

Rabbi Benjy Forester
 Anshe Emet Synagogue
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 Sanctuary Service

“Leave Your Raft Behind”

I'm told that when the great scholar and activist Abraham Joshua Heschel would interview candidates for the Jewish Theological Seminary Rabbinical School, he liked to ask them what 3 things they would take with them to a desert island. Hoping to impress the scholar sitting before them, the prospective students would list things like their Tallit, Tefillin, and a Siddur. He would laugh and say: You wouldn't bring food, water, or a tent?

While I haven't had to journey to a desert island, I have moved 7 times since I sat in my own interview for the JTS rabbinical school just over 5 years ago. I've unpacked and repacked. I've hung artwork up and I've taken it down. I've changed addresses and forwarded mail. I've watched *my* stuff become *our* stuff as Emily and I moved in together and got married. So while I haven't had to cut my packing list to just 3 items, I have had to ask myself a version of Heschel's question over and over these past several years: What are the most important things to take with, and what should I leave behind?

Because I come uniquely positioned to lend you some packing advice for your journey, I offer you the following piece of wisdom: Leave the raft behind.

Allow me to explain, by means of a parable borrowed from the Buddhist tradition.

The story tells of a person on a long journey who confronts a first obstacle: a fast-flowing river. The person realizes they must build a solid raft. They spend hours gathering logs and building a sturdy raft and carving wooden oars. The raft is placed in the river, and the traveler boards the raft. They use all of their might paddling as hard as they can to traverse the river and finally they're able to make it to the other side. The person realizes that this raft saved their life and allowed their journey to continue. So, they decide to strap the raft on their back and take it with them. They continue walking along, until they reach their next obstacle: a very dense and tall forest. The person begins maneuvering their way through the forest, but continues to get stuck on the dense brush and numerous limbs. The raft is catching on everything. At this point, they have 2 choices, hold onto the precious raft that saved their life and struggle through the forest, or put it down and build it later if needed, allowing them to walk through unimpeded.

Life is full of change. For some of you, this past year has been one of tremendous change. The person you are and the life you live are fundamentally different than when you last sat in these seats.

Think about who you were when you last sat here:

- What brought you the most joy one year ago, and what does now?
- What kept you up at night one year ago, and what does now?
- What was one event this past year that had a major impact on you - a promotion, new job, or perhaps the loss of work? The loss or addition of a loved one? An excursion to somewhere new?

I count myself amongst you that have changed - I became a rabbi, a husband, and a Chicagoan

during this past year. Even for those of you who have stayed the course since last year - same job, same house, same people in your life - the world around you is constantly changing. And so are you.

So I ask you candidly, as you reflect upon your life from last year to today: what rafts are you carrying on your backs right now? What do you continue to carry along even though it is no longer serving you and may in fact be slowing you down?

Maybe it's the collection of plastic shopping bags you keep below your kitchen sink that you swear you'll use the next time you go to the store. Maybe it's the manuals for your various electronic appliances that you've collected, or maybe it's the appliances themselves.

But beyond the things crowding your pantry, garage, and Google drive, I'd like us to think even more broadly and more deeply about the rafts we carry. What habits of mind, habits of practice, attitudes and ideas have we cultivated that may have served us well in the past, but are now weighing us down.

- Did you devote time and energy to an organization whose mission no longer feels aligned with your values and interests?
- Have you been building and sailing the raft of your career but now want to spend more time with family, friends, or giving back to your community?
- Perhaps you've been on a raft away from family members whose calls and emails it's been easiest to just ignore. Is it time to put the raft down and brace for a new chapter of reconciliation?

It's very possible that those rafts allowed you to make it safely to the shores of the new year ahead. You should feel immensely grateful to those rafts for their service.

But are they serving you now?

Are you able to leave the raft behind at the river and instead assess what you may need to best navigate the forest ahead. Your past rivers called for one approach, but we will all get stuck in the trees of the forest ahead if we refuse to look inward and to adapt to our changing world and our changing selves.

We spend much of the high holidays focusing on shedding the weight of our past mistakes and misgivings that weigh us down. Later today we'll perform the ritual of tashlich, when we cast away bread crumbs symbolic of the sins, vices, and mistakes that sit heavy in our pockets and on our souls. Unburdened by our past mistakes, we'll feel lighter and more nimble as we head into the new year.

While purging our past mistakes is core to the work of the high holidays, our task of self-improvement isn't complete just by washing ourselves of our sins. If we want to truly shed the weight that holds us back, we have to also drop those ideas, relationships, routines, projects, and belongings that have done us good, but are not needed for the leg ahead. As we throw our breadcrumbs into the water today, I want to suggest that we leave our rafts at the edge of the water as well. Who knows, maybe somebody else could use them instead.

I'm the first to admit: Dropping our rafts is tough. While I have managed to shed some of my own rafts as I've transitioned to my new home and life, there are many I still cling to. Change is

hard. During those moments of uncertainty or transition, we want to clutch what feels familiar even harder.

I want to remind us that all of us sit here today thanks to ancestors who crossed actual seas, and then were brave enough to leave their rafts, real and metaphorical, behind. Our ancient ancestors crossed the Red Sea to become Jews, and our more recent ancestors crossed the Atlantic Ocean to become Americans. We can only imagine the rafts our ancestors carried with them - stories, beliefs, ideologies, valuables, languages, and connections, many of which they learned to put down and leave behind, as strange and painful as that must have been.

We could also turn to the very first and most famous raft in our history: Noah, Noah who built an ark to survive a deluge, which is just a scaled up version of a raft to cross a river.

Today's Musaf service includes a special section called Zichronot, which means remembrances, and recalls times in our ancient history when God remembered us, as we hope that God will again today. Rosh Hashanah is actually known by our tradition as Yom HaZikaron - the day of remembrance.

The first instance of God's remembering that we recall is when God remembered Noah and his ark full of family and all of the animals 2 by 2. When God remembers Noah, God tells him צא מן התבה - Get out of the ark, which for our purposes, we might choose to read as, "it's time to move on and leave the boat behind." Leave the raft behind. Midrashim, collections of rabbinic stories about our biblical ancestors, suggest that Noah was unwilling to leave the ark until God finally came and gave him a nudge. I can imagine a midrash in which Noah tried to drag the ark along even on dry land, just in case. He worked hard on it, it served him well, and it's unnerving to imagine moving through the world without it in tow. But God showed him a rainbow to assure him that the ark was now obsolete. So as we recall Noah, and God's nudge, I invite us all to hear that message that still reverberates today, "צא מן התבה - it's time to leave the raft behind."

Carl Jung taught, "I am not what happened to me, I am what I choose to become." We all arrive here today as an amalgamation of our past beliefs and experiences. They define who we've been and who we are now. But they don't define who we are to become. Becoming, as Michelle Obama has taught us, is about "never giving up on the idea that there's more growing to be done."

So how do we manage to move forward through the unfamiliar, the unpredictable, and the uncharted? What should we actually bring to the deserted island that Heschel teased those prospective rabbinical students about?

Here's my answer: A compass.

Emerson taught us 200 years ago that life is about the journey, not the destination. Whenever we're on a journey, we always need a compass. Though we've now traded those magnetic relics for our iPhones and Waze, it remains true that we'd all be lost without a compass. Before there were iPhones, the compass was a reminder that while we might not know when we'll reach our destination, we at least need to know that we're heading in the right direction. Our compass helps us stay the course and realign when needed. It orients us in the right direction.

Did you know that the word "to orient" comes from mapmakers who wanted to align themselves with Jerusalem? "To orient" actually infers facing eastward, towards the Orient, or the Far East as it's more commonly called today. European mapmakers knew that if they faced the Orient,

which is to say eastwards, they would be facing in the direction of Jerusalem. Through their cartography, they crafted a world orientation directed to the Holy Land.

In Hebrew, the word for compass also invites a fascinating wordplay. The Hebrew word for compass is *matzpen*. The Hebrew word for conscience is *matzpun*. They are spelled almost exactly identical. The connection is obvious and striking. Each of us has an inner northern star that points us towards personal growth and fulfillment. We call this our moral compass.

Imagine if you'd shown up for your JTS interview and told Heschel that you wanted to bring your Matzpen to the desert island! 2 for the price of 1 - an answer with both spiritual and practical utility.

If you look up to your left at the first stained glass panel in this gorgeous sanctuary, you'll note our Jewish founding father Abraham looking out to the Promised Land. He took the ultimate leap of faith, leaving the comfortable and familiar rafts of his homeland behind. What do you notice in the middle of the Mediterranean? There's a compass. Abraham had no idea what his journey had in store for him, but he followed his inner compass down a path of righteousness and faith in God that we all continue to walk to this day, and into the new year ahead. The compass in that panel helped our people move through each era depicted around the room, and it is the compass we all must clutch today.

While my job as rabbi isn't to help you navigate your journey home from shul, my job is to help you to use Jewish tools, texts, prayers and ideas to navigate the waters of life. To make the best use of our JewPS systems.

I'll be honest, I had no idea that my journey would land me at Anshe Emet. All I knew was that my *matzpen*, my inner compass, pointed me towards joining a community that was vibrant, filled with compassion, held down by strong staff and leadership, and always thinking about how to shed the rafts of the past in order to navigate the challenges and opportunities of the present.

To be frank, I thought for much of the last year that I'd end up as a solo pulpit rabbi in a smaller city, like my mom.

However, when I visited Anshe Emet as a rabbinical candidate, I quickly left all my other rafts behind. My inner compass was buzzing. While visiting Anshe Emet, I had the opportunity to learn with this community's youth, to sit with teens, to eat Shabbas dinner with YAD, our young adult program, and to daven and study parasha with adults. I watched in admiration as my now-colleagues put on pigeon hats and hosted a Shabbat experience for young families unlike anything I'd ever seen. And I realized that only at Anshe Emet could I have the opportunity to be mentored and supported by Rabbi Siegel, Rabbi Chankin Gould, Cantor Brook, and Cantor Berke. My *matzpun*, my conscience, the voice within me, had told me that I had arrived home.

As I settle into my new life in Chicago as a rabbi at Anshe Emet, I'm reminded of a teaching from our great commentator Rashi, who notices (Ex 40:38) that the encampments, the resting places, of the Israelites are also called *מסעות*, journeys. Even at rest, he says, they still journeyed. Even after arriving here to my new home, my journey continues. So too with all of you and your journeys.

Compass in hand, I am so excited to join in the journey of 5784 with all of you.

Shanah tovah.