

Kol Nidre 5780

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Let's play a game.

I'm not promising you it's going to be a very fun game. It is Yom Kippur, after all - the moment we're implored to afflict ourselves, to make atonement for a year's, a lifetime's worth of regrets, those moments in our lives that pushed us to be better. Not exactly a time that is synonymous with fun. Still, for the very reason that we're meant to learn from our mistakes and the mistakes of others, I think this game will be a useful starting point for the reflection we're called upon to do at this time of year.

The game, which may be one only rabbis enjoy, is simply this: what biblical character are you? Who among the figures in our sacred stories resonates with you? Whose life has the potential to serve as a template for your own? Whose mistakes can you learn from?

Maybe you're Jacob. Member of a sibling rivalry. Beloved by mother. Still struggling to gain father's approval. Find yourself struggling with your angels or your demons, or whatever celestial figures inhabit you at the moment.

Perhaps you're Moses. Raised in privilege. Reluctant to take up the task you've been assigned. Constant wingeing, complaining the background soundtrack to your life. Getting a sense that you might never make that destination you struck out for and yet making your peace with wherever life takes you.

Maybe you're Rebecca. Would do anything for your child, to the point of deceiving your spouse to ensure that child gets what they need. Motherhood, parenthood, being the fundamental driving force in your life.

Which biblical character are you?

I'll tell you what. I'll go first.

In all seriousness, and without trying to be too melodramatic, this year, the biblical character with whom I most resonate is not an Israelite; it's Pharaoh.

I mean that not in some self-flagellating "I'm a terrible person" sense, or in some arrogant "the sun rises and sets with me" sense, (though I can certainly be susceptible to each of those impulses), but simply in the sense of one of the most frequently cited phrases in the story of the Exodus: vayeched et lev paroh, vayeched et lev paroh. Pharaoh's heart hardened, Pharaoh's heart stiffened, in reaction to the most recent turn of events in his world.

Some version of this heart hardening phrase appears no fewer than 15 times throughout the Exodus story. Exodus 7 When the Egyptian magicians matched the first plague turning water into blood, va'yechazak lev paroh, Pharaoh's heart stiffened.

The fifth plague, pestilence "all the livestock of the Egyptians died, but of the livestock of the Israelites not a beast died. Yet Vayichbad lev paroh, Pharaoh's heart hardened, and he would not let the people go.

Finally, Exodus 9 When Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, vayeched libo his heart stiffened and he would not let the Israelites go.

Again and again, we get this description of Pharaoh's heart hardening, heart stiffening in reaction to his world.

So what do I mean when I say this is the biblical character with whom I most resonate these days?

It's an admittedly harsh self assessment, especially given that the comparison point we're most used to seeing when it comes to pharaoh these days is with political figures, leaders who are violating the basic rights of their people. Truah, a Jewish non profit, distributes a popular sign to wave at protests that reads "resisting tyrants since pharaoh." That's the type of analogy we're used to seeing with Pharaoh. So how can I apply this to myself? What do I mean?

I mean, in the spirit of teshuvah, in the spirit of the self-reflection we're called upon to do at this time of year, this description of Pharaoh, his heart hardening, his heart stiffening in the face of events that would seem poised to overwhelm him, hits all too close to home.

I mean this with respect to three arenas in my life.

I mean this on an intimate level with respect to my family, my friends, and my loved ones.

I mean this on a societal level with respect to the world around us and the bevy of news events that inundate us on a daily basis.

And I mean this on a cosmic level with respect to my relationship to, my relationship with, the divine. God. Adonai.

First, the intimate level with my family, friends, and loved ones.

I am not good at receiving love. Despite my yearning for it, despite the natural longing for love that all of us experience, our need to be nourished by it, buoyed by it, surrounded by it, I have a pronounced tendency to mistrust it.

I mistrust its endurance, mistrust whether it is actually here to stay, that just because it's here one moment, doesn't mean it'll be here the next.

I mistrust its goodness, mistrust whether it is truly the thing that should be fueling me, as opposed to, say, drive or ambition or success.

And I mistrust its power, mistrust whether it will overwhelm me, whether if I let it in it will reduce me to a puddle, leaving me unkempt, complacent.

And so, in the face of love, in the face of words of affirmation or hugs or warmth or closeness, in the face of someone reaching out to tell me what I mean to them, often, not always, but often, I filter that love out. I keep it at bay. My heart stiffens a little bit. I become, dare I say, Pharaoh.

This is also true with sadness and loss. Now, when a loved one shares their sadness with me, I am good at being present for them. I will fly across the country for them. I show up. I listen. I make space for them. I don't interject with platitudes "like you're going to be ok," or "you'll find the silver lining." I make space for their pain.

But when it comes to the next step in a devoted, caregiving process, the step of empathizing, of temporarily but meaningfully taking in their sadness myself, (Empathy, after all, comes from the greek "em," into; "pathos," feeling, traveling into their feelings) when it comes to experiencing their sadness myself, my wall tends to subtly come up. I'm present on the outside, but taking in their sadness would mean I'd have to interact with my own. "I don't want to do that," my body, my soul seems to say. So, unconsciously but impactfully, I draw up my drawbridge and reside in my fortress. I listen but tend I filter out feeling. I stiff arm emotion. Sometimes, I become, dare I say, Pharaoh.

If you know me, then you know there's not a lot of mystery as to where these habits, these what I'm calling Pharaoh-like instincts come from. The patterns are similar in many so many of us. They tend to be echoes from our past. Survival instincts we learned when we were young that served us well then but that now seem to impede our progress of becoming more fully human.

My own story is familiar to many of you. In my ongoing work of teshuvah, it comes up every year. A father who died suddenly and unexpectedly, four months after being ordained as a rabbi at age 35, collapsing at a Philadelphia train station, leaving behind my mother and three young children. I was seven, my sister Sophie was 4, and Henya was one month old. My newborn daughter Lila is already three months older than Henya was then, and I'm a year older than he was.

It hits all too close to home, and yet, as I reflect on this, I notice a certain numbness, a certain protective shell, I suppose a pharaoh-like response even while identifying it.

I'm not trying to be too hard on myself. In some ways it's entirely understandable. More than that it was probably necessary. In the turbulence of the aftermath of his passing, my family endured a quick remarriage and divorce, two planned moves across the country, three schools in four years, and a general, albeit unconscious, sense that nothing lasts and everything is temporary.

We all have elements from our past that still impact us.

It's no wonder some of us developed a pronounced ability to go numb. Why trust love when it's so tenuous? Why nurture emotionality when it was stoicism and the ability to go along to get along that was of value?

It recalls the attorneys I worked with at the San Francisco City Attorney's Office who were tasked with representing social workers who sought to protect abused and neglected children. Investigating countless horrific cases a year they developed what they referred to as gallows humor, cracking jokes and making light of their cases even while the heaviness was not lost on them.

This is not only understandable but natural and evolutionary. As Psychologist Peter Levine writes, freezing in the face of threat, whether physical or emotional, is something we have long learned, something that has long been encoded into our dna. Freezing, numbing, limits the amount of pain we feel. And it can even save our lives -- think of the opossum playing dead leading the predator to look right past it. Freezing is one of the live saving mechanisms many species, including ours, have honed.

And yet, for so many of us, freezing, numbing, hardening, has come to be the default setting for us as we journey through life. We can't turn it off. Our inner pharaohs have taken hold.

And this comes with a heavy, heavy cost. Not only for those around us, who obviously want to feel like they're truly connecting to us and relating to us, like they can make an impression on us -- but for ourselves as well. When you develop a hard shell, when you filter out emotions, you do so not with a scalpel, but with a hammer. Filtering out hurt and pain means you're filtering out joy and connection as well.

Considering the synonymousness of joy and life in Jewish tradition, it means you are filtering out, you are eclipsing, life itself.

It's Yom Kippur. I don't want to do that anymore. I don't want to be Pharaoh.

I can be forgiving with myself, compassionate with myself, understanding that there was a reason I developed this protective shell, this inner wall, but I also can identify a different direction. That I want to let in more love, and yes, more sadness because it's that emotional vibrancy that makes life holy.

Fortunately, Jewish tradition, I think, offers us a pathway forward.

It starts with choice. In some ways the entire Jewish system is premised on choice, and that yes, we do indeed have the capacity to change and evolve. We are not predetermined by what we once knew despite how ingrained those habits may seem now.

In the aftermath of the Tree of Life Massacre this past year, I cited the words of Moses, who, speaking to the Israelites when they are on the precipice of the holy land, says "I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life—that you and your offspring may live."

Choose. They had choice.

Who had been through more trauma than the Israelites in this moment? Generations of genocide and slavery in Egypt, an at best erratic and at worse distrustous trek through the desert for forty years. Who would have been more inclined to be mistrusting and hardhearted than the Israelites at this point in time? Would have been entirely understandable.

And yet Moses named for them what was inherently true: They had choice. They could choose life.

That's endemic to the theology of the Yamim Noraim, the days of awe, too. That we do indeed, our tradition says, have the power to course correct. Teshuvah Tefilah

U'tzedakah mavirin et roah ha g'zerah. Repentance, prayer and acts of justice, we chant each year, have the power to affect the course of our lives.

No one made this more clear than Pharaoh himself. Pharaoh had choice.

He didn't choose his circumstances. He didn't even choose to have his heart harden initially. God did: וַיִּחַזֶּק יְהוָה אֶת־לֵב פַּרְעֹה. "God hardened Pharaoh's heart" is what the text initially says. Not, Pharaoh's heart hardened, but God hardened Pharaoh's heart. God was the one who initially made Pharaoh so numb.

This is synonymous, to me, with the notion that that we don't choose the circumstances into which we are born. Pharaoh was born into challenging circumstances. The head is heaviest that wears the crown. His head is in the crosshairs of every neighboring army surrounding him, playing the ultimate game of thrones. In the very first chapter of Exodus we read his fear. "in the event of war," he worries "the Israelites may join our enemies in fighting against us". We can hear the backdrop of fear and existential threat in those words. His life, and the life of his people is on the line. God hardened Pharaoh's heart. The circumstances of his life hardened his heart.

But demography is not destiny. The sheer fact of this threat did not need to determine Pharaoh's enduring reaction. There were other responses beyond heart hardening -- there was allyship and trust and love.

Which is why there is a subtle shift in the text at times from God hardening Pharaoh's heart to Pharaoh's heart hardening itself.

We ultimately have a choice. Pharaoh had a choice. And he chose not to do anything about his ever calcifying heart, and rather to let it inexorably solidify.

We have similar choices. I have a similar choice. I can choose to let in more love, scary as that prospect might be to me.

I can choose to accept more bids for affection from my loved ones. Those subtle moments when my loved ones invite me in, showing me they care. When they say something kind, I can let it penetrate. Nourish my soul. Rather than say, “they don’t mean it”, or “those aren’t the exact words I was looking for,” I can let it in. I can sit with it. I can accept love.

We have choice.

I can choose to listen to my body. Our bodies are often the best signifiers of when we go numb. It’s literal. We can notice that little tightening in our hearts, that slight tensing in our shoulder blades, that subtle solidifying of our cheeks when presented with what we perceive to be a threatening moment. Our body keeps the score, it tells us through our felt sense what our initial response might be to a moment. When we notice those instinctual bodily reactions, which are a natural part of the human condition, a field of choices become available to us. We can choose to intensify those sensations, intensify the wall, the protective measures, doubling down--a tack that has been, unconsciously, the chosen route most of my life; or we can choose to soften them, letting the love flow, allowing ourselves to be moved, trusting in the power of the life force between us.

And finally we can choose to not judge ourselves harshly when we’re not always able to make the right choice. One of my favorite teachings from the Talmud is when the rabbis ask themselves, whether God God’s self prays. Yes, they say. God prays that God’s sense of mercy and compassion overcomes God’s sense of strict judgment.

So may it be with ourselves. We catch more flies with honey than vinegar. When we wish change for ourselves, we're better served by treating ourselves with compassion, understanding it will be two steps forward, one step back; being gentle with ourselves about the difficulties of changing lifelong habits. Trusting the process of desire for and commitment to change.

So, for the coming year, with my loved ones, may I no longer be pharaoh. May contemporary references to pharaoh be restricted to references to society at large.

Which brings us to the second arena in which I often feel Pharaoh-like. Our world today.

Oh what a world we live in.

One day it's reports of deplorable conditions at our border, children separated from their families; the next it's stories of a climate in peril, seas and temperatures rising, biodiversity and quality of life declining. A third we wake up to reports of innocent lives lost, shot in parks and playgrounds and schools, events made all too easy by readily available weapons of war.

It's enough to put a strain on even the most resilient psyche. As, frankly, it should.

In response to all of this, this seemingly unrelenting stream of negative news, I, like so many others, I'm afraid, go numb. My heart stiffens, hardens, I become, ever so slightly, like Pharaoh.

I don't want to be too hard on myself. This is a common phenomenon these days. While I don't think it's worthwhile to compare whether things are worse now than they've ever been before--surely there were unspeakable horrors in 1492 or 1619 or

1943--what is different now is that, given the way we get our information, we're flooded by a constant stream of updates regarding the globe's calamities in ways we never have before. We're drinking from the firehose. Our phones light up every time there's a new catastrophe; headlines on news screens blare out the latest tragedy, our facebook feeds go on 'til infinity. We're inundated with adversity.

In some ways it's no wonder we go numb. How else can we cope?

And yet, we know that's not a sufficient response. We know the world demands so much more of us than that, our consciences demand so much more of us than that, our Jewish tradition demands more of us than that.

וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶּן חוֹרֵין לְבַטֵּל מִמְּנָהּ לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לְגַמֵּר

In a teaching that has been cited so often as to sound trite and yet which has never been more relevant, Rabi Tarfon taught two thousand years ago that it is not upon you to complete the work, but neither are you free to exempt yourself from it.

In a sense, this teaching addresses the very situation with which we are confronted: a world whose problems seem so vast that by their nature they would appear to overwhelm us; to stop us in our tracks; to freeze us. To have us go Pharaoh-like. And yet to which he has a response. Engage. You must engage. You can't let the scale of the problems daunt you, freeze you, numb you. You have to engage.

In some ways, it's the ancient equivalent to the contemporary statement from anthropologist Margaret Mead which says, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

Small contributions matter.

Not token contributions. Not dipping your toe in the water and saying “I’ve done my part.” But small contributions with impact in the aggregate: voting; monthly donations; volunteer work; activism. Waking ourselves up.

I’ll tell you how the numbing process has manifested in me and how I need to wake myself up. It’s not that I avoid the news. I don’t. If anything, I’m something of a news junkie and have been for a lot of my life. I’m constantly listening to podcasts and checking the headlines, scanning twitter and scrolling through facebook. I crave being informed.

And yet in all this news consumption, all this staying informed, I find myself steering away from the stories that talk about real people and their lives. The stories of individual people and how the events of the world really impact them. When there is a mass shooting (and it’s tragic that I have to say “when” not “if”) I find myself steering away from the obituaries, the beautiful stories of lives fully lived, lives touched, and towards the stories about the machinations of politicians, the legislative process, the back and forth tussle of red versus blue.

Don’t get me wrong, the latter is important. Rabbi Winokur likes to quote Martin Luther King Jr. for the notion that “love without power is sentimental and anemic. And that power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice.” Who wins elections matters immensely. Immensely. Legislation and executive action have the power to affect millions of lives for better or for worse. I am in no way suggesting it’s not relevant or important to follow the latest developments in Washington. But when I focus on red team versus blue team at the expense of what is happening out there in the world, the

country, my community, how individual lives are impacted, getting in touch with their stories, I believe I remain numb.

When I worked for AmeriCorps vista, a program designed to help alleviate domestic poverty, My boss would say that when making the case for your cause, you should never tell a story without giving a statistic and never give a statistic without telling a story.

Well I've long had the statistics part down. This cold, arms length approach to engaging with world events has long suited me. Made me feel informed while allowing me to be not too emotionally invested. Statistics like the fact that the average number of gun deaths per million people in advanced countries is something like four and in the United States it's seven times that. Or statistics like the fact that we have just five percent of the world's population but 25 percent of the world's prison population. I was an Economics major, I've long been comfortable with statistics.

But until now, I've been finding myself steering away from stories. It was Joesf Stalin who said that a single death is a tragedy, and a million is a statistic. To truly grasp the tragedy of what is taking place around us, to truly make sure we're invested in the work, to wake ourselves up, I think we need to supplement our statistics with stories. Like the story of the couple whose 18-year-old son was killed in the Parkland Florida school shooting, and who, in order to honor him, traveled to, of all places, El Paso, Texas to support children being held in detention centers there, only to have found themselves in the exact site of the next mass shooting. Or the story of the young man who was convicted of possession and distribution of about \$200 worth of marijuana and sentenced to 40, 40, years in prison.

It's Yom Kippur and I don't want to avoid these stories anymore. Engaging with them doesn't mean I'll singlehandedly complete the work of fixing them. But I believe doing so will help make sure I don't exempt myself from it either. I don't want to nurture my inner Pharaoh and neglect my inner Nathan. I want to be fully human. As it says in Leviticus 19,

קְדָשִׁים תִּהְיוּ כִּי קָדוֹשׁ אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם: You shall be holy, for I, the LORD your God, am holy. I want to live up to that statement.

Which brings me to the final arena in which I have become like pharaoh.

My relationship with, my relationship to, God, the divine, the Holy.

I hope this final section is relevant to you, even if you don't consider yourself someone who believes in some notion of God.

What is God, after all.

God is a word. A word which is insufficient to fully encapsulate any underlying thing that it seeks to describe and that could never be fully expressed by any linguistic device or metaphor. It's the thing that we are hovering over when we use the word God that pulses through all existence, that serves as the source of creation, that animates our every breath and our every utterance, and that blasts forth when we need it most. That's what we're getting at when we use the word God but even that fails utterly in its articulation.

Our ancestors understood this difficulty in encapsulating the Holy, which is why the most common expression of the word for God in the Torah is simply four letters -- YHVH. Four letters which we have no idea how to pronounce, but which form a cognate of--a word related to--the word for existence. In some ways, those four letters are a

linguistic shoulder shrug. They are our ancestors' way of saying, we want to articulate our reverence for and our relation to the source of our existence but we have no proper way to do that, nor could we ever, so we will have a symbolic representation of that unknowableness. YHVH.

Still, though, a shoulder shrug is ultimately experientially unsatisfying, which is why our ancestors also articulated such a rich bevy of stories in which God, in which YHVH is a character, a being that acts and thinks and talks and feels, which brings me to my last space of numbness.

My own relationship to God, to YHVH. Now, I have what I consider to be a personal relationship to this thing we reverentially call YHVH. This might sound unsurprising coming from a rabbi, but in this post-Holocaust, 21st century world, I would argue that a lot of non-Orthodox rabbis are quite uncomfortable with this straightforward, perhaps old-fashioned conception of the divine. God is ethics, said French Jewish Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. God is the force that makes for salvation, says founder of Reconstructionism Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan. God is a process, says Conservative Denizen Rabbi Bradley Artson each finding a description of God that, while beautiful, veers away from the personal.

While these metaphors are going to work for some, and the last thing I'd want you to do is discard a metaphor, a conception of God that works for you, I confess I sometimes find them a bit... sterile, numb. I need something that I consider to be more alive, something with which I can connect. And most of all, I need what, for me, feels... real.

So for a long time, I've gone back to the basics. My relationship with God is not unlike what I find in our ancient texts. The author of the psalms, in, for instance, Psalm 109 relates to God in the following manner.

עֲזֶרְנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי הוֹשִׁיעֵנִי כַחֲסִדְךָ

Help me, O LORD, my God; save me in accord with Your faithfulness.

A genuine plea, a direct cry for help from the divine

אֶהְבֶּתִּי כִּי־יִשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת־קוֹלִי תַחֲנוּנָי

I love Adonai for God hears my voice, my pleas; the psalmist says in psalm 116,

כִּי־הִטָּה אָזְנוֹ לִי וּבִימֵי אֶקְרָא

God turns God's ear to me whenever I call.

This approach, rooted in our ancient texts, is how I tend to experience God.

Now, I also want to be clear about what I don't experience, what I don't believe: I don't believe in a God who intervenes on someone's behalf simply because that God deems them more or less worthy than someone else. I don't believe in a world in which good works or acts of faith guarantees you good fortune or blessing or long life. I don't believe in a God who operates that way. We know of too many innocents who have suffered to justify that sort of belief.

What I do believe is that when I call out for guidance, or in gratitude, or in sadness, I feel a reverberation at the other end of the line. It's as though I send out a flare, a cry for help, and a flare shoots right back up with a signal behind it that says, I'm here. I may not be able to make things right on our physical plane, it says, but I am your strength, your rock, your life force. Lean on me. Be with me.

This is my conception of the divine.

So after all this, you might ask, “in what sense do you mean your relationship to God is numb? It sounds pretty vibrant,” You might say. “Your conception of God may not resonate for me” you might be thinking, or maybe it does, “but it doesn’t sound numb. How could this be numb, or pharaoh-like?”

Well, because, as may be apparent from my description of this, it’s grown prideful. Stale. I’ve become complacent about this relationship, not tending to it, leaving it on the shelf to collect dust.

I’m here most every week -- leading services. Theoretically I’ve created space in my life for the relationship. I’ve put a regular date night on the calendar. And when I sit down to write, I certainly have some space to let the relationship unfold. But more often than not, I allow myself to be too distracted to caught up in the here and now to reflect on the cosmos. Too preoccupied by what’s urgent to focus on what’s important.

So what up to this point had served as one of the focal points in my life, my center of gravity, has gotten shunted off to the side, collecting that proverbial dust.

It is important that we shake things up. That we continue to rejuvenate the relationship, continue to turn it over and examine it. To invite insight from multiple sources. My theology over the years has been informed by everyone from my Islamic studies professor Hoamyra Ziad to best selling hip hop artist Kanye West. 18th century rabbi Nachman of Bratzlov to 21st century rabbi Josh Bolton. The list should continue.

My exhortation to you this Yom Kippur, no matter your conception of the divine, even if that conception includes the absence of one, is don’t let that conception, that relationship, grow stale, calcify, grow numb. Don’t be pharaoh with respect to your relationship to the divine. It’s too important. It can’t collect dust on the shelf.

Far be it from me to be directive with respect to the nature of the shape that this relationship will take for you, but let it go somewhere. Let it ever renew. We are Am Yisrael, after all. The nation of Israel. The group of people that got up from Egypt and shlepped out to the promised land who was referred to as an erev rav a mixed multitude, a collective band of miscreants and idealists, dissenters and rabble rousers, am yisrael -- the name yisrael, of course, comes from the episode when our ancestor Jacob wrestled with the angel of God, sarah, wrestled, with el with God. That is our legacy, in perpetual wrestling mode. Wrestling entails effort, striving, resisting, give and take, back and forth -- the opposite of complacency, self-satisfaction, pride, hardening. The opposite of numbness, stiffness, calcification, Pharaoh.

Don't be pharaoh. Be you. With love. Shanah Tovah.