



Pottery Barn

Rabbi Michelle Robinson

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Temple Emanuel, Newton, MA

Have you seen the musical Dear Evan Hansen? Now, I have to ask a follow up question: did you see it on Broadway or here in Boston? It makes a difference.

For my birthday last year, Mike took me to Broadway to see Dear Evan Hansen, which the New York Times describes as “a gut punching, breathtaking knockout of a musical.” And boy, did it deliver! Forget a ten-hankie show; this was a thousand-hankie show.

As the final curtain came down, Mike looked at me wiping the tears from all the way down at my chin and teased, “Happy Birthday!”

Spoiler alert: In the heartbreaking final scene, one thing is clear: Evan has messed up his life. He lost the girl. His prospects are limited.

In the orchard that is starting to grow thanks to Evan’s fundraising on false pretenses, the final scene echoes the start of the play, with Evan trying to convince himself, “Today is going to be a good day.”

It was poignant -- a cautionary tale with a heart. As the parent of a teenager, I couldn’t wait to share it.

And so this summer, as soon as it came to Boston, Mike and I took Maya to see Dear Evan Hansen. We prepared her: Expect weeping. We came prepared ourselves, with a full box of Kleenex – each.

And then something remarkable happened. As I sat there watching the same show, same songs, same lines, it was completely different. The entire first act was not just heart-wrenching, it was hilarious. LOL hilarious.

I was particularly stunned by the final scene.

On Broadway, as Evan, actor Ben Platt turns to meet the heroine, Zoe. Before he even speaks, as great actors have a magical ability to do, his blocking tells a tale. He hangs his head, stops briefly, looks behind as if he might flee, then, awkwardly shuffles up to her.

How is he? Well, he's working at Pottery Barn (sigh) and will take classes at community college. The small glimmer of hope is only this -- he's alive... and flawed, but he finally knows, for all his flaws and failings, that he is loved anyway. Perhaps the next kid might see this orchard and feel that sooner. Perhaps the next kid might see, in the trees' blooming, his or her own possibility – perhaps.

In Boston, Evan Hansen, played by Ben Levi Ross, takes the same script and makes a different choice. He walks straight onstage, head held high. He looks Zoe directly in the eye. How is he? He's working at Pottery Barn! He will take classes at community college in the Fall!! He's got confidence. He's got possibility.

This Evan Hansen has leveraged his pain for new purpose. This Evan Hansen has hope not just for the next kid, but for himself. It radiates off the stage to us. He is broken. We are broken. But that's ok. "Today is going to be a good day."

Same script. Same set. Same songs. One crucial difference: Pottery Barn (oy) or Pottery Barn (wow)!

From Broadway to Boston, a powerful New Year Torah emerges. Our script may be written. The facts of our lives may be the facts. But how we see them makes all the difference.

We all have Pottery Barn. We all have something that is not quite how we imagined it would be.

Perhaps we imagined what success would look like, but our professional life has led us down another path. Perhaps we dreamed of riding off into the sunset with our beloved, happily ever after, but the right one hasn't yet shown up. Or we found our match, but lately we're

feeling less meant to be than meant to flee. A longed-for family never happened. Or we were blessed to hold beautiful babies and imagined easy breezy blissful joy, then reality hits. Or perhaps our kids were everything we could ever dream of, little *nachas* machines, but now they've grown. We can no longer fix what ails them with a kiss or protect them from the pain of their world. The rule applies: You're only as happy as your least-happy kid.

We may have material wealth but lack of time. Or have time but wish we had more money. Maybe we've been derailed by a medical challenge that we cannot fix or have lost someone we love, turning our lives upside down.

And that's only looking inward. Beyond our homes, there's a world screaming with injustice. Even as we do our part to repair, there is so much brokenness; some will inevitably persist. How do we not get so disheartened by the magnitude of what is wrong that we lose the hope we need to build on the foundation of what is still right?

Our Torah reading this morning offers us a story of two very different women who remind us: How we frame what happens to us defines what becomes of us.

There's Sarah, who has everything. We find Sarah this morning at the most bountiful moment of her life. All her dreams have come true – she is holding her long-prayed for son.

But, like so many of us, her picture is not perfect.

Wandering down the aisles of her personal Pottery Barn, she looks out the corner of her eye and sees Ishmael – Abraham's son, not her son. Suddenly the joy, the possibility of all she does have is overwhelmed by anger, jealousy, and pain. "Who is the son of that slave woman to inherit with mine!" she cries out. We all know what happens next – a rift that ripples from that moment to this.

We leave Sarah there and follow Hagar into the desert. At first, it seems we are in for more of the same. Hagar has lost everything. We find her this morning at the lowest moment of her life. All her dreams have been shattered – she's downcast with her languishing son. In the

brutal desert, their water is running out. She sets her son down in some meager shade, goes off a distance, and bursts into tears.

What happens next is one of the most critical lessons the Torah has to teach. God opens her eyes and she sees a well. As a modern reader, it's easy to get stuck in "enter God, stage left," and miss the critical shift in Hagar. Our rabbis read the grammar of the verse closely and notice that God didn't work a miracle – God simply opened her eyes to the well, to the possibility, that had been there all along – only now, she sees it.

We can say, easy for Hagar. No less a figure than God intervenes to show her how to see her blessings shine through her pain! No voice on high is coming to show me how to actually make that shift!

Or, we can realize that's precisely what we're doing here today. Take a look around. Of all the Jewish holidays, today the room is packed. Why?

Perhaps because today, as we come together with the promise of a new beginning, our prayers and our people remind us: When we have the same script, the same songs, the same set – the script may be the script, but it is in our hands.

Like Ben Platt and Ben Levi Ross, we choose: Pottery Barn (oy) or Pottery Barn (wow)!

For as long as I've known him (and I've known him literally my whole life), my father has been dreaming of Israel. A few years ago, when he retired, he and my beloved stepmom dipped their toe into life there, spending a few months out of each year in Jerusalem.

As those of you who have been to Israel know, there's a special magic to Jerusalem. And within Jerusalem, there is a special magic to the reinvigorated neighborhood of the *Tachanah Ha'Rishonah*, the old train station.

At night the neighborhood hums with vibrant energy. During the day there's an endless amount of sights to see, classes to attend, quaint sidewalk cafes to frequent, fresh produce to

taste, exotic cuisine to sample, and an endless bounty of neighbors greeting neighbors. And that's just during the weekdays.

On Shabbat, the streets are a small sampling of a world we'd hope to build – Haredi *buchers* with *payot* flying saying *Shabbat Shalom* to modern Orthodox families, who smile at secular joggers, and kids out just walking their dogs, while newly married Israeli Arab couples pose for pictures in the nearby park. My father and stepmother found a beautiful apartment right there near dear friends. This spring, they decided to make Aliyah.

In a flurry of activity and excitement, they sold their home, whittled down a lifetime of belongings, and set up what was to be a vacation home in the Berkshires, near my sister and not too far from me, where they could come back for a few weeks here and there to visit. Their long-aspired-to dream was finally coming true.

A few days before the move, my father's heart, which had been giving him trouble last year in Israel, interfered again.

As they turned over the keys to the New York home they'd lived in for so many happy years, in the community they loved, with friends who supported and sustained them, it became clear that the reason they had done all that was not as close as it seemed.

Instead of filing their Aliyah paperwork, they were filing insurance reimbursements for emergency medical care.

Instead of the delight of fresh fruits on the corner in a city where there's always something to do and see, just getting to the grocery store was exhausting.

Instead of strolling shining streets of Jerusalem stone, in the place they loved more than anywhere in the world, in a community they connected to more than anywhere in the world, they were now stuck stateside in a rural town with no one they knew. Although they still plan to make Aliyah, it went from today to someday.

As they unpacked their dishes, I expected Pottery Barn (oy). Their dream deferred – who knows for how long. Instead, my dad reflected on the joy of sitting on the screened-in porch listening to music in the morning and the chirp of crickets in the New England night. My stepmom reveled in the new community connections they are making, the ripe produce, and hidden kosher bakery that only opens its door to the public with delicious fresh breads every Friday morning.

On the days they can do more, they do more. On the days they can do less – so be it. After all they loved about the pace of city life, and the depth of non-stop Jewish life that both Riverdale and Jerusalem bring, I was struck on our most recent visit by my dad's words. He said, "I find myself wondering why we didn't do this sooner."

All our tables are set by Pottery Barn. The script may be the script, but it is in our hands. Our question this New Year is, how will we read it?

Shanah Tovah.