

When Rabbi Angel invited me to deliver a drash on Yom Kippur, two thoughts automatically zipped through my mind. The first was how I respond when anyone says anything nice to me: “I’m not worthy.”

The second was how I respond to *all* things: “What has Terry Pratchett written on this subject?” (In case you’re not familiar with his work, Pratchett writes wonderful fantasy novels that shed light on our own world.) I soon pictured a scene from his book, Going Postal. In it, our hero is standing in a dark room. He sees glowing blue letters forming in the air, spelling out his name. He responds to this call: “I’m not the one you’re looking for.” The letters of light answer, “At a time like this, any one will do.” He tries again, “But, but, I am not worthy!” The glowing blue letters command, “ACQUIRE WORTH WITH SPEED.”

I know in theory that my worth does not depend on giving a compelling yet amusing drash. But . . . it couldn’t hurt. The question I’d like to address today is: With so many things in the world in need of repair and healing, how can we acquire a sense of worth, with speed, so that we can do the hard things that we know we should do? Conveniently, Yom Kippur provides us with time for reflection. Plus, we read the book of Jonah, which helps us to ask the question from within our tradition.

Like the character from Pratchett’s book, Jonah was not a prophet who eagerly answered the call with “hineni,” here I am, eager to serve You. When HaShem instructed Jonah to bring a warning to the people of Nineveh, he answered, “Sure, I’ll totally add that to my list of Things To Do,” but then promptly caught a ship going in the opposite direction.

You remember what happened next. He got a big Time-Out in a fish belly, and decided it would be best, after all, to go to Nineveh as HaShem commanded. Upon arrival, Jonah issued a terse warning, to which the Ninevites responded admirably. They made t’shuvah. Even their cattle atoned. God’s anger abated. Everybody’s happy, right? Not our guy Jonah. He claimed that he fled in the first place because he knew HaShem wouldn’t destroy Nineveh anyway, being so kind and forgiving and all.

But, if I may project a bit on Jonah, I think his reluctance to do what he was called upon to do was from **fear**. **1** Fear that people in Nineveh wouldn’t pay any attention to him. **2** Fear that they might pay attention to him, long enough to shoot the messenger. **3** Fear that he’d get it wrong and people would die and it would all be his fault. **4** Fear that he’d get to know people who would then be destroyed. **5** Fear that they’d atone, so no disaster would happen, and then everyone would laugh at him for his dire predictions. **6** Fear that if he succeeded this time, he’d just get another assignment, and the next one would be even harder. **7** And, finally, fear that he’d get to know people who might break his heart.

So, on Yom Kippur, Jonah is a helpful vehicle for considering the question: What is it in our lives that makes us fearful? What is it that’s preventing us from doing the difficult thing that we know we should be doing?

Is there something that you've realized it's time to do, but you're just not sure about making the leap? Well, you may have noticed that it's more pleasant to pick up a book and read than it is to do That Dreaded Thing. In that spirit, I offer you some more interesting text, about Moses as our first reluctant prophet.

When HaShem called upon Moses to take on the job of liberating the Hebrews, Moses was *not* Mr. Hineni. Instead, he had a list of objections. "Thanks," he said, "but I'm not much of a talker." God agreed to a reasonable accommodation, appointing Aaron to be Moses' spokesperson. Moses tried again, "That's an interesting idea, but how about You just leave me out of the plan altogether?"

Let's consider what it meant for Moses to be called to bring Pharaoh the message about liberation. Remember how he started his life: Moses was among the Hebrew babies rescued by the midwives from Pharaoh's evil decree. HaShem (who apparently enjoys irony) placed Moses in view of Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him in. So Moses grew up in the palace.

As he grew up there, was he one of the guys--snapping his fingers at the slaves to fetch his chariot for a night on the town? Or, as some commentators say, did he remember everything his mother Yocheved and his sister Miriam taught him while he was a tot under their care—constantly aware of his identity as a Hebrew, and therefore identifying with the people enslaved?

If so, that must have made his home-life a bit challenging. Probably each of us has had an awkward meal when we weren't sure how we were expected to behave, or which side to take in an argument. But picture Moses when grandpa Pharaoh was at dinner: Was he ever tempted to rebel and ally himself with the slaves? Or was he afraid that something about his biological family would "out" him, and prevent him from fitting in at his adopted family's table?

Did he enjoy the comfortable life of the royal family? Take it all for granted? Or fear that all that privilege might be taken away?

At some point, he asserted himself on behalf of a slave, and killed a cruel taskmaster. I wonder if he thought about what he would lose by doing that *before* he acted. Or did it just occur to him as he was running away from a palace that now had him on its Ten Most Wanted hieroglyph?

I've been thinking about the fear of giving up some privilege in my life (*without* having to run away like Moses). In particular, by being out as transgender more consistently. Oh, sure, I'm out where it's safe. I'm out to my family, who have been great. I'm out to most of my friends. I'm out in this community. But not at work: Not to my non-queer colleagues, . . . and not to the people at the nice Jesuit school who decide whether to accept my "reapplications" to keep my job.

Why is it the thing I should do, even though I don't want to?

Well, the law has changed significantly in just one generation for lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. Part of that has been due to skilled lawyers, brave clients, smart judges. But a lot of it was from people finding out that “we are everywhere.” Being out was--and is--the key to a lot of the queer civil rights movement.

But trans people lag behind. There are fewer of us, and most of us live more precariously (financially, socially, and medically). Yes, some trans people are Out whenever they set foot outside their door. And some of us reject gender binarism and insist on being seen as somewhere on a fluid gender spectrum. Other trans people -- like me -- want to be perceived as our chosen identity, so we try to blend into the woodwork.

But if someone with my degree of privilege and support doesn't stand up for trans people, who else should? Worse, if I don't do it, how can I whine about routine denials of trans rights? (I do so cherish my Right to Whine.)

What am I afraid of? Hey, I was out as a dyke! Why don't I just come out to everybody now? Well, *always* being out as a transman is not immediately advantageous for me, because it means I might lose the “funny little guy” identity I worked rather hard to get. Partly, I don't want to have awkward conversations that I'm not really prepared for, when I should be getting ready for my classes or grading papers. But mostly, it's pure fear of losing privilege.

1 I fear losing the privilege of being seen as a “straight white man” [or possibly as a gay white man, if that's how I'm perceived at work due to my pro-queer statements].

2 I fear losing the privilege of being a cool and groovy non-transguy who really “gets it” about feminism & queer rights, and who can speak up for LGBTQIQ people from the safe, authoritative perch of “objectivity.”

3 I fear being viewed as “that guy who used to be a woman,” or (worse, from my perspective), “that woman who thinks she's a man.”

4 I fear that people will critically evaluate how my trousers fit.

5 As an added bonus, I fear that everyone at work already knows, and I'm only passing in my own little head.

And then I saw this line by Rachel Adler about the conclusion of the book of Jonah: Letting go of “both self-abasement and self-congratulation frees us to see ourselves as God sees us, with amused tenderness and persistent hope.”

It occurs to me that I could use these same fears as excuses for not coming out *ever*. But I *am* out in most of my life. So why have I drawn the line at work? Not being out as a transman at work just leaves my colleagues without known contacts with transgender people. It leaves us as the punchline to uncomfortable jokes, rather than as part of an unstoppable civil rights movement.

As a lawyer, it's less personally threatening to me to advocate for trans people from a distance, speaking on behalf of others. But when I think about the way L/G/B folks have changed hearts and minds by living out and proud, I realize that I have to be willing to show that transfolks are real people. Then, perhaps, my colleagues will help spread the idea that we're human, and we deserve to be treated with respect.

Assuming that I **have** been passing at work, I've really enjoyed it. But I guess I've had all I deserve of that privilege. I live in a version of the promised land, while my siblings here and elsewhere don't have it so good.

Now I just have to psych myself up to emulate trans leaders, like the legal director at the National Center for Lesbian Rights, my friend and hero Shannon Minter; Rabbi Elliot Kukla, Rabbi Reuben Zellman, Judge Vicki Kolakowski, and Yeshiva University's Prof. Joy Ladin, to name a few. (If you want, we can talk about their forms of heroism later.)

But back to our scriptural role models: Of course, Moses took up the challenge. He spent the rest of his life on an unwanted job that seemed to drive him up a wall. And in the end, after all that work, he only got to the edge of the promised land. But he made the world better for his people, liberating them and delivering the Law. That's not a bad result.

As for Jonah, maybe he was afraid, but in the end he did what he had to do--always whining, but saving the people of Nineveh—not to mention all the cattle—from destruction.

On Yom Kippur, we are perhaps more open to the idea that we have to **stretch** to do things we would rather not do. This evening, when we think about the gates closing, will we be committed to doing something difficult?

There are so many things to choose from: Give something up. Give something to others. Do something for others.

--We might commit to learn about another culture or religion. Sha'ar Zahav will have a "twinning" experience with a local Muslim congregation in November.

What a nice opportunity to learn about the "Others."

--We might give up some of our food budget through automatic donations to the Food Bank. On this day we CHOOSE to go hungry, but so many people do not have an option, year round.

--We might call our elected representatives, instead of complaining about bad results after the fact.

--We might advocate for the rights of people we don't actually agree with.

--We might advocate for our own rights, without the comforting pretence of detached disinterest.

Let's suppose that our efforts today "avert the stern decree." Picture us all inscribed in the Book of Life, and meeting here again next year. Will we have overcome some of our fears? Will we have improved a piece of the world? Will we have brought ourselves, our neighbors, our world closer to some promised land?

When you are in a dark place, what do the glowing letters call upon you to do? What will you lose if you do it? What will you lose if you don't?

It's a time of stress and peril for the planet and its inhabitants. It would be great if we could get past our fears so we can act. So I'd like to close with a quote from Debbie Friedman's prayer for healing:
"Help us find the courage
to make our lives a blessing.
And let us say, Amen."

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