



## “FROM THE BOTTOM OF THE WELL”

Once upon a time (you know it's going to be a great sermon when it starts that way) there was a farmer who had a donkey. One day, the donkey fell down a well. Oy vey! Understandably, the donkey was upset. Understandably, the farmer was pretty upset too. If it had happened today, the farmer could have gotten a big piece of machinery and lifted the donkey right out of the well. But this story didn't happen today and there was no easy solution at all.

The farmer gathered his family. They came up with lots of ideas - lower a rope and maybe the donkey would grab on with her teeth. She didn't. Dig a hole next to the well and bring her out that way. It would take weeks and so on... Finally, with tears in his eyes, the farmer said to his family, "Get all the shovels you can find. We can't leave her to die a slow death of starvation down there. We're going to have to fill the well."

And so they began to shovel dirt into the well. As each shovelful rained down on the donkey she brayed sadly. Could she have understood their intent? Perhaps. But perhaps she simply felt the accumulation of dirt on her back and there was nothing else to do but cry. The farmer's family had been shoveling dirt for quite a while when they realized that they had not heard the donkey braying for some time. One of the children peered over the edge of the well and saw...a sight she did not expect. Each time dirt would drop onto the donkey's back, she would shake every so slightly; the dirt would roll off and she would put one hoof upon the pile the fallen dirt created. One very, very small step at a time, the donkey shook off the dirt and climbed on top, reaching, eventually, the place where the farmer and his family could pull her back into life.

I don't know what your dirt is, and you don't know mine. But I do know that there are times in each of our lives when we find ourselves at the bottom of a very deep well; when as the Psalmist, the Bible's poet says "misfortunes without number envelop me" and "I cannot see." (40:13) In each of our lives, there will be times when life's dirt rains down on us in a seemingly un-ending cascade.

I don't know where I first heard or read this story, but when I looked for a source I found it on [betterlifecoaching.com](http://betterlifecoaching.com), on Chabad, on a number of inspirational Christian websites and one of stories from Islam.

On many of those websites the interpretation goes like this - the donkey gets out of the well and the author realizes that God/Allah/Jesus was there all along, waiting to pull her up. As the psalm I mentioned begins, "I put my hope in the Lord; He inclined toward me, and heeded my cry. He lifted me out of the miry pit, the slimy clay, and set my feet on a rock, steadied my legs."

Now I will tell you something private, since we're all such good friends. I don't believe that the donkey got out of the well because God reached down and scooped her up.

BUT I do believe that faith could be part of what helped her get out. MAYBE the donkey had faith that she mattered in the world,

that she would not have been created if there were if there were no purpose and no meaning, and no goodness in the world. The Rebbe of Karlin taught "Each person must know and think that he is unique in his own way, and that there never was anyone like him before. For if there had been one like him, there would be no need for him." (Beit Aharon)

Perhaps having faith means that my life has meaning and purpose; that freeing myself from the suffering I experience is part of a Divine system in which I matter.

So, I do take it on faith that each of us has ultimate worth and purpose, even in the depths of our pits with life's dirt dropping on us, each of us; that our getting out of the pit matters to God, however you conceive of God. Maybe just that knowledge is enough to help some of us shake off the dirt and step up. But I suspect that many of us need more than that faith. What does our teacher, the donkey, do?

Shake off the dirt? No, not first. Take a step up? Not yet. First, she cries. When she falls in the well, when the dirt comes raining down, she wails. If she had hands, she'd probably wring them. She'd say, "Why is this happening to me? Why is my life so terrible? When will it stop?" Very often the culture we live in sees this deep sadness and weeping as a weakness, a problem to be fixed instead of the first step in moving toward a solution. "Stop crying. Man up," we say to each other "never let 'em see you cry."

But as Ecclesiastes teaches (and Pete Seeger and the Byrds), "to everything there is a season and a time to every purpose under heaven - a time to weep and a time to laugh." If we aren't allowed to weep - about our own health, about a person we loved, about that easy, happy life we were living just before the dirt started falling - then we've missed an essential part of the process. The donkey cries. We cry because life is really hard sometimes. The late Supreme Court Justice, Louis Brandeis, is reported to have said to his frustrated, impatient daughter, "My dear, if you would only recognize that life is hard; things would be so much easier for you."

So, the donkey cries. And when the opportunity arises, she doesn't wallow; she shakes the dirt off. And she takes one step. The psalmist says "In the evening, one may lie down weeping; but at dawn there are shouts of joy."(30:6)

From weeping at night to shouts of joy at dawn? Well maybe not that quickly. How many shovels of dirt would it have taken to fill that well? How many times shaking, how many steps, seemingly making no progress at all, until the donkey finally found herself on higher ground? I think it takes a while to get from weeping to joy.

Unless...unless joy is actually the way she moves out of weeping, the way she gets out of the well. The great Chasidic Master, Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav taught: Everyone has lots of problems and the nature of man is to be attracted to sadness. To escape these difficulties, constantly bring joy into your life - even if you have to resort to silliness (Likutey Moharan II, 24)

Can you imagine our donkey smiling a little? Giggling perhaps? Maybe first “how ridiculous is THIS situation I’m in??” and then later “They thought they were burying me - HA - but look at me climbing right on out.” I don’t know if donkeys can chuckle, but if they can, I think our donkey is.

Maybe the dirt, though, isn’t funny by any objective measure. Maybe the dirt is quite simply the worst thing that could happen in a person’s life. How can we possibly find joy then?

Rabbi Nachman’s student Reb Noson taught that when there is no joy, not even a chuckle, we can borrow it. Maybe our donkey borrowed joy from her own past, when she wasn’t struggling, when she wasn’t burdened. I picture her texting a friend “remember when we?” looking at photos of her rambunctious youth or asking on Facebook for friends to share a good memory.

And we can borrow our own joy from the future - it’s a little harder, I think, and requires imagination - if the donkey can see herself celebrating a birthday, going to a family simcha, spending time with a friend, that image can give her a tiny lift, and inch by inch, she might climb up and out.

And we can borrow joy from people we do not even know - sitting at my computer in Starbucks, weighed down by the need to finish this very sermon, a fully gowned bride walked in with her groom on her arm and the whole room lit up. A smile, a laugh, rose and lingered for just a moment.

When we need just a bit more sugar for a recipe we borrow. When we need just a bit more cash to buy a house, we borrow. And when we need just a bit of joy...we can borrow that too.

Obviously joy is easier when we’re not at the bottom of a well, and equally obviously seeing a bride and groom in Starbucks doesn’t fix the problems of our lives. But if it lifts the pain for a single moment, then perhaps another bit of joy will follow and slowly, slowly, we can borrow enough to climb out of the pit.

As we enter a new year, I pray that none of us will be stuck at the bottom of a well, life’s dirt threatening to bury us. But if it doesn’t happen this year, then most likely another, we are certain to find ourselves struggling. When we do, I pray that we will have faith in how much our single life matters because if a donkey deserves to shake off the dirt and live, don’t we? I pray that we will weep and know that our tears are worthy, a first step toward healing. And then, I pray that we will search for and borrow little bits of joy to accumulate under our hooves and lift us steadily out of the depths.

I pray that what the psalmist says will be true for each of us “hazorim bedimah, brinah yiktzoru.” that “those who sow in tears will reap in joy,”

Shana tova u’metuka. A joyous and healthy new year. Amen.