

Living With Uncertainty

Earlier this year I studied tractate Yoma, the section of the Talmud that deals largely with the ancient Yom Kippur rite known as the “Avodah,” the Temple service. This is a part of our own Yom Kippur service, something which we symbolically reenact each year.

This Talmud explains the original Avodah service in the Temple, which revolves around the High Priest seeking atonement for the children of Israel, involves two goats; one goat that is sent off to die in the wilderness, and another that the High Priest sacrifices as an offering in the innermost sanctum of the ancient Temple, the *Kodesh ha Kodashim*, the Holy of Holies.

The act of entering the Holy of Holies was considered incredibly sacred. But it was also considered to be *incredibly dangerous*. *Who knows what might happen to the High Priest?* The Talmud goes into great detail explaining all of the processes and procedures that had to be completed in order to make sure things went smoothly.

First, it was important that the High Priest not take too long with the sacrifice. The time in the holy of holies was to be as quick as possible, and he was expected to return immediately after making the offering, *she lo lehoveet et yisrael*, to not alarm the Jewish people who might otherwise think that he died during this mysterious process. The Zohar explains that the other priests were so worried, they would tie a rope to the High Priest's leg when he entered into the Holy of Holies, so that if he should die in there, they could pull him out!¹

Once the High Priest emerged, he would make a few more offerings², immerse in the mikvah, change clothes (a few times), and then make his way home where he would celebrate his relief that he survived this dangerous ritual by making a feast for his loved ones and friends.³

Beyond the overall question of whether or not the High Priest would survive the ritual itself, the rabbis of the Talmud go on to discuss many other things that could go wrong during or surrounding this sacred ritual. What if the High Priest's wife should die when he is engaged in his Temple service? Maybe the rabbis should prepare a second

¹ Emor 102a?, see also 67a?

² Num. 29

³ 70a

wife as an alternate, just in case! And what happens if the High Priest that was chosen gets sick, and dies, before he is able to complete the Avodah?

Our sages worried. They were Jewish after all, is anyone surprised? But as much as they discussed, and much as they worried, it was clearly not possible for our rabbis to come up with contingency plans for every scenario that could go wrong.

In late July, I boarded a plane for the first time in eighteen months to see members of my family who I had not seen in far too long. I made the plans back in May, when things were looking up in terms of the pandemic. But by the time July came around, I was a bit of a nervous wreck. There was no question that I would wear an KN-95 on the plane, bring plenty of Purell, and avoid eating and drinking as much as possible so I wouldn't have to take off my mask. I was thinking through every possible risk, from the airport, to the plane, to the places I would visit and people I would see during my visit. As I was *dreying*, (worrying, or literally 'spinning') one night to Jane-Rachel at camp, she looked at me and said lovingly: "Enough with the catastrophic thinking."

And of course, she was right.

As a child I had my own experience with sudden, tragic loss, so as an adult I understand the roots of my catastrophic thinking. I also know that I am not alone when it comes to the anxiety, the worry, the heaviness that comes along with living in such an uncertain world. Many of us are tired, frustrated, fearful, stressed out from the past year and a half of unknowns, of changing circumstances and protocols and advice. Yet, just like we saw from the rabbis in the Talmud, trying not to think about all of the risks and the worst case scenarios can be hard. Fear of what could go wrong is so very real. This type of fear can sometimes feel more than exhausting, it can feel crippling and debilitating.

My teacher, Rabbi Jonathan Slater of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality once taught that most of the time, the reply to the question “What happens next?” ought to be, “Who knows?” We make plans: at work, at home, in our daily lives, and then something else happens. We have car trouble on the way to work, we get an unexpected phone call in the office that changes the course of our day, something happens with our partners, our children, our grandchildren, and the day suddenly looks different. Can we learn to be comfortable with the fact that we cannot perfectly predict the roadmap of our daily lives? Can we learn to be comfortable knowing that the GPS of our daily lives is continually “recalculating,” sending us off in new and curious directions all of the

time? To adapt this posture in life is to understand that nothing is guaranteed, and nothing (good or bad or in-between) lasts forever.

Just like the rabbis in the Talmud who were trying to plan for all of the possible things that could go wrong when the Kohen Gadol made his Yom Kippur offering, we too may try to plan and prepare. It is true that a bit of forethought and preparation and precaution is generally a good thing (don't leave home without your mask and your hand sanitizer). But just like these rabbis, *try as we might*, **there is no way we can prepare ourselves** for every possible bad outcome that might come our way in life. I know everyone in this room has personally experienced, perhaps multiple or many times, that there are no guarantees in life.

As we gather together on this most sacred day of Yom Kippur, aware of our frailty, our mortality, the question that we would do well to consider is just how we are to handle living with this cloud of uncertainty. We know that life is precious and that we have, at least as of this moment, been granted a clean slate for the year to come. We understand, even if we don't like to think about it, that we are mortal, that we will all eventually end up in the same place. We are aware that life is fragile, that our safety and security could

falter at any moment, much like the walls of the fragile and temporary shelters we build on Sukkot. This is not news, and yet this awareness rarely brings us comfort.

So how do we move forward? How does our tradition guide us to live healthy, productive, meaningful, and purposeful lives in spite of the fact that life is often anything but predictable?

The first thing Jewish tradition impresses upon us is the importance of faith and trust. What do we do when faced with uncertainty? We pray regularly. We embrace the unknown. Sometimes we act, and sometimes we wait. Hoping, believing, trusting that there is some order to the chaos, some plan, some rhyme or reason to the unpredictability, to the struggle mixed with blessing that is everyday life. The only thing that is eternal, in this world, is God, whose presence in our lives can give us purpose and meaning.

The Psalm that we recite every morning during the month of Elul and through these Days of Awe expresses our yearning beautifully.

Achat Sha'alti me'et Adonai, One thing I ask for, one thing I hope. To live in your house All the days of my life, to behold your loveliness every morning in the light of your temple, dawn.... Shema Adonai Koli Ekra, V'choneni, va-aneini- Hear my voice when I raise it up. Be gracious- answer me...Do not hide your glowing face from me. Do not reject me in anger because of my shortcomings. You have always been for me. Don't cast me off now, don't walk away, My helper my friend....I wait only for you, with strength and good courage, I wait only for you.⁴

Sometimes we feel God's presence so clearly, other times we are pained by God's absence, and other times we just wait, praying and believing that there is a presence working through and beyond each of us.

The Hebrew word for trust is *bitachon*. It is important to point out that this character trait of *bitachon*, as explained by the masters of the Musar tradition, is not a blind trust. As our rabbis taught, *lo samchinin anisa*, we are not to rely on miracles alone. We are not to put ourselves in dangerous situations, or act irresponsibly, in the hopes that all will work out. As Rabbi Mosh Chaim Luzzatto once put it: *One who chooses to ignore wisdom and is willing to place him/herself in danger is not displaying trust, but rather recklessness.⁵*

⁴ Fischer, *Opening to You, Zen Inspired translations of the Psalms*

⁵ Morinis, *Everyday Holy day*, 335

In other words, Judaism certainly believes in human agency, in human responsibility, while simultaneously recognizing that there is so much that is not in our control, or that is beyond our control. Understanding that we often cannot see the full picture of what is happening in our lives at any given moment, and living in a way that honors *both* our own sense of agency *and* our limited capacity to grasp the full picture, is living a life of *bitachon*. There is a parable told by the 19th century Chafetz Chayim that demonstrates this idea. The story is about a man

who was once visiting a small town. It was Shabbat morning and he went to the local synagogue, where everything was just as you might expect, until unusual things started happening. There were well-dressed, obviously prosperous people seated near the front, but all of the honors for the Torah reading were given to the scruffy men who stood clustered in the back of the room. When it came time for the rabbi to say a few words of wisdom, all he spoke about was the weather. After the prayers were finished, lovely food was spread on the table and nobody ate.

The visitor was flummoxed by all these incomprehensible going-on. What kind of place was this? Was everyone crazy? Finally, he pulled aside one of the locals and asked, "What's going on here? The men who got the Torah honors, the rabbi's talk, the uneaten food....nothing makes any sense?"

The man explained, "Those scruffy-looking men had been unjustly imprisoned and the community worked long and hard to ransom them to freedom. Isn't it wonderful that they are now free to come bless the Torah? The rabbi spoke only about the weather because there has been an unusual drought this season and the farmers have nothing on their minds but their crops, and the rabbi knew and cared for their concerns. Why didn't anyone eat? One Shabbat every month the community prepares its usual lunch but instead of eating it, the food is donated to the local home for the elderly. I can see how it might have looked to you," the local man told the guest, "but when you can only see part of the picture, it's easy to put together the wrong impression of what's going on."

Alan Morinis, a leading thinker in the mussar movement, feels this is THE parable for our own lives. Since at every moment we can only see part of the situation, we can't possibly know what's really going on. The complete picture will be revealed to us only in the fullness of time. In the meantime, our task is to trust.⁶

Again, this is much easier said than done. And *bitachon* does not necessarily imply that God has or will directly cause something wonderful or terrible to happen. *Bitachon*, trust, is about believing that God is present in the moments of our lives. Hidden perhaps, but not absent. As Deuteronomy says, *ha-nistarot la' Adonai eloheyenu, v'haniglot lanu u'levoneinu ad olam*, the hidden things belong to Adonai our God, but that which is revealed belongs to us. We can only comprehend so much.

Cultivating a sense of *bitachon*, of trust, might also help bring us to a calmer space, a more open posture towards life. Morinis writes that trust "gives rise to tranquility and fearlessness that will make us a better friend, spouse, parent, worker, citizen, and just about every other role that we play in our lives."

⁶ Morinis, *Every Day Holiness*, 215-216

“A heart,” says Morinis, “cannot hold both fear and trust at the same time. When we cultivate trust, we inevitably loosen the grip that fear holds on our heart.”⁷ Just think about those whom you trust the most in this world, the ones who you turn to for hugs, for comfort, and the calm, quiet grounding that they bring into your soul. Trust calms our spirit and opens our hearts.

So we understand that nothing lasts forever, not the good stuff, and not the bad stuff, and not the stuff that is somewhere in-between. Indeed as the Hasidic literature teaches, we only have this *rega*, this moment, this breath that we are taking right now. The rest is anybody’s guess.

An appreciation of this idea should lead us to a place of gratitude, which I will get to in a moment. But it should also remind us that as long as we can breathe, we have the power to take a breath: when we are suffering, when we are confused, when we are in pain. Once we remind ourselves to take that breath, we can remember that the given moment, the pain, the suffering, will not last forever. Having done that, we can then

⁷ *ibid.* 216-217

turn in gratitude, towards the Holy One of Blessing, grateful for the gift of the very breath that we just took.

So, my proposed formula for living with uncertainty: Practice learning to trust and to accept not knowing the whole picture. Remember that no suffering lasts forever, and recognize that as long as we are breathing, as long as we are alive, we have so much for which to be thankful. And then, our gratitude should compel us to share our blessing with others, to pay it forward.

It is to this last piece that we now turn. Take a moment to make a list of the top five things that you are grateful for right now. Be specific: not just health, family, and friends. Now, once you have the list in your head, ask yourself whether or not you are 100% responsible for these gifts in your life, whether these blessings in your life are all things that you have somehow earned? The answer is likely that they are not.

So who do we have to thank and how might we learn to show our gratitude? To friends, family, God, strangers, life? *Avinu Malkeynu*, we pray *Choneynu v'anaeinu, ki ein banu maasim, Avinu Malkeynu, forgive us, answer us, because the truth is that we are not worthy of every blessing that we have received in this life. Ein banu ma'asim, we don't*

necessarily deserve anything that we have, let alone the gift of our very life- we say repeatedly over these *Yamim Noraim*. So, the very least that we can do then, to show our appreciation to God, to life, to luck- is to actively figure out ways to transform this gratitude into blessing. *We may not know what will happen next, but we know what has happened already.* Most of us are so very blessed. Can we remember that and then learn to pay it forward to help so many who are desperately in need? Can we learn to shift from worrying about what is uncertain in life, and instead work to be useful, productive, to make a difference?

The answer is that we can, and we must. As Rabbi Akiva once reminded us: *hakol tzafui, v'hareshut netunah*-all may be foreseen by God, the One who sees the whole picture, but the freedom to choose how to respond in life, the freedom to choose to bring blessing into this world with each and every breath, is ours alone.

I would bet that the Kohen Gadol probably *was* afraid before he had to perform the Avodah offering in the Holy of Holies. He was under a lot of pressure-he had to perform this ancient rite in the inner sanctum, he had to know all of the details of the ritual -- what was permitted, what was forbidden-- and he alone was responsible for making sure that God forgave all of the children of Israel. I am sure he was uncertain as

to what might happen, and yet he moved forward. Indeed he had no other choice. This was what he was called to do. And so it is with us.

May we move forward with *bitachon*, with trust, in ourselves, in one another, in our community, and in our God. May we move forward with awareness, that nothing lasts forever, neither that which is wonderful nor that which is terrible. May we move forward with appreciation, for our very breath, for this very moment. And may we move forward with determination, to make the best out of the gift of our lives, and work tirelessly to ensure that all others have that very same opportunity.

Gmar Hatimah Tovah-May we all be sealed, in good health and filled with gratitude, in The Book Of Life.