

## The Isle of Dung

Rosh Hashanah 5775

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Last winter break, Toni, Robert, Daniel and I were privileged to explore the Galapagos Islands. One afternoon, during a hike, our guide exclaimed: “This is a *National Geographic* moment.” She had spotted two albatrosses, engaged in what she called a “love dance.” Albatrosses virtually always mate with the same partner for life, which is rare among animal species. Each pair, though, performs this “love dance,” only once or twice in a lifetime. Our guide, who sees albatrosses up close almost daily, had spotted this spectacle only rarely. The two albatrosses stood, facing one another, clacking their beaks against one another for longer than we were permitted to stay there and watch.

Those albatrosses weren’t the only wonders we saw on the island of Espanola that day. You might have heard of the magnificent blue-footed Boobie, and we did see some at close range that day. Two Nasco Boobies were even more amazing, albeit without blue feet. One permitted us to walk up right next to her, as she lay on her eggs. Another – close enough for me to touch, though of course I didn’t – was tending to a newly hatched fledgling.

Espanola is also home to sea lions and Christmas Iguanas, so called because the males take on bright red and green coloring only at one time of year, which happened to be the late-December season of our trip. Oh, and I almost forgot to mention: Espanola is home to lots and lots of dung: bird poop of every kind, sea lion poop, iguana poop, you name it, that island has it. We only had a half day on Espanola. One could, I suppose, spend those precious hours busy being disgusted by the poop. One could return home, calculating the tons of excrement, instead of the scores of species.

On this Rosh Hashanah, as we examine our lives, we could easily focus on the negative. Admittedly, our High Holy Day liturgy calls upon us to do just that. We are to examine our sins, preparing to ask forgiveness in the days ahead.

More than a day to focus on sin, though, Rosh Hashanah is an opportunity for God, and for us, to open the Books of our lives, to examine who we are and who we have been. This day is called *Yom HaZikaron*, the Day of Remembrance, as we recall the experiences, the actions, and the people who have filled our lives. No doubt, the Book of each of our lives is covered in dung. Each of us has been hurt. Each of us has known suffering. Each of us has reason to regret.

Nevertheless, God has offered us the inestimable gift of life. Just as the dung on Espanola is the inescapable by-product of the magnificent life there, our sin and sadness are unavoidable alongside our gifts and blessings. This Rosh Hashanah and every day, let us strive to notice and to celebrate life, with gratitude.

Consider how we regard our ancestors, the Children of Israel, enslaved in Egypt for more than 400 years. Each Passover, we acknowledge their suffering. The *matzah* represents the poor bread that our ancestors ate in slavery. But that same *matzah* reminds us even more of liberation, of the bread that didn't have time to rise as our people hastened to leave Egypt ahead of Pharaoh's armies. Passover is not primarily a remembrance of more than four centuries of suffering. Instead, Passover is a celebration with gratitude to God for the miracle of our freedom.

The Exodus example is potent: We recognize the gift of liberation even as we acknowledge the terror of bondage. My teacher, Alan Morinis, points to gratitude expressed after the most devastating defeat in all Jewish history. In the year 135, a band of Jewish warriors rebelled against the Romans who had destroyed the Jerusalem Temple 65 years earlier. The Jews were not only vanquished, they were slaughtered. After the survivors had buried their dead, the rabbis called for thanksgiving. The people of Israel yet lived. The remnant had been permitted to provide a proper burial to their fallen comrades. Hardly a time of rejoicing, the rabbis nevertheless recognized life's blessing and called God *hatov v'hameitiv*, the good One who bestows goodness.

Most of us have not known such devastation. Even while acknowledging life's difficulties, we have cause to give thanks.

Let us be grateful for the people in our lives.

I have a friend who makes a terrible first impression. I'll call him Jeff, not his real name. Jeff dresses poorly, sometimes in a way that conveys disrespect, even wearing athletic shorts when dressier attire would be more appropriate, and not because he can't afford nice clothes. He isn't very socially adept, either. Jeff is known for being argumentative, saying things more pointedly and bitterly than necessary. And yet, as I said, this guy is "a friend." Underneath the unappealing exterior, Jeff is kind and he is loyal. He is an attentive, caring father. A social worker, Jeff has been known to provide his professional counsel at greatly reduced rates to those with limited ability to pay.

I am grateful that Jeff is in my life. Because I took the time to get to know Jeff, and didn't permit myself to be turned off by that first impression, I found a *mensch* whose friendship and goodness enrich my life.

We all know a person like Jeff. Some people seem to have all of their faults emblazoned on a proverbial neon sign, constantly flashing over their heads. One person talks too loudly, and another complains too much. One person has terrible table manners and another has bad breath. We can always find something wrong. Some are more easily loveable while others are harder to take. Our sages taught, *al tistakel b'kankan, eleh b'mah sh'yesh bo*: "Don't look at the vessel, but pay attention instead to what's inside." By peering beneath the unattractive veil – the dung, if you will – we may recognize the good in the people in our lives. We may be enriched by living with others, with gratitude.

Let us be grateful for our bodies.

Our society is obsessed with physical appearance. Advertisers place a picture of the perfect body in front of us. Who among us can live up to that ideal? Too often, we see only our physical imperfections.

I know a woman who suffered a devastating spinal cord injury decades ago, when she was a very young adult. She would never walk again. From what I'm told, Linda went through a time of abject depression; life as she knew it and expected it to be had come to an end at a tender age. Now in her sixties, though, Linda continues to live a full and active life, shaped in significant measure by her wheelchair. She is a leading advocate for people with disabilities, and was intimately involved with the effort that brought the Americans with Disabilities Act into law. No, her life didn't turn out as she had imagined it would. I can't say that she's grateful for that spinal cord injury. What I can say, though, is that Linda is thankful to wake up in the morning, for the ability to maneuver in this world, now better than ever, in her wheelchair. Linda knows that she has changed the world – because, not in spite of, what happened to her body.

Linda's disability offers perspective as we regard the comparatively minor physical flaws that plague most of us. Emerging from depression, Linda had to discover what was good about her new body. She had to become grateful for the opportunity that accompanied disability, so that she could function happily and effectively.

When we look at our own bodies, we should indeed pay attention to issues that impact our health, and we should do what we can to improve those. At the same time, let us free ourselves from enslavement to the advertisers' image of perfection. When we peer into the mirror, let us embrace the blessings of our bodies. We should no more regard our bodies as mounds of flesh or sacks of bones than I should have seen Espanola as an isle of dung. Let us see the beauty and the power in our bodies, like the magnificent Christmas Iguana and the dance of the albatross. We may be enriched, and we may be empowered to make the world a better place, if we will live with gratitude for our bodies.

Let us be grateful for ourselves this year.

I know: This season calls on us to take a harsh look at ourselves, focusing on misdeeds and committing to overcome our sins. That work is important; we are commanded to do it, and we should. Who couldn't stand to improve? The risk, though, is that we will imagine ourselves to be terrible people.

One person knows that she told an awful lie. Another feels guilty about having repeated an unkind rumor about a colleague at work. And still another is tortured by having lost his temper with his child. All are sins. All require our repentance. We are commanded to ask for forgiveness. We must change our ways. We are taught to pray for atonement. We must restore justice to this world with acts of righteous charitable giving.

None of our High Holy Days rigors suggests, though, that we should see ourselves merely as the sum of our sins. That woman who lied? She went around and told everyone at work to stop spreading nasty rumors. That dad who yelled at his kid? He also spent countless hours coaching his daughter's soccer team and patiently helping his son learn to read.

Very few people in this world are thoroughly evil. Very few. Each and every one of us has done wrong. Each and every one of us called ourselves to account when we heard the shofar a few moments ago. Each of us is also a precious human soul, created by a God who loves us. Our responsibility is to love ourselves in return. Yes, in return. Failing to recognize our own goodness insults the God who created us in the divine image. Yes, the dung is there, in the form of sin. And there is also much good to report: One person is kind, and another is generous. One is responsible and another is quick to help a person in need. Each of us has reason to be grateful for the person we are and the person we can yet

become. None of us is an island of poop. Instead, each of our souls is as pure as that clear light blue of the boobie's foot.

I recall an activity from a Religious School retreat when I was in junior high. We were given shoe boxes, each inscribed with a persecution that had befallen the Jewish people across the millennia. Other shoe boxes were emblazoned with words about the light and honor and gladness that our people have known and brought to the world. We took the boxes with the pogroms and expulsions, and we made a wall. Then, we made a tower out of the triumphs.

This year, when we consider the people in our lives, let us recognize their goodness, towering over their flaws. In 5775, when we stare in the mirror, let us see the blessings of our bodies overcoming the flaws that are no more than skin deep. In this new year, let us see the goodness of our own souls vanquishing the sins that we must overcome.

Then, may we live with gratitude. Then, may 5775 truly be a *shanah tovah*, a good year.

Amen