

Is this going to be on the test? Judgement and Anxiety at Yom Kippur

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I feel quite honored to have the opportunity as a member of Beth Chai to speak to you on this occasion. Honored and just a bit surprised. When I got ‘the phone call’ a while back from Suzanne Greenfield asking me to speak, one of my first thoughts was: gosh, this means I’ll actually have to show up!

You see, although I’ve been fairly involved over the years in Beth Chai and in the Jewish community as a whole, I’ve had a somewhat... ambivalent relationship towards the high holidays, and particularly towards Yom Kippur. Sometimes I’ve come to services, sometimes I haven’t. On many occasions, to be frank, I’ve gone up to the top of a mountain somewhere, or into the woods, basically as far away from a synagogue as possible...

Generally, my feelings around this time of year tend to range from a simmering anxiety, to a rather more pronounced anxiety, and going all the way up to absolute fear and loathing. Part of the problem has to do with... moderation. I’m not very good at it.

When I was an adolescent and young adult, I would typically immerse myself in *tshuvah*, in repentance, for the whole ten days, and on Yom Kippur I would attend every service that was offered throughout the day, in what can only be described as a great emotional ordeal. What’s ironic to me now is that I can’t even remember what terrible sins I had committed in those days to bring on such a flood of remorse and guilt. And at some point in my life I burned out and rebelled against this self imposed ordeal, and found myself wanting to avoid the holiday all together as just too much misery.

Another reason, I think, that I view this season with some trepidation is its association with the academic calendar, the beginning of the school year, and in particular with a different kind of day of judgement: final exams. Although I’ve been out of school for many years now I don’t think I’ll ever escape the nightmares of it. You know how they go. You open up an exam book and realize to your horror that you haven’t attended any of the classes all semester and haven’t done any of the reading.

And actually this is one of the problems that I have each year with Yom Kippur. There’s too much material to cover... and I’m never sure exactly what’s going to be on the test. In the days of awe I’ll be hit with all these sudden realizations: gee, when was the last time I called my sister, or talked to my father in law? Why aren’t I exercising more? When was the last time I checked my cholesterol? Did I actually send a check this year to the Rape Crisis Center or did I just mean to...and forgot?

As the memory of my academic life recedes, however, another more current analogy comes to mind: the corporate annual performance review. Who shall live and who shall get reduced in force. Who shall get bonuses and stock options and who shall not.

Indeed, I think modern HR departments have taken the concept of days of awe and judgement and raised them to a level of sophistication and ruthlessness undreamt of in biblical days. By comparison, our high holidays seem relatively unstructured. It's not really clear what level of behavior Meets Expectations. The linkage between performance and subsequent rewards seems tenuous at best. And the documentation on job requirements is rather confusing and terribly out of date.

At least sometimes in the corporate world, judgement actually does come swiftly and surely, although some people always figure out how to game the system. And it kind of amuses me, at least where I work, how quick people are to make amends with each other for hurts committed in the past year, when they know that anyone still holding a grudge against them can take their vengeance during a peer review process. Instant karma indeed.

But it seems inadequate to just view Yom Kippur in terms of individual judgement and its modern analogues. In ancient times the collective aspect was much more dominant. The people assembled together in a great mass and the priests performed sacrifices and pleaded for forgiveness of the sins of the entire community. Now it could be argued that the people by and large got off pretty easy. The priests do most of the work – they perform some magic, send a goat off into the wilderness and suddenly you are cleansed of all sins and can go have a big party.

But on the other hand we have our entire prophetic tradition in which the people of Israel are called to task and threatened with any number of disasters if they do not turn from evil. The prophetic voice of judgement is tied inextricably to Yom Kippur with readings from both Jonah and Isaiah.

And of all the prophets I have to say Jonah is very dear to my heart because of his unabashed and total misanthropy. He knows that people are no damn good and he's certainly in no mood to forgive them for it. Look at what he does. He's asked to go to the great city of Nineveh to proclaim judgement upon it, and instead he runs as far away as possible. Only after being eaten by the whale does he follow through on his mission, and tell the people of Nineveh their city is going to be destroyed as punishment for their sins. So in fact the people of Nineveh do repent, and God forgives them and calls off doomsday.

What follows is to me absolutely hilarious: Jonah has a fit, a complete temper tantrum – he says: What kind of a God are you? Why why did you have to forgive these jerks? I knew that was going to happen! You're always so loving, so merciful, let me tell you, it makes me sick. That's why I tried to blow off this gig in the first place. I can't stand to see these people get off like this. Hello!? They're EVIL. You should have BLOWN THEM AWAY. Just, just kill me now, OK? Please.

[really, that's what he says! you can look it up!]

So now I have to admit a certain amount of sympathy for this guy. Part of what makes this holiday a bit difficult for me sometimes is I start thinking badly of other Jews. I don't like to think badly of other Jews but it happens. I think, has that person in the next row, really taken the time this year to repair all the wrongs they've done to their loved ones and associates? Or are they just here to dress up and schmooze a little bit with their friends?

I think I hit a height of alienation with organized Judaism one year when Rain was teaching at an area congregation that I will not name, and they gave us complementary tickets to the high holidays. So I went to Kol Nidre, and I figured that if I brought my ticket I certainly wouldn't need any money so I left my checkbook at home. BIG MISTAKE.

Unfortunately when I arrived I discovered that the tickets did not cover a charge of \$20 to rent the prayer books for the evening. I tried to explain my situation but I was out of luck. No money, no prayer book. So I went into the sanctuary took my tallit, put it over my head and just cried for a while. I sat through the whole service but nobody offered to share a siddur with me. I looked into the faces of the other congregants and I saw only strangers. I felt utterly alone.

Where did this feeling of alienation come from? I think for a number of young people there comes a time as you're growing up, it starts to dawn on you how much terrible suffering there is in the world, and how thoroughly rotten human beings have been to each other throughout history. And if you're of a certain sensitive temperament as I was, the awareness of all this suffering is almost too much to bear.

But what is really alarming is how other adults are able to go about their business so complacently, apparently unmoved by all this suffering. I think it's this dissonance that creates the feeling of alienation – of feeling oneself to be apart from the rest of humanity – and a sense of impatience and disgust very much like Jonah's.

And this gets back to the difficulty I've had with Yom Kippur. Not only have I found myself to be impatient, suspicious of other Jews attending the services, but the ordeals I used to go through stemmed in part from a basic inability to forgive even myself, much less other people.

This corrosive alienation can often be found among people who are otherwise very idealistic – and it makes us really bad at political organizing: Yes, Hi, I think I'm better than you, and I really don't like you very much at all, in fact I think a total collapse of industrial civilization would just make my day, but hey would you like to join our campaign?

This is basically Jonah's problem. He's so aware of whatever evils have occurred in Ninevah that he would actually enjoy seeing the whole place engulfed in flames. When

disaster does not strike he is seriously bummed out. It's like the folks who were looking forward to Y2K turning everything back to the stone age. What a let down that was!

Where does this idea of a judgement day come from. A sudden doom brought on by a powerful outside force, in response to our sins. Undoubtedly this goes back to the dawn of human history as people tried to make sense of terrible disasters such as floods and earthquakes, and assign a reason for them. In modern times, as belief in a traditional avenging God has weakened, sometimes robots or space aliens have come to the fore as surrogate deities.

In one of my favorite films, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, which was set right in Washington DC, the space aliens create a world wide power outage as a demonstration of their superiority – and then dispassionately explain to our assembled world leaders that our violent and destructive ways are not going to be tolerated, and if we persist in expanding into space in the same aggressive manner, then we will simply be exterminated by the galactic robo-cops.

One thing I find interesting about this film is that it was released in the 1950's, at a time when the Cold War and the threat of nuclear annihilation was very much on people's minds. So it makes me wonder, why did it even seem necessary to construct this kind of fable or allegory of threats from an extra terrestrial civilization – when the direct consequences of human destructiveness – the threat of a nuclear war – were so immediate and obvious?

There's a problem with the whole notion of prophecy and judgement today. It's that we've seen this movie before. A lot. For the past half century, as a human species we have become acutely aware of our potential capacity for self destruction – what Carl Sagan called our *technological adolescence* – a stage of development in which our power to cause irreparable harm to ourselves and to the planet has outstripped our capacities for tolerance, wisdom, empathy or cooperation. I could rattle off a lot of statistics to you about environmental impacts – habitat loss, climate change – or about human deaths from war, genocide and famine.

But I don't really have to. The book of Jonah says that the people of Ninevah started to repent almost immediately after Jonah started to speak to them. They knew in their hearts exactly what they had done wrong ... Jonah really only had to barely open his mouth and they knew already. Just as each of us knows in our hearts, at each Yom Kippur, where we have fallen short of our own personal ideals.

And we as Jews already know that it is only necessary for good people to do nothing for evil to triumph. We know for example that genocide is continuing to occur in Darfur, and that once again the response from the world community has not been adequate.

We know that by the end of this century a substantial percentage of species now alive will become extinct due to the activities of human beings. A mass extinction event of this scale has not been seen on this planet since 65 million years ago when an asteroid impact

caused a nuclear winter type effect and wiped out the dinosaurs. How can the mind even cope with the knowledge of a crime of such magnitude unfolding before our eyes – and by our own hands?

The problem is not that we don't know what's going on but that we know too much. Global media and the internet make it possible for us to be aware of suffering anywhere in the world, any time. It's easy to become overloaded with this awareness of suffering and to simply tune it out. The psychiatrist Robert J Lifton observed this phenomenon among survivors of the Hiroshima bombing and then more generally in people's response or lack of response to the threat of nuclear weapons. He called it '*psychic numbing*'.

Lifton considered this kind of closing off of emotion as a defence mechanism against being overwhelmed with grief -- a necessary phenomenon, but ultimately still pathological. But now this pathology has become part of the normal psychological state of most adults in modern society.

The novelist Barbara Kingsolver addresses this problem in an essay from her book *High Tide in Tucson*:

*Confronted with knowledge of dozens of apparently random disasters each day, what can a human heart do but slam its doors? No mortal can grieve that much. **We didn't evolve to cope with tragedy on a global scale.** Our defense is to pretend there's no thread of event that connects us, and that those lives are somehow not precious and real like our own. It's a practical strategy, to some ends, but the loss of empathy is also the loss of humanity, and that's no small tradeoff.*

[Kingsolver suggests that art, and specifically fiction, can be a vehicle to restore a sense of empathy.]

It lifts you away from your chair and stuffs you gentle down inside someone else's point of view. It differs drastically from a newspaper, which imparts information while allowing you to remain rooted in your own perspective. A newspaper could tell you that one hundred people, say, in an airplane, or in Israel, or in Iraq, have died today. And you can think to yourself, How Very Sad, then turn the page and see how the Wildcats fared. [Or in our case the Redskins.]

But a novel could take just one of those hundred lives and show you exactly how it felt to be that person rising from bed in the morning, watching the desert light on the tile of her doorway and on the curve of her daughter's cheek. You could taste that person's breakfast, and love her family, and sort through her worries as your own, and know that a death in that household will be the end of the only life that someone will ever have. As important as yours. As important as mine.

Of course, a personal narrative does not need to be fictionalized in order to reach us. Although it's horrible to admit it, I have to say that the tragedy a decade in Rwanda did become so real to me as when I saw the film of *Hotel Rwanda* that told the real life story

of the hotel manager Paul Rusesebagina and his struggle to save several hundred refugees from that genocide. Or consider the Paper Clips project of the school in Whitwell Tennessee, and the impact on those kids of having actual Holocaust survivors come to speak at their school.

Another example of a personal narrative bringing a global issue into human scale is a recent and fascinating book by Michael Pollan called *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. In this book Pollan traces the origins of four meals and makes his way through the entire modern industrial food system and all its problems.

What I found so engaging about this book is that Pollan is not alienated. He does not make himself morally superior to the reader. For one thing he's an unabashed meat eater. But at the same time Pollan does not shy away from looking at the various problems in the system that produces the food that most of us eat, including so called 'organic' food products, a system that he concludes is simply unsustainable. That's not a moral judgement, it's an observation. This system cannot last, and it will have to change.

But Perhaps because Pollan is so accessible, someone you can identify with, and because he does not harangue the reader that you must do X Y and Z, he makes it easier to take in the information. And in fact I notice that I have made some different choices in what kind of food I buy since reading his book.

Responding in an adequate fashion to broad environmental threats like species loss or climate change I think is particularly difficult. Just as Barbara Kingsolver said, humans did not evolve to cope with tragedy on a global scale. And it's even harder for us, I think, to connect the mundane and seemingly benign acts of our everyday lives with some global disaster that might unfold over the course of decades or centuries.

Suppose I get in my car one morning and I go out and get myself and get myself an Egg McMuffin. Well now I've burned some fossil fuel and contributed to global warming and some refugees from a drought or a hurricane a century from now will curse my name! If it's a summer day maybe I raised the local ozone alert level and helped give someone an asthma attack. And what about those eggs? Were they locally produced from happy free range antibiotic free chickens? I DON'T THINK SO. Well now I've got enough guilt on my head to last the whole day – I might as well go back to bed!

The absurdity of this situation could lead a person in one of two directions. One would be to shrug the whole thing off as ludicrous. "Hey, I just went and got myself some breakfast. I didn't do anything." This is what I would call the Denial approach. Another possibility would be to utterly condemn my actions as evil. This is what I would call the Jonah approach – one somewhat lacking in empathy or mercy. But which approach if any is correct?

And it's in the Jonah story that I find a key to this riddle. At the end of the story God is trying to get Jonah to understand his compassion for the people of Nineveh. He gets the last line in the book, saying, "should I not care about Nineveh, that great city, in which

there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not [yet] know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well!”

Now the standard interpretation of that phrase persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, is that God is referring to all the innocent babies in the city who should not be held responsible for the actions of their parents. But for me that phrase always carries a different resonance, as if God is in fact speaking about the entire population of Nineveh – indeed about the human condition.

Indeed in a moral sense we often do not know our right hand from our left. Our *yetzer hara* from our *yetzer hatov*. Our ethical senses seem to be only partially evolved, stunted and limited.

These limitations make us have difficulty connecting to horrible tragedies that are far away from us.

They cause us to simply stop feeling the suffering of others because we otherwise will not be able to go on living ourselves.

They make it difficult for us to respond to potential crises unless they are right in our faces.

These tendencies, these shortcomings, are not in any way excusable, and yet we cannot deny that they are part of human nature, part of our evolutionary, psychological and cultural programming.

To accept the fact that human beings are what we are, that we are so limited, so short sighted and foolish much of the time, to see humanity pretty much as a parent would see a two year old child who must be watched constantly – no that does not go in your mouth -- and no no that is not a toy – no you really should not hit your sister – to accept this is the essence of forgiveness, the lesson that God was trying to teach to Jonah, without much success.

And yet as humans we must realize with humility that despite all these limitations, these inadequacies, we are responsible for our actions or our inactions, that the alleviation of suffering, of hunger and misery and war and injustice and cruelty, and indeed the very fate of life on earth, that all of these are in our hands.