

"THE PROMISES WE KEEP"

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Congregation B'nai Jehudah – Overland Park, Kansas

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Five years ago, I made a promise to myself.

That's not so unusual. We make promises all the time. I promise to call my mother more. I promise to listen better. I promise to be on time.

However, some promises are – well – they just stick with us. They gnaw at something inside and – like chronic indigestion – it continues to remind us that something is not quite right.

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Five years ago, some of you may recall that Andrew Kaplan, then our just-elected president, and I hiked the Appalachian Trail. The idea was Andrew's.

He was a seasoned hiker and camper. I was a complete novice. We flew down to Georgia, and early the next morning, we started at the southern beginning of the Appalachian Trail...Springer Mountain. For three days, we hiked north. We camped and cooked and walked and talked.

But it wasn't easy for me. The pack I was carrying was borrowed, did not sit comfortably on my hips, and was far heavier than I had ever imagined. Yes, I had "trained" for the trail by taking 5 and 10 mile walks here in Johnson County, sometimes carrying 20 or 25 pounds worth of stuff in a backpack. But I was not truly prepared for the actual experience. While Andrew had imagined we might do

10-15 miles a day, our true hiking distance was only about 22 miles over the entire trip due to my struggles. Andrew had planned for us to end our journey at a waypoint along the trail, called Neel Gap, which is just north of the tallest mountain in Georgia along the Appalachian Trail...Blood Mountain.

Blood Mountain. Some say it got the name from a terrible battle between the Cherokee and Creek Indians. According to Cherokee legend, it was the home of the Nunnehi, the "People Who Live Anywhere," a race of Immortal Spirit People.

For me, Blood Mountain was – to mix metaphors – my Waterloo. I couldn't do it. I knew it. I had to quit. And I had to admit it to myself and to Andrew. And so, we ended our trip at Woody's Gap, just south of Blood Mountain.

That's when I made my promise.

I was going to climb Blood Mountain. I didn't know when. I didn't know how. I didn't know with whom. But I promised myself that I would do it.

Failure taught me an important lesson. If we are prepared...if we are committed...if we are capable, then we can succeed. Those are the ingredients to success. And I didn't possess any of them. So, Blood Mountain was both my object lesson and my future goal.

I spent the next four years contemplating my failure. How to prepare? How to commit? How to become capable? On September 24, 2015 – the day after Yom Kippur – I began to prepare. I changed my diet. I began a regimen of exercise, of cycling, running, and walking. I lost 20% of my total body weight. And this summer, my family joined me in a one day hike along the Appalachian Trail. We began at Woody's Gap, ascended to the peak of Blood Mountain, headed north and ended at Neel Gap...a 14-mile hike that was – for me – a life journey of five years. I kept a promise that I made.

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The promises we keep.

As with all of you, my life path is carpeted with discarded, disillusioned, and disingenuous promises. As someone once said, "Promises are like babies. Easy to make but hard to deliver."

Rabbi Mark Greenspan once wrote: "There is a practice among [traditional] Jews of saying *b'lee neder*, "without a promise," any time they make a statement of intent, no matter how trivial. They'll say, "I'll meet you for lunch tomorrow, *b'lee neder*." Or, "I'll call you next week, *b'lee neder*." It's not that we don't believe in keeping our promises...it's just that we can't always do so...because of a lack of resolve, human weakness, or...conditions beyond our control."¹

Taken to this extreme, we avoid the pitfalls, the guilt, the repercussions of not fulfilling promises – either to ourselves or others – simply by never making them in the first place. It may seem an attractive option at first blush. However, "promises...define us: our ability to live up to the words we

speak is a statement of our character and integrity."² While the author, Jonathan Swift once said, "Promises and piecrusts are made to be broken," my colleague Rabbi Greenspan suggested something different: "a world in which we cannot count on the words of the people around us is a world without trust. And a world without trust simply can't exist."³

While promises to others are important – for they imply trust and integrity – promises to ourselves are essential. How can we continue along life's path if we cannot trust our own selves? If we do not feel that weight of responsibility to fulfill our own self-imposed commitments?

What, then, are the promises that we keep? They are the most powerful, transformative, and clearest expressions of our deepest natures. Why? Because they reflect not our sense of others, but our sense of self. The promises we make are an echo of that which each of us is given – that which our tradition calls "*neshama*," that we awkwardly translate as "soul." There is that spirit of the Nunnehi from Blood Mountain, of immortality, that emerges from our *neshamot*, from our souls. Permit me to share three brief stories of promises made and kept...and their potential to transform.

Our first story goes back in history exactly 147 years ago Rosh Hashanah. For it was on October 2, 1869 that Mahatma Gandhi, was born. He was raised a Hindu and believed deeply in the core value of non-violence to animals or to humans. Thus, he was both a vegetarian and a pacifist. Whether overtly or somewhere in the recesses of his "*neshama*," his soul, he promised that he would do no harm. Here is one example of how he fulfilled his promise. In January 1897, Gandhi landed in Durban, South Africa. A

mob of white settlers attacked him and he barely escaped with his life. He, however, refused to press charges against any member of the mob, stating it was one of his principles not to seek redress for a personal wrong.⁴

While Gandhi's "promise" was not a specific articulation that he uttered and then implemented, it was the true north star of his life. He was prepared for the life he would live. He was committed. And fortunately for the Indian people, he was more than capable. Gandhi promised himself to walk on this earth in a certain manner. And he did.

Our second story is less famous, but no less extraordinary. Unlike Gandhi, Martha Michel only changed herself. But it is a promise worth recalling.

Martha and Lester were happily married. One of their hobbies was hiking. Martha was a willing partner, but Lester was the avid fan. He had climbed all 54 of Colorado's "fourteeners" – mountains higher than 14,000 feet. Martha joined for 32 of the peaks. Then, Lester began forgetting things. Small things. Big things. They went to the doctor. And Lester was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. He went to live in a memory-care facility.

Each and every day, Martha would come and visit with Lester. At first, they would walk together around the lake, right next to the facility. It was a way for the couple to continue to enjoy the outdoors.

Eventually, it became too difficult for him to navigate the path. The last time Lester spoke to her was by the lake. "He was pretty far along with the Alzheimer's," [Martha] said. "We had been married 56 years." After that moment at the lake, each day she

would visit with Lester. And then walk around the lake alone.

After Lester died, Martha kept walking around that lake. She walked 15 laps around that lake – day in, day out. Every day, she would walk. Rain. Snow. 100° heat. It didn't matter. She kept meticulous records of her walks. For 12 years, she could be seen on her own personal journey. When her story came out, she had walked 10,000 miles, the equivalent of walking across the United States almost four times.⁵

Why did Martha make this promise to herself, to keep walking? Perhaps it was a way of remembrance...perhaps a way to heal what had been broken...perhaps a way to fight against that which had been taken away from her husband. Whatever it was, Martha's promise was powerful. She was prepared. She was surely committed. And even in her late 80's, she was capable.

Two powerful promises. Most of us aren't that focused or – perhaps – that fortunate to carry with us a singular promise that we keep. Rather, it's the smaller promises that are easily within our grasp.

Which brings us to a third story. A woman blogger wrote a post reflecting on her marriage vows. She had – like many Jewish couples do with their ketubot – framed the vows and hung them in their bedroom. She wondered how connected she was to those promises she saw every day.

She wrote:

"I have never made **myself** such [weighty] promises...I suspect that I should...Maybe it's time for me to create some vows for my relationship with myself. It definitely would do me

no harm and perhaps a very great deal of good.”

She ends her blog post with a challenging question to her readers: “I’d love to know what you would vow to ensure a harmonious, supportive and loving relationship with the person who will have your back every minute of your life, you.”⁶

And I guess that’s the point. The most important relationship we have is our relationship with our own selves – our neshamot. What do we promise to our selves? And how do we – and others we touch – change and grow when we keep those promises? The three ingredients – being prepared, being committed, being capable – are all qualities we can acquire. The “ikar,” the essence, is recognizing that we are tapping into our most precious connection...to our selves, our neshamot. That will permit us to succeed.

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On the way back to the car after climbing Blood Mountain, I asked myself

what I had accomplished? My feet ached. My back was sore. I had spent a silly amount of money flying our children and us to Georgia for a one-day hike. What was it all about? I realized that this wasn’t about Andrew, it wasn’t about the Appalachian Trail, it wasn’t even about Blood Mountain. It had been about me. It was that object lesson of failure and resolve. I also understood that I had used that promise to myself these intervening years as a way to better myself in some small way as a human being – both physically and emotionally. And that is what the promises to ourselves achieve. They help us grow into the best we can be.

May this day – may this year – be one not of excusing ourselves for broken promises. But for celebrating those promises we make to ourselves, for ourselves...and keep. It won’t be easy. But it can be done. As Robert Frost once wrote: “The woods are lovely, dark and deep. But I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep.” And miles to go before I sleep.

¹ “We Are the Promises We Make,” Sermon, Rabbi Mark Greenspan; www.oceansidejc.org/rebmark/SERMON/sermon_5769/Vaera69A.pdf

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

⁴ “Gandhi before India,” Vintage Books. April 4, 2015. pp. 24–25

⁵ www.slipperyrockgazette.net/file/archive/1209/articles/14_1.html

⁶ www.bumblingthroughlife.com/2016/07/15/the-promises-we-keep/