



*Parshat Nitzavim*  
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**The Heretic and the Admiral**  
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New York Times columnist Frank Bruni has had a lifelong tumultuous relationship with food. He wrote a book entitled Born Round: The Secret History of a Full-Time Eater. Every word in that title was carefully chosen. Round? From his earliest age he felt overweight, and at one point he ballooned to 275 pounds. Secret? His eating was a source of shame and compulsion. Full-time? That was a double entendre. At one point he became the food critic for the New York Times. But before that eating was something he did, or thought about doing, or did too much of or too little of, always extremes, every day.

Bruni came from an Italian American immigrant family, where food was more than food. Food was love. Food was comfort. Food was family. For a very long time, the one thing food was not, for him, was healthy. For decades, he would veer between bingeing and purging. He would deprive himself by day, and then engage in what he called sleep-eating. He would, in a semi-conscious state, eat in the middle of the night, and would wake up in the morning to see the evidence of what he had consumed. For decades, he struggled to get his food demon under control, with no success.

Frank Bruni is not Jewish, but his story evokes that line in our machzor *al cheit shechatanu lefanekha b'ma'achel u'vemishteh*, for the sin we have committed against you in our eating and drinking. His long-time struggle with food is treated by Erica Brown in her book on the High Holidays entitled Return.

Like Frank Bruni, we all have our own demons that we struggle with year after year.

How do we approach Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur *this year* knowing that some of the serious issues we had *last year* at this time are still unresolved.

Last Rosh Hashanah, and the one before that, and the one before that, we had work angst. We were not happy at our job. The same is true this year.

Last Rosh Hashanah, and the ones before that, we had financial angst. Always worried about money and making ends meet. And we're still worrying.

For the last number of years, we had tensions and ambivalences in some very important relationships, and all that complexity has only gotten thicker this year.

For the last number of years, we would make high holiday resolutions, how we spend our time, adding more of a spiritual element, doing more communal service, engaging in more learning. Every year we meant those resolutions when we made them. Yet here we are, a year later, and all too often we do not have much traction.

In Erica Brown's book Return, she quotes the prophet Isaiah who seems very optimistic: Your sins are like crimson, but they can turn snow-white. Optimistic, but is that realistic? Isn't it perhaps more realistic to acknowledge that in the real world, our crimson sins do not turn white, they stay some variation of crimson? A more accurate framing would be the title of a classic sermon by Rabbi Milton Steinberg entitled The Problem of Our Persistent Failures. For many of us, much of the time, our struggles persist.

Given that reality, how shall we enter this year's high holidays? There are two models we might adopt.

One model comes from a Talmudic figure named Elisha ben Abuya who is something of a cult hero to American Jews, especially those of us who struggle to believe. Elisha was a learned rabbi, but one tragic day he witnessed something that made him lose his faith. He saw a

father command his young son to climb a ladder, shoo away a mother bird, and snatch the egg. The boy obeys. According to the Torah, this boy was doubly entitled to a long life. He had obeyed his father, the reward for which is long life. And he had sent away the mother bird before taking the egg, the reward for which is, again, long life. But instead of this doubly promised reward, the boy fell off the ladder and died. Elisha ben Abuya sees this injustice and cries out: *leit din v'let dayan*, there is no justice and there is no judge. He becomes a heretic and stops observing the mitzvot. The Talmud refers to him as *acher*, the other.

That part of the story is well known and is the subject of a novel written by Rabbi Milton Steinberg called As a Driven Leaf. But there is another part of Elisha's story that is not as well known but is especially relevant to us now. Elisha retains a tender friendship with his student, Rebbe Meir. One Shabbat afternoon Elisha is riding on his horse, not a Shabbasdik activity, talking to Rebbe Meir. They walk to the very border of the Sabbath boundary, beyond which traditional Jewish law would not permit them to pass. Elisha ben Abuya tells Rebbe Meir, go back. Elisha did not want to be responsible for his student's violation. To which Rebbe Meir responds: You also turn back, a metaphor for return to the tradition. To which Elisha responded, in effect, God has told me that *everyone* can return, *all those who strayed* can return, *except for me*.

This is a self-fulfilling prophecy of stunted spiritual growth. Since Elisha does not believe he can return, he cannot return. Since he does not believe he can grow spiritually, he cannot grow spiritually. Since he feels himself to be permanently estranged, he is permanently estranged.

Elisha's self-fulfilling prophecy of stunted growth casts its shadow on us. Do we do that?

Do we think we are stuck with our bad habits and our demons? If we think we are stuck with our bad habits and our demons, we are.

How then do we get out of Elisha's doom loop? To answer that, we need to go to the Hanoi Hilton prisoner of war camp from 1965 to 1973, during the height of the Vietnam War, where Admiral Jim Stockdale was taken a prisoner of war. Eight years. Eight years of deprivation and hunger. Eight years of torture. Eight years of not seeing his family. Eight years of missing Christmas and Easter and lifecycle moments. Eight years, and he finally got out.

How did he do it?

Admiral Stockdale is the hero of a business classic by Jim Collins called Good to Great. Collins was teaching at Stanford. Admiral Stockdale was a senior research fellow at the Hoover Institute on the Stanford campus. One day they have lunch. Before lunch Collins is reading Stockdale's memoir of his eight years of captivity, and it is so hard and depressing Collins can hardly finish *reading* it. How then did Stockdale actually *live* it?

Stockdale answers like this. He says that the people who could not survive the Hanoi Hilton were the optimists. The optimists perished. Those who said to themselves we're definitely getting out by Christmas were then crushed when they were not out by Christmas. Those who promised themselves I'll get out by Easter were devastated when Easter came and went and they were still stuck.

Unlike the optimists who were set up a fall by hoping for redemption by a date certain, Stockdale took a different approach. He took a long view. He did not know about this Christmas or next, this Easter or next. In fact he knew that in the short term his reality was brutal. When he got out, and what happened to him while he was in prison, were out of his

control. He needed to cultivate inexhaustible patience. He also retained the faith that, in the end, somehow, someday, he was going to get out of prison and rejoin his wife and his life.

Stockdale's unique blend of owning his brutal reality and retaining faith that he would ultimately survive and thrive gave rise to one of the pivotal teachings in Collins' book—and *also our best strategy for dealing with the problem of our persistent failures*—what Collins calls the Stockdale Paradox. Namely, “confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.” **And at the same time**, “retain faith that you will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties.”

Confront the most brutal facts. That requires honesty with ourselves, transparency with others.

And faith that you will prevail in the end. That requires great patience and persistence.

The heretic, Elisha ben Abuya, saw only the brutal facts, only his self-doubt, and so he was stuck there.

But the admiral, Jim Stockdale, saw the brutal facts and had the patience and persistence and faith that he would transcend, and so he was able to transcend.

Which brings us back to Frank Bruni, after decades of binging and purging, decades of self-loathing over food. He could have pulled an Elisha ben Abuya and said all can repent but me. I am stuck. But instead he pulled a Stockdale. He believed he would ultimately prevail, and prevail he did.

One year he went to live in Italy, and the eating ethos in Italy was very different from the home he grew up in. In Italy it was not about quantity, but quality. Instead of binging and purging, he changed how he ate, eating healthy portions of healthy food. Ironically it was just as he was figuring this out that he got a job as the food critic of the New York Times. He was paid

to eat, but again the emphasis was on quality not quantity, and he also learned to be gentle with himself: “One botched day or even one botched week wasn’t apocalyptic. It was life as most people lived it—certainly as I did.” Brown,p. 41, quoting Bruni.

Rosh Hashanah is tomorrow. All of us have got on our version of Frank Bruni’s decades-long challenge. All of us have got our own persistent struggles that we carry with us from one High Holiday season to another.

Stockdale teaches us that it is never too late, we are never too old, we are never too trapped, in old patterns to create new ones. The person stuck in unhealthy eating can learn to eat and live healthier. The person stuck in an unsatisfying job can find work they love. The relationship that is strained can be made healthier and stronger. The person who has not grown in soul can take that leap of learning and growing. Elisha ben Abuya makes our past, and our past failures, king. But Stockdale points us to our future, to the person we can become. It is never too late. We are never too old to get ourselves unstuck. Let’s start now. Shana tova.