

From Personal Discomfort, to Awareness, to Action

Yom Kippur Morning – 5781

Rabbi Gary Pokras

So there's this young rabbi who meets with the synagogue president before his first High Holiday service.

"What will you be talking about this year?" asks the president.

"With all the news in the air, I thought I would talk about world affairs and how Jewish values help us understand our situation," responds the young rabbi.

"No! No politics from the pulpit. You can't do that!" exclaims the president.

"Well, then, I'll talk about the life of mitzvot, the imperatives that shape Jewish life."

"No. Not everyone is religious like you are. You'll exclude too many people."

"How about the beauty of Shabbat, the joy of Sabbath?"

"No. Most of us work or shop on Saturdays. You'll offend people."

"The flow of the Jewish holidays through the year?"

"Ditto."

"The moral imperatives of Kashrut?"

"Big ditto. All the steakhouses in town are owned by our members."

"Perhaps Jewish ethics, the importance of Tzedaka, of caring for the poor and the downtrodden?"

"Rabbi, not everyone is in a position to give, you know. You don't want to embarrass those members."

"Ok, so what would you like me to talk about?" asks the exasperated rabbi.

"You're our rabbi," responds the president quizzically, "talk about Judaism!"¹

Worse than a dad joke, right?

¹ Rabbi Ed Feinstein, "People of the Soul," Yom Kippur sermon, 2020.

Yet, it's not only a bad joke, it is also sad. What is Judaism if not all of these things and more? That poor rabbi! The fictional president of that joke of a congregation wants a smooth high holy day season – and that means making sure the rabbi doesn't ruffle feathers by making anyone uncomfortable. Assuming the rabbi follows this direction, the holidays will be sweet and lovely, and devoid of a meaningful frame. The congregation will experience an entertainment, moving at times, that doesn't have a lasting impact on their lives, and the whole thing will reinforce the misconception that Judaism doesn't speak to the real world.

It may be a very old joke, but it still rings true.

Michael Meyers blames it all on Burger King. Not Mike Meyers, the actor, but Professor Michael Meyers, now retired, of the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion. He was speaking at a conference in the mid-90s, and was pondering the question: what would the historians of the future call the present age? He thought it would be called “the age of rage.” At the time, road rage had recently reared its ugly head, and he was trying to see how it fit into larger cultural shifts in our society.

That led him, inexorably, to Burger King.

In the 1970s Burger King made a radical change to their customer service model, and launched a culture changing marketing campaign with the slogan: “have it your way.” What was so radical about this? Before the Burger King campaign, we chose from whatever was on the menu. There were no special orders. The very idea of “hold the pickle, hold the lettuce” did not exist as part of American culture – until Burger King promised otherwise. The concept became so popular that other fast food restaurants followed suit, and then over time, other industries, until – in the 1990s – our expectations were so self-centered that when they were not met exactly on our terms, our response was disappointment, anger, and even rage.

That was thirty years ago.

Today is far worse.

Rabbi Gregg Marx draws our attention to a massive culture shift which we are witnessing all across this country. He notes that we are taking more selfies than photos of others, that a life of service is being replaced by one of entitlement. “Our national mantra,” he writes, “is no longer ‘we’re all in this together,’ but rather, ‘I’m free to be myself.’”²

Consider this: today we live in our own little information bubbles and generally interact with people who share the same views that we already hold. We distrust, and even hate, those who hold views contrary to our own. Over time, we have become more extreme in our views and our positions, and when we hear an opposing view, we respond with anger and even rage. There can be no compromise, no acknowledgement of the other. The social fabric of our nation is torn, and the tear is widening.

Yet, anger, rage and intolerance are not our only problems. Rabbi Marx is worried, as am I, that as social infrastructure is disappearing, we are becoming increasingly lonely, afraid, vulnerable and depressed. “Social infrastructure,” he writes, “is our oldest and most powerful resource for turning disconnected ‘I’s’ into a collective ‘we.’”³ And religious communities, like Beth Ami, are essential not only for the transmission and development of our beautiful spiritual traditions, but as places where we build social capital and community. While I am glad that Beth Ami remains a vibrant and meaningful community, we should be worried that religious affiliation rates are dropping throughout the country. We should be worried that so many synagogues and churches are closing their doors or merging because they can no longer sustain themselves as independent organizations. We should be worried that so many people are saying: ‘my religious beliefs don’t have anything to do with the real world, or they are not important enough for me to stay connected right now, so maybe I will take a break for a while.’

Thomas Hobbes, the seventeenth century English political philosopher, taught that in our natural state, moral ideas do not exist. Instead he opined that human nature (and therefore actions) fall into two categories: the avoidance of pain and

² Rabbi Gregory Marx, “The Need for Social Infrastructure,” HHD sermon, 2020.

³ *Ibid.*

the pursuit of pleasure. Even further, he posited that good is simply what we desire, and evil is simply that which we avoid.

While I find his empiricism morally bankrupt and even dangerous, I cannot help but wonder if he is not describing today's world of me, myself, and I. Our tradition stands as a bulwark against this bleak worldview. It reminds us that we each have a moral center, that we are capable of rising above the instinctual level and building the kind of world we want to live in, and more importantly, we want for our children. And so we read these words from Torah – about Torah – every Yom Kippur:

For this mitzvah, which I command you this day, is neither beyond you nor far away. It is not in heaven, causing you to say: "Who will go up to heaven on our behalf, get it for us, and let us hear it, that we may do it?" And it is not across the sea, causing you to say: "Who will cross the sea on our behalf, get it for us, and let us hear it, that we may do it?" No, this is so very near to you – in your mouth and in your heart – that you can surely do it.
[Deut. 30:11-14]

We are not mere animals, creatures of instinct. Our natural state is not bereft of moral imperatives. We are created in the Divine Image, born with a deep reservoir of spirit to cultivate the higher moral awareness and commitment already within us. Our tradition steadies us on our way, inspires us when we falter, supports us when we fall, and strengthens us when we succeed.

Throughout the past ten days, we have cultivated the hope and optimism we can bring to the new year, examined how *teshuvah* (realignment), *tefillah* (prayer), and *tzedakah* (the pursuit of justice) are not just mitigations against the severe decree, but a call action. We have considered how, when we add our long memories to the mix we are reminded that we are resilient, and that we have the power to soften the hardness of the world around us. Last night at Kol Nidre, we explored how we can break old habits which no longer serve us and create something new.

Now, we are finally ready for the deep dive of Yom Kippur: we will get uncomfortable.

The ancient rabbis ordained that Yom Kippur be a day of *innui nefesh* — afflicting our souls — by denying ourselves the five greatest pleasures of life. The first we know: today is a fast day. We abstain from food and drink (unless doing so endangers our health) and experience not only the lack of one of life’s great joys (food and drink) but also the omnipresent discomfort of hunger. The other four forms of *innui nefesh* are less well known to some. We are prohibited from bathing, from anointing ourselves with perfumes and makeup, from wearing leather, and from what the rabbis euphemistically called “using the bed” wink, wink. Why? Bathing not only feels great while we are washing, but gives a sense of fresh cleanliness which lasts for hours after we bathe. Denying ourselves a bath forces us to recognize what stays with us when we do not wash away yesterday’s dirt. Anointing ourselves is about our vanity, about looking and smelling, and therefore feeling good. It helps us feel comfortable in our skin. Not anointing ourselves makes us feel exposed, vulnerable. Leather shoes, two thousand years ago, were only available to the wealthy. Removing the comfort of our wealth makes our feet ache, and challenges the illusion that wealth creates security. And do I even need to explain why we aren’t supposed to “use the bed” on Yom Kippur?

Hobbes would call this unnatural. Our tradition understands it as central to our very nature.

The rabbis decreed that we afflict our souls on this day because they understood that there is no separation between body and soul. When we create discomfort in one, we create discomfort in the other. And they understood that comfortable people have no incentive to change or grow. As Rabbi Weiss reminded us ten days ago, “the purpose of these days is to increase our discomfort. For if we are not careful, we become accustomed to things that ought to shock us and shame us.”⁴

So, we make ourselves uncomfortable through *innui nefesh*. And we seek out discomfort instead of avoiding it with the *vidui*, the repeating confession of sins

⁴ Rabbi Baht Weiss, “Rosh Hashanah in the time of Covid-19: How do we react when things don’t go according to plan?” Rosh HaShanah sermon, 2020.

recited in the plural, because while none of us has committed everything on the list, collectively we may have – and that is something we should never find comfortable.

For this reason, our tradition teaches us to approach the *vidui* with honesty and humility, to overcome our self-righteousness and defensiveness, so that we can move beyond the mirrors with which we surround ourselves, that only reflect back what we want to see. Only then can we move from our discomfort to awareness, from who we have been to who we strive to become, from the world as it is to the world as it can be.

On Yom Kippur we seek discomfort so that through our worship, and especially the communal *vidui*, we can become more self-aware, more honest with ourselves. It is not easy. Perhaps that is why Hobbes considered it so unnatural. He was wrong. We have it within us – in our mouths and in our hearts.

This year we have an unusual opportunity. In past years we may have been less motivated to get uncomfortable, this year we cannot escape it. So many changes are already in the air because of our discomfort: our politics, the fight against racism, confronting the growing dangers of climate change. Our discomfort forces us to examine our reality, and if our discomfort is strong enough, we are inspired to change. That is the progression of this day: to embrace our discomfort, in order to focus our awareness, that it may call us to action. Today is not a depressing day, but a day of hope, rebirth and renewal.

As we enter the *vidui* service now, I challenge you to pick up the gauntlet, to intensify your discomfort by offering the confessional prayers with honesty and humility instead of reading them by rote. I challenge you to reflect not only on what makes you uncomfortable in general, but on what you specifically have done or not done that causes you discomfort, and why. And finally, I challenge you to embrace both your discomfort and your new self-awareness, and harness them, leverage them, use them, so that you may enter the year 5781 with the hope, the strength, the resilience, the determination, and the clarity you need to truly make this new year everything it is capable of becoming.