



Sliding Doors

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A while back I was searching my bookshelf for Viktor Frankl's "Man's Search for Meaning," a philosophical masterpiece from the Holocaust era that has shot up Amazon's bestseller list, a balm for our pandemic world. Frankl's most profound point? That the answer to the question, "What is the meaning of life?" is, "To make meaning."

I *love* the book. I *needed* the book. I know I *have* the book; my copy is dog-eared from repeated reading. But I couldn't *find* the book.

As I searched high and low, an entirely different book jumped out at me. Its spine read, "Not Quite What I Was Planning." If ever there were a phrase that captured where we are right now, that would be it! I would wager there are not many of us who can say, "Yes, this is exactly where I thought I would be come Sukkot."

Since the first moments of the shutdown in early spring, I have been thinking, perhaps an unreasonable amount, about an old movie, "Sliding Doors." It imagines one woman's life unfolding in two drastically different ways for the smallest of reasons, depending on whether or not she catches the subway. The movie splits into two tracks. In one, we see her catch the subway and have a painful moment which ultimately leads her to becoming her best self. In another, we see what happens if she misses the subway: she stays stuck.

It is a concrete embodiment of the butterfly effect, a popular chaos theory that posits that very small causes can have infinitely large effects. In the context of our own lives today, if the butterfly effect applies, then we all have a million butterflies loose. What is the pandemic, after all, if not a massive sliding door?

I know this in my own family. The shutdown last spring coincided with something we had planned for my daughter since probably before she was born – an independent Israel

experience. Mike and I both had been shaped and profoundly changed in Israel. Like a cosmic railway line shift, my entire life's trajectory transferred to a different track by my experience there as a teen. I would not be here as a rabbi today if not for that. I would not have met and married Mike if not for that. And so we dreamed and planned and expected. What path would be shaped for our daughter? What would she discover about herself? Who would she become?

Instead, the spring felt a bit like one of those sci-fi movies where the crew is travelling light years away and they put the crew in stasis. Instead of adventure and discovery in Israel, our daughter was sitting home in front of a screen day after day. And we were the lucky ones. For others, their sliding doors moments have been the loss of a job, relationship collapse under the strain of too much together time, illness, or death of a beloved family member.

For each of us in this season of sliding doors, we thought we were living one story, along comes COVID, and suddenly we are living another. Throughout the High Holiday season I have been catching up with members: "How are your kids?" "My child was supposed to have moved to campus for their first year of college; instead they are online in the basement." "What are you doing to mark the season?" "We thought we would be seeing my parents, our children or grandchildren by now, but it's just us – again." "What does your work life look like?" "We've chunked the five-year plan out the window. We are focusing on just trying to navigate a five-week plan or even five-day plan – this definitely is not what I was planning."

It turns out we are not alone. Our tradition has a hero that embodies the Torah of sliding doors. We read about him today: Moses. Moses thought he was living one story. It turns out he had to live another.

Our Torah reading this morning begins with Moses sharing with our ancestors the details of the *Omer* sacrifice that we'll offer when we get to the promised land – all while knowing he himself will never set foot in that promised land.

At the end of his life Moses gives a big speech. It is a long and beautiful and inspiring speech. But in the context of coronavirus, something I had never seen before flashed into focus.

The context of his speech-giving is not just, “Here is what you are going to need to do when you get to the land; go and make me proud.” It is actually Moses’s reflection on the sliding doors moment about which he clearly still has feelings so many years later.

If not for the fear that gripped the Israelites and the decisions they made not to enter the land when they first arrived, the whole world could have been different! Moses would have been there 40 years ago. The whole hitting-the-rock-for-the-second-time thing would not have happened. He would be a young man in a young land. The people he had brought out of Egypt, he would have gotten to bring home.

When God called Moses back at the burning bush, the deal was go to the land. “I made a promise to your ancestors,” God says. “You’re my guy.” Then, of course, it turns out that is not the deal. Moses is angry. Then he is sad.

That could have been the end of the story. But it’s not. It’s the beginning of a story, a story we still tell today. You see, Moses has critical wisdom for us. Moses thought he was going to the land. Instead he got a sliding door. He knows his life has been indelibly shifted off its most foundational course because of events he could not control. He will never get to the land he has been dreaming of. It is exactly then that his most important legacy clicks in: he shapes a story of what can I do now? He names the loss, then gets to work on laying out tools for what it might mean to shape this new reality.

Author Bruce Feiler speaks pointedly to the power of shaping our sliding doors into new stories in his new book “Life Is in the Transitions.” It was printed before coronavirus became a household word, but it feels like it was written for precisely this moment. In it, he argues that each of us will experience, repeatedly over the course of our lives, what he calls disruptors: an event or experience that interrupts the daily flow of our lives and shifts the path we thought we were on. Feiler calls the most major of these “lifequakes”: “signature events that shape or, more accurately, reshape our lives, often in ways we can’t imagine with an intensity we can’t control.” The thing is, none of us are immune. Feiler argues that “even those in their twenties had been

through one or two; no one over forty had been through fewer than three...the average [is] between three and five in a lifetime.”

If sliding doors take what we would have done, should have done, but did something else instead, and inexorably shape us into someone else instead, lifequakes do the same on an epic scale.

Feiler offers himself as an example. Having been diagnosed as a 43-year-old new father with a rare cancer, he re-examines not only his own life, but all life – setting on a path that ultimately leads him to conclude that “the proper response to a setback is a story.” What is his story? That he is a collector and teller of stories – and so he interviews hundreds of people, inviting them to share their stories, teasing out from them universal life lessons we all can apply to our own. The biggest finding from all these stories? Lifequakes are traumatic. But lifequakes, if we use them properly, can be the ingredient we need to force our hand toward renewal and resilience.

Which leads us back to Viktor Frankl, who writes, “Live as if you were living already for the second time.” In other words, imagine the sliding doors that you have gone through, and those you have missed, and use that vision to craft a different story with this one life you actually have now.

It is easy to see what has been lost. The idea of entering our own promised land is every bit as compelling for us today as it was for Moses. But the Torah of Sukkot is that our lives are fragile and precarious. The Promised Land is not always on the menu. When, inevitably, life is “not quite what I expected,” we can learn from Moses, Viktor Frankl, and Bruce Feiler. In this season of sliding doors, as we weather our lifequakes, we are called to shape a different story: not what happens to us, but what we make of it.

My father and stepmother left back in January to spend a couple of months in Israel. In March, the world shut down and they realized they were not coming home any time soon. This was not what they were planning. They had signed up for travel across the country, for great

restaurants, for their favorite spice shop, for classes and connections and seeing friends. They had not signed up for being alone in a city not their own. They had not signed up for lockdown in their small apartment in Jerusalem, spending endless 24-hour days between four walls. They had not signed up for being unable to get home, an ocean separating them from grandchildren they wonder when they will see again.

But, realizing that they were not getting what they ordered, they wrote a different story. They filled their days with every online class they could find. They went for late-night walks down the deserted Jerusalem roads and started the paperwork for a process they had put to the side. In August, they made aliyah, fulfilling a life-long dream.

Today, they are in another lockdown in Jerusalem, as the whole country has shut down once again. The lifequakes keep coming. But they keep rewriting their story. And so must we.

In this season of sliding doors, what will your story be?

Shabbat shalom and chag sameach!