

## Getting Comfortable with Our Discomfort

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Kol Nidre, 5781

In the spring of 2012, during the week when Jews were marking the festival of Passover and Christians were celebrating the holiday of Easter, comedian Jon Stewart, then still the host of TV's The Daily Show, publicly bemoaned his efforts to raise children whose parents came from each of these sister faiths. Pretending to instruct his children on the traditions of Easter, Stewart noted, "Easter weekend is an observation of [Jesus]'s crucifixion and resurrection, so...a basket with candy! We got chocolate bunnies, we got candy eggs, we got chocolate bunnies who lay candy eggs filled with more chocolate!"

Then, lamenting the need to present the Jewish corollary to his children at that season, Jon quipped: "Jews, whadda we got? We're celebrating our freedom from slavery so...We coulda gone with a freedom-themed festival. Instead we chose to focus on the slavery part of the dinner. Hey five-year-olds...basket filled with candy and jelly beans or horseradish still in root form?...Which egg am I going to go for, the one filled with chocolate or the one filled with egg? Cause that's what slaves ate...taste it. Before you eat it, be sure to dip it in salt water. It represents the tears of your ancestors. Oh, good I see you're making more."<sup>1</sup>

I remember laughing hard at Jon's juxtaposition of the two faiths' spring holidays and their radically different treatment. Myself the father of a 3 and a 5-year-old at the time, I understood his struggle to make our Jewish holiday celebrations accessible, comfortable, and fun for young ones. But the rabbi in me knew that Jon might be fighting an uphill battle here because, while there is much sweetness in Rosh Hashanah, great celebration in Sukkot, boundless light in Chanukah, laughter in Purim, and joy in Simchat Torah, fun and ease are not the main points of any of these holidays. And the holy day which we now begin - this Sabbath of Sabbaths known as Yom Kippur - well, it seems downright crafted to evoke discomfort in us.

Rather than feasting, we deprive ourselves of food and drink altogether for 24 hours. Traditionally, Jews avoid any creature comforts on this day...no wearing leather, no perfumes or colognes, no sprucing ourselves up. In a typical year, we spend almost the entire day in synagogue, sitting and standing through aches and cramps, the

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<sup>1</sup> The Daily Show with Jon Stewart April 9, 2012

temperature either way-too-hot or way-too-cold depending on your seat and internal thermostat, heavy prayer books in hand and stomachs rumbling.

And the stated purpose of our coming together today? To confront all of the things we each did wrong over the past year that we'd much prefer to just forget and let go...to approach those whom we've hurt, make ourselves vulnerable and ask their forgiveness...to begin the day by emptying the ark of its Torah scrolls during the recitation of Kol Nidrei so that we might all stare into a big empty box - an allusion to the grave - a reminder to us of our mortality, that our short lives are precious, and that we are likely not living them to their full potential. Sorry, Jon Stewart...this holy day is about as far as one can get from chocolate bunnies laying candy eggs filled with more chocolate. We might as well call it Yom Discomfort.

Why would we do this? Why would we dedicate the holiest day of our year to making ourselves so uncomfortable in such a wide variety of ways? I would suggest that it is in keeping with a tradition that has always been concerned about what will become of us if we grow too comfortable in our day-to-day lives.

Moses already intuited this reality by the Torah's end. The Israelites were completing their journey to the Promised Land, an adventure that had been rife with challenges: extreme hunger, thirst, physical and emotional fatigue and threats that ranged from wild beasts to foreign armies. They did all of this in the name of building better lives for themselves and their children...lives that would not be shackled by the burdens of slavery, nor the exigencies of homeless wandering. They endured what they needed to endure in order to create a brighter future for the generations to come, just as so many of our own parents, grandparents, and great grandparents did for our sake.

And yet, before their homecoming mission is even complete, Moses foresees a different kind of problem that will arise for those future generations of Israelites. He warns the people: "When you have eaten your fill, and have built fine houses to live in, and your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold have increased, and everything you own has prospered, beware...lest your heart grow proud and arrogant, and you forget God who freed you from bondage in Egypt and fed you with manna in the wilderness."<sup>2</sup>

There seems to be a happy medium - an ideal middle ground - to which Moses wants to guide our people. Clearly, he does not wish for us to continue suffering as desert

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<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 8:11-16

wanderers, without the security of food-bearing land, homes, livelihoods, possessions, or defense. Were that Moses' hope for his people, he could simply have left them there in the wilderness. But now that they are on the verge of achieving those goals - and so much more - Moses fears our future prosperity will sever us from the moral and ethical roots that got us here in the first place. "Be careful," I imagine him saying, "of getting too comfortable, self-satisfied, or at ease. If you do, you'll lose sight of the values that made you who you are."

Now, to be clear, I do not believe that our Judaism relishes suffering or promotes misery for the sake of finding meaning in it. While we must all live through times of real pain - physical, psychological, or emotional - this is neither a goal to seek out nor a means to a noble end in our tradition. To the contrary, Judaism is replete with communal structures, practices, and rituals to minimize such suffering and bring one another added comfort in these circumstances.

The kind of desirable discomfort of which I speak is something else, but we tend to skillfully avoid it just as adeptly as we do those other afflictions. It is the unease that comes with admitting one's own ignorance, and we avoid it by posturing or avoiding settings that challenge us. It is the churning stomach that accompanies a possibility of embarrassment or rejection, and we avoid it by remaining quiet, observing from a safe corner rather than taking the steps that would move us forward.

It is the aversion to being laughed at for our beliefs, and we avoid it by only listening to people who reinforce our views and only speaking with those who already hold them.

It is the fear of what we'll discover if we engage too long in an exploration of our true worldviews, motivations, and biases, and we avoid it by busying ourselves, distracting ourselves, and assuming we must be better than we fear we might be. It will not kill us to engage in any of these activities, yet many of us have built up fortresses around ourselves to guard against situations that might challenge us in these ways or put our imperfections on display.

But those are walls worth tearing down, and doing so may be the very answer to our own challenges in the year ahead. Brene Brown taught the 50 million of us who watched her TED Talk on the Power of Vulnerability<sup>3</sup>, that her research on courage and shame yielded two groups of people : those who have a sense of worthiness, a strong sense of love and belonging and folks who struggle for those things and always wonder

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_the\\_power\\_of\\_vulnerability#t-832417](https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability#t-832417)

if they're good enough. We clearly want to be in the first group, so what separates the two?

Those in the first group who are living what Brown calls "wholehearted lives" had the courage to be imperfect and the willingness to embrace vulnerability. For some people, this comes naturally, and for others of us, it is a struggle. As she notes: vulnerability is at "the core of shame, and fear, and our struggle for worthiness, but it's also the birthplace of joy, creativity, of belonging, of love." In other words, making ourselves vulnerable is hard - risky even, but it's the good kind of hard, the kind that pays big dividends in the long run like tackling a new project, learning a new skill, or achieving a fitness goal.

This is why Yom Kippur comes to disrupt our normal patterns and propels us into discomfort of body, soul, and mind. This holy day knows that we've just begun a new year of life and that our hearts are open - for at least a few days - to charting a new path forward. This day demands that we make the most of that opportunity and not only pray but act.

But how do we know what is in need of address? How can each of us ascertain the work that we need to do? I recommend we each start by asking ourselves, "What is it that I've been avoiding? Procrastinating. Telling myself I ought to get around to but just haven't found the time." Begin there.

Perhaps it's related to your health...the exercise that you wanted to start, the eating habits you've been meaning to adjust, the therapist you've been intending to find. Is there something about starting that makes you feel uneasy? What kind of courage would it require for you to take the first step? The second?

Maybe you've been putting off telling someone how you feel because doing so would make you vulnerable to judgement or rejection. But, if that relationship matters to you, isn't that a conversation worth having? What is the real risk, and isn't the potential reward so much greater?

Or, perhaps you've been staying on the sidelines as racial tensions boiled over in our country this summer, meaning to do some more reading on systemic racism but haven't quite gotten around to it, intending to lend hands and voice to the good fight but hesitant to step in. We may be wary. What if we say or do the wrong thing, which we almost certainly will? Or, worse yet, what if the learning and listening we do prompts us to see ourselves differently? Many of us who have thought ourselves wholly on the right side

of racial justice issues for decades are being challenged to consider whether we've truly been the allies we thought ourselves to be. We've been asked to reflect on the ways in which we may have benefited from - or even perpetuated - systems of discrimination in our communities. Talk about conversations likely to evoke discomfort, but - if we aren't willing to engage in uncomfortable discussions for the sake of ensuring people's basic rights - to guarantee our neighbors the same freedoms and liberties which set our people on a journey to the Promised Land in the first place - then haven't we become the people Moses feared we might? Too self-assured or self-absorbed to attend to our covenant which committed us to love for our neighbor, care for the stranger, and justice for the oppressed?

Yom Kippur is here to tear down our walls of guardedness and urge us to confront the important matters in need of address. To make ourselves uncomfortable for the sake of a greater good. The day brings with it the story of Jonah, the prophet who was charged with the task of telling the people of Nineveh to change their ways and responded by fleeing in the other direction. All too often, we are Jonah. We know the direction in which we are being called, and we know what we ought to do, but we'd much rather run the other way, even if that lands us in the belly of a whale at the bottom of the sea.

Perhaps, then, 5781 ought to be the year of dedicating ourselves to getting more comfortable with being uncomfortable. And so we pray, O God, grant us the strength to lean into our imperfections and vulnerabilities and accept them as part of a life well-lived. Help us to embrace our unease when it is being experienced for the sake of a greater good. Bless us with the ability to push ourselves past our fear and self-doubt so that we can live full, courageous, wholehearted lives. Help us to be the people we strive to be - to ourselves, to our friends and families, and to our world. And, to that, we can all say, Amen!