

Elul Week 2: "Never Walk Away: Loyal to Others, Loyal to Yourself" (A Teaching on Courage and Loyalty)

Dear Friends,

There is a teaching in *Mussar* that courage - *gevurah* - is not primarily about facing down danger. More often, it is the quiet strength to hold a line when no one would notice if we let it go. It is the discipline to stay, to keep a promise, to remain present, long after the spark of feeling that first led us to make it faded.

I have come to think that this is where loyalty lives - not as an obligation imposed on us, but as an act of courage we choose, again and again, in small and unglamorous moments.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory, drew a distinction that has stayed with me: the difference between a contract and a covenant. A contract, he taught, is for mutual advantage, and it dissolves when the advantage does. A covenant is sustained by something deeper - by loyalty itself, by the sense of belonging to one another that doesn't ask to be repaid. "We need covenants as well as contracts," he wrote, "meanings as well as preferences; loyalties, not just temporary associations for mutual gain."

He also wrote of *chesed* - the Hebrew word we often translate as loving-kindness, but which he described as something more specific: "the love that is loyalty, and the loyalty that is love... born in the generosity of faithfulness, the love that means being ever-present for the other, in hard times as well as good." And then this, which I keep returning to: those who practice this kind of loyalty "experience the world differently" than those who do not.

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov taught that the whole world is a narrow bridge, and the essential thing is not to be afraid. I have usually heard this as a teaching about personal courage - but I wonder if it is also about relational courage. Staying loyal to another person, or to a community, while we ourselves are frightened, is its own crossing of that narrow bridge. It asks us to remain present for someone else even while we are unsteady.

And loyalty need not stop at the edge of our own species. In the illustrated children's book, *All Our Relatives*, Paul Goble records a teaching from Brave Buffalo, a Lakota elder: "If a man could prove to some bird or animal that he was a worthy friend, it would share with him precious secrets, and there would be formed bonds of loyalty never to be broken." What strikes me here is that loyalty wasn't a given - it was earned through demonstrated care; and once formed, it was an enduring bond that required protection from both sides. All genuine relationships - even one with a bird, an animal, a place - deserve and benefit from that kind of loyalty. Loyalty, it turns out, isn't a human invention we occasionally extend to other creatures. It's simply what genuine relationships ask of us, wherever they are found.

It seems to me that loyalty holds a smaller place in our lives today than it once did - not because we have stopped caring about one another, but because loyalty itself no longer feels like an essential practice, the way it once did. Perhaps our lives are simply fuller than they used to be, crowded with more demands than any one person can hold. Or perhaps we've just drifted toward individualism, without ever choosing it outright - so that friendship no longer assumes loyalty the way it once did.

I was taught, growing up, that you do not leave a friend who is in danger or at risk - you stay. The Torah gives us this in the story of Miriam: when the infant Moses was placed in the river, she did not walk away. She stood watch at great personal risk, defying the very decree that had put him there, and refusing to expose him to danger alone. That is courage and loyalty together - not the ability to rescue or fix, but the tenacity to remain, unwavering, even when walking away would have been far safer.

But there is one more direction loyalty must travel, and it may be the hardest: toward ourselves. We often speak of loyalty as something we owe others and forget that we can abandon ourselves just as easily - abandon our own values under pressure, abandon a commitment we made to our own growth the moment it becomes inconvenient, abandon the person we were trying to become because it was easier not to try. *Elul* asks us to return - not only to the people we may have let down, but to ourselves. To ask: have I stayed loyal to what I know to be true, to the values I claim, to the person I am capable of being - or have I drifted off course? And yet - true *Teshuvah* is an act of radical, stubborn loyalty to our own inherent goodness. It is a

declaration that despite the stumbles and missteps of the past year, we are fiercely committed to the unique track we were always meant to walk.

As we move through this month, perhaps the invitation is simple: to notice one place - with another person, with a community, or with ourselves - where loyalty has quietly slipped into something more conditional. And to ask, gently, without judgment, what it might look like to restore it.

A practice for the week

Stand watch. Do not walk away.

This week, when someone I care about is struggling, I will check in a second time - not just once, and not just when it's convenient.

This week's musical selections:

We turn to **Kol Nidre**, the haunting declaration recited as Yom Kippur begins, releasing us from vows we could not keep and asking us to confront, honestly, our own human frailty - the very courage this teaching is about. My favorite rendition is by **Johnny Mathis**, whose raw emotional power combined with intense vulnerability captures exactly what this prayer asks of each of us. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrS3H0Li7yo>

We are also including a beautiful explanation of the **Kol Nidre** prayer from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks z"l:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hW-cSrxQ1IU>

Hashkiveinu - the evening prayer asking God to spread over us "the shelter of Your peace" and to guard us through the night. It is, in a sense, the same plea this teaching has been exploring all along: just as we trust God to watch over us while we sleep, we are called to watch over one another with the same steadfast care. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XV7Efniu0QE>

James Taylor's "You've Got a Friend" - written by Carole King, who has said the song came to her almost as pure inspiration, "written by something outside myself, through me." Taylor later shared that King wrote it as a direct answer to a line in his own song "Fire and Rain" - "I've seen lonely times when I could not find a friend" - her response being, simply, "you've got one right here". That's the very definition of loyalty this teaching is

asking us to practice not loyalty as a feeling, but as a promise to show up. Never walk away, set to music.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yz9Fi4VI6MQ>

And we close with **Tracy Chapman's performance of "Stand By Me"** (Ben E. King) - soulful and stripped down, closing this week's set with what may be the plainest musical statement of loyalty ever written: "I won't be afraid, as long as you stand by me". It's the whole teaching in one refrain — not the promise to fix anything, just the promise not to leave. (Note: the performance opens with a short introduction before she begins singing — feel free to skip ahead to get right to the song.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SK9uV4j4buA>

Shavuah tov, a good week,

Alan