

This morning, I slept late, made challah, and grabbed my dog Ari and his leash. We piled into the car and went up to Pound Ridge, where I found the Westchester Wilderness Walk, a new walk for me. I went in and looked at the map on the kiosk. Seemed easy – so I left the trail map, unleashed Ari and proceeded to get utterly lost. We walked up and down hills, over streams, through mud. There were mossy rocks and trees just beginning to bud. The only green was the fir trees. The only noise was the jiggling of his id tags, my shoes and an occasional bird.

Now Ari is used to walking with me, and our walks are usually pretty predictable. But this was a completely new place. As I walked, he ran ahead. As Mike says, Ari's walk is about twice the length of my walk. But he looked back, checking to see where I was, always aware of the distance between us. As I became more and more aware of how lost we were, I was also aware of my responsibility to him. He relies on me. I am his touchstone.

I remembered other walks, with Dan running ahead and then coming back to check on me.

“Where are you, Mom? Catch up!” And I thought about all the times the kids check in when they're upset or confused or even over tired. I am their touchstone, too. It's a lot of responsibility.

In this week's parasha, God tells us to be holy, for God is holy. Not to be perfect, or to be omnipotent or to be sure, but to be holy. To be responsible for each other, to strive to be better. To give more and to love more. And to be willing to be the touchstone, even when we're lost.

In a few days, our community will gather here to remember the Shoah. Last year, I spent Yom HaShoah in Auschwitz and Birkenau, with a group of 11 kids from Stamford. We walked, with 9,000 other people, from the brick buildings at Auschwitz, under the famous sign, past the food court near the camp entrance, through the town of Auschwitz, up a hill and into Birkenau, with its tumbledown wooden barracks and huge train tracks. 9,000 of us – the same of people the Nazis could slaughter on any given day at Birkenau. The photos you see of the train tracks that you think are Auschwitz are actually of Birkenau. It is a vast expanse of dilapidated, crumbling wooden barracks. There is grass there now, and we saw bunnies hopping through the camp. Any grass that might have tried to grow during the war was eaten by prisoners – anything to fend off starvation for another moment. There were birds singing, and one survivor told me she never heard birds the whole time she was imprisoned at Birkenau. As I walked, I found myself feeling that I was in a holy place, a place of great tragedy. I looked at the ground, fearful that I might step on a bone or some other remnant of that time. By the end of the day, it was cold and raining. I gathered the kids around me, instructing the girls to make a circle around me, and the boys to make a circle around them – to share our limited warmth. A asked them: “Are you cold?” They nodded. Are you tired? Nods again. Are you hungry? More nods. And I pointed out that we all were able to leave. We could walk through the huge brick gate, and leave that place behind.

Today, I am aware then that my walking there makes me a touchstone again. To be holy, I must remember. As a community, we must remember. We must be willing to be lost, to take our children on new paths, to hold them and support them and lead them out. Much as I did this morning with Ari, our responsibility is to find our way home.

So, for all of us, are we ready to be the touchstone for this people, this community, the people we love? Not to be perfect, nor right. But to be there, to witness, to love? Even when we're lost?

Betsy Stone