



***Parshat Re'eh***  
**August 31, 2019 / 30 Av 5779**  
**Take Your Best Shot**  
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Recently I came upon an article in the New York Times which took my breath away titled, “He was shot and paralyzed 37 years ago. That’s not how the story ends.”

Thirty-seven years ago, thirteen-year-old Jeff Williams was hanging out with his brother and a friend, Maury, in the Bronx when the unthinkable happened. Maury got out his uncle’s gun and started showing it off: spinning the chamber and pointing the it around the room. Jeff’s brother, Reggie, tried to convince Maury to put the gun down. But Maury insisted it was perfectly safe, pulling the trigger to prove the point. It wasn’t safe, though. The gun was loaded. Jeff collapsed.

The local newspaper covered the story with a short article, all of four lines. It read: “A 13-year-old boy who was shot accidentally by a 15-year-old friend playing with a gun in the Bronx remained in critical condition yesterday, authorities reported. The victim, Jeffrey Williams of the Grand Concourse, was in intensive care at Lincoln Hospital. Police said a bullet from a .22 caliber gun had lodged near his spine. Williams was playing with his 14-year-old brother and the 15-year-old friend in the fourth-floor hallway of a building on Nelson Ave about noon Friday when the shooting occurred, police said.”

The story focused on that gun shot as if that were the entire story. It did not talk about Jeff’s prognosis, about his infections and probable, then ultimate paralysis. It did not talk about how he moved forward, about what happened to Maury and to his brother. The story was incomplete. And so, 37 years later, Jeff reached out to the reporter who covered the shooting. He

wanted to share about his life. He wanted to make sure the reporter knew that life isn't only about what happens *to* us, the best stories are about how we choose to respond. Jeff was even hoping his story might be interesting enough to become a feature film. How cool would that be!

This is the lesson of the season. A few weeks ago, we marked Tisha B'av, the solemn day on which we fast and mourn the destruction of our Temple. The day on which we remember every painful moment, every gun shot, every loss in our history. On Tisha B'Av, we—like this article—focus on what happened *to* us. To feel that pain as if it were unfolding today.

But Tisha B'Av is one day. One day that comes and goes, and afterwards come the seven weeks of consolation and the month of Elul which we enter today. Whereas Tisha B'Av asks us to focus on what happened *to* us, these weeks of consolation ask us how we are going to respond. How will we make sure that this coming year will be a better, brighter, happier, more successful year? What are we going to do?

And so, on this Shabbat of Labor Day, we have some spiritual homework. Let's return to Jeff's story.

On that terrible summer day, after Jeff collapsed, the boys carried him downstairs and hailed a taxi. On the way to the hospital, they engineered a cover story. They would tell doctors that Jeff had been caught in the crossfire of a gang fight. It wasn't until Jeff's mother, Shelia, arrived and started asking questions that the truth came out. Reggie, Jeff's brother, blurted out "Maury didn't mean to do it!"

Police wanted to arrest Maury and his mother, for the shooting and for illegal possession of a firearm. But Shelia refused to press charges. As she recently explained, "the boys were in the house together. It could have been my son who shot the other boy. You have to look at all

things from all sides. They were just kids.” It would have been so easy for her to blame 15-year-old Maury, to blame his parents, to blame his uncle. But instead, she chose to take a higher perspective. She chose compassion over judgement, forgiveness over anger. In the language of Jewish tradition, she chose to see the best in everyone around her, *dan lchaf zchut*.

That is our first challenge. In this first week of consolation, can we see the merit in every person around us? Can we think about life from their perspective? Can we take the high road?

Shelia was gentle with Maury and his family, but once her son returned home from the hospital, she refused to let him wallow. She would say, “Put your clothes on, put your socks on, put your shoes on. You going to wait for me to take you up and down the stairs every day?...no need in crying...you need to get in that wheelchair and treat it like a Rolls-Royce. It will get you where you need to go.” She was clear with Jeff that his life was just beginning, and her clarity enabled him to see his own possibilities.

Jeff finished middle school, high school, and graduated from the John Jay College of Criminal Justice all with honors. He got a job at Colgate Palmolive in the mail room and impressed management with his dedication and work ethic—when other able-bodied employees would refuse to come in on snowy days, Jeff would brave the elements in his chair so as not to miss a single day of work. He opened his own real estate company and became a motivational speaker. Jeff is adventurous. He drives a three-wheel Slingshot motorcycle customized with hand controls, and never misses an opportunity to go hang gliding, water skiing, dune buggy driving, or jet boat racing. He wants to learn to parasail. As Jeff says, “I never looked at what I couldn’t do, only how I could do whatever I wanted to do.”

This is such a Jewish move. Today we recite the Ten Commandments, the Torah which came to us after a moment of brokenness. Remember when Moshe went up to meet with God for the first time and received a set of tablets that were inscribed by God Himself? Remember his fury when he saw the Golden Calf and the way those tablets shatter in his anger? In that moment, we could have mourned the loss of our true Torah. We could have felt crippled and limited by the loss of those words. But instead, our ancestors picked up the broken pieces and put them in the ark. Instead, Moses went up and got a new Torah. And today we celebrate what we have, what God has given us that enables us to move forward.

Our second challenge is about our broken pieces. Can we pick them up and move forward? Or will we allow the brokenness to dictate the course of our lives?

After the shooting, Maury visited Jeff in the hospital almost every day. When Jeff moved home from the hospital, Maury visited him there. Jeff was worried that Maury was just visiting out of guilt. He kept telling Maury that he had already forgiven him; told him he didn't need to come so often. But Maury did. Because Jeff was paralyzed, eight years before the Americans with Disabilities Act, there were often occasions in which he needed help getting up or down stairs. Maury was always there for him. He gave him rides and helped him navigate the streets of New York. The two of them would go out together looking for dates. They would lie about what happened and say Jeff had been hit by a bus. Maury introduced Jeff to the woman who would become the mother of his child, and to his now wife.

And their friendship goes both ways. When Maury was arrested in a separate case and later incarcerated, Jeff visited him regularly at Rikers Island. He showed up for Maury's court appearances and wrote letters and petitions for his release. He even wrote Maury a letter which

he still has. In part, the letter read, “If I could walk, or you could have your freedom, I’d rather you have your freedom.”

This is so profound. Jeff, who cannot walk because of a choice he did not make laments Maury’s situation—a situation which was precipitated by choices Maury made. How do we do this? How can we move beyond our pain and choose to stay in relationship with the people who have hurt us most deeply?

Jewish tradition offers us a simple instruction. In Leviticus we are taught that we shall not hate others in our hearts, we shall not bear grudges. לא תשנא את אחיך בלבבך. But Judaism does not teach us how to do this. There is no manual for forgiveness. But here, Jeff and Maury are our teachers. They did not focus on forgiveness or on getting past the shooting. Instead, both Jeff and Maury kept showing up for one another.

When we’ve been hurt, it’s so tempting to write someone off, to end the conversation, to pick up and move somewhere else. How can we learn from Maury and Jeff, how can we stay in conversation and hold out for healing?

Tisha B’Av is over. We’ve all had our share of painful moments. But now is the time when we gather up those broken pieces, when we look back on others with compassion, look forward with empowerment, and take our next steps hand in hand.