

The Cone and Kol Nidrei: Living with Uncertainty
Erev Yom Kippur/Kol Nidrei 5780
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We hold in our hands devices of such power previous generations could hardly have imagined them. So much information in our quest to make sense of the world.

And there are things, of course, we do want to know. This time of year, we watch the weather all the time. All of us have favorite apps we turn to for the latest updates and information. Mine is My Radar.

My Radar features an expandable map, and the clearest depiction of a path from yesterday into tomorrow, of that...thing that sends shivers down my spine. But I realized, recently, that for two years I have been calling it by the wrong name. The item I stare at and study like it's a text of Talmud is not named a path of probability. It is, in fact, called the Cone of Uncertainty.

All Jewish communities come together for this moment. This night, in dimmed light, we recite one of the strangest prayers in any spiritual setting, anywhere: *B'yeshiva shel mala, u'v'yishiva shel mata, al da'at haMakom, v'al da'at haKahal...* In the academy on high, and the assembly on earth, with a sense of Eternity, and the power of community...we come together now. *Kol Nidrei, v'esarai, v'chamei, v'konamei, v'kinuyei, v'kinusei, u'shavu'ot...* All vows, resolutions, commitments, abjurations, obligations, promises and dedications..."

What happens next, though, depends on who you are, or where you are from. Are we sinners, or prophets? In some Sephardic settings, we ask for annulment of vows which...we have *already* failed to fulfill. The Aramaic formula seeks forgiveness for promises we broke... “*between last Yom Kippur, and this one.*” We look back, to what we know we have done.

That is not, however, what we said here tonight. Our congregation is Sephardic in origin; perhaps our plea was once for retrospective relief. But the standard Ashkenazi version of this formula begs for release, seeks leniency for what is yet to be. “*Miyom Kippurim zeh... ad Yom Kippurim haBa.* From *this* Yom Kippur... until the next one.”

We look ahead. We peer into the unknown. We assume, no, we *know* that we will slip, we will stumble, there will be a gap between our words and our deeds, our promises and our action. But we do not know how, or where, or when or what.

In this way we say we know we don't know. Or, perhaps, we know *that* we do not know.

Uncertainty. What we do not know. To understand the importance of coming to grips with such a state, we return, again, to a historical and spiritual divide, the great differences in attitude and outlook between the people of the Bible and us.

You have heard me already address one such difference: the people of the Bible come close to God by killing sheep; we do so by *reading about* them killing sheep. The first is a lived act, sympathetic magic; the second requires a literary imagination. Their mode of spirituality was a barbeque; ours is a book.

But there are deeper differences as well. The most basic: we have something the people of the Bible did not have. It is true by definition. What is it that we have, that they did not? It is...a Bible. It is difficult to overstate just how important that distinction is!

But they, too, if we step into their world, had something we do not. Try to feel what they felt! With sheep and goats and fire and blood and smoke and altar, with the Temple standing and priests in charge, there was pattern and purpose. They *knew* what to do! This is what you did when you wanted to be close God! If you need forgiveness. To give thanks. If you want the clouds to come and the crops to grow and there to be food on your plate next year. You follow the rules, you adhere to the procedure and the system works. Answers given; atonement automatic. God was there. It was a world of assurance, security, certainty.

More: there were tricks and trinkets, ways to determine destiny and find your way forward. In the hands of the High Priest were the *umim* and *tumim*, some kind of oracular instruments, to use and garner advice on war and peace and the wisdom of particular policies. There was the *Sotah* ritual, a foul-tasting drink used to establish the fidelity of a suspected adulteress.

But the Second Temple, like the First, came tumbling down. Smoke and incense ceased, the flames of the altar went out. God's house lay in ruins. With it went any sense of easy religious confidence. The curtain closed, closeness over, God gone, as it were, from our midst. Miracles ended, priests were out of work, even the prophets went mute, the Divine Voice muffled. The implements of determination were lost; the rituals of certainty seemed like so much hocus pocus now. Distance approached. Intimacy with the Eternal, the immediacy of the Presence was shrouded behind mist and mystery.

Our whole tradition could have ended, then. A miracle that it did not. But it was, forever after, something very different.

Many people, believers and skeptics alike, see the primary purpose of religion as providing answers. I'm...not so sure.

First of all, so much of what we often hear when people need answers seems simplistic, superficial, superstitious, even, occasionally offensive. A plane crashes. But your cousin, stuck at a light, missed the flight. God protected her! Really? And everyone else on board, they just... deserved it? A hurricane veers from here but hits over there. Thank God! Really? But the Talmud teaches, if we see smoke on our street as we are headed home, we are forbidden to pray that it is a fire someone else's house!

But even more than bristling at the smugness and false-comfort that comes from those who claim to know it all, I just think that faith in this kind of faith is... well, look, obviously it works for a lot of people. But something seems off to me. We are asking a spiritual tradition to do something which, maybe, it is not meant to do!

In some ways, post-Biblical religion, what we call Judaism is, well, yes, it is still about asking questions, and yes, it still seeks meaning. But now, I believe, our tradition teaches how to live with uncertainty.

We are here, in this place, to step out of time for a day, and step back in, we hope and pray, different in some way. But look around at the world! What do we see? There have been harsher times, but tension and strife seem rampant and intense right now. Passions pull us apart. The very fabric of a unified community is frayed.

Paralyzed by division and indecision, many places, all over the world, are going nowhere, fast. Israel may yet go to a third election. Not inevitable, but not impossible. The UK can't decide who, or what, or even where it is. I know we can see part of the British Empire from some of our homes, but is it in Europe, or not? Even our very polite neighbors to the north are basically split right down the middle, fit to be tied – literally tied -- in their coming choice.

And in these Divided States of America? Words grow from hot to worse, inane to insane. How low can we go? Terms like “treason,” and “civil war” are dangerous. And rising populist autocrats wherever they are -- maybe they all need Kol Nidrei, for promises made they can’t possibly keep.

How will we manage, how handle such a messy world? Where do we turn, what is our bridge over troubled waters?

In the Western world many people pray, and turn to Scripture, too, for insight and comfort. Obviously our entire tradition flows from the Torah.

But without direct Divine Guidance... we may talk to God on a regular basis, but rarely get a clear response. We won’t find our way with an appeasement offering, or oracle, expecting a clear answer from an inscrutable Deity. God has been a bit remiss returning calls of late. And even the way we see the Bible is filtered through the lens... of something later.

To live in a world of uncertainty, actually, it is the Talmud which shows the way. Not only what is in it, but what it is, and how it speaks.

Why? And how? The Talmud is hard. It is an obscure, cryptic, confusing, circular, insider-Baseball, code-laden Aramaic text, riddled with shorthand and technical terms, filled with antiquated assumptions and a pre-scientific view of the world.

But how we study this strange work is valuable. It can actually help us, in how we understand, cope with, and make sense of our lives today.

What do I mean? Well, first, the **Talmud is circular; it makes many assumptions about what you already know, so you sort of have to just dive right in.** Second, it requires both **a guide and a partner. You can't do it alone.** Third, it is **more pragmatic than dogmatic, and more casuistic, or case by case than systematic.** It experiments, pushes the limits of logic. Fourth, and probably alone among the sacred texts of the world, it **preserves minority opinions.** And, finally, it focuses **more on discussion than outcome.** So much so that it sometimes forgets to tell us the final decision. The journey is more interesting, more important than the destination.

These are great life lessons, to help us face forward, and step towards tomorrow.

Diving in. In a world of uncertainty, we can't line up everything in advance. We just can't...know everything. But we have to start somewhere.

Guides and partners. A teacher and a chavruta, a companion. It brings together old and new, tradition and innovation, wisdom and creativity.

Pragmatic. The rabbis who wrote this were concerned with what works. They test ideas, push boundaries, argue to the absurd, and cherish discussion. It may be pre-modern in parts of its message, but its method anticipates later forms of experimentation and discovery. And, with a few exceptions, they debate over issues – even important ones, but without tearing each other apart.

Preserving the minority view. What a sign of humility and respect, to cite, to include arguments made by your opponents! What comfort with ambiguity it shows, to say that, in other settings, or at another time, other views, other wisdom, might yet prevail.

Journey over destination. Too often we are too focused on results. All we want to know is the final score. But life is not only about outcomes. Who we are, how we act, what we do along the way, these are important. And being one with the journey leaves us open to the unexpected; who knows where a chance encounter, impulsive decision, or moment of serendipity might lead?

What does all this mean? How we make people feel, and how we feel around others often lasts longer in us than whether we win one round or another. And: we should value our own voice, share and defend our own opinions. But we should also listen with integrity, be ready to learn -- and be open and able to change our minds.

One of the most heated disputes in the Talmud begins over an oven. It seems technical: is a certain appliance, made up of different parts, subject to the laws of ritual impurity. Rabbi Eliezer says that it is not, and is therefore usable as it is. The other rabbis all disagree with him.

Now, maybe Eliezer is just used to getting his way. He gets frustrated, and engages in some... unusual tactics. He declares that if he is right in his opinion, the nearby carob tree should move a hundred cubits. It does so. And the other rabbis shrug. He announces that if he right, a nearby canal should show it, and the water reverses flow. Still, nothing.

He says that if he is right, the walls of the house of study should prove it – and they begin to collapse. A not so subtle reminder that, yes, sometimes our arguments can be destructive. They can even bring the house down.

But Rabbi Yehoshua gets up and rebukes the walls. “Look,” he says, “we’re having a perfectly normal argument over a fine point of Jewish law. You walls, you... don’t have a role to play here!”

So, to honor Yehoshua, the walls did not collapse. But to honor Eliezer, they did not return to their previous position, either.

But Eliezer is certain. He is sure he is right. And he has had enough. So he exclaims: “If I am right, let the heavens prove it!” God, weigh in here please!

And God listens! A *bat kol*, a heavenly voice is heard. God intervenes on Eliezer’s behalf! “What do you have against Rabbi Eliezer?” God asks. “Don’t you know that he is always right in his rulings about Jewish law?”

And, yet... the other rabbis stand their ground! “Alright, so now it’s 5-2.”

Rabbi Yehoshua gives the rabbis' radical response. He quotes Torah back to God! Using a line from the Torah portion we will read tomorrow morning, he declares: "*Lo Vashamayim Hi!* 'It is not in heaven!'

What did he mean? Rabbi Jeremiah explains: 'The Torah was given at Sinai, and we pay no attention to any heavenly voices after then! Especially because the Torah also says: 'Decide matters according to the majority.'"

So God got one shot? God spoke at Sinai. But after that it's all us? This is beyond radical. It is a brazen power grab, awareness on the part of the sages that the locus of meaning is *not* in the text they claim to revere, but in the way *they* choose to read it!

But, even more: they don't *want* to know for sure. They don't *want* to be hearing voices with the right answer. The story says is that... even if... even if there *were a way* to verify reality, even if we could return to that nostalgic, Biblical-level of certainty, even if there is some objective reality out there, it is *still* true that... the power to choose, the decisions we make, responsibility for our actions *is in our hands*.

This is not Biblical religion anymore. God could appear right here, and it would still be up to us what to do about it! How we live, what we do, the direction of our lives... the vows we take, the commitments we make, even the promises we will break... all of it, all of it... *lo vashamayim hi*. It is not in the heavens. It is our life. It's in our hands. The world we live in, the reality of our lives, we embrace the mystery. We *choose* to live with the unknown!

The cone of uncertainty. It can be nerve-racking and uncomfortable.
But it's where we live, and the way our world works.

Once again, Yehuda Amichai:

The Place Where We Are Right

From the place where we are justified,
(where we are certain we are right)
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.

The place where we are certain
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.

But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
Where the ruined
House once stood.

המקום שבו אנו צודקים

מן המקום שבו אנו צודקים.
לא יצמחו לעולם
פרחים באביב.

המקום שבו אנו צודקים
הוא רמוס וקשה
כמו חצר.

אבל ספקות ואהבות עושים
את העולם לתחוח
כמו חפרפרת. כמו הריש.
ולחישה תשמע במקום
שבו היה הבית
אשר נחרב.

This is the first night of the coming of tomorrow. Between this Yom Kippur, and the next... we don't know what will happen to us. Maybe we don't really even want to know. What happens to us is not in our control. But what happens in us, and how we respond, is.

All we do know is this: walking with others can help. It is a blessing to be able to listen, to learn, and to love. To change, and to grow.

Not knowing is normal. And who we are is up to us.

L'shana Tova.