in unison shouted, "We're not leaving!"

To be so life affirming when death is staring you in the face; to believe that you have the key to affect positive change when everything else says otherwise, seems impossible. And yet these individuals refused to give in to what reality should have dictated, that the likelihood of their dying was far greater than the likelihood of their living, so why bother trying to affect change. Why bother running into a burning building, when you're probably not going to make it out.

Sure Psalm 118 verse 17 says, *Lo Amut Ki Echyeh Va'asaper Maaseh Ya*. I will not die, but live, and proclaim God's great acts. Yes, miracles do occur, but not always. It takes a certain kind of individual to continue to hold on to the key when everything points to the fact that maybe you should let go.

I am assuming that many of you have either read or seen the movie adaptation of *Sarah's Key*, Tatiana deRosnay's fictionalized version of the very real suffering of French Jewry during World War II. As the story goes, during the roundup of the Jews in Paris, by French authorities, no less, Sarah locks her brother into a secret compartment fully believing she would return shortly to release him. But as the hours and the days drag on and as the Jews are first interred locally with no amenities which only become worse as they are shipped off to concentration camp like conditions in the French countryside, it is only Sarah who fights against her fate because she needs to release her brother. Struggling from hunger, sickness and eventual separation from her parents, Sarah's key is her liberation in as much as she believes it is her brother's. And yet, after escaping the camp and managing to make her way back to Paris, her world collapses when she opens the closet only to find her brother's decomposed body.

With her mission failed, Sarah's life is essentially over, despite the fact that she goes on to live with the French farm couple that took her in after she escaped the camp, a couple who treat her as if she were their own granddaughter. Even after she moves away to America, marries and gives birth to a son, Sarah still cannot come to terms with her failure. That she ends up taking her own life many years later further compounding the tragedy probably surprises no one. And yet, the beauty of *Sarah's Key* is the fact that when the American-born journalist Julia, discovers the story and makes it her mission to resurrect, as it were, not only the plight of French Jewry at the hands of their own countrymen, something the French would prefer to forget, but also the individual plight of Sarah. It is as if the key that Sarah held onto for so long has been transferred. Although Sarah could not save her brother's life, Julia, in a metaphorical sense, resurrects Sarah's.

Although not on the same level as that of the 9/11 responders, there was an element of risk in Julia's decision to resurrect the story of Sarah & the abandonment of French Jewry by their countrymen. It alienated her in-laws, it further strained her relationship with her soon to be ex-husband who desperately wanted her to abort a pregnancy, a child whom Julia knows will one day bear Sarah's name. Again, although not on the same level of that of the 9/11 responders, it still took an element of courage for Julia to use the key she possessed to right a wrong, to save a life.

Rabbi Lawrence Forman gives a beautiful example of what courage means in the face of great risk in a midrashic retelling of one of the lessons from the Akeida – the binding of Isaac – tomorrow's Torah reading. Abraham, Isaac and their two servants are trudging through the wilderness. Mile after mile of unrelieved bleak desert passing under their feet, their thirst becoming unbearable, the sun hot and unremitting upon their heads.

Suddenly the old man sees what appears to be a great mountain off in the distance, but he was not sure that his fading eyesight was correct. He turned to his two servants. "Do you see anything in the distance?" "No, we see nothing but this desolate expanse of desert that will surely kill us with its blazing heat," they answer. The old man then turns to his son and asks the same question. "Yes, father I do see something! I see a majestic mountain peak and the glory of the Lord hovering above it."

How is it that Abraham & Isaac see the mountain, while the two servants do not? The answer seems clear or at least it seems clear to Rabbi Forman. The two servants actually do see the mountain, but are only focusing on the danger of the moment. As far as they're concerned, the choices involved in climbing that mountain far outweigh any possible benefit to themselves or to others in the future and as such, they can't reach beyond themselves. Abraham & Isaac also know only too well the danger in climbing that mountain. Isaac is probably going to die but both Abraham and Isaac, so the Midrash would have us believe, understand the possibility for a spiritual and everlasting reward to countless others. Climbing that mountain is the key and to not follow through would ultimately cause a greater loss to more than just themselves.

Sometimes, however, like Abraham's two servants, people would rather pretend not to see the mountain, or refuse to climb it even if in the end there is the possibility for reward and resolution for the benefit of others.

Mahmud Abbas is like Abraham's two servants. Funny, since according to the midrash, one of the servants is Ishmael, the father of the Arab people. Abbas sees the mountain, which is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but he doesn't want to climb it because there are too many dangers. It's too risky. He can't deliver what his people want and expect. He can't say what his people want to hear. They expect him to promise the return of all Palestinian refugees to their homes, whether that home be in Jaffa or Jerusalem. Funny that Palestinians believe that they still are refugees 3 generations after the fact, still believe they are refugees even when they're living quite nicely be it in London or in Lisbon. True, there are still Palestinian refugees in places like Jordan and Lebanon, but that's also too difficult to bring up. Abbas also doesn't want to, or can't reach beyond himself to say that Israel is the Jewish State because if he does then he is ignoring what a good portion of his people have always felt or certainly have been taught over the course of the past three generations, namely that there is no legitimacy to the Jews having their own State. They said so in 1947. They said so in 1967. They said so in 2000 even when then Prime Minister Ehud Barak promised to give back 97% of the territories. Yassir Arafat despite his Nobel Peace Prize, couldn't climb the mountain, refused to be all he could be, refused to reach beyond himself, refused to take the risk by telling his people the truth - that there had to be compromise. Instead, he started the 2nd Intifada because Arafat always was a better terrorist than he was a statesman.

And Abbas is no better. Although holding the key for a future that ultimately would be better for his people, not to mention the Israelis whom he claims he wants to make peace with, Abbas only sees the immediate risk. In the streets of Ramallah following his pronouncement of seeking recognition of Palestine as an independent entity, when the crowd was singing, "with

Blood & Tears we will liberate Palestine,” they didn’t mean just the West Bank. What’s more when the person who was interviewed on American TV who spoke perfect English, and who clearly is well educated, expressed that while he wants all of Palestine, he’ll take what he can get, for now, Abbas isn’t willing to tell them differently.

So Abbas stayed off the mountain. He punted away the opportunity for greatness. Each time Israel said, “come sit down, “Abbas said, NO! “Accept the fact that that Israel is a Jewish State.” NO! Instead he stood at a podium last week at the UN, pretending to be a hero, even though because he was unwilling to take the risk, unwilling to be all he could be, unwilling to make use of the key that he possesses, the prospects for his people and others in the area will not be dramatically changed for the better.

Abbas won’t make use of the key, but can we when the opportunity presents itself?

Friends, I want you to take a look around this congregation. When I first came to the Jericho Jewish Center 10 years ago every single seat, all 1100, both in the sanctuary and in the ballroom was occupied. There was literally no room. And now ten years later, such is no longer the case. Blame it on demographics, if you want. We all know how the face of Jericho has changed. Blame it on Chabad. They certainly haven’t helped. Whatever the reason, the reality is that the future of the Jericho Jewish Center and the future of all area synagogues, if not the entire Jewish community in the East Nassau area is being compromised. Oh sure, we and everyone else in the area could just keep the status quo and to be honest it wouldn’t really make a difference – not for the next 3-5 years. But what about after that? What is the future for us and every other progressive congregation here in our area? Will we all continue to be able to maintain ourselves as independent institutions?

So MERGE, everyone says. That certainly is what is happening down on the South Shore. Congregation after congregation is disappearing into a merge mania to the point that the once proud South Shore Jewish community with flourishing synagogues and temples barely exists except for a few survivors who are the beneficiaries of the merge mania, but when you look very closely, they are not much better off than before. Oh sure, they have more money, but they don’t really have more people because the nasty little truth about mergers is that the individuals from the congregation that merges into another one never truly feel a part of the new congregation and so, they slink off into oblivion because in choosing to merge, they’ve lost their identity and feeling part of a community.

To the credit of a few forward thinking members of this congregation and the Jewish Congregation of Brookville, they have come up with a different choice. Instead of a merger, why not an alliance? An alliance? How can you have an alliance between a pretty out there Reform Congregation and a pretty traditional Conservative synagogue? But that’s the beauty of it. In an alliance, nobody loses their identity. They worship how they worship. We observe how we observe. On Friday nights, when they usually meet for services, they’ll do their thing and we’ll daven Kabbalat Shabbat. Sure there are risks. There’s a level of discomfort in our knowing that when JCB is holding services they may be doing things that we might not consider to be either traditional or even Shabbosdik. Interestingly, Rabbi Moskowitz, whom I greatly admire and

consider a friend, would be the first one to admit that their services are far from halachically correct. So how can we let them “treife” up our building, some of you may be thinking to yourselves. First of all, as long as you’re bringing up the issue of treife, they have agreed that all food brought or used in this building must be kosher because they understand that otherwise it would be impossible to maintain our kashrut certification. As far as whether what takes place in this building is Shabbosdik or not, the last time I checked, YOU are supposed to be Shomer Shabbos, not the building. Sure there will be plenty of other mountains to climb. I have no clue how the finances of such an alliance would be run, but then again, I can’t balance my checkbook. More importantly, for the life of me, I don’t understand how you can put two congregations into the same building during the High Holidays. It’s not humanly or logistically possible. That’s a mountain the members of the committee are still trying to scale.

Understand, this is not an arrangement that is going to be implemented tomorrow, nor next week, and possibly not even next year. And yet, I thought it would be irresponsible of me not to tell you that as a congregation we are being asked to take a risk, climb a mountain, for the betterment of our entire community. Just think of the potential. A Hebrew school made up of, not 50, but 150 children. A building where activities and programming will abound because we will be drawing not only from the physical presence of more individuals, but the minds and creativity of more individuals. We as a congregation are being asked to be all we can be so that the greater Jewish community can become all that it can be.

Until that time, however, I am asking you as individuals to do what I ask of you every Rosh Hashana in one way, shape or form, which is to raise the level of your commitment to Judaism, the Jewish people and the Jericho Jewish Center. Only this time I am asking you to do much more than choose to make a minyan before making a movie, commit to being an active participant in Sisterhood rather than just an active participant in your weekly Mah Jong game, or choose to parse the different layers of meaning of the Selichot prayers we recited just this past Saturday night as opposed to parsing the different kinds of sushi served at the party or restaurant you attended. It’s not that these things are not important. Believe me, I was not a happy camper when I had to stand outside the shul last Friday night wondering if the tenth man was going to show because our regulars have reached the point that they just can’t drive at night. Where were you? I also was not happy that the average age of the attendee at last Tuesday’s Sisterhood program at which my daughter Michal, together with three of her friends, danced, performed and entertained, was 65. This is not Florida, people. Where were you? And as for Selichot, I was not happy that for the three wonderful young women who related in the most heartfelt and moving manner their experiences about Israel, experiences that created a life-long bond with our homeland, they were speaking to a crowd of only 50. Where were you? And yet in addition to, Where were you, I am also asking another question. I am asking, Who are you? I am asking whether you are willing to take a risk and make a difference in the lives of others.

I was sitting, not so long ago with a family who had just lost a loved one. In the course of the discussion one of the daughters related that her son volunteers to work with autistic children every Sunday for several hours. When I commented that this was truly amazing considering that here in sports-crazed Jericho, the weekend is when most of the travel teams meet and compete, so didn't he feel he was missing out on life. Her response was very instructive. How can he be missing out on life, she said, when he was making such a difference in the lives of others?

Listening to this woman made me realize something else. Every weekend, or so I'm told, the new gym in our area, Lifetime is packed. Wouldn't it be wonderful if people would spend a little less of their lifetime focusing and obsessing on themselves and more time helping to extend at least the quality if not length of someone else's life. The opportunities for doing this are endless and Phil Taubman has agreed to help me help you find the right vehicle for making this a reality.

I started this sermon trying to fathom how it was possible for the people who responded on 9/11 to have reached beyond themselves and to have accomplished what they accomplished. To have understood that regardless of their personal priorities, the priorities of others led them to state, "We're not leaving!" Now I know that aside from people like Mal Tarkin and David Ginzburg, and perhaps the cadre of doctors in the room, most of us are not 1st, 2nd or maybe even 3rd Responder material. And yet, is it really too difficult for all of us here to commit ourselves to a different kind of "We're not leaving! That when we say, "we're not leaving," it is because we finally recognize that we possess a Jewish key to affect positive change for ourselves and for others.

If you could hear over the crying at the end of Sarah's Key, after Julia tells William, Sarah's son, that she has given her newborn daughter his mother's name in order to keep his mother's legacy alive, and after William breaks down because Julia has helped him recover the life of a mother he barely knew, the voiceover relates the following powerful message:

We tell these stories not just in order to tell us who we are, rather we tell these stories in order to tell us who we can be!

It is said that President Abraham Lincoln often slipped out of the White House on Wednesday evenings to listen to the sermons of Dr. Phineas Gurley at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church.

He generally preferred to come and go unnoticed, so when Dr. Gurley knew the president was coming, he left his study door open. On one of those occasions, the president quietly entered through a side door of the church, took his seat in the minister's study, located just off the sanctuary, and propped the door open just wide enough to hear the preacher.

During the walk home one Wednesday evening, an aide asked Mr. Lincoln his appraisal of the sermon. The president thoughtfully replied, "The content was excellent... he delivered with eloquence... he had put work into the message."

"Then you thought it was an excellent sermon?" questioned the aide.

"No," Lincoln answered.

"But you said that the content was excellent, it was delivered with eloquence and it showed much work," the aide pressed.

"That's true," Lincoln said. "But Dr. Gurley forgot the most important ingredient. He forgot to ask us to do something great."

Friends, I am asking you to do something great. I am asking you to be great Jews. Not just good Jews. Not just occasional Jews who can fit in their commitment between 10 and 12 noon three days a year, but great Jews who can reach beyond themselves, reach beyond what's comfortable for them, to think of others and not just themselves. I am asking that you climb the mountain when it presents itself. I am asking that you be all that you can be.

I've got a brand new pair of roller skates

You've got the key