

Something Resembling Lemonade

Gmar Chatimah Tova -

Every time I tell my father that I'm writing a sermon, he asks me if I'm going to talk about the Red Sox. When I tell him no, he shakes his head and says, "people like it when you talk about sports. Red Sox, Redemption - it's all very Jewish." He's right. But I'm really more of a Talmud anecdote kind of rabbi.

That said, it's Yom Kippur, which feels like a good time to step out of my comfort zone. No, I'm not going to talk about sports. But I do want to talk about television - that's almost the same thing, right?

If you're not already hooked on the show "This Is Us," I highly recommend that you start watching it as soon as the holiday is over. Grab a box of tissues, curl up on the couch and start binge-watching - it's worth it. And when you're done, let me know so we can get together and discuss.

The pilot episode introduces us to Jack Pearson and his wife Rebecca, who are in the hospital, ready to deliver triplets. Optimistic Jack continually insists, to anyone who will listen, that they have *three* cribs waiting for *three* babies at home. But the delivery takes a turn for the worse; in a heart-rending moment, we find out that only two of the triplets survive.

As Jack is trying to wrap his head around the magnitude of his blessings and his loss, the obstetrician comes to comfort him. In doing so, Dr. K shares a piece of himself with Jack: every single day, he says, he thinks about how his own stillborn child has shaped the work he has done for the past five decades. He then tells Jack about another baby at the hospital who was abandoned at the door of the fire station and needs a family.

Dr. K says to Jack, "I like to think that maybe one day you'll be an old man like me, talking a younger man's ear off, explaining to him how you took the sourest lemon that life has to offer and turned it into something resembling lemonade. If you can do that, then you will still be taking three babies home from this hospital. Just maybe not the way you planned."

“Something resembling lemonade.” All lemons give us is lemon juice; but with the addition of water and sugar, the bitter liquid becomes a sweet refreshment. We can’t always control the outcomes of our plans, but we can change how we react to those realities.

Best-selling author and Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg calls this “Option B.” When our planned outcome doesn’t materialize, when our expectations are shattered, when the unexpected - even the stuff of our nightmares - becomes our reality; all we are left to do is to make the best of what we’re given. In these times, the most we can strive for is to make “something resembling lemonade.”

In one way or another, we are all living a form of Option B - nobody truly lives their ideal life. Each of us has suffered pain that comes from being robbed of something much larger than the actual hurt itself. Like a single pebble causing ripples across an entire pond, one painful experience can reverberate across our whole life.

“Man plans, and God laughs,” goes an old Yiddish proverb. Whether the cause of the deviation was us, someone else, or an act of God, we all end up in the same place - grieving the loss of what could have been, and attempting to figure out what to do with some very sour lemons.

Often when we find ourselves in great trouble, we turn to prayer for support and guidance. Our liturgy, though, assumes that we have a deep knowledge of the Torah, so that we can fully understand not just the words in our prayers, but the context in which they were originally said. Since we are not all scholars of Torah and Biblical Hebrew, even the most beautiful sentiment may lose something. And even if we DO understand the words themselves, we might not have that setting in mind as we speak to Adonai.

Arguably the central text of Yom Kippur is the listing of the Thirteen Attributes of God.

ה', ה', אֵל רַחוּם וְחַנוּן -- אֶרְךָ אַפַּיִם, וְרַב-חַסְדֵּי וְאֱמֶת. נֹצֵר חַסְדֵּי לְאַלְפִּים, נִשְׂא עוֹן
וְפָשַׁע וְחַטָּאָה; וְנִקָּה.

Adonai, Adonai, God merciful and compassionate, patient, abounding in love and faithfulness, assuring love for thousands of generations, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, and granting pardon.

It is a moving supplication that we repeat over and over; begging, pleading with God to remember the qualities of mercy that we wish to be shown as we stand in judgment on this day. But its context within the Torah text exposes us to a new level of understanding - and an empathy for God that we rarely get to experience.

After the Israelites built the Golden Calf, Moshe descended from the mountain, deeply disappointed in his community; God, however, was hurt and angry. Tradition tells us that God wanted to wipe out the Israelites entirely and start again, creating a new nation with just Moses. Yet it was Moshe who pleaded with God on our behalf, successfully lobbying for us to be spared. As the reality of living “Option B” came into focus, both Moses and God had to adjust their plans, accepting that the Israelites were stubborn and scared.

At this moment, Moshe sought to understand God better - essentially asking, “Who are you?” In a rare moment of self-disclosure, God listed the 13 attributes that we repeat so many times during Yom Kippur, extolling God’s own attributes of mercy and lovingkindness. This prayer, then, is a reminder that God can accept and forgive, despite tremendous hurt. God grieved for God’s hopes for us, as a People - and still showed us how to accept *tshuvah* and move on.

We don’t see the internal monologue or healing process that takes God from wrathful to merciful, but we can certainly imagine it - and empathize. After all, grief is universal - whether mourning a person, a relationship, or a phase of life, we have all experienced the loss of something we held dear.

It is precisely that universality that led to the Kubler-Ross Five Stages of Grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance. What you may not realize is that Elizabeth Kubler Ross did not intend these to represent a linear progression; she and her co-author recognized that everyone moves through the stages at a different rate, in a variety of permutations. Some people spend years in denial, while others hop back and forth between anger and depression, until begrudgingly moving into acceptance. What’s true in nearly all cases, though, is that the act of grieving does not end with the final stage. Even once we have ceased to mourn our loss, we are still capable of experiencing emptiness from the missing part of our life.

Grief is a prime example of the difference between sympathy and empathy. It is easy to say, “I’m sorry for your loss,” but much more difficult to honestly say, “I understand what you’re going through.” Grief is a new experience for everyone, nothing like what we might have imagined. We know this is true; we’ve seen grief

come for others. Yet until we experience it, we have no idea what we're in for - and our first instinct is to challenge its very existence.

Joan Didion, author of *The Year of Magical Thinking*, tells how, on the first night after her husband unexpectedly passed away, she refused all offers of company. "I needed to be alone," she wrote, "so that he could come back. [pause] This was the beginning of my year of magical thinking." She goes on to describe her inability to donate his shoes; because obviously, when he returns, he'll need shoes to wear.

Similarly, in an op-ed called "Death Comes Knocking," Bob Hebert gives us a glimpse into the power of self-delusion. He shares the reaction of an Army mom whose 19-year-old daughter was killed by a bomb in Kirkuk: "It was the lightest tap on my door that I've ever heard in my life. I opened the door and I [saw] the man in the dress greens and I knew. I immediately knew. But I thought that if, as long as I didn't let him in, he couldn't tell me. And then it -- none of that would've happened. So he kept saying, 'Ma'am, I need to come in.' And I kept telling him, 'I'm sorry, but you can't come in.'"

Research shows that it takes 5 years to settle into a new normal after the death of a loved one; to stop tearing up at the mere mention of their name; to get past the vertigo and find an equilibrium that accounts for life without the person. Jewish rituals have often been seen as progressive, in that they are particularly helpful to the healing process and sensitive to our needs. But the expectation that we would be over our loss after a month or even a year is neither reasonable nor fair.

The end goal - acceptance - is far away, in a hard-to-reach place at the end of what feels at first like a treacherous road. To accept loss means letting go of anger, hurt, and resentment. It means acknowledging the truth of what happened, foregoing magical thinking in favor of harsh reality. And it involves continuing to grapple with the difficult issues at hand. We are forced to stop living in fear: fear of the unknown; fear of what-if; fear that letting go means permanently losing the very thing we're trying to hold onto.

When we finally start engaging with our new reality - when we reach acceptance - then we will have figured out how to live with our new normal. During the process, we may even catch ourselves finding brief moments of joy. At first, our urge will be to deny or begrudge ourselves that pleasure, but over time we will recognize that life truly does go on. No matter how sad and disappointed we are that we don't get to live the

life that we expected, we aim to figure out how to continue living the one that we have.

This is the season for striving toward that goal. For that, I want to bring us back to the liturgy.

The word “Adonai” is repeated because God is compassionate toward us both before we sin and after. Amazingly, our relationship with God changes in the breath between those two “Adonai”s. It is in that moment that we take a measure of control over our own lives.

In the first forty days while Moses was on Mount Sinai - before we as a people sinned - our connection to God was uni-directional. God carved the stones; God wrote the words; God handed them to Moshe to bring to us.

The next time Moses went up the mountain, the experience was different. Rabbi David Starr, our scholar-in-residence this past Shavuot, taught that the second set of tablets that emerge from this encounter is a “renegotiated marriage” between God and Israel,

which more profoundly suggests that God learned something about working with Israel: they needed to be active participants in the process of covenant making and transforming of the world. “Carve yourself two tablets of stone,” God tells Moses this time, “and I shall write upon them.”

Yom Kippur then becomes a holiday of potential power, not sheer powerlessness - a reminder that we need to carve out the tablets of our lives. We need to negotiate with God for ourselves. We don’t write the terms of our lives completely alone, but nor is that story dictated entirely by God.

In other words, we are all active participants in our own lives. This is as true when times are tough as when everything is going smoothly; we *cannot* be passive complainers, people *to whom* life happens. We must be participants in our own stories, taking things as they come and making the best of them.

This is also true for our community. It is easy to abdicate responsibility for the things we want - to accept what comes with the first set of tablets, so to speak, and then complain about it. As David Starr says, “We want the perfect rabbi, the perfect davening, the perfect sanctuary, the perfect menu of programs designed to serve our ever-evolving and expanding wants and needs.” I’ll add to that, on a local level, we

want the perfect town, with a beautiful lake, a perfect school system with wonderful teachers, and a perfect crime-free, speeding-car-free neighborhood. On a larger scale, we expect properly functioning government at all levels, providing speedy fixes to complicated problems, and an ever-growing economy. We feel entitled to such things.

And for the most part, we can have them - but they won't be handed to us on a silver platter. We have to work for them, because in reality, we have been given the second set of tablets - the set that requires a partnership, a sense of something greater than ourselves, and a commitment to participate. This *brit* is not transactional, but rather communal; it reminds us that we each have a role to play in creating the community that we want - here at shul, in our town, and in the broader world.

It is with this in mind that we enter the new year with more work to do than ever. Few of us have ever experienced a year full of so much dread for the state of world affairs. From the threat of nuclear war to a spate of devastating natural disasters; from the rise in overt anti-Semitism on American soil to the daily blurring of the lines between church and state; we enter 5778 with existential fear - for ourselves, our families, our country, and our world.

“Option A” would be for there to be no Nazis, no nukes, no natural disasters. But we all live in some form of Option B - and all of those things not only exist, but have the potential to impact our lives. And if they do - we will find ourselves faced with the next iteration of Option B.

But we are not powerless. It is our task to understand the problems facing us. We must be honest with ourselves about the state of our lives, our community, our country, our world - and about the dangers bearing down on us. “We cannot sugarcoat this,” says Rabbi Sharon Brous. “Especially in a time of all-out assault on truth, we have to speak openly and clearly” about the threats that we face.

And we must face them **together**. No Jew mourns alone; the customs of shiva ensure that the bereaved enter their new reality in the company of others. Similarly, we must understand the impacts on our greater spaces - Temple Israel; Sharon; America and Israel; Earth - and find within us both the wisdom to accept that life has changed, and the strength to do something about it, together in community. Only when we are able to co-author the tablets in all of the facets of our lives will we truly be able to take ownership of the outcome. And *that* is turning sour lemons into something resembling lemonade.