

Margot found Caleb sitting in his car, in the garage at 2:00 a.m. He was staring aimlessly at some unseen enemy far off in the distance. The doors of the car were locked. She quietly asked, "Caleb, can I come in?" He didn't avert his distant stare. Her only answer was the locks on the door popping open. She slipped in the car and softly said, "We're alright. No one is hurt. We can get a new window." -- "But not a new job," he said flatly. "You lost your job?" She tried to say without too much disappointment. He just slowly nodded, his eyes never leaving the unseen enemy in the distance. Not long ago, Caleb had been a hero, the quarterback of the Boll Weevils, his high school team. He was the boy who brought the town its first championship in 17 years. His name was in the paper. His picture was in shop windows. People said, "That boy's going places."

And he did. First, he went to college to study sports medicine, but he wasn't satisfied. He wanted his life to matter -- to make a positive impact on the world. So, he quit college and joined the Marines. Before shipping out, he married Margot, his high school sweetheart.

Not surprisingly, Caleb served with honor. He came home with medals for bravery -- but he also came home with scars. Scars no one else could see. The kind that don't heal when the parade is over and the uniform is hung in the closet. We may

know this story in our own lives -- empty seat at the dinner table -- The veteran who cannot sleep through the night. The silence that speaks louder than any parade.

Despite his discharge, despite his wife whom he loved and now his daughter whom he lived for — his life slowly unraveled. It was as though his mind was losing control of his body. Any sound that hinted of danger -- the drop of a coin – a car alarm -- sent him sprawling on the ground, groping for his gun that was no longer by his side. He had left his family to serve his country, but he never fully returned. His mind was in exile.

We may not know Caleb's exact pain. But we do know what exile feels like. We all know the feelings of failure and disappointment when we slip into valleys of despair. In Judaism we call them "exile moments."

Exile is what happens when life takes you far away from where you thought you were going or where you want to be.

Maybe you felt the pain of exile when a job ended -- when a dream collapsed -- when a relationship shattered --or when you achieved success—but found it wasn't enough.

In those exile moments, even when surrounded by others, the soul whispers: I feel alone. I am lost. The story of our people is how we constantly seek return from exile. In the Torah, we are exiled from the Garden of Eden and always seek return to that closeness with God; we were exiled from the Land of Israel and spent two thousand years planning our return. We are exiled from health, from joy, from safety, from relationships, and we seek desperately to return. Several times during these High Holy Days we will sing our central theme, — הַשִּׁיבֵנוּ יי אֱלֹהֵי וְנָשׁוּבָה — *Return us, God, and we will return.* Perhaps more than any other time in our lives, when we are in exile, we long for return.

Our Torah records the story of our people's exile and return, but in a real sense, each of us is writing our own Torah — our own story of our lives. The central question of our personal Torah story is not, "Have you experienced exile?" Almost everyone has. Our question should be, "Will our personal exiles define our life like Caleb's exile is threatening to?"

We may believe that once the outline of our personal Torah story is written, then the meaning of our lives is cast in stone. If we were healthy, and now, we are ill. Our life is a story of loss. We were in love and now we struggle, our life is a story of heartbreak. We were successful and now we stumble, our life is a story of

failure. But we know that story contained in our sacred scroll, and even our own personal Torah story, is only the beginning. Because every Torah, and every one of our personal Torahs is wrapped in its own story that can change the very meaning of our lives.

Let me show you with the same Torah story with two separate meanings.

When a 13-year-old stands on this bima and they carry a Torah in their arms, they don't just feel its weight; they feel its meaning. Each student carries our Holocaust Torah. Scarred. Patched. Smuggled out of Rakovnik, Czechoslovakia. Its words are the same as every other Torah, but its meaning extends beyond the story contained on its scroll. Our Torah was exiled by the Nazis from its original community and smuggled to freedom and ultimately to our community who cherishes and cares for it. It is a Torah of survival. We could have ended the story of this Torah when it was used as one of the scrolls in the Rakovnik synagogue, and it would have been considered a Torah of Legacy. We could also tell its story and end this Torah hidden away while the city of Rakovnik was emptied of its Jews; now its meaning would be a Torah of despair. But we tell its story today as it sits in our ark and in the hands of our B'nei Mitzvah, and it is a scroll of overcoming. And we added another layer to its meaning when our Cantor and a

group from the congregation returned the Torah, at least temporarily to its home in Rakovnik. When we end the story there, it is a Torah of redemption, and Torah of Return. Depending on when we begin and end its story, it takes on a very different meaning.

We all tell stories about the objects in our lives, the wedding ring left to us by our grandmother, the flag that was draped over our uncle's casket and presented to us by an honor guard. The stories we tell about these objects shape the way we view our world around us. But more important still are the stories we tell about ourselves.

What story are you telling about yourself? Consider Joan's story. She was living a joyous and fulfilling life with her husband, Gary. They would travel the world, discovering wisdom and beauty along the way, until a strange sensation crept over her, and she lost the ability to use her legs and more. From a life transversing the world, she was now confined to a wheelchair. That is her story, and if we end it there, it is a story of exile with no redemption. Where we begin and end our story can change the way we experience our lives. Joan doesn't end her story there. She was determined that she would walk again. And she stretched and pushed and strengthened and fought, and she walked into this sanctuary tonight, not as

she did before the disease that attacked her, but nonetheless, walk she did. Is her story one of exile or redemption? I will tell you that for Joan it is absolutely a story of redemption, and for her it is not over.

If Caleb's self-story ended in the garage, it would be a tragedy. A broken hero in permanent exile. But his self-story didn't end there. With Margot by his side, with help, with time, he began to find his way back. His scars remain, but so does his strength. His story is no longer only one of exile — it is also a story of return.

Psychologists tell us that often the difference between an exile story and a redemption story is often where we choose to begin the story and where we end it. What about your story of your exile moments and what do they mean about your life? If you were to write your Book of Life right now, where would your story begin and end?

Would you start with promise and heroism as did Caleb's story? Would your story conclude in bitterness? Or in gratitude like Joan's?

This is the question that we are asked to consider on Rosh Hashanah. Today is Yom HaDin, the Day of Judgment. We imagine God weighing our lives, deciding our fate like a shepherd who judges the fate of his sheep.

I'll be honest: I do not see God as a judge with scales. The truth of Rosh Hashanah is deeper: God does not judge alone. God invites us to look in the mirror, and to judge ourselves. What is the story of my life? Is it only loss?

Is it only exile? Or—can I see the valleys I have crossed, and the heights I have climbed? Will I speak only of my wounds? Or will I also tell the story of my healing?

On this night of remembrance, God hands us the pen and says: Write carefully. Write bravely. Write with compassion.

The facts of our lives may not change. But the story we tell about them can change everything.

So may this year be a year of redemption. For you. For your family. For our community. May we carry forward the blessings of our past, even through struggle. And may the shofar's cry this year be not only a sound of alarm, but a sound of return, a sound of redemption, a sound that calls us all home.