

## RH 1 Rabbi Amy Joy Small

### On Being Caught in the Thicket: What is Your Purpose?

“Every once in a while, I meet a person who radiates joy,”<sup>1</sup> writer David Brooks opens his newest book with this enticing idea: Wouldn’t we all want to be near to that person? If only we could **be** that person! It is this yearning, this striving, that brings us here this day.

In this book, *The Second Mountain*, Brooks is climbing toward a new beginning, admittedly after a devastating divorce that awakened him to where he was stuck, and -- where many of us may also be stuck. His prior book, *The Road to Character* was, he came to realize, a pathway up the first mountain of life. It tracked the “normal goals that our culture endorses”: success. But at a certain point that isn’t enough. We need more than character. We need *purpose*.

While I found his chapters on his meandering, expansive and boundaryless personal faith journey as interesting as they were confusing and troubling, I appreciate Brooks’ thoughtful take on this question of purpose.

Our journey is rooted in the soul’s question: “Is this all there is?” This is a question of midlife, when bewilderment or suffering shift our perspective. It is when we find ourselves *not* on the mountain, but in a deep *valley*, looking up toward another, different mountain. This, the *Second Mountain*, can be, and *should* be, “the making of us.” It is the moment when we rebel

<sup>1</sup> *The Second Mountain*, by David Brooks (New York: Random House, 2019), xiii

against our ego ideal and go deeper, beyond selfish desires to discover what is truly worth finding. This is a rebellion against “mainstream culture,” a striving for purpose, a reaching beyond ourselves toward our *moral cause*.

The first mountain is about *acquisition*; the second mountain is about *contribution*. This is where we shift to a perspective that is *relational*, where our concern for others drives our choices. This is where life is fully lived, and while it may be exhausting, it is deeply satisfying and fulfilling.

Can't we all remember the tumultuous time in our lives when we strove to individuate, to become independent, to set our lives on a course?

How many of you would say you were a rebellious teen or young adult?

Some of us struggled more than others. My rebellion was, oddly enough, fully expressed in my becoming a rabbi, striving against forces pushing me in a different direction. *What was yours?*

One way or another, all of us must transition from dependence to independence. But on life's journey independence and achievement can become lonely or confusing.

The next rebellion is ultimately when we ask ourselves the question: *What's my purpose?*

This question can be unsettling, especially if brought on by losses and failures. After emotionally plummeted into the valley below, we want to climb back up, reaching towards our most fulfilling selves. We are seeking

something much more satisfying than independence and achievement: interdependence and contribution.

We are living in a time of uncertainty and distress. We need each other and we need inspiration. Among the thoughtful books stacked around me, are the writings of David Brooks. Having met Brooks in 2015 when he published his last book *The Road to Character*, I was intrigued enough to attend his book launch for *The Second Mountain* last spring. What touched me most was the author's sharing of his personal struggles, and the way his personal suffering and renewal connected to the crises facing our society right now. In our hyper-polarized world, how can we reconnect? Who are the exemplars of renewal? What can we learn from individuals who have found deep meaning through a sense of purpose devoted to the good of the world?

Brooks captured what has been on my mind, troubling me this year, an analysis of why so many of us are struggling, feeling confused, frightened or alienated. "Our society suffers from a crisis of connection, a crisis of solidarity. We live in a culture of hyper-individualism. There is always a tension between self and society, between the individual and the group, but over the past sixty" or so years, in the massive cultural shifts since WWII, "we have swung too far toward the self. We are stuck" and we are struggling. "The only way out is to rebalance, to build a culture that steers people toward relation, community and commitment -- the things we most deeply yearn for, yet undermine with our hyper-individualistic way of life."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *The Second Mountain*, by David Brooks (New York: Random House, 2019), xvii

A poem by Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld captures the struggle of this time. It is a midrash on the Akedah, a Torah reading for Rosh Hashanah that never fails to tug at our hearts:

**The Ram's Horn: On Being Caught in the Thicket**

*Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld<sup>3</sup>*

The ram's horn is silent at first  
As is the ram.  
Caught in the thicket,  
Waiting for Abraham to lift his head and see,

It appears at the last minute,

Out of nowhere,  
When it's almost too late.

Of course, it was there all along.  
Since twilight  
On the eve of the first Shabbat, we are told.

It was there before darkness fell.  
(We barely knew what darkness was then.)

It was there all along.  
Waiting for us to open our eyes.  
Waiting for us to see another way.  
It's not just our stubbornness that blinds us.

Sometimes it's the commanding voice of faith.

Sometimes it's the commanding voice of despair.

And sometimes it's the thicket itself.  
The thorny, tangled overgrowth of our lives.

It's not that we're blind,  
We're just busy.  
Schlepping the wood,

<sup>3</sup> "The Ram's Horn..." Sharon Cohen Anisfeld. Boston Hebrew College Elul Booklet. 2018

Tending the fire,  
Building the altar,  
Trying to quiet the children— Trying to answer their questions— Even  
though God knows

We can't answer our own.

Up until the angel calls out, and Abraham lifts his eyes, up until the  
ram suddenly appears, caught in the thicket, the trajectory of the  
story—the tragic momentum of the story—seems irresistible,  
irreversible, inevitable. The sacrifice has to be offered. The child will  
have to die.

This is the power of the ram's horn. It beckons us back to this  
moment in the story. No longer silent, it calls us back to the ram from  
which it came and asks us:

Think about the thicket of your own life. What possibilities have you  
not seen? Think about a story you are telling yourself—whose  
outcome you think you already know. What alternatives have you not  
noticed? And think about the path we are all on together. The altars at  
the end of the road. The children we love but seem prepared to  
sacrifice.

Look up. Listen.

Incline your heart, your ear

To the hollow, bent ram's horn

Through which human breath becomes a summons and a blast. What  
might we hear? How might we respond?

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Sometimes all we need do is shift our perspective, to see the world from a  
new vantage point. Our forefather Abraham learned this lesson. In the  
opening chapters of Abraham and Sarah's story, we learn of Abraham's  
ascent toward "making it." *"Now Abram was very rich in cattle, silver, and  
gold."* Genesis 13:2 *"And you shall no longer be called Abram, but your name  
shall be Abraham, for I make you the father of a multitude of nations."*

Genesis 17:5.

But once he has achieved what he and Sarah yearned for, with the birth of Isaac, his world came crashing down. Sarah could not endure her jealousy of Hagar and was threatened by Ishmael's place in the family, and so she demanded that they be banished.

In today's Torah reading, Abraham forces his son Ishmael and Hagar to leave. We learn of the anguish that Hagar and Ishmael experienced after their banishment. But we hear very little about Abraham's grief. The Torah tells us, "*The matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his.*" Genesis 21:11.

Abraham's painful story of emerging out of the deep darkness of loss and failure is followed by his climb up his *second mountain, Mount Moriah*. Was it *despair* that drove him up the mountain with Isaac, believing he was called to offer his son as a sacrifice? Sarah is absent from this story, but we learn soon after that she died. We can only imagine how she may have been crushed by watching them secretively leaving without an animal for sacrifice. She *knew* -- and it killed her. Sarah and Abraham were each on individual paths; Abraham proceeded that morning without sharing his anguish with Sarah, and aloof from his long awaited and beloved son, Isaac. The mountain called to him, drew him up to find his *purpose*. How tragic that Sarah did not survive to know the relief that Abraham and Isaac experienced on the mountain.

Any of us could be Abraham. Any of us could be Sarah. We learn from them that while "there is a lot to be learned on the road to character," and while

success is good, “there’s a better thing to have -- *moral joy*.”<sup>4</sup> Moral joy comes from finding our purpose, far beyond ourselves; its foundation is interconnectedness.

Brooks comments, “the rampant individualism in our current culture is a catastrophe. The emphasis on self -- individual success, self-fulfillment, individual freedom, self-actualization -- is a catastrophe.” Brooks gives voice to my thoughts and to the spiritual message of this day, “living a good life requires a much vaster transformation. It’s not enough to work on your own weaknesses. The whole cultural paradigm has to shift from the mindset of hyper-individualism to the relational mindset of the second mountain.”<sup>5</sup>

A colleague reflected, “It turns out that we can travel to the moon and cure polio and send messages to the outer reaches of the universe over the internet, but we don’t know everything. We aren’t all powerful. So many questions. Theologians may ask why? Scientists may ask how? Newscasters may ask what? Family may ask where? In the face of all that we do not know, here is what we do know. We find God in one another’s faces.”<sup>6</sup>

In their book *Practical Wisdom*,<sup>7</sup> Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe tell a moving story about a hospital janitor named Luke. There was once a patient in the hospital, an injured young man in a coma from which he would not awaken. His father sat by his side daily for months. Once, Luke

<sup>4</sup> *The Second Mountain*, David Brooks (New York: Random House, 2019), xx

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>6</sup> *Rabbi Joy Levitt, Carol Rivel, and Debbie Friedman, z"l, Healing Service*

<sup>7</sup> *Practical Wisdom*, Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe (New York: Riverhead, 2010/2011), 10.

cleaned the room while the father was out. Later, the father snapped at Luke for not cleaning his son's room. Luke understood and accepted that the father needed comfort, and so he cleaned the room again. He later explained, "I cleaned it so that he could see me cleaning it...I can understand how he could be...But I wasn't angry with him. I guess I could understand."<sup>8</sup>

This cultural paradigm that we seek to shift is not only a matter of personal spiritual development. But it turns out that when a society shifts the scale toward individuality and self-preoccupation, its tilt is toward division and alienation. This is a serious problem -- and it is where we are now. Brooks writes, "our society has become a conspiracy against joy."<sup>9</sup> We are divided along rigid lines of identity politics regarding religion, race, gender and political attachments. At the same time, mental illness, depression and suicide rates are sharply up. While there are multiple reasons for this, there is no doubt that our hearts and souls are undernourished and hurting. It should be a wake-up call, a shofar blast to find our way back to each other, to interconnected purpose.

We see this division in the story of Abraham and Sarah, and heartbreak that scarred all of the characters -- Hagar, Ishmael, Isaac, Sarah and Abraham himself. Can we learn from their pain how to climb the mountain toward being relational, with commitment?

<sup>8</sup> *The Second Mountain*, by David Brooks (New York: Random House, 2019), xv

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* xvii



We can yank ourselves out of the thicket, and find the world opening up to *joy*. Joy flows from mutuality and it is different from happiness, which is fleeting. “Joy involves self-forgetting... A narcissist can’t even conceive of joy.” Brooks writes. <sup>10</sup> “Joy is a fuller and richer state beyond happiness.” It is a frame of mind that stays with us as we master the art of living a life of commitment.

Emotional joy is only one stage of joy; another is spiritual joy. This is when we come to sense the mystical force that pulses through all life, to hear the angel of God calling for us.

The great Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel spoke of “wonder,” teaching that religion's urgent role is to step in and say that there is another way of being in the world. Even religion sometimes becomes a commodity to serve “*me*,” robbing us of its power and potential. This makes religion part of the problem, “like stepping into quicksand,” Heschel wrote.

Wonder is a reorienting of who we are; it is our most fundamental spiritual project. From our youngest age, we experience the world as if our ego is the center of our universe, but the only ego in the center of the universe is God. When we look deeply into the eyes of someone who is suffering, we see into the nature of the universe. When we realize that we are not the center of the universe, we become different people. The beginning of *joy* lies in understanding, Heschel taught, that life without *wonder* is not worth living. We experience wonder in the pleasures of nature, surrounded by God’s creation. When one of my beloved dogs stops me to look into my eyes, it is,

<sup>10</sup> *The Second Mountain*, by David Brooks (New York: Random House, 2019), xxiv

literally, awesome. Martin Buber observed, “An animal's eyes have the power to speak a great language.” But wonder is even more powerful when we are with people. Buber taught us to understand the spirituality of relationships. He wrote, “When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity that surges between them.” “All real living is meeting.” Transcendent moments may be brief, but their impact lasts a lifetime. Buber observed, “All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveler is unaware.” Here is found *wonder*, and it is transformative.

Connectedness and the sense of wonder lead to *moral joy*, the highest level of joy. Brooks tells a story from Jonathan Haidt of one woman’s experience from within her group of Salvation Army volunteers. In a snowstorm, one team member offered to give everyone a ride home. On the way, they saw an older woman standing in her doorway with a snow shovel. Suddenly one of the guys asked to be left off -- they all thought his house was on that street. But no, he walked up to the lady, took the shovel and started shoveling her driveway. Witnessing this from the car, one woman said, “I felt like jumping out of the car and hugging this guy. I felt like singing and running, or skipping and laughing...I was joyous, happy, smiling, energized.” Haidt observed that powerful moments of moral elevation “seem to push a mental reset button.”<sup>11</sup>

“People who radiate permanent joy have given themselves over to lives of deep and loving commitment.”<sup>12</sup> Imagine the possibilities if more and more

<sup>11</sup> *The Second Mountain*, by David Brooks (New York: Random House, 2019), xxx

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* xxxi

of us were to make *giving* our way of being in the world. Writer Benjamin Hardy offered, “A life of ease is not the pathway to growth and happiness. On the contrary, a life of ease is how you get stuck and confused in life.” Stuck in the thicket again, as the poet calls,

“Look up. Listen.  
Incline your heart, your ear  
To the hollow, bent ram’s horn  
Through which human breath becomes a summons and a blast.  
What might we hear? How might we respond?”

*Moral joy* emerges when our desire turns outward towards others. I am privileged to observe and learn many stories when you, the members of our community, devote yourselves to kindness and generosity. I’d like to share an example. Though I share this with permission, I’ll keep this person’s name private. Let’s call him Sandy. Sandy came to talk with me about a year and half ago seeking advice. He felt a need to find a serious volunteer job where he could give back. I had a list of synagogue projects and committees at the ready for him. But no, he wanted something different, a commitment to contribute to others while using his time well -- rather than staying home and watching TV. He needed to feel like he was making a difference and his life has purpose. In a turn of events that now seems *bashert*/fated, he ended up in a weekly volunteer position that was not his first or second choice. He had wanted to be a hospital volunteer to sit with cancer patients who don’t have anyone to be with them during treatments. But he couldn’t produce a required vaccination record, so he was declined. After another dead end where he didn’t meet the criterion, it turned out that his third choice beckoned. A homeless shelter in Burlington needed volunteers who could commit to one night a week for 3.5 hours. But first

Sandy hesitated because the homeless shelter is decidedly Evangelical in its mission. He worried, would he be imposing himself, a liberal Jew, in an Evangelical setting? As Jew, would it be ok for him to help promote the proselytizing mission of this very traditional Christian organization? Sandy came to me to process these questions; I gave my hechsher, and he decided to do it. Since then, I have heard some moving stories from Sandy of the people he has met there. Sandy -- and I -- are very glad that he is doing this.

I have been touched by the moral joy Sandy has demonstrated. Recently I admired a t-shirt he was wearing, so he gave it to me. Why did Sandy give me the shirt off his back? It is because Sandy's purpose -- connecting, giving, sharing -- are front and center for him.

Another OZ member who volunteers her time and talent to make beautiful flyers for us, is a passionate climate justice activist. Recently, she told me how worried she is that so many friends and acquaintances talk about feeling totally overwhelmed by the crises facing our world, so they stay home cocooned with Netflix to entertain them. How can we activate people? she worried.

There are so many ways we can find our purpose through small acts of kindness and large acts of commitment that are not only empowering, but our pathway toward *moral joy*.

I am privileged to observe many of your acts of altruism and kindness, or to learn of them from you and from others. But I am sure there are many

more. Rabbi Heschel said, “*When I was young, I used to admire intelligent people; as I grow older, I admire kind people.*” Now is our time to highlight this way of being, to share our stories and to commit to connect with purpose even more. This is how we will continue to elevate *moral joy* from the top of the second mountain.

“There is joy in self-forgetfulness” Helen Keller once observed. Indeed, the pursuit of happiness is good, but it is fleeting and superficial. On this day when the shofar calls us to come out from the thicket, we can surpass happiness to joy. Happiness can fade, but joy does not. “To live with joy is to live with wonder, gratitude and hope.” The love that we share can heal and elevate our troubled world and wounded souls. May it be so.