

Kol Nidre – 5778

I blame God or the compilers of the Torah, or a lifetime of tradition. But it's definitely made very clear from the start:

28 And God blessed them; and God said: 'Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that creeps upon the earth.'

כח וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם, אֱלֹהִים, וַיֹּאמֶר
לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת-
הָאָרֶץ, וְכַבְשֶׁהָ; וּרְדוּ בַדְגַת הַיָּם,
וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם, וּבְכָל-חַיָּה, הַרֹמֶשֶׂת
עַל-הָאָרֶץ.

Our relationship with the world is simply spelled out: we are in charge around here, we, humans are in control. It appears to be built into our very DNA that our life is to be plotted, mapped and fulfilled. As children we are taught to see the path ahead, constantly looking to the next marker along the journey, “soon you will be big enough for nursery, school, university...” We ask questions like, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” We teach them to start planning the next chapters of their lives before they are ready to write them.

וְשִׁנַּנְתָּם לְבָנֶיךָ

And you shall teach it to your children, you shall repeat it so that they can repeat it, life, growing up, getting old is a well-trodden path and we teach in order to replicate the lives of those that went before us. But there is one huge lesson that we do not get taught as children and it seems we are only taught in the most painful way; that we are not actually in control of life. We may see ourselves as the stewards, so beautifully depicted in Genesis but ultimately, tragically, so painfully for so many we learn we are not in control.

For more than four years I have stood leading services at FRS consumed with a question. Some weeks I questioned with hope, others with pleading and then month after month with great sadness. Over the ark at FRS are written the words:

עֵץ חַיִּים הִיא

It is a tree of life. Yet that word chayyim, life, contains within it the two- letter yuds of God's name. For those struggling to picture the word you can see it on the banners. The word chayyim is written over the R of FRS in our logo.



Chayyim, life and the very essence of the word, those middle two letters, the very simplest form of God's name. For four years I decided, arrogantly, that I, like the biblical Job was being tested just as the biblical characters of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Hannah had been and that word, chayyim, each time I turned to face the ark during services became the focal point in my search for understanding. I was trying and failing to bring a new life into the world and trying desperately to rise above the frustrating biology, the intrusive and unpleasant medical side of things and find God at the centre of my plight. Where is God in the creation of new chayyim, new life, and where is God in my life when I feel so out of control? I would love my story to continue

וַיִּהְיֶה פָקֶד אֶת מַרְיָם

that God remembered me, like we are told He does for our biblical Matriarchs, but then I would never have learnt that,

כִּי הָיָה בְּחֶמֶר

“like clay in the hands of the potter”, for years I knew what the finished product of my life was to look like but suddenly I was learning that the vision of the finished article needed remoulding.

Life is not the fairy tale we teach our children; we can’t read the last chapter first and live out our lives getting there, however sure we once were of how that final scene would look. All we can do is to teach ourselves to find the closest to happily ever after we can achieve amongst the dirty reality of life and maybe that involves being truly malleable.

“Like the clay in the hand of the potter, like the iron in the hand of the smith”. I didn’t find the God in the centre of my chayyim was the potter or the smith, I wasn’t willing to fully relinquish responsibility for my life, we are not puppets on a string but I did take great comfort in feeling I wasn’t alone in the craftsmanship as I tried to find ways of making the painful change of design more bearable.

Ritual has accompanied me on the journey both in the years of pleading (– more *etrog pitoms* have been bitten off by me than I care to admit to, well old wives tales, even the Jewish ones must have come from somewhere), but ritual has played an important part in my learning to close this difficult chapter and embrace the redesign. I wonder how many people are thinking of the far more tragic ways the picture of their lives looks different to how they imagined it would be, and so I offer creating ritual as a way of acknowledging the pain of rewriting your future and as a way of accepting what the reality of that future looks like.

Timing played an important part to the first opportunity for ritual. Confirmation that our final IVF attempt had failed came on the morning of my mother-in-law’s funeral. Mourning rituals are incredibly powerful and we are often mourning the loss of someone when we are forced to recognise the changes that makes to the following chapters we had already partially written. Perhaps within every funeral there needs to be space and time to acknowledge what of ourselves we bury in that moment. Whether it is the retirement we thought we would have when we lose a spouse; the vision of our baby becoming a father when we lose our son or the grandparent we wanted for our children when we lose a parent. In every case the pain is not just in the loss of the person who has died but in the change of who we are to become as those who are forced to go on living. When someone dies we bury with them the version of ourselves in which they played a part. At that point we can only “choose life” with the help of the potter, remaking ourselves in order to keep living. That day as I buried the vision of any future children alongside their grandmother I was pleased to have the strength of the potter, the smith, the stonemason as God helped to reshape me, help find a new vision for my future – a task so difficult to do alone.

This summer gave me another ritual to help me close a difficult chapter and stop it bleeding into the rest of my life story. We may not be in control of life but we are in control of how we respond to the challenges it presents us with.

In Boston I went to a place called “*Mayyim Chayyim*” Living Waters. It is a beautiful mikveh where privacy and personal healing take absolute priority. They have created

poignant and creative liturgy to help close the most challenging of chapters and to help regain control. They have created a space to use mikveh in all its traditional forms as well as creating a ritual of immersion for people after life defining moments: divorce, cancer treatments, infertility, miscarriage, abuse and mourning. Times which can leave us feeling like a victim, still suffering, enduring pain for years and moments which can dominate how we look at the rest of our lives and experience the world forever more through the scars it leaves behind.

For me this wasn't about hoping something might change in the future; I am not going to be someone who is pleasantly surprised in my old age like Sarah, because holding onto that hope embitters my life and brings me pain, so we took back control by learning to say, "this is our life and it is rich and beautiful just as it is". Closing the chapter, controlling "it will never happen" rather than living with eternal hope and therefore continual disappointment, enables me to be genuinely thrilled for others who are having their own children and pleased for me that my life is exactly as it is.

Alone in the mikveh I said out loud for my own ears to hear:

"I emerge from these living waters, strengthened to move forward into the fullness of life. As the Torah says: I have put before you life and death, choose life. My life, not potential life but the blessing of life as it is." I felt myself able to turn to a clean page, my words no longer fighting for space that had been so overwhelmed and cluttered by something unobtainable.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said that we should live our lives as if painting a work of art. For many in this room the paint pot has just spilt or an ugly smudge has only just appeared and I am all too aware that the liturgy you are faced with this Yom Kippur may leave you seething: "choose life" - surely we would if the choice was really there for us to take. But many more of us have long since dabbed with a tissue, mopped up the mess and are left staring at the painting which no longer looked like the work of art we set out carefully crafting all those years earlier when *ושננתם לבניך*

It was taught to us as children to pick up the brush, mix the colours and make the broad brush strokes that each decade afforded us. Recently I used as a eulogy for a Shoah survivor the story by the Dubner Maggid that I am sure many of you are familiar with. It is about a king who has the finest diamond in the world but discovers a scratch in it. The story, when told properly involves many of the world's finest jewellers trying to polish out the scratch unsuccessfully until one comes along and turns the unsightly scratch into the stem of a beautiful rose. The Shoah had been the scratch in her life's diamond whilst many people contributed to adding petals to make her rose.

Nothing takes the spilt paint or the unsightly scratch away, whether it is there because of the loss of a loved one, the fear of how temporary remission may be, the end of a marriage or the countless other ways we mourn for the picture as it was meant to be and not as it is turning out. But we are in control of how we absorb the stain into the rest of the picture. Whether we allow ourselves to reimagine the finished piece enough to absorb the blot on the landscape into an integral part of the picture, most likely the spot the art critic thinks gives the picture depth, emotion and movement.

Brazilian novelist Paulo Coelho writes, *"It is always important to know when something has reached its end. Closing circles, shutting doors, finishing chapters, it doesn't matter what we call it; what matters is to leave in the past those moments in life that are over."*

On Yom Kippur we are encouraged to delve deep into our souls but how can we use it to bring closure too? If Rosh Hashanah is about starting something new, how do we allow Yom Kippur to be about leaving in the past that which doesn't need to taint our future. How do we take the lives of our loved ones and not their absence? How do we take today's healing without the fear of tomorrow's pain? The blessings of the relationships we have and not the ones that never were? How do we take the blessings of our loved ones as they are and not as we'd hope they would be?

Pain and disappointment is an all too familiar reality of the world and many many of you have endured it in far more profound ways than me and even expressing mine as pain must appear greedy to many. But together this Yom Kippur, I hope we can help each other to close many painful chapters and learn to embrace our lives as they look and not how we would have liked them to be. If during this year you would like to work individually with me, or any of the other clergy, on creating your own personal ritual to help come to terms with how differently your life looks to the early drafts of the perfect painting you had assumed it would become, please do get in touch.

We may have no control over the spilt paint or the scratches on our diamonds but together I hope we can remake our worlds absorbing our personal and collective imperfections. I hope together we can allow ourselves to be clay in the hands of the potter and be helped to be remoulded, making those life-changing moments integral to the design whilst the pain slowly heals. As silver in the hands of the smelter to be fused or refined at his will

כִּן אֶנְחֵנִי בְיָדְךָ מִמְּצִיא לְמִזֹּר תְּרָרָ

so are we in Your hands O God who heals all wounds.

(This is the link to the version of ki hinei kachomer written especially to follow this sermon - www.danielcainer.com ([soundcloud.com](https://www.danielcainer.com/soundcloud.com)))

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