

Giving Up The Cape
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5783
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You know, when I first came to Shearith, I was told that in days gone by, each Shabbat morning, the bimah flowers were a different color and the clergy wore robes to match. Surely one of my predecessors delivered an Erev Rosh Hashanah sermon in a fetching shade of red.

When I read (no pun intended, just the word read, r-e-a-d) last fall, the day after Thanksgiving, that Stephen Sondheim had passed away in his sleep, it took me a full minute to catch my breath.

Many revered Sondheim and consider him the greatest composer and lyricist in the history of the American musical theatre.

I considered him family. No, we didn't know each other. The closest we ever came to meeting was when he sat across the aisle from me at a very starry, very expensive production of a Chekhov play in New York City.

When he left at intermission, I was relieved for two reasons:

First, because his writing had challenged me and changed me in ways I desperately wanted to express to him, but I couldn't find the words, or the courage, to do so.

And second, because I hated the show and if he didn't return for the second act that meant that he, the sage, and I, his disciple, agreed.

But in studying and performing his work, I came to feel as if I knew him. And because I found so much of myself in his music and lyrics, I also came to feel that he knew me.

When he died, I sat shiva for him. Refusing to listen to anything else but his music, crying as I silently mouthed the words that taught me that life is not defined by its ups and downs, but by the discoveries we make along the way.

For his most of his life, Sondheim was not a popular composer. His shows are hard--for actors and audiences alike--and their lessons hard to swallow. But for me, that's what's makes them so good, so powerful, and so true.

To offer comfort and community to the hundreds of thousands who mourned him as intensely as I did, one theatre in New York gathered a cast of unprecedented skill and renown for a production of what has become his most beloved musical, the fairy tale mashup, *Into the Woods*.

At the performance I attended, the roar of the crowd, as the lights came up on Cinderella, Jack, of beanstalk fame and a slew of other familiar faces from our childhood bedtime stories, blew the roof off the place with more gusto than any wolf could muster.

Though I know the show backwards and forwards, as so often happens after you lose a loved one, the lessons Sondheim was trying to teach me came into focus like never before.

And I was especially taken with one performance, in particular. A little girl in a red cape, journeying ever so innocently into the dangerous wood to bring some sweets to the sick bed of her granny.

On the way, she meets a predator who plots to steer her from the path her mother told her to follow without delay, so that he might devour grandmother and grandchild in quick succession.

“Little girl,” he purrs seductively, “hark and hush, the birds are singing sweetly. You’ll miss the birds completely; you’re travelling so fleetly!”

Later on, she’s rescued from the belly of the wolf by one of the two characters Sondheim created to tie these stories together as they meet each other in the woods, a baker, who needs her cape to have a baby—I know that doesn’t make much sense, but just go with it.

Singing to the audience, she ponders aloud with the wise voice of someone no longer a child: how someone so dangerous could open her eyes to “many beautiful things that [she] hadn’t thought to explore,” how she was both thrilled and terrified by her adventure, and how facing her fear made her feel “excited, well, excited and scared.”

But most of all, she wondered, what has been blinding me, shielding me, covering my eyes from so much evil and so much good that comes from facing it.

Most of us come to think of Rosh Hashanah as the anniversary of creation, the birthday of the world. But the sages who assigned this sacred day a cosmic significance not found anywhere in the Torah, had a slightly different calendar in mind.

In the midrash, Rabbi Eliezer teaches that God began to separate out the primordial forces of existence not on the first of Tishri, but on the 25th of Elul. Tonight, we mark the start of the sixth day, the day in which, the Talmud tells us humanity was created in God’s shadow. But by its end, Eve and Adam had already stepped out from underneath its shelter and into the harsh sunlight when they bit into some forbidden fruit.

Eve too was led astray by a sinister force, who, like his counterpart in the story of Little Red Riding Hood, made a powerful argument for disobeying the command of an overprotective parent.

“You are not going to die,” hissed the snake in an inviting tone, “but God knows as soon as you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like divine beings who know good and bad.”

Rosh Hashanah is not the day that God pierced the darkness with the first light.

It is the day in which our eyes were first opened to the tantalizing and terrifying gleam of those forbidden fruits in the woods we call life--some good and some not, but each one deliciously sweet.

Over this past year, we have eaten our fill, for what choice do we have. We can ponder why the world was created this way from this Rosh Hashana to the next. But what we cannot deny is that the more we have come to know about the world that God created, the more promise and the more danger it holds.

For many years and for reasons that made sense, others tried to protect us from what lay beyond the boundaries of what was permitted to us. Our parents and grandparents created stories to frighten us, to warn us that if we are too greedy a giant might come bounding down a beanstalk to crush us, that if we let down our hair what we invite into our lives is heartbreak and betrayal, and that maybe the wisest thing to do is to hide.

But here in this sanctuary, standing before the presence of an eternal light and the ancient teaching it illuminates, we know what Adam discovered 5783 years, or so ago, in the end, as in the beginning, there is nowhere to hide.

Standing outside her grandmother’s cottage, Little Red spies the baker who had cut the wolf open and pulled her to safety. She realizes at that moment, that she faces a difficult choice. She can either pull up her hood and skip back down the path she came from, or venture even further in the wood without its protection.

“Mr. Baker, you saved our lives,” she says, handing him the cape he needs to complete his own quest in the woods.

“Are you certain?” he replies.

“Yes,” she chirps enthusiastically. “Maybe granny will make another with the skins of that wolf.”

She’s eaten from the apple, the danger ahead of her is clear. But if she’s going to have to chomp down on its tough flesh, she as might as well enjoy the taste.

By the time the evening had ended, my hands raw from clapping and my cheeks red from tears, each of the characters had taken their turn revealing, through song, what

they had learned by venturing into the deep and dark wood after midnight to chase their dreams and face their nightmares.

Not everyone who enters the enchanted forest makes it out alive, but the ones who do find one more truth that helps them along the way. The same truth revealed in a Hassidic parable taught on many a Rosh Hashana evening throughout the centuries:

A man, wondering lost in the forest for several days, finally encountered another. He called out: "Good brother, show me the way out of this forest." The man replied: "Good brother, I too am lost. I can only tell you this: The ways I have tried lead nowhere; they have only led me astray. Take my hand and let us search for the way together."

Or, as Sondheim so brilliantly put it:

*Sometimes people leave you, halfway through the wood.
Do not let it grieve you.
No one leaves for good.
You are not alone.
No one is alone.*

We will spend many hours losing ourselves in the dense, sometimes intimidating and sometimes downright frightening book we hold in our hands. As we go deeper and deeper, we will be tempted to convince ourselves that we are safe, that its words do not apply to us, that the dangers it describes are not imminent, and that we will find each other in the woods again next year and the year after that.

But nevertheless, God will cry out to us, just as God did for Adam, saying "where are you?" And we will be forced to choose--do we remain hooded and cloaked, hiding not just from the difficult truths around us, but also within us? Or will we allow ourselves to be seen, truly seen, thrilled by the challenge and the terror of answering God's call?

I pray that I'll be just as brave as the little girl in the red cape whose strong, insistent voice pierced the shadows of a darkened theatre:

*Now I know,
Don't be scared.
Granny is right,
Just be prepared.*

Isn't it nice to know a lot?

And a little bit not.