

On Fragility, Second Chances, and Dreams:
Rabbi Alan Lew z"l, USAirways 1549, and Dr. King
Parashat Shemot 5769
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This week, as I do at this time every year, I attended the Rabbinic Training Institute, or RTI, at Pearlstone Retreat Center in Baltimore. In many respects, the conference was an experience as positive and worthwhile as always, featuring compelling and intensive study and great networking and camaraderie in a relaxed and informal camp-style setting. Except in one significant and unforgettable respect this RTI was different than any other, and, sadly, in a tragic way. Rabbi Alan Lew, a colleague, author of several books, and longtime RTI faculty member, went out for his daily 2.5 mile walk near the retreat center on Monday morning, only on this day—he collapsed and died at age 65. Within a couple of hours, the conference director gathered all of the faculty and participants together to share this horrible and unexpected news. People shared many thoughts and reflections about our colleague and teacher during the rest of the afternoon and evening. Personally, I did not know Alan very well—we had met and seen each other at several RTI's—but, oddly enough, it was this year that I had finally decided to try one of his meditation-centered workshops. Sunday night was the first of the four sessions and we focused our meditations on issues

relating to the High Holidays such as preparation, spirituality, and *kavannah*.

While each of the participants in his class shared his or her personal reflections, Alan took copious notes on their remarks and, when we ran out of time at the end of the session, said, “I took some notes on your comments and I have some thoughts and responses for you, but since it’s time for everyone to go to davening, we’ll have to get back to it tomorrow”.

Unfortunately we would never get that opportunity. What would he have taught us? What insights did he have to offer each of us in response to our soul-searching reflections on our personal joys and challenges of the High Holiday period? The dialogue stands incomplete.

Perhaps strangest of all was that, since we were discussing the High Holidays, one of the topics that came up was the *U’Netaneh Tokef* prayer, in which the author reflects—On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed—who shall live and who shall die. The fragility of life is laid bare for us in this powerful prayer, and, after contemplating it in its abstract terms, we experienced it in all too real fashion—the very next day. Life can come to an end in the blink of an eye, reminding us how precious our time on earth really is.

But do we really need to witness death to learn that vital lesson? Amazingly, this week’s national news brings us a story that by all rights

could have featured a tragic ending like the sudden passing of Rabbi Lew, and yet, instead, resolved altogether differently. When the engines of USAirways flight 1549 were knocked out by freak mid-air collisions with not one, but two, birds shortly after takeoff in NY, the pilot was somehow able to avoid crashing into buildings in the city and managed to land in the Hudson River, a crash from which all 155 people aboard were able to be rescued and survive. Governor Patterson of New York has referred to it as “the miracle on the Hudson,” and indeed it was. Thank God that this terrifying landing concluded with a happy ending. One wonders, however, what people aboard the plane were thinking as it was going down quickly and most unexpectedly. Perhaps they were wondering—are we going to make it? Or perhaps in those brief moments they were thinking about things they still wanted to do, or people that they wanted to say goodbye to. One survivor that was interviewed said that, as the plane was quickly going down, he took out his business card and scribbled a brief note of “I love you” to his family and put it in his pocket, assuming that he was going to die and would be found with the card. For those, like this man, who may have believed they were doomed to die, the landing and rescue represents a second chance of sorts, a chance to re-embrace life and all its fullness and

potential, having gone to the brink—and even fallen off the precipice—and survived. Will their lives change going forward? And, if so, how?

In yet another one of the many examples of Torah mirroring life, our parashah this week also relates a miraculous rescue from the water. The rescue did not happen on as large a scale as the Hudson rescue, but the implications of the biblical rescue are no less miraculous. Pharaoh had declared that all Israelite boys be drowned in the Nile as a way to check Israelite population growth. The Israelite women did all within their power to protect their babies, and in the case of one family, the baby was placed in a waterproof basket in the reeds of the Nile. Ironically it was none other than the daughter of the evil tyrant Pharaoh who pulled the baby from the Nile and claimed him for herself. That little boy who grew up in Pharaoh's house eventually became our great prophet and teacher Moses who led Israel out of Egypt.

We don't always get a second chance in life, but some very lucky passengers on Flight 1549 have been given just that, just as our great prophet and teacher Moses caught an incredibly fortuitous and life-saving break and avoided Pharaoh's decree, and it should give us all reason to consider the way in which we all choose to spend our days. None of us need to become

Moses, who, after a reluctant start to his prophetic career, became a paradigm of modesty, wisdom, and virtue in our tradition. We may not be prophets, but each of ARE one of God's partners in improving the world.

Being God's partner is not easy. We have a lot of work to do. And, just like Moses, we often meet with disappointments and even failures. On Monday, we will celebrate the life of one of God's great partners – Dr. Martin Luther King, Junior. Like Moses, Dr. King was a spokesman for the freedom of God's enslaved people. Like Moses, Dr. King was disappointed numerous times. Like Moses, Dr. King was rejected by many people. And like Moses, Dr. King inspired humankind to a higher standard of treatment of one another. And he did all of this in his tragically short life of 39 years.

Moses died before the descendants of the freed slaves were able to enter into the Promised Land. One could easily make an argument that the struggle to transform ourselves from Israelite slaves into one unified, God-fearing people continues, 3000 years after the death of Moses. Dr. King also died before his dream was realized—before freedom and equality was achieved in America. Forty years after his death, the struggle continues. Racism and discrimination remain in America.

But Dr. King's dream, the dream that "*one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.'*" is still very much alive, for no one can argue against the fact that great progress HAS been made. For if our country's views on the equality of all people had not at least changed significantly in these last forty years, then surely we would not be preparing for the inauguration of our country's first African-American president this coming Tuesday. How wonderfully appropriate it is that we will celebrate Dr. King's legacy on Monday and then welcome Barack Obama as our president on the very next day!

Our partnership with God is not over. While great progress has been made, we still have much work to do. Yes, my friends, life is fragile, unpredictable, and sometimes tragically short, but we need not be afraid. We can accomplish much in our short time on earth, as Dr. King's legacy testifies. Our responsibilities start at home and close to it, with the relationships we build and sustain with those we love and care about, family and friends, whose presence in our lives reminds us of the incredible sense of meaning and purpose that love brings to life. Those relationships must be treasured and actively nurtured, because the reality is we don't know when our last walk will be or whether we'll be forced to write a note on a business

card in what we presume to be the last moments of our life. And then we also turn our attention to the world around us. There is still Jewish community to be built and cultivated and unity to work towards within the Jewish People. There are still hungry people to feed, naked people to clothe, homeless people to shelter. And, most certainly, there is still understanding and respect to be achieved between religions, races and countries.

Like Alan Lew, the passengers of USAirways 1549, Moses, and Dr. King, we don't know the length of our days. But we do know how to love, how to care, how to be understanding, and how to build. And if we don't, we can still learn. Can we treasure that invaluable knowledge and put it to the use for which it is intended?

May we continue to partner with God, building loving relationships, caring for the downtrodden and the stranger, standing up to the oppressors, and working day by day, step by step – hand in hand with God – to make our homes, communities, country, and the world a better place for all who dwell within.