



Parshat Beha'alotecha
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Dance Recital
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If you have a daughter or a granddaughter, and if she happens to dance, then you are in the season of dance recital. And you know what that means.

It means of course buying those luxurious costumes that cost a lot of money that will be used for one weekend and will then take up residence in her closet forever.

It means buying those colorful tickets which tell you if you have the morning recital or the afternoon recital, or both.

And it means being at the dance recital, as I was last Sunday, at Watertown High, the home of the Watertown High Raiders, for the recitals beginning at 10:00 and 2:30.

Let's dwell here. What does it mean to be at your daughter or granddaughter's dance recital? There were 27 numbers. My daughter was in 2 of them. That means I was watching 25 numbers of other girls dancing. Times 2. Morning and afternoon. I was there for 2 hours. My daughter was dancing for five minutes. Now I know why I, and everyone else, was there for the *five minutes* that our daughter was on the stage. She is our daughter. We love her. We would do anything in the world for her. What a joy to be there. *But what about the other hour and fifty five minutes?* How do we understand the rest of that time?

For a lot of life is dance recital. Just *being* somewhere. Just *sitting* somewhere. Not particularly stimulated. Not particularly engaged. Not particularly happy. Just there. How do we understand that time, for it happens to all of us all the time?

This is also the season of graduations, high school and college. How long does it take for your son or your daughter to get their degree? Minutes. How long are we there, in a suit and tie, or in a dress, on a hot May or June day, uncomfortable and sweating? Hours. Dance recital.

It happens with work dinners or engagements with your spouse. Oh, honey, the big firm holiday party is coming up at the Charles Hotel. I'd really appreciate it if you could mingle with all of my work colleagues. We don't have to get there till about 7, and it won't last much longer than 10 or 10:30. Great. Three hours of my life I will never get back.

It happens with community dinners. We love community. We believe in the underlying cause. But then comes the season of dinners. Cocktails at 6. Introductions at 7. Motzi at 7:25. Program at 8:15. Heart-rending film intended to open heart and wallet at 8:35. We believe in it. Otherwise we wouldn't be there. It's important. Dance recital.

Even here. Even now. Let's talk about the experience of being in synagogue on Shabbat morning from the point of view of a person we have here every week—the Bar or Bat Mitzvah guest. Let's say that you are not a Temple goer. Or even religious. Or you don't read Hebrew, and this service is conducted mostly in Hebrew. But you get an invitation to come to a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. If we are being honest here, you are very happy to see the Bar or Bat Mitzvah doing their thing, as Josh did so beautifully this morning. That is why you are here. But the service, in a language you don't understand, is two and a half hours. Dance recital.

What is the spiritual resonance of dance recital?

Woody Allen famously observed that 90 percent of life is just showing up. What does that mean?

What is the contrast, the foil, the alternative, to just showing up? I suppose there are two.

One alternative is *not* showing up. Not showing up for your daughter's dance recital. Not showing up for your dear friend's Bar Mitzvah. Not showing up is not an option. If we want people in our lives, we've got to show up. But then how do we understand our time once we are here?

The other alternative to just showing up is actually *doing something, solving the problem*. We are a doctor, and we help our patient feel better. We sell insurance, and we make sure you are insured. We are a CPA, and we do your taxes. There is an important place for doing stuff, for solving problems. But that genre of experience is *not* dance recital, where we are just sitting and being.

If dance recital is not about doing and solving, what is it about?

The answer, our model for understanding dance recital, comes from God. In our most important prayer, the amidah, we say three times a day that God is *shomeah tefilah*, God hears our prayers. What does that mean?

Does it mean that God actually does things and solves problems? When our loved one is on the operating table, we urgently want God to bring healing. This is certainly a valid mode of prayer, and when we or our loved ones are in extremis, we pray that God says yes.

But for most of us, most of the time, this is not our experience of prayer. We don't usually pray for God to solve something, fix something, or do something. Rather, we pray for God to be present, to be with us so that we are not alone.

The paradigm of God as listening presence, but not as problem solver, is found in the midrash from Deuteronomy Rabbah about the last plea of the dying Moses. Moses has gotten his sentence. Stand on top of this mountain. You may see the River Jordan, but you will not cross it. You may see the Promised Land, but you will not enter it. The Midrash has Moses

praying to God to change this outcome. At first Moses says: God, I understand I cannot live years and years in Israel. But I've worked so hard for so long for this goal. Please let me cross the River and enter the land, just a moment, just to touch the earth, let the sand sift through my fingers, and then I'll die. God says no. Then let me be a bird in the sky and fly over the land. God says no. Then let me be an animal of the field and graze the land. God says no. At last Moses accepts that there is no changing God's mind, at which point, having poured out his heart, Moses accepts his lot. God then takes Moses' life with a kiss and lovingly proceeds to bury him.

For most of us, most of the time, that is the God we pray to. Not the God who gives us what we want. Not the God who solves our problems. Not the God who fixes what is broken. But the God to whom we can pour out our heart. The God that we can talk to. The God who hears us, so that we are not alone.

Presence means love. Sometimes we show our love by doing things and solving problems. Other times we show our love by showing up and just being there.

A few weeks ago I heard this segment on NPR about a woman named Kate Braestrup, who tells the following story. She was happily married to Drew Griffith, a state trooper living in Maine. They had 4 children. He planned on retiring in a number of years and becoming a minister. That all changed suddenly when, on one fateful day, a driver slammed into Griffith's cruiser, and he was killed. His widow, Kate Braestrup, decided that she would become a minister, what she calls a "hand-me-down calling." Eight years of study later, she becomes a Unitarian Universalist minister, and she gets a job as a chaplain with the Maine Warden Service. Her job would be to accompany wardens on search and rescue missions in the woods of Maine, and to be present with people in what she calls the hinges of existence, those defining moments where life can change, dramatically, forever, in a second.

For example, she relates that one crystal cold night, she accompanied the Maine wardens to a beautiful, still pond where they could see that some skater had been skating on the pond. They can see the skate tracks, across the pond, to the point where the ice thinned out and the man who was skating fell into the frozen pond and died. Kate Braestrup's job was to go and comfort his widow.

When she gets to the widow's home, the widow is sitting and crying on the floor, surrounded by friends. Kate Braestrup is dressed in her official gear, which makes her look like just what she is, a chaplain and a warden. At which point the grieving widow takes one look at her and says: there are two things I hate. I hate religion. And I hate the police. At which point Kate Braestrup, seeing that this woman is supported by friends, takes her leave.

Those friends later tell the widow, when she can hear it, that Kate Braestrup is a decent sort who was just trying to be helpful. So the next day the woman reaches out to Kate Braestrup, who accompanies her as the widow goes to identify her husband, who had been pulled from the pond. The two walk together, shoulder to shoulder. Kate just stands with her. Says nothing. The wife looks at her departed husband, identifies him for the wardens, and then begins to sing a Cole Porter rhapsody that the two used to love to sing together. Kate still says nothing. She just listens. A listening and loving presence.

The name of Kate Braestrup's book is Here If You Need Me. That would be a good mission statement for all of our lives. Here if you need me. I show up. Even if there is nothing to do. I show up. Because presence is love. That is why we go to dance recitals. To go to dance recitals is to fill our lives with love. Shabbat shalom.