

In the summer of 2021, my sister and I took a trip to Glacier National Park in Northern Montana. It was exquisite. Otherworldly in its wildlife, its beauty, its calm. We hiked and swam; we made trail friends with whom we sang 90s pop at the top of our lungs to keep away the bears (unclear what part of that succeeded as the deterrent).

On one of our last days, we signed up for a zipline tour of Whitefish National Mountain. Now, adventure courses are not really my strong suit. I'm much more of a "do a long hike but on a well marked and crowded trail and then have a cocktail at the lodge bar" kind of traveler. I also happen to be deeply scared of heights. But this felt once in a lifetime, so we signed up.

When we got there, they gave us all our harnesses, fitted us for helmets. And then they began the safety instructions, which started with the warning that *sometimes*, in *very rare* cases, *occasionally* it *has been known to happen* that mid zipline, one could - *theoretically* - get stuck. As in, not make it all the way across the line. But it's so unusual, they promised, that it's really not even worth worrying about.

Well, you know where this is going, and so did I - as soon as the guide finished the description, my sister turned to me and said - "that's definitely going to happen to you."

And happen to me it did. Midway through the first line, I felt my pace slow. And then slow some more. And then - maybe 2/3 of the way across the valley - I just stopped. Stuck. They tried a few low effort remedies, starting with throwing up a rope for me to catch (ha).

And then, when none of that worked, the poor 16 year old staff guide ran down the side of the mountain until he was directly below me, launched a pulley for me to grab on to, then ran back up the mountain essentially towing me along the line behind him.

When I landed, I was full on shaking. Pathetic enough, I guess, that for the rest of the trip, the other participants - children, mostly - treated me as their kind of group mascot. Letting me go first, cheering me on when I made it across. It was both totally patronizing and totally adorable. We made it through the next five lines to the bottom of the mountain (where I swore I would remain for the rest of my days).

And then it was time for the closing activity, where each participant was given a “paper plate award” chosen and granted by the group as a whole.

My award was for “bravest bud.” And I’ve kept it close by in the two years since. Why? Partly as a memento of the trip, to be sure - a reminder of the adventure, the quality time with a dear loved one. But partly for what the magic marker on paper plate said. “Bravest.” Was I? Am I? I’ve never really thought of myself as brave. In that moment I was scared, yes. Determined, I suppose. But brave? Could the paper plate gospel be wrong?

Hebrew does not have a great word for bravery. If you look it up in a Hebrew/English dictionary, you’ll first find the word “גְּבוּרָה” - might. As in “Atah **gibur** l’olam Adonai,” “your **might**, God, is boundless.” As in “mi yimalel **gvurot** yisrael” - “Who can retell the **mighty feats** of Israel?” referring to the story of the Maccabees, our Jewish rebel warriors. Gvurah, bravery, here, is action. It’s fighting. Power. Strength.

The other definition or translation you would find is “*ometz lev*,” more often rendered as courage. Literally, “heart strength.”

This sounds more expansive than gevurah's brute force, but it has its own militaristic origins and connotations. The famous line from Joshua, commander in chief, to his assembled forces on the brink of their conquest of the land of Israel? **יָמֵץ וְעֵז** - be strong and resolute. Ematz - ometz. Brave. The verse continues "be strong and resolute, and do not fear, nor be dismayed." Be strong. Be fearless. That is, apparently, how to be brave.

These are our paradigms, it seems. The Maccabees, annihilating their enemies. Joshua's army, storming headstrong into an unknown land. This bravery is active. It's raucous, rambunctious. Full of force, no room for fear. Macho. Not, shall we say, a 30 year old rabbi making it across a zipline adventure course with her younger sister and a crew of pre teen cheerleaders.

So yes, there is within our tradition a bravery of the body. A bravery of putting oneself on the line, of pushing out and wiping away, puffing up and catapulting across. But that's not all. It can't be. Because we also know, from our collective history and each of our experiences of life on this earth, that in truth, bravery is most often not loud. Or grand.

The bravest people I know, in fact - the bravest moments I have witnessed, in truth - are often quiet. And intimate. Dogged, but gentle. Persistent. Insistent. A whisper to oneself. A breath that is steeled, or perhaps released. A stepping in, or sometimes stepping back. A holding on, or a holding in, maybe even a letting go.

I want to tell you one of my favorite stories of bravery. It comes from the Exodus story - our people's grand narrative. Now, that story has a lot of the gevurah type bravery we mentioned before. There's bravado and bluster, competitive magic. There's God's might, for sure, in the traditional sense - raining hail and crushing with darkness and splitting seas and drowning foes. Gevurah gevurah, strength strength, bravery, I guess, for some. Not for me.

Let me introduce you to my bravery models.

Babylonian Talmud, masechet sotah:

בְּשֹׁכֵר נָשִׁים צִדְקָנִיּוֹת שֶׁהָיוּ בָּאוֹתָו הַדּוֹר נִגְאָלוּ - *Rav Avirah taught*: דִּרְשׁ רַב עֲוִירָא
יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמְצָרִים

On the merit of the righteous women that were in that same generation were the Jewish people redeemed from Egypt.

What did these women do? I'm glad you asked :)

At the time when the women would go to the river to draw water, the Holy One, Blessed be God, would materialize for them small fish that would enter into their pitchers, and they would therefore draw pitchers that were half filled with water and half filled with fish (which, you should know, were considered an aphrodisiac in ancient times). The women would then come and place two pots on the fire, one pot of hot water for washing their husbands and one pot of fish with which to feed them.

And these righteous women would take what they prepared for their husband into the field, and there they would bathe them, and anoint them with oil, and feed them the fish, and give them drink, and "address their needs between the sheepfolds." Wink wink.

Which is to say - at the selfsame moment that they were enslaved and shackled in Egypt, these women found a way - made a way! - to birth the next generation. To keep their people going. To will a future into existence.

Now, questionable seduction tactics and biblical euphemisms aside - this story, opens something deep in me. It stuns me with these women's bravery. Not because of their act itself, but because of what must have preceded it, undergirded it. What these women were able to do - what made it possible for them to have children while slaves in Egypt - was to allow their hearts and minds to picture and believe in a reality beyond their current moment. They were able to see past, see outside of, their current constriction. And dream, and have faith in, and act as if, and move toward and for that imagined future. Live now, despite - and for - an uncertain tomorrow.

To their husbands, these women must have seemed ridiculous! Perhaps even to one another, or to themselves. Bringing life into a broken situation - who could fathom that? Who could *want* that? It's not just misguided - it borders on delusional. Believing that they might one day be free? That the cycles of oppression could break? These women were the young girl who hits her soccer ball into the net on her own, imagining one day she'll be on the world cup stage; they're the child who so earnestly practices his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in front of the mirror. Naive. Foolish. Preparing for a future that - odds are - will never come.

Or were they? Maybe, actually, they were the Afghan girl who is going to secret school - under threat of death - to finish her education, training not for the reality that is but for the society that could be. Maybe, instead, they were my grandfather and his brother, having an illicit Pesach seder while in hiding from the Germans and Russians, whispering to one another “next year in Jerusalem,” and believing it. Maybe they were the parents who nurtured life amidst a pandemic, the people who are giving birth and raising children now, bringing loved ones into a world that, a mere decades from now, might not even exist in a safe or life sustaining way.

The bravery, here, isn’t just the action. It’s the hope. The acting as though there could just be a different tomorrow. And - it’s the insistence, in the meantime, here now today, on *life*.

There’s a book that came out last year called “Bigger Than Bravery: Black Resilience and Reclamation in a Time of Pandemic.” It’s an anthology of essays and poems that describes vividly, painfully, the intersections of the collective pandemics on the black community over these last several years.

We might think - we could reasonably expect - that the tales of bravery in this book would chronicle protests and sit-ins, action and activism. And some do, a little. But most talk about grilling on a deck. Taking kids on an adventure. Singing.

Karen Good Marable contributes an amazing essay called Joyride. She describes a pandemic practice of theirs in which she took her daughter on a series of car trips around their city - windows down, wind ripping, music blasting. Rides of joy. Joy rides. She writes - "It's an American shame that racism doesn't rest, even in a damn pandemic...today, however, there's nothing left to do but put a steak on the grill, make a salad and have dinner on the porch, amen. As we turn [onto our street], I decide there's time for one more jam. I pick up my phone, push the side button, and say 'siri, play 'whip my hair [back and forth],' by willow." (You know the one: "*I whip my hair back and forth, I whip my hair back and forth.*")

Sometimes bravery looks like screaming that your life matters to anyone who will listen (and godwilling also those who won't). And sometimes it looks like putting on Willow Smith, in the car, with your girl, and dancing.

We often think that bravery means fighting back - somehow cheating death, changing circumstances, imposing will. But most of the time, bravery isn't about conquering - neither an enemy nation, nor an errant fear, neither a tragic situation, nor a cosmic challenge. It's about being in your present - fully in it - and finding a way to live.

Sarah Wildman is a New York Times editor and writer. She is also a member of this congregation. She is also a mom, and a teacher, and a friend. Over the last several years, she has been chronicling her family's life - and her daughter Orli's journey with cancer - in a series of heartwrenching, and beautiful, and raw, and - yes - brave pieces in the Times.

This past February - around a month before Orli would die - Sarah published an essay called "My Child Is in an Impossible Place, and I Am There With Her." In it, she wrote - "In these years as cancer caregivers, we have often been told how brave we all are. I always find the sentiment lovely but misplaced. Bravery implies some agency in the matter. And what choice do we have? We have spent the last 38 months putting one foot in front of the other."

Orli shared this feeling with me a lot too. Here's what I said to her. Here's what I say to Sarah. Here's what I say to us.

Having cancer does not in and of itself make someone brave. Neither does chemo, neither does surgery, neither does remission nor recurrence.

Tragedy and bravery are often found together, but they are not mutually dependent. You are not brave just because you survive, because that would imply that you are *not* brave if you die, and nothing could be farther from that truth.

But Orli was brave. She was brave when she recorded Tik Tok dances. She was brave when she ordered new decorations for her bedroom. She was brave when she added ideas for books and essays she would one day write to the notes app in her phone. And her family - her parents who nurtured this hope, who manifested these reprieves, who let in room for some light and some life; her sister Hana who posed for Instagram reels and performed synchronized swims and adopted and loved a new family dog - their bravery puts the Maccabees to shame.

Surviving does not in and of itself make someone brave, and there is no lack of courage in dying. But even when circumstances should have prohibited it, even when a body is trying to limit it - still finding ways to *live*? To imagine a future? To find slivers of joy? That is brave beyond measure.

We are in a world that is scary. It's unknown and precarious and somehow simultaneously flooding and on fire, literally and metaphorically. And I have to tell you that if bravery means, as the book of Joshua says, "do not fear," then I guess my paper plate award really was dead wrong. Because I am scared. And I do feel despair. I am overwhelmed and paralyzed and hopeless and angry all at the same time. So "be strong and resolute?" Neither helpful, nor possible. No thank you. Not for me.

But if being brave means believing - even if just a kernel, even really deep down, even, I guess, not believing, but still being able to act *as though* - it might not always be this way? If being brave means carving out space for joy right here, right now? Means singing and dancing, riding and belting no matter the circumstance, prognosis be damned? Means showing and sharing love? If being brave is all of *that*? Then, maybe, it just might be possible.

This isn't letting us off the hook from tackling the systemic ills. And it is worth noting that bravery looks different - makes different demands - depending on where you sit. The more comfort and privilege you have in a given circumstance, the more action and the more risk bravery takes. Said otherwise, for me to record a tik tok dance or sing Willow Smith as my friends and neighbors are dying is not especially brave.

But what I *am* saying is that - especially for those at the epicenter, in the bullseye of challenge or tragedy, but really for all of us at our own moments and in our own ways - bravery does not always have to be quite so big. Or so bullish. Quite so sweeping, so all-powerful, so all-consuming.

Sometimes bravery is as big and as small as decorating your room when you don't know how long you'll be around to see it but damned if you won't make life what you want of it while you can. Our Matriarchs in Egypt remind us that we must believe tomorrow will come, but also that today is worth finding pleasure and purpose and meaning in as well. This moment, in all that it is, is worth it. Is worth living to its fullest. Even if it's all that there is. And recognizing *that* can be really freaking brave.

The Talmud tells a story about a group of Romans on the brink of slaughtering a mother and her seven children. As her youngest son was being brought forward, the mother cried out -

יְהִיבוֹה נִיְהִלִּי וְאֵינִשְׁקִיָּה פוֹרְתָא.

Bring him to me so that I may give him a little kiss.

The tragedy had already struck. The outcome was baked in. This mom couldn't fix the injustice. It's as shattering a feeling as one could imagine. Utterly helpless. Utterly tragic. But - and - still, amidst that - a show of love. "Bring him to me so that I may give him a little kiss." It didn't change the circumstance. It didn't save his life. But it expressed all that was precious *in* life. It was a moment of insistence that when it might feel like nothing matters, this still does. The new life. Flirting with a fish. The belted out song. The tik tok dance. The kiss that was small, the bravery that was enormous.

This is what I wish for us in this coming year. Not a year of no tragedy. Not a year of nothing wrong. I mean sure, yes, those things.

But when that doesn't happen - when the experience of being alive and human does what it is bound to do, throwing us for loops, twisting and turning, defying expectations, escaping control - when we confront all that this messy life has to offer - I wish for us to have glimmers of hope. I wish for us to find joy. To sing. I wish for us to believe in the future and the now. I wish for us to be embraced by those we love. In other words - I wish, for us, to be brave.