



*Parshat Nitzavim-Vayelech*  
**September 16, 2017—25 Elul 5777**  
**Hot Coal Down**

by Rabbi Wesley Gardenswartz  
Temple Emanuel, Newton, MA

---

I was speaking with a good friend about a big vacation he took this past summer to Morocco. He and his family had always wanted to go, they had planned it for some time, they went for two weeks, they came home. How was it, I asked?

The first night we stayed in the old city, at a small, smelly hotel. There was no air conditioning and it was unbearably hot and humid.

And then there were the large family meals in Moroccan restaurants. None of us spoke French or Arabic. Almost none of the waiters spoke English. We all had eating issues which we could not convey. How do you say gluten free in French or Arabic? I have no idea. How do you say I am highly allergic to fresh garlic in French or Arabic? I have no idea. One of us was vegan, not vegetarian. How do you explain the nuances of vegan—no cheese, no eggs—to a Moroccan waiter?

And then there is the matter of smoking in public restaurants. It's legal to smoke in restaurants in Morocco. I hate cigarette smoke. Every time we sat down, and we worked our way through gluten free, no fresh garlic, not just vegetarian but vegan, we could finally start to enjoy dinner, and some fellow diner at a nearby table would light up, and the cigarette smoke would waft, and I would go berserk, and the waiter would remind me that it is legal to smoke here.

Finally almost every one of the ten of us came down with some ailment or another over the two weeks. Most people were not feeling 100%.

I'm sorry to hear that it was such a challenged trip, I said.

What do you mean such a challenged trip, he said. It was a fabulous trip! It was one of the best, most memorable vacations we ever had. We loved it!

What?

The troubles he related were real. There is no doubt that he experienced them as troubles.

And his post-mortem on the trip, it was fabulous, they loved it, is also real.

How can both be real?

The answer to this conundrum comes from Israeli psychologist Daniel Kahneman who won a Nobel Prize in economics even though he is not an economist, based upon his insight into human behavior, how humans think and act. In his book Thinking Fast and Slow, Kahneman shares one of his most famous insights, the difference between what he calls the experiencing self and the remembering self.

The experiencing self is you when you are *on* your vacation.

The remembering self is you when the experience is over and you have had some time to reflect on it. It is you when you have come back home.

The experiencing self and the remembering self can have very different takes on the same experience. My friend's experiencing self was indeed troubled by the lack of air conditioning. But my friend's remembering self, now that he is happily at home, fondly recalls the marvels of Morocco.

Which brings us to the High Holidays. The rest of the year we live. We make choices. We do things or things happen to us. But in this season we step back and think about what it all means.

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells the story of a woman who came to see him in a highly agitated state. Her husband of many years had cheated on her, and had left his marriage for his girlfriend, twenty years younger. They had three teen-age children. She shared with Rabbi Kushner that she felt a double fury.

First, that he had cheated on her and broken up their family.

Second, he is at peace, and she is not. He has moved on, and she has not. She is still furious. What can I do, she asked Rabbi Kushner? How can I live without this anger?

Rabbi Kushner responded you are like a person who is holding onto a hot coal. You want to hit your husband with the hot coal, but he has moved on and is no longer there to hit. By holding onto the hot coal, all you are doing is burning your own hands. If you want to live without anger, let go of the hot coal.

We are all holding hot coals. Life is a contact sport. It is inevitable that as we live we accumulate wounds and hurts that easily could become hot coals. Somebody we love disappoints us. Somebody we love gets sick and dies. We make a bad mistake and hurt ourselves and others. We have a failure at work. We lose our job. We suffer a financial reversal. Our dreams are dashed. When any of this happens, we find ourselves holding onto a hot coal.

I want to tell you the story of a woman who held onto a hot coal for sixty years. Margaret Bergman was born in Hitler's Germany and was a world class high jumper. In June 1936, a month before the Olympics, she competed against Germany's other best high jumpers and won. Her leap of 5 feet 3 inches put her first, and it would have been enough to have earned her the gold medal at the '36 Olympics. But after winning the tournament, she received a letter from Nazi officials kicking her off the team and striking her recent victory from the record books.

Margaret Bergmann was able to immigrate to the United States in 1937 with ten dollars in her pockets. She worked as a massage therapist, a housemaid, and a physical therapist. She met and married a fellow German refugee and raised two sons, and she was blessed to be able to get her parents out of Germany before the Shoah started, but she was never able to compete at the Olympic level again. She vowed that she would never, ever go back to Germany again.

The pain of being kicked off the team, of having her record stricken, was her hot coal. *Sixty years* later, in 1996, she is watching a pre-Olympics meet at her home in Queens. She is 82 years old at the time. She describes what happens next:

Suddenly I realized that there were tears just flowing down my cheeks. I'm not a crier. But now I just couldn't help it. I remember watching those athletes, and remembering what it was like for me in 1936, how I could very well have won an Olympic medal. And through the tears, I said, "Damn it!"

What is it about hot coals that they are unpleasant, they burn our own hands, and yet we can hold onto them for 60 years? In some complicated ways it must be emotionally satisfying to have a target for our anger. It can be cathartic to have something, somebody to vent our negative energy upon. I am never, ever going back to Germany again. That can get the juices flowing for 60 years. Negative energy has its own perverse seductive appeal.

Most of us are holding onto some hot coal which is doing us no good. Most of us are also vulnerable to the seductive appeal of negative energy. Having something or somebody to be angry at works in some perverse way. Holding onto that grudge or grievance—I am never talking to that person again, I am never going to that place again—does have its own complicated satisfaction. But it also comes at the cost of burning our own hands.

Can the High Holidays help us reverse this dynamic, to let go of the hot coal and the perverse appeal of nursing a grievance, however legitimate it once was?

Putting down the hot coal is a choice. The facts don't change. But your attitude about the facts changes. Do I want to hold onto bitterness and bile and negative energy, however seductive that may be? Is that doing me any good? Or do I want to let it go? For my own sake if not for anyone else's.

After vowing for sixty years she would have nothing to do with Germany, Margaret Bergman Lambert received a letter from the German Olympic Committee, inviting her and her husband to be their guests at the Atlanta Olympics in 1996. The Committee explained: "We feel that Mrs. Lambert was not treated adequately at the time of the Berlin Olympics. We wanted to do something for her; we felt she deserved it." Margaret Bergman Lambert and her husband accepted the invitation and accepted Germany's apology.

Then Germany invited her to return to Germany. Despite her six decade repeated vow never to return, she did return to Germany, where the stadium in the German town where she used to train was renamed in her honor. "I was told that they were naming the facilities for me so that when young people ask, 'Who was Gretel Bergmann?' they will be told my story, and the story of those times, so that what happened to you will never, ever happen again.

This past summer, at the age of 103, she was laid to her eternal rest.

When she let go of her hot coal, she could be at peace again.

There may be a perverse seductive appeal to holding onto our hot coal. But doing so comes at a steep price. In the history of the world, no one has ever been at peace while holding onto a hot coal.

What hot coal are you holding? Might this be the year when you finally let it go? Shana tovah and Shabbat shalom.