

BSD – Sermon – Day One Rosh Hashanah 5778

Chabad of Port Washington

The Hurricane: I'm not in charge – but someOne is!

As we stand here tonight on the eve of the new year, there is no doubt that **our hearts and minds are still reeling from the difficult weeks** we just experienced, when our country was pounded so heavily by devastating hurricanes and natural disasters.

The painful loss of life, the hundreds of billions of loss in property, millions still without power and feeling powerless, loss of too many lives, and the general uncertainty and shake-up which affected our country.

Almost everyone in this room knows someone who was personally affected. The images coming out of Texas and Florida, and all the other cities and island hit so forcefully, communicated massive devastation, tragedy, evacuation chaos, and stories of extraordinary heroism and kindness.

The place that people always considered a "Safe Space" - their own homes, were now no longer sufficient in keeping them sheltered from one of Earth's most devastating Natural Disasters.

Heart-wrenching stories keep coming...

Colette Sulcer, 41, who worked as a surgical nurse, attempted to escape the flooding with her 3 year old, daughter, Jordyn Grace. The two drove in her car on Tuesday.

Mother and daughter pulled into a parking lot when the waters began to rise and then left their car. At some point, the water caught up to them and the two were swept into a canal and ended up floating about half a mile, said police.

The little girl was just clutching on to her mother's body.

Jordyn Grace was located by a rescue team in a Zodiac boat driving around Beaumont, Texas. **When the team spotted a small pink backpack,** they pulled her

and her mother aboard. Unfortunately, Jordyn's mother, Colette Sulcer, 41, died on Tuesday while her daughter held on to her lifeless body.

The little girl survived by clutching her mother's body in rising floodwater. Her mother kept herself alive as long as she can, to save her daughter's life.

"Mama was saying her prayers," Jordyn told her relative as she recovered in a Beaumont hospital.

"Jordyn told me they were in the yucky water for quite a while," the relative told the Press.

It breaks your heart.

Then I watched the story about the man who used his last words to save a friend's life, warning him away from a live electrical wire.

Twenty-five-year-old Andrew Pasek was **on a mission to check on his older sister when he stepped on a live electrical wire in ankle-deep water** Tuesday.

Pasek then fell into the lamppost attached to the live wire. Pasek's friend moved closer to help, but Pasek warned him away.

"He said, 'Don't touch me. I'm dying.'"

And the extraordinary goodness that was seen:

Like every difficult moment there is an opportunity for growth.

The last few months this country has been so divided. It was worrisome. Historians were looking to see the last time this country was split in two in such a bad way. What we have seen in the last couple of weeks since the Hurricane is the true colors of this beautiful country.

Someone told me a month ago that **Charlottesville and Houston could not have been more different. In between there was an eclipse.** Hashem showing us His glorious mastery of His world... Maybe He was also saying if the sun and the moon even out their differences so should we...

Suddenly, when it came to saving people, everyone volunteered and everyone was saved.

Race, religion, and political affiliation disappeared in the midst of this mass crisis. The two parties even started talking in Washington, something no one imagined could happen a few weeks ago. In the midst of the hurricane, we saw humanity at its best.

My name is Harry... but they call me Elizabeth

A couple is in the midst of a tremendous fight, as a gunman breaks into their home. Pointing his rifle at the woman of the home, he asks her for her name. The terrified woman mutters, "Elizabeth." This is your lucky night," the gunman responds. I just can't get myself to kill somebody who carries my mother's name, may her soul rest in peace. My mother was a special woman. I won't shoot you." He then points the rifle at her husband's head. "What is your name?" thunders the gunman. The poor man is terror-struck. He knows that his answer will equal life or death, and pauses to think. If you don't want your brains blown out, tell me your name right now!" the gunman shouts. **My name is Harry," the horrified man replies, "but they call me Elizabeth."**

Some couples learn to share each other's names and to identify with each other only in time of crisis... Same with us as a society...

Unfortunately it seems to take a disaster to unite the country...

Gallery furniture store in Houston opening stores for people to sleep!

Jet Blue offering \$99 flights after other airlines tried taking advantage of customers who were trapped. Other airlines had to follow... like dominos they all fell, to goodness!

"Act of G-d"

It bothers me is that while perusing the various news stories covering this monumental mess, three words keep on appearing: "Act of G-d."

During Hurricane Sandy (which we felt, over a million dollars damage, weeks without power) the operative word I kept hearing from insurance was Act of G-d...

It bothered me... suddenly everyone became so religious...

And what do you think G-d thinks of this expression?

I can imagine Him saying, "Hey, every time something goes terribly wrong it's an act of G-d?! Every time ANYTHING that happens it's an 'act of G-d' too!

Yes, when you walked outside to a gorgeous sunny day – that's Me!

When your granddaughter was born, healthy and wonderful – hey that was Me too!

Look up, you see that very visible and completely ordinary cloud, it's Me who is suspending those water crystals in the atmosphere. **I'm not just in the hurricane business!"**

Don't waste a recession. Don't waste a hurricane.

There's got to be a lesson we're meant to take away from this:

We're not in control...

But someOne is!

Story guy who fled Florida only to be in the hotel in Mexico on the 28th floor when the colossal earthquake hit... he was never so scared in his life

He realized... if I'm meant to be shaken up by what's going on, there aint no getting away from it.

He realized: I'm not in control... but someOne is!

Hurricane tracking screen shape of a SHOFAR – SHOW IMAGE AND READ FACEBOOK POST

My 6 year old son sees me poring over the computer, he asks what I'm doing. I told him I'm trying to figure out what's going on with the hurricane. He said to me: "Tatty, look, it's a shofar. I think Hashem is telling us to do teshuvah!

Nothing says this better than Psalm 93

I've found myself drawn to Psalm 93 to help guide my praying and processing. It's the flood-waters psalm.

"The seas have lifted up, O G-d, the seas have lifted up their voice; the seas have lifted up their pounding waves. Bug G-d is mighty on High, mightier than the thunder of the great waters..."

It reminds us a hurricane isn't nature run amuck.

G-d is in the hurricane. It IS in fact an act of G-d... like everything is!

We're not in control, but someOne is!

Don't Lean Too Much

Yitzchak Breiter was a successful owner of a shoe factory in Warsaw before the War. Every day in synagogue he gave a short sermon after the evening services. He spoke virtually every day about the importance and value of faith and trust in G-d, and the absolute need for complete joy that comes from trust in G-d.

There was one elderly Jew in shul who listened to these speeches cynically, thinking, "It's easy for Yitzchak to speak about full faith and trust in G-d when he is sitting on lots of money. He is wealthy and has everything he needs. When you have all the money you need, sure, why not preach about how one must trust G-d. But what about those of us who struggle with putting bread on the table, with paying tuition, with covering our mortgages?" This man mentally dismissed Reb Yitzchak's sermons and even made fun of his message to others around him.

Unfortunately, Yitzchak's factory burned down one day. He lost everything. This is pre-insurance days... With more than a little relish, the older man waited for the services that evening, to see how finally Yitzchak would be "silenced" by the challenges of life.

To his great shock, Yitzchak stood up that evening and spoke as enthusiastically as ever about how important it is for a Jew to have faith and trust in G-d. To know that G-d is cradling him or her like a mother cradles her infant in her bosom. The

infant has no worries in the world. The child is not afraid he or she will be dropped. The child trusts fully that in mom's embrace he is as safe and secure as can be. This, he said, is how a Jew must feel about G-d.

Unable to restrain himself, this Jew walked over to Yitzchak and says to him, "I have to apologize to you. Today I realized how sincere and real you are. But please, tell me how you do it!? How do you maintain such strong faith in the face of such a challenge?!"

Yitzchak answered him using a lovely illustration from Jewish law.

According to the code of Jewish law, a person must stand during the Amidah prayer, out of respect and concentration. But what about leaning on a lectern, on a chair, or the table? Is leaning considered standing or is it more comparable to sitting? The law states that if the person is leaning with so much of his weight that if the object were to be removed, he would fall, then it is considered as if he is sitting. If, on the other hand, he is not placing much of his weight on the object such that if it were to be removed, he would remain standing, then it is considered as if he is standing and he could pray the Amidah while leaning.

Yitzchak explained that the same principle has guided him concerning his wealth. Sure, I have been "leaning" on my wealth. I relied on it, I enjoyed it, I was grateful for it, I cherished it. But I always made sure not to "lean on it" to the point that if it is taken from me I would fall down and lose my inner dignity and relationship with my soul and with my G-d. I always made sure that my faith and trust in G-d is not "leaning" and dependent on the money. I never leaned on my wealth," said Reb Yitzchak, "too heavily. I appreciated it and used it, but it never served as the foundation of my humaneness, Jewishness and self-confidence. Therefore, I not fall when this support was pulled out from under me. A Jew must "lean" with all of his or her weight on G-d alone.

That's Psalm 93 –

My Bobby Stern – her Psalm is 93 because she passed away in her 93rd year of life

She embodied this faith and optimism...

Extraordinary woman, first woman to be anywhere in the US as a nursing home administrator, (she broke that glass ceiling) a religious woman with a shaitel (wig)... a job she held for 60 years, retiring at 91

She was likely the person, after the Rebbe, who was the greatest inspiration in my life

She buried two of her four children... both in their early 60's

But Bobby kept on going! She always strong, always upbeat

Bobby was high on life, because she her faith was real, it was unshakable!

She talked to G-d in a first name basis...

Psalm 93 is her psalm (because she died in her 93rd year)

Shidduch story: I was dating and had a let down, and was heartbroken and angry... Bobby came for Shabbos, she called me over and said: Sholom, we gotta talk... Hashem has His plans for you, sometimes they're different than your plans for you. But you'll see, His plans are much better than your's!

Well... anyone who knows Sara knows... I hit the jackpot!

Plaque on my office door:

Dedicated in loving memory of my amazing Bobby Stern who taught me nothing is impossible!

When things were good she said Baruch Hashem!

When things weren't so good she said – OY Hashem!

It doesn't fix the problem, but knowing someOne's in charge and there's purpose to it all makes it manageable...

Kach et hamag

Cheryl Mandel, whose son Danny was an Officer in the elite unit of the Nachal Brigade who was killed on a mission to capture wanted terrorists in Nablus in 2003, spoke at a large gathering of college age kids on Israel's Memorial Day.

Danny was killed two days before Passover; Cheryl was in the kitchen cooking and getting ready for the Seder when the IDF officers showed up at her door with the terrible news. The Seder table was already set, and the next night, having come back from Danny's funeral just a few hours before, no-one had the heart to remove his place setting, so his chair sat empty, his wine glass unfilled, and Haggadah un-opened through the seder that was more like Tisha B'Av than a pesach Seder....

After telling Danny's story, Cheryl asked the kids to ask any question they'd like to, she said there probably was not a question they could think of that she had not already been asked and she wanted them to feel comfortable asking anything and everything....

Eventually, one of the boys asked if losing her son had affected her faith. The entire room went quiet; you could hear a pin drop.

"Not at all".

And again there was silence in the room.

"Actually", he said, I feel sorry for people who have to struggle with this without faith; it must be very difficult; at least in my world there must be some plan, some reason, even if I cannot imagine ever understanding it..."

She explained that while she was in labor with her first child, her husband was extremely stressed seeing his wife whom he loved so dearly in such pain during labor. His wife, sensing his duress, said to him: "You know, I am in pain, but I am not suffering, because I know there is a purpose to this pain. Suffering is when there does not seem to be any purpose."

"Having real faith doesn't take away the pain. I'm in a lot of pain! But I'm not suffering..."

WOW - What a woman!

At the end of her presentation, she told us a story:

At the end of their training period in the Nachal unit they had a 'masa mesakem' or final trek. This 90 kilometer (50 miles) march is one of the most difficult experiences in the Israeli army and is a test of endurance as well as will power. The soldiers are gradually being prepared for this grueling experience from the beginning of their army service with the treks beginning at 4-5 kilometer baby hikes to 10, 20 40 and eventually 60 or 70 kilometer hikes, so that they are ready for the 90 kilometer trek when it comes. In addition to the gradual training of long distance walking And running sometimes with open stretchers carrying wounded, they are also trained to carry additional gear. Each soldier, in addition to his gun and gear carries an additional piece of equipment such as a jerry can, stretcher, grenade launcher or radio. One of the heavier items is the heavy MAG machine gun known in slang as the 'Mag'.

The mag is always given to a larger solidly built soldier as it is very heavy and difficult to carry; as such it also is an honor to carry. But the soldier who carries it has been training with it through his entire army service and is ready to carry it for 90 kilometers having trekked with through all of the previous treks. But the particular soldier tasked with the Mag on this march was sick, and collapsed a few kilometers into the march.

Danny, who was nearby, immediately ran to his aid when he collapsed, and his commanding officer said to him **"Danny: Kach et haMag"** ;("Daniel take the Mag").

Now **Daniel, was not a very big boy, and was not trained to carry this heavy load. But if your commanding officer says "Danny Kach et haMag", you take the Mag.**

So Daniel hefted the heavy machine gun on his back and proceeded to carry it for the remaining 80 kilometers. He succeeded in finishing the trek, after which he promptly collapsed and ended up in the hospital; but he finished the trek and became a legend in his unit.

Cheryl looked at the kids whom she as sharing this story with and said, pointing heaven-wards with her finger:

“My Commanding Officer (G-d) has given me a great burden to carry. Hashem has, for some reason I will never comprehend looked at me and said “Mendel: kach et hamag”. I was never trained nor was I prepared to carry this burden; but if your commanding officer says “Mendel Kach et haMag”, you take the Mag. So I am carrying this heavy burden and will, till my last day on earth carry the burden of having buried a son who fell in defense of Israel. It is not a burden I wanted to carry, and I would gladly give it up, but I will carry it, because that is what I believe my Commanding Officer is asking of me.”

People have often asked me: How can there be purpose in challenge that ends in tragedy... how can that be to that person’s benefit, when they’re gone now...

But the soul doesn’t die... the soul lives forever. Not just 90, 100 years. And we only see our own lifetimes, from G-d’s vantage point He sees our ancestors all the way back to the beginning of time as well as our descendants until the end of time, all of whom are part of our story, of our destiny, of our souls’ collective mission...

When we judge things, we’re like someone walking in for 5 minutes in the middle of a 2 hour movie... they have all kinds of questions... why did he just do that? What did he mean by that? And everyone else is frustrated.. could you just sit down and be quiet... you missed it... that’s the extent of our understanding of events.

My Scar

Rivky, a 13 year old girl living in Israel, had gone with her family to a nice resort in the Galilee for Sukkot. During one nice afternoon of the holiday, Rivky went for a walk, and apparently wandered too far, away from the resort, near an Arab village. She suddenly realizes she’s being chased, by 4 tough looking teenage boys, she runs for her life, they pursue her, eventually she climbs a tree, it’s not a strong tree, she shakes it violently, laughing all the while that this tree will eventually give or she’ll fall, and she’s theirs... She’s petrified, her greatest fears are happening...

From out of nowhere a 15 year old Yeshiva boy from the resort heard her shouts and came running, he shouts at the teens to leave her alone and go away. They laugh at him and tell him to mind his own business if he knows what's good for him. But he doesn't give up. He attacks those boys, one against four, like a tiger... fighting with everything he's got... They regroup, and grab a huge wooden beam... Now you're gonna get it they say... "Oh yeah?! First you gotta catch me". He runs off, they begin chasing him, he quickly motions to Rivky to climb down and escape, which she does, runs back to the resort to call for help....

As she runs, in the distance she hears the scuffling of the chase, and she then hears shouts... shouts that no human being should ever hear... she's petrified, what could have happened to this yeshiva boy, the hero who saved her life. She calls for help, men run out to the woods and she's told the boy is fine with some minor injuries... She's not sure she believes it... She keeps asking her parents if he's alive or dead... they reassure her all is well, but the trauma from the event remains with her...

Fast forward 10 years, she's dating. She does not like what she's seeing... She keeps rejecting one after the other... She's told about a truly wonderful boy, a gem, smart, capable, charming, tall, handsome, talented, a mentch, you name it... A date was arranged. She couldn't understand why this amazing guy wasn't already snatched by other girls... until she met him. Yes, he was all of those wonderful things... but... he had a deep scar right on his face, from the corner of his eye to the bottom of his chin... It was difficult to look at...

She decided to give him a chance. She enjoyed the evening with him, but went home with a heavy heart... would the scar get in the way of this working out. She continued to date him, and their relationship grew, they were truly compatible, they clicked, they enjoyed each other's company immensely and were on the same page about almost everything... It seemed like a match made in heaven, except... that she couldn't get passed the scar... try as she might...

So finally on the last date she turned to the boy and told him, that as much as she liked him this should really be their last date because she doesn't see it working out... He didn't have to ask why ... he knew why... he'd been rejected numerous times before, same story...

As they walked towards the car, the silence was awkward, she tried to break the silences: I'm sorry... And ... how did you get that scar anyway?

No one had ever asked him that question before...

So he told her the story. His family was visiting a nice resort in the Galilee for Sukkot 10 years prior... he is taking a stroll one afternoon and hears shouting of a girl coming from the woods, he follows the shouts, and sees a girl on a tree, and 4 teenagers shaking the tree and she's shouting, afraid for her life... He attacked them, he gave them a run for their money and saved the girl, but they chased him, and one of them hit him with a wooden beam with a rusty nail sticking out...

Rivky can't believe her ears... Her eyes overflow with tears... she begins to shake... "That scar... its MY SCAR!.... You saved my life!"

They ended up marrying and living happily ever after. Rivky would often say that at that moment, the scar that until then had been so ugly to her, suddenly became beloved to her... it was her scar... It was the scar that actually saved him for her... so that none of the other girls should marry him until she found him...

Closing:

Friends, in closing, I ask that you join with me in prayer.

Let us pray that the coming year be filled with goodness and sweetness, with only obvious blessings for each of us and our loved ones.

May we have few challenges or very small challenges...

We certainly don't ask for them... I often say to G-d – please, don't test me... I'm gonna fail...

But each of us does get our own share of tzoros, every single person in this room is carrying around as we say in Yiddish "ah pekel" – a bag of tzoros, be it as small as losing a client or missing an important flight, or as colossal as the heroic challenges presented to those gigantic souls such as Cheryl Frankel to

whom the Commanding Officer has personally turned to with His seemingly impossible request: Kach et Hamag...

Let us pray that when a challenge does come our way, when life presents us with a burden to carry, an inner turmoil brought to us by nature or nurture, or a struggle from without presented to us by life and circumstances...

May we each have the wisdom and the strength to realize... my personal burden, it may be a scar, but it's my scar... it's my personal challenge... tailor made for each of us by Hashem for a purpose that at times may become clear to us, but often remains known to Him alone...

May we find comfort and strength in the knowledge that yes, we're not in control. But someOne is. Someone who loves us dearly..... like a father... or like a mother... and more so... Any parent in the room knows... the love for a child runs deep... VERY deep. There's almost nothing we wouldn't do to bring happiness to our child. That's just a glimpse of G-d's love for each of us... Because after all we are finite human beings, He's the infinite G-d... His care is personal... to each of us... individually... And it is constant... minute by minute... holding our hands... helping us reach our own potential and fulfillment and happiness.

And to YOU, Tatte in Himmel, nothing's impossible for You. You could find a way to get us there without the pain... find a way for each of us to reach our destiny without suffering and without tears... Shower your beloved children with ONLY REVEALED goodness and blessings. Inscribe each of us, our loved ones, and all of Klal Yisroel, to a Shana Tova Umetukah, a good and a sweet year!

Amen!