

Uncertainty in Our Time

The most famous person in Jewish history is - hands down... (*invite people to shout it out*) ...MOSES! From Egypt, across the Sea of Reeds, up and down Mt Sinai, through the desert, to the edge of our Promised Land, he was our leader, our spokesman, our visionary, our liaison with God. He wasn't a saint, nor was he exactly an official prophet; instead, he holds the distinct title Moshe Rabbeinu – Moses, our teacher.

There are hundreds of texts that teach valued lessons from Moses' life. This summer, I learned of one I found most prescient.

In Egypt, just before the Exodus, Moses comes before Pharaoh for the last time to warn him of the 10<sup>th</sup> plague, the worst one, the killing of the firstborn. Moses announces that this event will take place '*Ki-chatzot*' – 'around midnight.' (Exodus 11:4) He says something like, "Pharaoh, you could let us all go free right now, but if not, be ready for the calamity that will befall you sons, *Ki-chatzot*, around midnight." As you know, Pharaoh does not free the Israelites, and the Torah says that all firstborn Egyptian males die.

Within the turmoil and tragedy of this story, the rabbis notice something peculiar. For them, any oddity or grammatical inconsistency in the Torah hints to a lesson. Why, they ask, does the text say '*ki-chatzot* – **around** midnight'? Surely, the Torah's omniscient God knew the precise time of this event! Was God intentionally vague? Or Moses deliberately unclear?

I find the Rabbis' answer remarkable! They understood this tiny addition to one of the most important stories in the Torah as the basis of a critical lesson, one which is with us very much today.

That is the lesson of living with uncertainty.

From one word, which is actually just one letter, we are exposed to the reality of the unsure, the ambiguous, the open-ended, the precarious. How lucky we are to have Moshe

Rabbeinu, who teaches us to build a personal and communal ethic, enabling us to endure doubt and tolerate the unknown.

In the last year, I have found myself in a place of uncertainty about so many things. So many aspects of life that once seemed secure and clear now feel fragile and tenuous, and it's a bit scary. The ambiguity of **Ki** looms large for me, and I know it does for many of you as well.

In truth, uncertainty is very much a part of the experience of the Jewish people. Go way, way back – Abraham and Sarah left their secure home in Ur and stepped onto a totally unknown path to a new life in a totally unknown place. A thousand years later, our ancestors left Egypt to wander and wander and wander. A thousand years after that, we were forced out of our homeland when the Temple was destroyed, and over the next two thousand years, we were expelled by nearly every country in which we settled. There are no people in the world that have existed as long and as dangerously in the milieu of uncertainty as our Jewish people.<sup>ii</sup>

All that changed about 100 years ago when, within a few short decades, a miraculous thing happened. We went from being a wandering, unsafe people with no home to a people with not one but two homes. In a way that had never happened before, Jews were welcomed in America, embraced, given rights and freedoms, and in this new safe realm, we thrived. We also rooted ourselves in the existence of another home, the State of Israel, whose project was, for many, a safety net and, for others, a religious and spiritual wellspring.

I think about what a profound sea change this was for people like my own grandparents, whose families fled the pogroms of Lithuania. They had lived with profound insecurity and uncertainty. Around the turn of the century, they arrived in this amazing country. And, while in so many ways, it became a true home, I'm not sure they ever fully stopped looking over their shoulders. Feelings of uncertainty never entirely receded from their minds. We might say that they were **Ki-American** – **sort of, almost, nearly** here.

And what about all of us? Although we might not say that our lives have been entirely certain, many of us would say that the uncertainty of past Jewish generations has been eclipsed by the feelings of security that both America and Israel have gifted us. When I was a child, I never hesitated to wear a Jewish star nor felt any antisemitism from my classmates or neighbors. Not that many years ago, with no hesitation or fear, my own children would stop people in the store to ask, “Are you Chanukah or Christmas?” And then declare, “I’m Chanukah!” Not a hint of *ki* to be found.

Sadly, in the past year, I fear that this type of confidence, this security, has changed. It seems as though that *ki*, that little word of uncertainty, has returned to our psyche. On my recent summer vacation, I intentionally left my favorite hat, which happens to have Hebrew on it, at home. It’s not worth the risk, I thought. After Charlottesville, after Pittsburgh, this type of thing may have crossed my mind for a second, but this year, daily, I have found myself thinking about what I wear, with whom I engage, and what I say. I wonder if you have as well.

Yehuda Kurtzer, who lectures at the Hartman Institute, attributes this renewed feeling of uncertainty to what he calls the crashing of our foundational stories. These are the narratives we tell ourselves, historic or mythic, true or nearly true, that capture what it means, in our case, to be American Jews. Stories like George Washington writing letters to synagogues in the colonies, Jewish immigrants sending their children to Harvard, the financial success of Jewish families like the Bloomingdales and the Goldman and Sachs, and stories of seders at the White House. Kurtzer suggests that for the last few generations, we have told ourselves stories about how unique America is, how we are safe here, how the American system of democracy protects us along with all minorities, how the intellectual engagement in our universities ensures we will be understood; how we can wear our Jewish stars and tell people that we are ‘Chanukah.’

Kurtzer believes that October 7 and its aftermath, both in Israel and in America, has taken our narratives down. I don’t fully agree that these stories (in his words) have crashed<sup>iii</sup>, but they undoubtedly have come under new scrutiny. About antisemitism and

anti-Israel sentiments, about the security of American Jews, about the safety of Israel, I sense that *ki* of uncertainty inching its way back into my life.

Recently, I brought this concern to a group of rabbi friends. We gather often to talk about our lives and our work and to support one another. What, I asked these wise colleagues, is Judaism's antidote to all those times when we feel *ki -almost-somewhat-not quite-* like Moshe Rabbeinu at his moment of *ki-chatzot*. How does Judaism guide us when we feel uncertain, even insecure – whether it is about our world, our health, our job, or our family? Is there a practice or a ritual that addresses our unsettling realities?

After trying to channel Moshe Rabbeinu, we agreed that perhaps the most powerful and salient response to uncertainty comes dependably, predictably, and regularly each week with Judaism's greatest gift, our most important observance, and my favorite day—Shabbat.

*And how fortuitous a conclusion given (commercial break!) our launch of “Discover Shabbat!” I hope you’ve seen our announcements about the huge variety of new programs that enrich our Shabbat experience and give us a chance to recalibrate, rest, and grow.*

But I digress.

How, you are wondering, can Shabbat, a day designed to take us away from the world of work and struggle into a world of rest and holiness, be a response to uncertainty? Allow me to share some lesser-known gems that helped us build that personal and communal ethic Moshe Rabbeinu began, enabling us to endure doubt and tolerate the unknown. ‘Let's start at the very beginning...’ which is, of course, Friday evening.

All of us know that Shabbat begins when the sun goes down, but do we know the exact moment that happens? Our rabbis of old loved questions like this. They were exceedingly precise. They wanted everything to be exact and certain. It is, therefore, extremely curious that this holiest of days actually begins not with precision but with ambiguity.

The rabbis suggest that there is a special period of time, an interval that is neither day nor night called *bein ha-shemashot*, *between the suns*. Shabbat begins, they teach, at a time that is clearly not day but not yet clearly night. A time of uncertainty. In their world of exactitude, this is more than notable, it's astounding. How is it possible that Judaism's holiest day of the week, would begin with a *ki*? What is the value of entering our most hallowed time through a portal of uncertainty?

Perhaps this liminal *bein hashemashot* points to the reality that thousands of years ago, the world was a place, as it is now, where its inhabitants sought certainty; they wanted to solve their mysteries, to predict everything from the harvest to the weather, to forecast and control the future, to cure all illness, and more. And perhaps thousands of years ago, God and Moshe Rabbeinu knew, as we also know, that certainty is elusive. We know we don't really have control over most things in our lives. We know how a pandemic can upend the existence we depend on. We realize, as hard as it is to accept, we don't know what will happen tomorrow. Uncertainty is a fundamental condition of the human experience, and while all people struggle with this unsettling lack of control, Judaism, a tradition with much experience in this realm, says, "Let me help you with that! Let me assure you that there is a way to live with uncertainty. More than that, our uncertainty is not only connected to the sacred, it can be leveraged to better ourselves and our world." *Bein Ha-shemashot* – in the undefined, unclear *ki* between day and night, we are invited into the holy.

Once Shabbat begins, while it has become our custom to light candles and eat challah, the main commandment that defines the day is *לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂה כָּל-מְלָאכָה* – You shall not do any *Melacha* - work. (Exodus 20:10) This fundamental component of Shabbat is also a remedy for the challenge of living in our very uncertain world.

Recently, I had a great conversation with a member of our 5<sup>th</sup> grade about this very issue. Here's how it went.

5<sup>th</sup> grader: "My friend told me that since Jewish people aren't allowed to work on Shabbat, they aren't allowed cook, or sew or even tear toilet paper – Is that true? None of those things feel like work. And if we can't rip toilet paper, how do we use that bathroom?"

Me: “Well, it’s sort of true. The things that Jews are traditionally instructed not to do on Shabbat are not about using muscles or breaking a sweat. The work we don't do is the same work God didn't do on Shabbat, and that work was the work of creating things. So, when you cook or sew, you create something that wasn't there before. And also, if you tear a piece of paper in half, you are actually creating a new second piece of paper.

5<sup>th</sup> grader: So, if I can’t create, what can I do?

Me (being very rabbinic): You can enjoy what is great about the world now. You can focus on being with people and enjoying nature. You can be free from feeling you have to do something productive every minute and just live.

5<sup>th</sup> grader: You still haven’t explained the bathroom.

While I might not have gotten all the way there, I was trying to explain a gem of Shabbat observance that is often misunderstood. That is Shabbat's prohibition against work. According to Genesis, for 6 days, God created the world, and on the 7<sup>th</sup> day, God refrained from creating. Following this example, on Shabbat, we too refrain, not so much from working, we really refrain from creating. That is, just as God did in Genesis, we refrain from dominating the world. We give up control!

Letting go of our need to dictate and influence our world, our partners, our children, and our time is Judaism’s way of teaching us to be comfortable with that which we cannot affect. In truth, we have little power over this world, and that's scary. We wish we could force the world to go our way, but we can't. For 24 hours, metaphorically, we sit on our hands so that we can learn how to endure all that is out of our hands.

And as we sit there, refraining from engaging in our usual tasks – cooking, sewing and ripping toilet paper, we have time to look around at the beauty and wonder of what is here and now. To relate to our friends and loved ones without an agenda. To be grateful for the small and large blessings we have little time to notice in our busy 6 days of being powerbrokers - creators like God.

As we contemplate both the scary uncertainty of our world and the sacred uncertainty of Shabbat, allow me to end by going out on a limb and connecting us all to an image that frames these realities more as ‘possibility and hope’ and less as ‘anxiety and distress.’

Have you seen the British TV show Dr. Who? This is a science fiction series where Dr. Who, who is part human and part Time Lord, travels across time and space doing heroic deeds. The most intriguing part of the show is Dr Who’s spaceship, which is called the Tardis. From the outside, the Tardis is a small blue 1960s police box the size of a British phone booth. But once The Dr. steps in, we see that the Tardis is actually huge, open, and expansive. (This, by the way, is called being dimensionally transcendental for all of the Sci-fi folks out there.)

Like the Tardis, our *Ki* is a tiny prefix, but when we step inside, we see that, despite its outward appearance, it is actually expansive and open. A place of opportunity and possibility. You see, when things are certain, they are set, completed, and closed. But when things are uncertain, we are invited, empowered even needed to influence the outcomes ourselves. We have agency. In the spaciousness of uncertainty, there is room to act, to imagine, to adapt, to design. Uncertainty is the engine of human achievement because if all things were certain, there would be no need to strive.

Dependably, predictably, and regularly, our Shabbat gifts us with time in an expansive place of endless possibility. We surround ourselves with the stories of our people who endured uncertainty and survived and thrived again and again. We surround ourselves with the values and morals of our tradition so that when Shabbat ends, we can go out into that uncertain world grounded in who we are and what we stand for.

Today, of course, is Shabbat, and today is also Yom Kippur. What do we take away from the rare occasion when Shabbat, our sacred day of uncertainty, and Yom Kippur, our day of judgment, intersect? Perhaps this affirms the very profound truth that we are not judged for what we do when things are certain but for what we do when things are uncertain. We are judged for how we act *bein hashemashot*, in that unclear, undefined

time, when that little **Ki** is placed before our lives and an open, unknown, exciting path lies ahead. May we have strength, courage, and wisdom as we take the first step into the New uncertain Year. Amen.

Rabbi Amy Schwartzman

Temple Rodef shalom

5785-2024

---

<sup>i</sup> Ein Ya'akov, Berachot 1:8

<sup>ii</sup> Rabbi Berel Wein

<sup>iii</sup> Yehuda Kurtzer, Shalom Hartman Institute, Summer Seminar 2024