



Humans and **A**nimals in **M**utual **A**ssistance

A Government Registered Non Profit Organization (NGO) # 513349647

HUMANS AND ANIMALS RESCUING EACH OTHER

*But ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee;
And the fowls of the air, and they shall tell thee...
In whose hand is the soul of every living thing,
And the breath of all mankind:
Job 12: 7, 10*

Diaba: The Devil Wears “Discomfort”



A Letter from Carl Tishler

December 13, 2013 Tevet 10 5774

Carl is one of HAMA's most dedicated and cherished friends. This particular letter from him is primarily concerned with the spiritual issues of Parasha Vayechi. Quite unintentionally he also defined the spirit of our work in AAT (Animal Assisted Therapy) in a simple and beautiful tale of bonding between a remarkable young lady called Stasha and a feral cat called Diaba. Their friendship deepened the bonds of understanding between everyone in the Tishler family, children and parents alike.

This retold story of “Beauty and the Beast” so inspired me that it was translated into Hebrew, and today this is the story which explains our work to religious families far more than any other. It has indeed joined our religious and secular worlds in a beautiful and subtle expression for the need to hear both the voice of the world outside of us, that “Call of the Wild”, as well as the voice inside each and every one of us calling for “Tikkun Atzmi”. Every Shabbat Carl sends a letter to family and friends, and each and every letter bears this message. I for one am all the better for it. Thank you, Carl!

Twenty years ago, with endlessly dark late Autumn days like these, I would come home early from the Bank on Fridays. It wasn't exactly keeping Shabbat, but with each painful office extraction on a Friday, with each attempt to figure out how-despite being at the very bottom of a very tall corporate ladder- work loads could be shifted around, with each week it was moving in that direction.

Pekin (Bill Pekin that is, my college roommate) and I lived on the Upper East Side, not far from Gracie Mansion and the East River in this one-bedroom apartment. Actually, to be precise, Pekin lived in the one bedroom – somehow he convinced me to live at the end of our living room, fenced in with a white temporary wall and door:

“Oh sure Carl, you'll love it there, look at these huge windows- and what a great view out from the 33rd floor – you know, I think you actually may have more floor space than I do.”

Thanks a lot, Pekin.

So I would come home on Friday afternoon, take the 4-5-6 to 86th Street and buy a huge container of Tropicana and a rotisserie chicken and walk through this, surreal, no-man's land time – after the frummers had gone to shul but before school was out and anyone else was coming home from work- back to our apartment on 88th and York.

Our apartment of course was totally empty at this time, and there in the corner with the wooden extend-a-table table and the black, free-standing halogen lamp- a veteran of our college dorm- I would sit and alone with my chicken and 17,453% percent of the Recommended Daily Allowance of Vitamin C.

It was a strange existence, sort of a purgatory, but every week by this time Friday I was just so sleep-deprived and so emotionally drained by the process of leaving the office and trying to do things like wear tzitzit for the first time, that it was only here and now- between glass-large gulps of orange juice and eating the whole chicken on auto-pilot – that I had a moment to sit and stare at the walls, to catch my breath.

And it really was for only a moment because as soon as the chicken and Tropicana ran out I would walk the five steps across the vestige of our living room to our “second bedroom” and fall into bed.

Well, it wasn't exactly bed and actually it was a fall of some distance.

In my charming attempt at post-college sophistication I decided to buy a Futon when I moved to New York. Yes, a Futon, and – even better- an expensive one made of proper wood- how zen of me.

People often ask me why I moved to London after two years in New York – the real answer is to get the hell away from that futon. It was miserable- I hated it like you can't imagine, but that familiar and ever potent cocktail of laziness and unpreparedness to admit stupidity, prevented me from doing anything about it the whole time I lived in New York.

The futon- at least mine, I don't want to speak for anyone else- had precisely no redeeming qualities: it was low to the ground so you could inhale all the dust, if it ever folded into a couch somehow I sure as hell don't know how that would work or why I would want to inflict it- with the possible exception of Pekin- on any guests in any positions, and most of all it was just incredibly uncomfortable.

But on Friday afternoons, drunk on OJ and chicken, none of this really mattered- I would collapse onto the futon- probably breaking a few ribs in the process- and then- from my unique viewpoint at floor level- take a moment or two to stare out of the unblended and uninsulated large windows into the dark, unobstructed sky – each time marveling at its darkness and how you could almost see the cold- and then I would be out. Game over.

Twelve, fifteen sometimes even eighteen hours I would be asleep – non-stop – almost in a near hibernation.

Such deep sleep, uninterrupted. I wouldn't always remember my dreams, nor after most of a day spent laying on a westerner torture machine, was it always pleasant to wake up, but sometimes I would remember fragments of my dream, if even for a

moment drifting into consciousness. But what I would recall, even more than a specific image or event, was just this sense that despite all the rush and madness of daily life, all the distraction and ADD, that somehow these were moments when, somehow this was a space where at least part of your mind was engaged in a deeper level of reflection or processing, somewhere in that quiet of your mind things were at work.

I recall all of this- those afternoons, that balanced diet and mostly those long slumbers and their deep dream pauses to life- because twenty years later, last Shabbat, they were unintentionally and unexpectedly reenacted.

I think it must have been about fourteen hours or so and its end, in the drift back to consciousness somehow I just knew that I had dreamt about my close friends who had passed away over the last year. It's a feeling like you're walking in on someone else's thoughts, eavesdropping on the end of their conversation, you get just the last parts, just a bit – but yet you appreciate that it has been a far longer and deeper conversation and something in you just sort of respects that, you give it credence, you listen to it.

Unfortunately I lost a number of good friends, people I have known and spent significant time with for decades, over the last year and while I know they are often on my mind, it was someone else that popped into my head in that last moment – and that was Diaba.

Let me be clear- Diaba was a cat.

But before you rush to any judgments or encourage me to add Gin to my Friday evening OJ, bear with me for a moment and tell your preconceptions to Foxtrot Oscar.

I hate cats- or at least I used to – in fact, pretty much in the same way that you told me it was possible to really learn something useful, something profound from a pet, I honestly would have really thought you were weird (and I, in general happen to like animals).

When we moved to Portugal we settled- and I still live- in a country house that my partner's late mother owned before she passed it to him. If you are able to find the house in the first place, you pass through these large green mechanical gates and see a house surrounded by a large, tall concrete fence- broken glass embedded in the top to keep people away. The driveway winds around the far side of the house and as you come further in you come to appreciate that there is more “country” in this country house than you expected- there are gardens, a row or two or orchards, lemon and orange trees, chickens in a chicken coop, pine trees throughout and various, carefully tended greens and vegetables growing everywhere.



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And there is also a cat.

She's **black**, with **yellow eyes** and she's been here for all of her **13** years. This is her home. She's never been a house cat – her original owner only came out at weekends, and not all of those- and she's also not a feral or wild cat. She's independent. This place has countless, countless nooks and crannies for her to move around in and she knows every inch of it.

I didn't know she was part of the bargain – then again, she didn't know we were part of it either, but one day we just moved in- all five of us, straight from suburbia, all clueless, all out of place, all of us having only seen lemon, chicken and parsley within the same four walls before at the supermarket, all of us foreign.

All of us strangers.

I think it was the kids who first spotted the cat – once a week a terrific gardener- Senor Nuno- would come to take care of the grounds, and most likely it was he who told us her

name. For months and months we thought it was “Diana” – we liked the name, but eventually, as with so many other language and cultural driven points, we were finally politely and gently guided by the Portuguese to the truth – her name is Diaba (meaning Devil), not Diana.

That was fine with me- I can’t stand cats and who cares, so what if she’s been here, she doesn’t need us and we don’t need her.

But the kids cared- they were fascinated by her. We never had pets in London and now all of a sudden we had one- kind of. At least we had something- other than mice- consistently alive and sharing the same space as us.

I remember once coming home and seeing our daughter Stasha sitting by the far wall, just past a row of plum trees where an old driveway used to be- she’s sitting on the side, and just staring at the cat, who is maybe 50 feet away minding its own business. Slowly I walk to Stasha and sit down next to her – she points wordlessly to the cat and we just sit there together, transfixed. It’s actually amazing to watch this cat- she’s decided at 50 feet we’re no threat so she doesn’t run away- she sits doing her thinking, scanning the premises, stretching, cleaning herself, listening – and then eventually she just gets up and walks away.

Stasha and I are so excited- she’s already excited, it’s me who somehow has been transformed by our little safari journey, our encounter with the wildlife, a real live cat in its native environment.

Look, what can I tell you, I’m hooked. All of us are. **This is our cat.**

So I buy her some new high-tech containers for drinking water-which neither she nor I can figure out how to use, and then I decide we need to start feeding her and rush with such excitement to the supermarket to buy her all kinds of cat food, **how wonderful are these pigeon-Portuguese conversations with other cat owners, how great to have a cat to worry about, to each Shabbat when we decamp to Lisbon worry how she’s doing.**

Nothing is as dangerous as the well-intentioned. I mean that – it’s really true. Each weekday morning at 5:45, with evening dew still on the car windshield, I would put out heaps of cat food for her before leaving for work – she was nowhere in sight but I would wish her a good day and drive off, content my duty as carer-of-cat had been fulfilled.

After a month or so of that our neighbor, a skilled artist and knower of animals, came by to take some lemons and saw the heap of food – even so diplomatically, in the way you

might approach a complete moron, she explained to me that- in effect- I had been feeding all the feral cats, rats, ants of the western Lisbon peninsula for the last month, and that perhaps it might be a good idea to dial it back. In fact, she had been feeding the cat for the last thirteen years, putting a bit of food over the wall – just enough to ensure her a consistent diet and not too much so that she should refrain from hunting and honing her natural skills (and killing all the rats).

Ah. I see.

And by the way she added, that yellow cat that I had once seen and screamed to scare off- indignant that any cat should invade Diaba's territory- well, that was her cat, Cenourinho (literally: small carrot) and she and Diaba were going steady- they'd been an item for a decade or so. Cenourinho spends almost all day everyday in our yard not only because of his companion Diaba, but also because our neighbor has two nasty- really nasty- guard dogs who wait every day for the opportunity to rip Cenourinho to pieces.

Ah. I see.

An unspoken sort of compromise emerged over the following weeks- each morning I would put out just a small amount of food (the good stuff, though) and things appeared to remain in equilibrium. The kids and I would watch Diaba- and then Cenourinho once she was done- come and snack and we could not have been happier.

After another nine months of this, with an increasing amount of tuna, the cats began to slowly appreciate that we seemed here to stay and were not, overtly at least, out to harm them.

We never dreamed of being able to pet Diaba – that was just too much of a reach, but the fact that we had developed a relationship of sorts, the fact that we now shared this common space, this was enough for us. Plus, there was just no way to get close to them- you'd take a step, even a slow step, towards them and they would be gone.

I grew up with dogs and loved them in the same way that I neither knew nor loved cats. Dogs you can call and they come running to you – they let you pet them if you (wisely) walk up to them- cats just seemed totally different, but that was ok. We had adjusted our expectations- or at least I had.

One day my wife cracked the code. She realized that if you just stood there long enough, if you remained calm and didn't freak out, Diaba would eventually come up to

you, she would rub against your legs in a affection/ownership way, and she would purr. You just had to chill out and let it happen.

I literally did not believe her when she told me this and I was astonished to see it for the first time – despite being the consistent provider of tuna, I was the last one to experience it myself- such a foreign concept, an odd experience.

But as is often the case in life, once you have passed one of these unmarked, significant, relationship milestones, everything changes quickly. The same thing happened the year I was at Oxford- after miserable everyday rowing training, after daily near impalement climbing over the gates down to the river, and freezing on the water and puking because of the erg, suddenly one day all of your boat mates- mostly first year Englishmen with whom you have nothing in common otherwise- somehow suddenly, you are in, accepted. And then, as with Diaba, you never look back.

She started waiting for me every morning at the door- complaining if I wasn't there on time, gulping down the tuna before the rest could even get out of the can (this I could really relate to) and then following us, mostly me, everywhere we went. My wife wouldn't let her in the house, but she was constantly trying to get in and she would greet everyone in the family. She wouldn't leave us alone.

The wind blows hard at the country house, especially at night, and here there practically no clouds in the sky. Three kilometers from the ocean, thirty due east from Lisbon and twelve due west to Europe's farthest western point, it is dark and clear at night- almost like you are at sea. Except for the wind and an occasional dog bark, it is dead quiet, peaceful like no populated place could be. Diaba and I sit on the outside patio stairs together silently, watching the pine trees struggle against the wind.

Soon Ariella and the kids return to London, and it is just Diaba and I. Minutes after their departure she finally arrives within the house, and now at last she has full run of the place.

This is how we spend what becomes her last few months- aged 15 now her eyes begin to fail, first the left until she is totally blind in it, and then suddenly the right. Amazingly she seems to take this all in her stride- she bumps into walls, she moves slowly, but she manages. I have to put the tuna right in front of her, sometimes up against her front paw, so that she knows where to get it. But she never loses her cool, she just adapts, makes the best of it, navigates through the darkness that has become her world.

Cenourinho is gone – he slipped up one day and the dogs got him, ripped him to pieces – but surely Diaba knows that the neighbor and I are still here- she knows our voices,

our smells, our touch- and she knows that we still care for her. Her mobility worsens and we try to keep her in an enclosed area, but she is miserable. **Far better to be blind and awkward outside on your home patch than artificially confined.**

No matter how close we became with Diaba, there was no way you were ever going to pick her up, no way. Petting her is a totally different thing than carrying her. Maybe if we had her as a kitten, if we had acclimated her to it, that would one thing- but not an adult, independent cat. But now, on the last of her days, she is so weak and cold that I just have to move her outside into the afternoon heat – so I just pick her up and carry her in my arms. The neighbor is there and she too is at first taken aback that anyone is carrying Diaba, but circumstances have changed – even in her weakened state I sense that she has accepted this – there is no scratching or fighting. **As at her birth- the last time she would have tolerated being babied or cared for like this, the last time she was this vulnerable- so too now at the end of her life will she accept such care.**

In the course of 20 months or so we had made - and then lost - the most interesting and unexpected of friends. I'm not embarrassed to say that I really mourn her loss, that – as my hibernation dream reminded me - I miss her and that, on reflection, I have to say she had quite a profound impact on all of us.

This week we finish reading the book of Genesis – we end it with parasha Vayechi, called the hidden or closed parasha because it is the only one in the entire Torah where its start is not marked with a paragraph division- instead it begins buried in the midst of another paragraph – it's striking to see in a Torah to scroll- something that is separate, that is distinct but yet cannot be easily seen – there is an uncomfortable blurring.

One of the most powerful literary and cinematic tools is when the reader/audience knows what is about to happen but the protagonists do not. We have to sit there and watch this all play out. This is how we feel about parasha Vayechi and each year it chills us. Vayechi marks the end of our independence, the end of our beginning and the start of the Egyptian exile. It contains our descent down to Egypt, the movement of the entire clan – 70 souls- to settle there – at first in comfort if not prestige, but we know what follows from here.

It is said that the Torah is for all times and all places, and surely this is true, but I have to say it really works a lot better in the Northern Hemisphere, the further north the better, because parasha Vayechi just fits with ever-shorter, darker and colder days – it matches the start of one of our most challenging periods when the world around us grows more hostile and we have to bundle up to survive; it is the time of year when you want to hibernate but can't.

No one wanted Egypt to happen, but it did, and it seems to run a very close second to the giving of the Torah itself, as a formative, foundation event in our collective identity. Forget about Passover, look at the daily prayer book, look at the holiday machzors, the blessings we say – the Egyptian experience is everywhere. We dwell on it at length every single day, and the Torah continually hammers it into our heads.

There are two main takeaways from Egypt – the first is about our relationship with G_d, and how we were delivered from Egypt with a purpose; and the second is about ourselves and how we have to approach the world. Both are counterintuitive- which is why they require reinforcement- but the latter one is at the same time more challenging and yet perhaps more within our reach.

I've come to believe the best thing in life is to be kicked out of your comfort zone, to be put in a place and in situations where you are uncomfortable, where you lack familiarity and perceived control, where- in short- you are a stranger.

The more often you can be a stranger, the more you give yourself opportunity to grow and, I think, the closer you get to the intended lessons from Egypt.

Think of the times you've been a stranger, the odd person out at a party, a dinner, a conference- whatever the case. The examples come quickly to mind because they are vivid- even raw- they stick in our minds because of their attendant discomfort. They also stick in our minds because part of being a stranger is being super alert, primarily to our own discomfort- we are on edge, we are vulnerable and we can't stand it.

Look at how many times it says in the Torah (and I paraphrase): don't oppress the stranger, because you were a stranger in Egypt.

Only having been strangers ourselves- and only being reminded of this every single day- can we then possibly get into the right mindset- to empathize and understand the stranger, to try and find the person most ill at ease, most at need, in the room and go up to try and make them feel at home. If life were a chemical equation, you would have to think that "*hesed*", kindness, was a byproduct of discomfort- awareness of others, wanting to help them, springs from being in their shoes, and never forgetting it.

And so fellow strangers, or even strangers and incumbents, can make seemingly odd companions.

We didn't move to Portugal to be uncomfortable, we didn't even really plan it per se – it just kind of happened and seemed like the right thing to do. In fact we spent the first Sunday night there in a hotel so we (meaning I) could watch the SuperBowl – so I can't say our sojourn there was a cultural immersion quest.

But we were - more than anything else - *strangers*. Real Strangers, living in this semi-rural place in the middle of nowhere with limited language skills – **and a cat, which was probably the most foreign thing of all.**

But our whole relationship with Diaba- from scorn and attempted displacement through to acknowledgment, from fumbled best intentions and misunderstandings through to most unusual of friendships- encapsulated the entire Stranger experience.

You come to a new place, you know nothing and no one and believe me you are very self-aware and uncomfortable. But that experience is a great one, an essential one, because you can never quite go back to who you've been. That entire process has altered you- and if you are lucky then as part of it you have come to meet and get know all kinds of different people you would never otherwise know – even you, a lifelong dog lover and knee-jerk cat hater, might come to strike up a friendship with a cat.

Last Tisha B'Av Maurice Ostro came to speak at Keshet – and he talked at length about his father's experience during the Holocaust. It's an incredible story- and it's in book form (*My Leap from the Train to Treblinka*, by Max Ostro) if you want to read it- but what stood out the most- even more than his father jumping off the top of a concentration-camp headed nighttime train was the story of how his father was saved and sustained during the latter part of the Holocaust. Maurice's grandfather, a frum man, was active in the steel business and through his commercial dealings as well as the life he chose in their town, developed strong relationships with his non-Jewish neighbors and counterparts- more than perhaps what might otherwise be expected in a predominantly Jewish town and by "the orthodox". But- and you should read the book- these were the relationships that ultimately saved his son's life, relationships of trust and mutual understanding that survived as a once friendly (or at least accepting) place descending into a killing field. **Had there not been something driving the grandfather to seek out his neighbors, to put himself in a new, perhaps uncomfortable position, to try to not blur over differences but find areas of similarity with others, then surely his family would have ended there.**

The cycles for us are always the same- we have been stuck on Vayechi for 2,000 years. We settle somewhere, within a few generations our discomfort has given way to assimilation and entitlement. We lose our edge and we lose ourselves, and it takes getting knocked back out of our comfort zone to put our heads back on straight.

Our Sages gave us the prayers, the daily reminder of Egypt, and Torah stays on message throughout, but at some level it requires us to meet halfway, to search for

discomfort and growth, to push ourselves beyond what's easy and towards what we are meant to be doing, and towards engagement with those around us.

As skies darken and days shorten, as Pharoahs change and sentiment wavers, we need all the strength and all the friends we can muster. Sometimes- even in an unexpected moment, stolen between sleep and waking- we can be reminded, by way of example, that a cat can also be man's best friend.

Shabbat Shalom and an easy fast,
Carl

A special note of appreciation:

The circular Logo of HAMA is also one of Carl's creations. He conceptualized it as an SOS life raft, the kind we throw into the ocean to save people from drowning. At its center lie the very real human and animal heroes of HAMA. "La Belle", our Newfoundland, Kee-Kee, our Ragdoll Cat, both of whom passed away peacefully in their old age and an incredible boy who has since grown up to have children of his own. These three super heroes have passed on their legacy to the next generation of humans and animals who, too, will courageously battle the waves of a stormy sea in their life rafts, and find their way back to shore.

