

So a couple of weeks ago I arrived at an Executive Committee meeting and Barry Brian says to me as I come in: We were just talking about what kind of Top Ten list you would do for your sermon this year. Well, I was definitely gratified that there was interest and speculation in what I would be talking about. But I also had the nagging question: should I mix it up a little this year? Do something different and unexpected? Mess with their minds? Instead of a Top Ten list of things I learned about doing *teshuvah* to move us into the New Year, should I do something that defies all their expectations? And then I thought: nahh.

So this year it's my pleasure to present – Barry, are you ready? – the top ten things I learned about making *teshuvah* from taking my children to Dutch Wonderland. Now I should preface this by saying: it doesn't *have* to be Dutch Wonderland. It could really be any family-oriented amusement park. But in our case it's Dutch Wonderland because we really like Dutch Wonderland, and the kids really like Dutch Wonderland, and we go to Dutch Wonderland every summer – as I imagine many of you did with your children and possibly even with your parents. But having a good day at Dutch Wonderland can take some work – there are so many things to do and everyone's excited by something different. So making sure that everyone has a good experience is a bit of a balancing act. You've got to know your kids – and yourself – and take everyone's needs into account, perhaps in different proportions. Which is why I found myself reflecting, as the Kingdom Coaster turned me upside down for what felt like the fortieth time, that there were some really good learning opportunities right here.

So without any further ado...

The Number 10 lesson I learned about making *teshuvah* from taking my children to Dutch Wonderland: Take time to explore the landscape. Before we went, Aimée and I got online to look at the map and the attractions – there were lots of different rides, and some of them were OK for some of the kids but not others, and then there were different shows and events the kids might like that took place at specific times. There are distinct areas of the park and some rides are pretty far away from others. It's good to know where the bathrooms are. So a successful day takes some planning and knowing what's where. Same with any difficult conversation you need to have with someone you love – whether a parent, a spouse, a sibling, a child, or a dear friend. To get a relationship back on course, you need to know the landscape that you're exploring. The paths have lots of twists and turns and, if you're not careful, you'll find yourself going 'round in circles: "Is that the same ice cream stand that we've passed ten times already?" A productive conversation – with someone else or with yourself – involves taking the time to plan out the things you'd like to say.

Now, there may be some philosophical disagreements about this – some people might argue that the best way to approach an amusement park is to dive right in and start going on rides. And there's definitely something to be said for that: certainly kids won't like feeling like they're being overly directed. So you need to be flexible if something pops up in your path that just *needs* to be explored before moving on. If a conversation takes an unexpected detour, sometimes it's best to go with it. But overall you're better off if you have a sense of the whole picture.

Number 9: Make sure that each child's needs are being met. Tzvi loves being spun around really fast. Last year Yael didn't but this year she does. Adir thinks he does but then sometimes in the middle of a ride finds out he really doesn't. There are some attractions all the kids like and there are some times you need to split up. Or say: we'll do this thing that *he* likes better and next we'll do *this* thing that *you* like better. A day at Dutch Wonderland won't work unless everyone's needs are being taken into account and you try to strike some kind of a balance. The same, of course, is true of any relationship: when we only pay attention to our needs – or, for that matter – only pay attention to *another* person's needs, something will increasingly go out of whack. Relationships are balancing acts, there's give and take, gratification deferred and gratification achieved. The best way to work this out is

to be open and honest about it: to state what your needs are, to ask the other person if his or her needs are being met. Sometimes there isn't one magical solution that takes care of everyone all at once, but if you're thoughtful and pay attention you can usually take care of everyone.

Number 8: Don't get impatient on line. As anyone who goes to amusement parks knows, the wait can get pretty long sometimes. It can be rough when you're excited to get on one ride or another and you can see other people getting on up ahead but you're just inching along. Sometimes the frustration can even get to the point that it takes away from your enjoyment of the ride. The key is to be patient: anything worth doing takes time, which is why it's usually the better rides that have the long lines. The key is to give it the time it needs because the payoff at the end makes it worthwhile, whether it's the double water flume or a rare chance to openly and honestly express your feelings to someone with whom a relationship has been strained or broken.

Number 7: While you're at the park, don't forget to take advantage of hot dogs, chicken nuggets, and knishes at Central Pennsylvania's only Kosher concession stand. The kids'll thank you for it.

Number 6: Know when's the right time to go. A lot depends on weather – it's too hot you'll have meltdowns but if it's too cool you can't have fun at the water park section. If the kids went to bed too late the night before they'll crash at some point during the day so ideally you go when they're better rested because it's a better experience for everyone. And the same is most definitely true for any difficult and open conversation you need to have: not all times are equally opportune. Don't ambush someone when they just got home. Don't call someone when it's late at night and you're both exhausted. If you have work to do on exploring your own issues, don't do it as an afterthought. Pick a time, put some thought into it. And then go.

Number 5: Of course even with planning you can't control the way things work out. Maybe the only day that's good to go turns out to be hotter than you expected. Or there was a lot of traffic on the way there so everyone's out of sorts when you arrive. When this happens, take time to adjust and catch your breath. Pace yourself. Know when it's time to take a break, sit down, and get some ice cream. Or switch gears and go to Duke's Lagoon to cool off. The point is, if the conditions are too challenging, forging relentlessly ahead without some time to reassess is a recipe for disaster. In working out a difficult issue with a loved one or with yourself, be generous and build in time for self-care. Remember: it's a marathon, not a sprint.

Number 4: Sometimes it's best to start with the small rides and work your way up to the bigger ones. Sure, as soon as you rush in everyone wants to run straight to the roller coaster, and there's nothing wrong with that. If you're a pro you might be able to go directly to the Double Loop. But sometimes it's better to work your way up – to start with some of the small stuff to help you get your bearings before tackling the really big, scary stuff. After all, the big coaster – it's always there. And so are the big issues in a relationship – believe me, they're not going anywhere on their own. But if you start with something smaller you can have an experience of successfully navigating something together, learn what your capabilities and limitations are, build trust. And *then* you're ready to tackle the Double Loop.

Number 3: It's gonna cost you. At Dutch Wonderland, like many amusement parks, you pay a flat price for admission and then you can go on unlimited rides. Funny thing is, almost immediately the kids start asking about all the other attractions in the park that *aren't* covered by the admission fee: ice cream, carnival games, face painting. And suddenly you realize that your flat admission fee isn't so flat

anymore. You can rail against it, or you can insist that the kids only do activities that are already covered. Or you can recognize that this is part of the process and it's OK. Relationships, after all, are never paid in full up front. Sure, you make a heavy emotional investment when you enter into a relationship – whether with a partner, a child, or a community – but it's not a one-time payment that gets you off the hook for additional demands. Saying, "I do" doesn't mean you get to say "I don't" to paying attention to someone's ongoing emotional needs. So bring a wallet – 'cause no matter what it's gonna cost you.

Number 2: There are lots of ways to get through Dutch Wonderland, and no one of them is the "right" way. You can start at the front and work your way toward the back. Or vice-versa. You can hit the big-ticket items first or put them off until later when the crowds may have thinned. You can start with the Duke's Lagoon water park or you can double back and hit it later. Depending which route you take, you'll have a different experience. More interestingly, you can move through the park by foot seeing each ride and attraction as you come across it. Or you could catch the Choo Choo Train near the entrance which takes you around the park so you can survey what's available before going anywhere. Or you can take the Sky Ride, which lifts you way up above the park in a cable car as it carries you through the air from one side to the other, getting a wide view, which changes your entire perspective. The point is there are lots of ways of getting from point A to point B and you might choose different ones at different points to suit your needs.

When sorting out issues in a relationship there are also lots of paths to take. Sometimes you want to dive right in with the nitty-gritty. Sometimes you want to pull back for a broad view. Sometimes, you realize that you've sailed off on the monorail while the other person is still getting their bearings at the front entrance. So be thoughtful about how you go, and particularly about how the ways in which you travel affect your perceptions of where you are – everyone has a better journey this way.

But the Number 1 lesson I learned about making *teshuvah* from taking my family to Dutch Wonderland was probably the most important for me of all. Now what you need to know is that I really don't like roller coasters. I've never understood the appeal of being turned upside down and spun round, which makes me both dizzy and nauseous. I don't know why you'd voluntarily do something that makes it feel like the ground is falling out from under you, you've left your stomach behind twenty feet up, and you're *going. to. die.* I know there are people who like this sensation. I don't understand them, but Tzvi is one of them. And Tzvi was too short to go on the big coaster – unless I went with him.

And so I did.

Not because I like roller coasters, but because I love Tzvi.

Sometimes the people we love need us to go to some pretty scary places with them, and we do – not because we want to but because they want us to, because it's important to them, which means it's *important to us*. Because sometimes relationships require overcoming our fear and resistance, making sacrifices for the sake of the other person and the relationship itself.

And so you sit down and brace yourself for some unpleasant sensations, a tough discussion where you stay open and vulnerable: a scary ride. And when you're done, you find that you've come out unscathed, maybe even enjoyed yourself a little.

Now I realize that the way I've described the process of planning and preparation, of taking needs into account, of overcoming fear – all this may sound intimidating. Like it's enough to keep someone from wanting to try to have these tough, meaningful conversations – let alone set foot in an amusement park ever again. But what I need to convey is that the payoff is tremendous. We love going to Dutch Wonderland – not because it's effortless but because the effort is so worthwhile as measured in smiles and laughs and memories.

Doing teshuvah isn't easy. Making an honest account of your shortcomings and owning up to ways you have hurt others is not for the faint of heart and requires a stronger stomach than riding the Double Loop. But after you've survived all the twists and turns and gut-wrenching drops you come out in a much better place: a place of joy and acceptance, of openness and honesty, a place where we are at peace with ourselves and those we love and where you will want to turn and re-turn year after year after year.