

Embracing Uncertainty  
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Imagine a man with zero hairs on his head. We would call this man bald, correct? Ok, if we add one hair to that man's head is he still bald? Sure! Homer Simpson famously has three hairs, and he's bald, right? What if someone has 20 hairs on their head? How about 100? How about 765 or 2,017? Sooner or later, we all come to a threshold where we can no longer confidently call this man bald<sup>1</sup>. It might be a different number of hairs for each of us. And I bet you, if you set a hard limit on the number of hairs on a bald man's head, you would have a hard time telling the difference if I crossed that line by taking one hair away. This has been a harmless little thought experiment as we continue to mentally stretch for this marathon of Yom Kippur. But the scenario does introduce one of the more challenging, and I'll personally say frightening concepts in our lives - Uncertainty.

I loathe uncertainty. I don't like it when it is thrust upon me, like when someone starts to say something important and then cuts themselves off with "I'll tell you later". And I really don't like my self-inflicted indecisiveness like when I am at the store to buy ice cream but I am confronted by an entire aisle of choices. And I think society dislikes uncertainty too. More and more frequently I witness people reaching for their phones to check on facts, even trivial ones, rather than engage one another to work out the answer in conversation, or maybe just let it remain a mystery. The flip side of course has its consequences as well, as some in our society take advantage of our uncertainties to feed us lies and false information, hoping we avoid being scrutinous and accept their facts rather than confront the uncertainty ourselves. But those are heavy stakes, and I would like to stay avoidant for one more moment.

One of my favorite places to examine uncertainty is in professional sports. In part because it is a very low stakes setting, and in part because it is one of the only places where I welcome suspense and uncertainty. I love the energy, the ups and downs, the high drama and tension as the last seconds tick off the clock of a close game. But recently, those last second moments have been grinded to a halt. As referees are tasked with reviewing their calls on instant replay. Enter the unwelcomed, anxiety provoking uncertainty that makes us doubt what we thought we clearly saw. The longer the referee reviews the play, the more angles looked at, the less certain they can be of what they originally thought they saw, which prolongs the process even more. At some point, these reviews amount to adding and subtracting hairs on a bald man's head. Either he's bald or he isn't! Either it's a score or it's not! Let's get on with the game!

Instant replay for the sake of certainty devalues the human element at hand. It condemns our natural fallibility<sup>2</sup>, after all to err is human. It demands perfection at the expense of in-the-moment joy. Way back in 1989, predating the current state of instant replay, Major League Baseball Commissioner A. Bartlett Giamatti wrote, "what do we learn about our society when we demand total accuracy all of the time, and are willing to elevate technology and sacrifice interpersonal interaction on the field to get it?"<sup>3</sup>. When human relationships devolve for the sake of being certain, I believe we have missed the mark.

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<sup>1</sup> James Darcy, "A Philosopher's Definitive (And Slightly Maddening) Case Against Replay Review"

<sup>2</sup> Greg Hillis "Inhuman Baseball"

<sup>3</sup> A. Bartlett Giamatti, *Take Time for Paradise: Americans and Their Games*

Most of life does not come with instant replay, and we do not have the opportunity to stop time to evaluate every angle to make sure we get it right. Time keeps ticking and life goes on whether we're correct, or made a mistake. Whether we know the final outcome or not. The truth of the matter is that my family has been facing all sorts of uncertainty lately. We moved to Boston at the end of June, while Alison was 31 weeks pregnant. We were in a new city and a new home, with a new baby, and this new career within a matter of weeks. I have been frustrated with people over the past month asking if things have settled down. I felt like nothing is settled! I felt like we were in survival mode. But when I pause and take a step back, I realize that I actually just checked off a lot of boxes which remain huge unknowns for others. My "settling" is actually just that, a matter of getting comfortable in my new environs. I was blessed to find a job which provides health insurance, we were able to find a (somewhat) affordable place to move into, my wife safely gave birth to our beautiful son and thank God the two of them are both healthy.

Is this a moment for relativism? Should I be dealing with my challenges through the lens of "some people have it harder"? Maybe. Maybe that should be an impetus for gratitude. Life's uncertainties can be far more severe:

Where will the next month's rent come from?  
Who will watch my child if I get sick?  
What if my partner turns violent again, will we be safe?  
What if the Supreme Court rules against my protections?  
What if this traffic stop turns bad?

These are high stakes uncertainties; whose unclear future outcomes carry immense weight. The human brain does not like uncertainty. No, we are programmed to like identifiable routine. Normalized behaviors allow for routinized brain activity and creates a sense of calm and safety. That baseline feeling of safety allows for the brain to focus on more ambitious projects such as exploration, play, and cooperation; the brain of someone who feels constantly uncertain specializes in managing feelings of fear and abandonment<sup>4</sup>.

In this context, it is no wonder that the theology of Deuteronomy attempts to remove uncertainty. The foundational Jewish mindset lays out the rules and structure for a relationship with God quite simply: follow the rules and you will be rewarded, disobey and you will be punished. There is no chance or accident, only order and justice. As we will read tomorrow, "I have placed before you this day life and death. Choose life, so that you and your children shall live".<sup>5</sup> Our Yom Kippur liturgy fits right beside it, "Who will live and who will die"<sup>6</sup>? As we place our year's merits and sins on life's ultimate scales. We know that we do not live in the world of Deuteronomy. We know that unplanned and unexplained events impact our lives on a daily basis. And though we often think about Yom Kippur as a binary holiday of life or death, gates open or closed, we find ourselves in this moment in between outcomes. Where no ink has

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<sup>4</sup> Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, p. 56

<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 30:19

<sup>6</sup> Found in the *Untaneh Tokef* prayer

dried, and anything is possible.

I have two stories of “Synagogue Uncertainty” that I’d like to share with you. Taken from my last two High Holy Day pulpits. Two years ago, I found myself in a small town in North Central Pennsylvania in a congregation of about 12 members. The town which was once a major lumber and railroad hub had faded over the years and with the exodus of industry, so too went most of the Jewish population. On Yom Kippur afternoon, the congregation’s president toured me through the cemetery. There, you could track 150 years of family names and stories. There you could see the names of loved ones whose names we would read during *Yizkor*. There in the cemetery, the congregation came further to life.

As we left the cemetery, the president mentioned that he planned to get the congregation’s Torah’s appraised. Having already sold the building to the local university, the Torahs became the congregation’s most valuable possessions. The three members of the leadership council were in debate over what should be done with the Torahs. Should they be donated to a needy congregation? Or should they be sold, so that the money could be used to maintain the cemetery even after the shul inevitably closed its doors? I quickly realized that the congregation was on life support even more than I anticipated. It felt depressing to say the least.

But that afternoon, I had the chance to spend some time alone with the congregation’s oldest member. A man in his 90s in failing health, for me, he was the embodiment of the local Jewish community. I had literally walked by his burial plot an hour before. Here was a man who held life and death in the same moment. He bemoaned the loss of his beloved wife, and was anxious about his recent surgeries, but in the exact same moment, I have never seen a man more enthusiastically greet every day. He knew the importance of seizing the moment, embracing everyone he encountered with immense joy. Though I’m sure a piece of him knew that his number of High Holy Days with this congregation were dwindling, after seeing a parade of HUC student rabbis over the years, he believed passionately in the future, which motivated him to live in the present. He chose life.

The second story comes from last year. Last Yom Kippur, my rabbinic internship took me to New York City, the 92nd Street Y, and all over the country. I stood not on a bimah, but sat at my laptop. My role for the High Holy Days was to be an online moderator for the Y’s robust live stream program. While most shuls have a one-way stream where at-home worshippers sit passive in their participation, the Y has set up their livestream as a chatroom where people could ask questions, and share their thoughts during the service. This gave me a window into the minds and hearts of thousands as we wove our way through Yom Kippur. Many people were feeling isolated and alone, grateful for the contact points created by our cyber shul. Some were painfully remembering loved ones. Most were moved by the music and excited to begin the new year. On Yom Kippur our personal moments are typically silent, and our communal moments typically scripted. Here we had an opportunity to deviate from that path and communicate laterally during this so often top-down holiday.

A question on metaphors for God led to conversations about gender identity. Our healing prayers led to communal outreach and meal share opportunities. I was uncertain if I would be able to find holy moments in front of the screen, or create them in a chatroom. The answer was a

surprising yes, and an inspiration to think more creatively about our communities in the future. I remember the first person opening up about some pain they were experiencing. The responses came slow at first, but they were unanimously supportive and empathetic. We adopted the phrase “we are here for you” which chatters repeated in response to fellow congregants throughout the *chagim* during moments of shared suffering.

Here at Temple Israel, living in the vibrant Jewish community of Boston. It is easy to feel secure about our Jewish future. But in other parts of our Jewish world there are communities disappearing and isolated individuals out of range of a much-needed community. All of these moments of facing uncertainty, not shying from it, happened because we gather together to observe, no, to celebrate, Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is a spiritual innovation, which helps us confront and cope with all of life’s uncertainties. Uncertainty will pervade, but we address it rather than hiding from it. How blessed are we to have this day? Yom Kippur provides us a blend of personal and communal reflection on how we’ll get by, and how we can help others do the same.

We may not know the right answer. There may not even be one. And so, Elie Wiesel’s words may ring true to us in this moment. “Perhaps you are not looking for answers. You are looking for responses to your questions, to your life, for ways to live rather than ideas to espouse. Answers close things down; responses do not”<sup>7</sup>. We don’t always have the answers, but we can always give a response. Sometimes to a loved one, sometimes to a relative stranger online, sometimes to our reflection in the mirror. To keep the conversation going, and to address what lies ahead.

On this Yom Kippur, I would like our response to be leaning in to uncertainty. Confronting the unplanned so as not to be paralyzed by fear, and to embrace the unknown for the laboratory of creativity it can become. It means leaving our comfort zones, it means taking some risks. In the upcoming year, may we choose life in the face of uncertainty. May we share our anxieties, and may they be less bitter because we share them. And may our shared successes be sweeter because they are multiplied.

L’shana Tovah- in the midst of all the uncertainties, may you be sealed with strength, courage, community, and possibilities, in the year ahead.

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<sup>7</sup> Ariel Burger, *Witness: Lessons from Elie Wiesel's Classroom* p. 78