

Yom Kippur 5781/2020
D'var Torah
Temple Emanu-El of Haverhill, MA
Cantor Vera Broekhuysen

Pause, don't freeze

****Sing: Kol ha'olam kulo (Judith Silver)** through "not to be afraid"**

These months I have heard often from you, and sometimes from myself, "if I have to make one more decision, I'm going to lose my mind. Just tell me what to do." In this time of coronavirus, we're all feeling decision fatigue. And I think most of that exhaustion comes from fear. Fear of making the wrong decision. Fear of infecting someone, diminishing an experience, losing a person near to us, or even inadvertently ending a life.

Fear is enormously powerful.
We need a day free from fear.
God has given us this day.

Kol ha'olam kulo gesher tsar m'od, v'ha'ikar lo l'hitpacheid klal. All the world is a very narrow bridge, and the essential thing is not to become paralyzed with fear. (Attributed to R. Nachman of Bratslav)

Lo l'HITpacheid: don't make yourself afraid. In the reflexive Hebrew verb, don't do fear to yourself. Don't get caught in a self-perpetuating cycle of your fear.

My first spiritual director, Rabbi Stephen Arnold, flagged for me that usually when we talk about this teaching, we leave off a few important letters. We say "ha'ikar lo l'facheid klal." Not "l'HITpacheid." We say, "the whole world is a very narrow bridge and the most important thing is not to be afraid."

Well, that's baloney. We all experience fear, right? And sometimes fear is appropriate and justified! Sometimes fear helps us make sensible decisions that keep us safe—like staying back from that ledge, like wearing a mask.

Rebbe Nachman doesn't say, don't fear. Rebbe Nachman says, when you're walking a narrow pathway, don't let fear freeze your footsteps. Don't let fear keep you immobilized over the abyss yawning at your feet, don't let it close off your options. As Judith Silver sings, "don't look down—keep moving."

I grew up with my mother reading me the Isaac Bashevis Singer collection of Chanukah stories each winter. My favorite was always "The Power of Light." Rebecca and David are two orphans living in a cellar in the bombed-out Varshava ghetto, trying to survive. There's no heat; there's

no food; Nazis patrol outside. But they can't make up their minds to leave. Then, one night, David brings home a little food—and a Chanukah candle and match.

Quote: For some time David and Rebecca had thought about escaping from Warsaw. But how? The ghetto was watched by the Nazis day and night. Each step was dangerous. Rebecca kept delaying their departure. It would be easier in the summer, she often said, but David knew that in their predicament they had little chance of lasting until then. Somewhere in the forest there were young men and women called partisans who fought the Nazi invaders. David wanted to reach them. Now, by the light of the Hanukkah candle, Rebecca suddenly felt renewed courage. She said, "David, let's leave."

"The Power of Light," Isaac Bashevis Singer, p. 57

With coronavirus, we too have spent some time thinking about what we might want to do, or should do, snared in "what ifs". And even when we've made choices, the doubts and fears don't go away.

Will I see a friend for lunch? Will I get my hair cut? Will my child go to school? Will I hug my sibling? Will I pull my mask down for a few minutes on this walk?

My husband and kids and I took a three-day vacation this summer, up to a beautiful little camp in New Hampshire. We pitched our two tents, set up our stove, stocked up at a grocery store. I turned my email off. We hiked and scrambled over rocks in a state park and swam each day in a lake so warm and pleasant that it felt like a bath. We had a wonderful time. And still, even in the open air, every time I saw someone near us without their mask on, my stomach dropped and my breath quickened. Every time I needed to use a bathroom, or buy food, I had to think: Is it safe to go inside here? Will I get sick? Will I get someone else sick?

We need to interrupt the feedback loop of fear in our bodies. For David and Rebecca, it was a moment of fire in the darkness, the Chanukah candle, that did that for them. For us, Yom Kippur can be the interruption we need. Yom Kippur is our day of atonement without fear.

On Yom Kippur, Shabbat Shabbaton, Rest of Rests, we don't affirm apathy. We don't sit on our hands—God forbid!—and say, "not my problem." On the contrary, we say that other people's pain, hunger, want, IS our problem. We say that explicitly in today's Haftarah, which Wilson chanted so beautifully for us. But on this one day, we give up anticipatory fear. We give up the "what ifs." Instead, we dwell in awe. We stand, wrapped in our own needs and sorrows like a tallis, and in this emotional place we cry out clear like the voice of the shofar. We focus on the responsibilities for care and justice-seeking that we feel RIGHT NOW and know we haven't lived up to.

But we don't fear what may come. We concentrate on this one day, and this day only. There is a time limit. And I personally find that enormously helpful.

Anyone who has ever worked on something in writing with me knows that I am a compulsive re-writer. I go back; I re-imagine; I think of things at the last minute to stick in. I never feel finished. But for every piece of writing, there is a final deadline. There is a point at which I simply must accept that I am done, and I cannot put any more work into it. What I have done must be enough. And I move on to the next thing.

I'm not going to tell you when that point was with this sermon.

Rabbi Micha'el Rosenberg reminds us: "The Mishnah, in Tractate Berakhos, bans what it calls a tefilas shav—a prayer in vain (9:3)." Such as, praying for a specific result, after a test has already been taken. "We understand this mix of determinism and uncertainty ... [Such a prayer]—the prayer over that which is uncertain, but already determined—reflects our instinct to pray for what we want, when we don't know what we'll get." ("Who will live and who will die: faith in the age of uncertainty" 2020/5781 https://medium.com/@michaelrosenberg_25820/who-will-live-and-who-will-die-faith-in-the-age-of-uncertainty-175e62df1201)

God, in Their infinite wisdom, has given us Jews a deadline for our yearly t'shuvah, past which any worry about what we've done, any instinct to revise or pray for a different fate, is a t'filas shav. That deadline is the last hour of today. The gates close at N'ilah.

B'Rosh Hashanah yikateivun, uvyom tzom kippur yechateimun. On Rosh HaShanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed.

This statement can feel difficult theologically, as Rabbi Rachel explored with us last night. We say that God is making unchangeable, inscrutable choices about what will happen to us. In a year including more than its share of righteous people dead before their time, this idea may feel painful, even enraging.

I don't personally believe that this liturgy means that God points a finger and says "you, yes; you, no." How could a merciful, loving God ever want a child to die? If coronavirus has taught us anything, it's that disease and disaster bear no consistent relationship to the character of the person afflicted. But we repeat loudly and insistently on Yom Kippur that our stories are in God's hands. For this one day, we give up—at least in our liturgy—the idea that we can alter the decree any further. And giving up this urge for control, I believe, gives us the ability to start afresh the next day, and to make new choices with more freedom.

A teacher of mine told a story once. She had a time in her life when she observed the laws of niddah, abstaining from sex at certain times and going to the mikveh once a month after her period was over, to immerse. She wasn't sure how she felt about the mikveh, or indeed the whole system of laws of "family purity" that designate only women's bodies as needing a wash and a stamp of approval after menstruation is done. But she went, once a month. She immersed

three times and said the blessing. And at the end, each time, the mikveh lady, who was her witness, said, "Kasher." Kosher. You've immersed the right way; you're now ready to return to family intimacy. My teacher said that despite her continuing ambivalence about niddah, this became a really special moment for her over the course of the months. Whatever else was going on in her life, when she heard that "kasher," she knew that this ritual was something she'd done right. It helped her leave the previous month behind, and be ready to start the month to come, fresh and clean.

God, says the prophet Yirmiyahu, is the mikveh of the people Israel. And our closeness to God throughout the whole day of Yom Kippur is also the mikveh that washes us free.

We still have to prepare for that moment of absolution. Before immersing in a mikveh, we take off all of our clothes, jewelry, contact lenses, even stray hairs—anything that's not of and connected to our body, and could get between us and the water. And we come out clean. Still ourselves, but freer. So too, during the month of Elul and the ten days of t'shuvah before Yom Kippur, we make t'shuvah and t'fillah and tzedakah to prepare, to remove any schmutz on our souls that could get between us and God. We pour out our words and our penitential prayers liberally, repetitions of words like ripples against our bodies. A final flood of Al Cheits and Ashamnus and S'lach Lanus carries us through our exhaustion, towards that final moment of N'ilah when the shofar blasts and the gates of t'shuvah are supposed to clang shut. There's momentum. There's closure. On this one day, as the gates close, as the shofar blows and the last of our prayers fade away, we can feel that together, we have done this ritual right. We can imagine the expansive, generous Divine smile of our Mikveh Lady in the sky, saying, simply, "kasher."

With that feeling of completion, sh'leimut, on the biggest Shabbat Shalom of them all, we are set free. Not free from responsibilities! But free to dream. Free to plan. The words of our piyyut Eil Nora Alila, which we'll sing this evening, urge us forward: "In the hour of closing ... renew our days as of old, and at the beginning—may this year be pleasing to You." The road of the New Year stretches open before us. Where will we go?

The yechateimun, sealing, of which our B'Rosh HaShanah prayer speaks, I don't think that's a rigidity of fate. I think of it as a witness: the stamp a signatory puts down at the bottom of a contract, or testimony. On Yom Kippur we seal ourselves to the possibility of what we may do in the year to come, conceived on this day without fear. With emotion, with responsibility, but without dread. We, with God, sign our names to the potential this day reveals for us.

So today, on Yom Kippur, on this day of awe and dread, I invite you to put down your fear. I invite you to swim in the warm waters of possibility. The hours are passing—we have just today, just now. But when today is done: What's on the other side of the doors for you? Where can your strengths, your compassion, your relationships lead you? When you feel truly free of last year's debris, what acts of newness and healing can you make in the world?

G'mar chatimah tovah.