

In 2018 I gave the Kol Nidrei drash here at Shira Chadasha. Many of you would have been there; back when we did things like that.

In preparing for this year's drash, I read back over that old one which concluded with three very personal *viduyim*, confessions. I read over them again these last few weeks to see if anything had changed; it's rare to have a word-for-word record of guilt from the past. It's dangerous too.

The lawyer in me wanted them **struck** from the record as **hearsay** and **conjecture**. I was ready to be disappointed about the state of my progress.

My final confession went as follows:

I, Yoel Peretz Lazar, have for a long time struggled, and still struggle, to relate to the word "Love". And because of the baggage it carries for me, I rarely say "I Love You" to the people I love most.

Many of you are, **of course**, now **eagerly** wondering: 'Yeh! What ever happened with Joel and that love business? Did he just go back to his old ways? The classic rinse-repeat of so many Yom Kippur confessions? He probably did.'

I can almost hear the hecklers in the digital back-row:

"Get back to us when you've changed, man!"

Well, I'm here two years later, to tell you that I **did** change. As many of you know, I got engaged 4 months ago, and I'm here to describe how I settled that confession once and for all. I'm here to provide a sequel to 2018 that I hope, unlike *Father of the Bride 2*, will not disappoint.

I'm titling the sequel: *Quit-Taking-Yourself-So-Seriously-Joel (And-Other-Such-Matters)*.

Now, it goes without saying, that Joel's love conundrums could only be solved by first answering the greatest challenge in Jewish theology, which is:

If God is Infinite, where do we humans fit in?

If He fills the entire cosmos, every nook and cranny, without exception, how can we also exist?

Does God stop here to my right, and continue here to my left?

What about all the gazillion objects and atoms in between?

It's not possible for both us and limitless God to exist concurrently.

The Kabbalists' roared onto the theological scene with a splendid answer to this conundrum: God contracted Himself from the physical world, they said, thereby making a little space in which this physical world could exist. Tzimtum they called it. Contraction. It's a neat answer.

But there was another camp of Kabbalists who had a different idea (two-Jews-three-opinions; a tale as old as time). Sam Lebens, a wonderful Rabbi and philosopher at the University of Haifa, explains it well.¹ These Kabbalists, he says, didn't take *Tzimtum* literally. God didn't literally contract. Rather, he only appeared to contract. It was all make believe - *apparent* Tzimtum he calls it.

The Baal Hatanya, founding father of Chabad Hasidism of 18th Century Russia, described it this way:

The Tzimtum [of God]... is only from the perspective of the lower realms [ie. from our perspective], but from the perspective of the Holy One, blessed be He, everything before Him is considered as actually naught, just as the light of the sun inside the sun.

Sam Lebens explains this further:

According to the doctrine of apparent tzimtum – our suffering isn't real from God's transcendent perspective. Our suffering is no more real to God than the suffering of fictional characters is to their author.

¹ See this paper by Lebens: <https://philpapers.org/archive/LEBRTC.pdf>.

God never created a *physical* world and *physical* humans, says this camp of Kabbalists - but rather the ***idea*** of these things.

Mind boggling! This idea feels intolerable to us as humans, who sense ***deeply*** that our lives, experiences and world are ***real***. And what does this mean for every foundational Jewish idea describing a ***relationship*** between mankind and God? It's all meaningless? None of it exists?

Not necessarily.

Says Sam Lebens:

*"we shouldn't overlook the possibility of feeling love and compassion for a fictional creation. Upon realizing how Anna Karenina's life would end, Tolstoy is said to have cried.... [And] even if we ***are*** imaginary from God's transcendent perspective, ***we are real within the world in which we live***".*

Take for example Shakespeare's Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. From ***our*** perspective, Hamlet the literary invention is no Prince, and never was! But in the world of ***Hamlet himself***, he certainly ***was*** and ***is*** a Prince. And in ***that*** story, Hamlet is not walking around wondering to himself: "what's the point of all of it if I'm just a creation of Shakespeare?" (actually, he's wondering if To Be, Or Not To Be for many other reasons).

Now, in this world, the story of ***our*** lives, God has also created another character - Himself.

This 'God' character is an imperfect ruler of the universe, who creates an imperfect world. This is the God of the Torah, the midrash, of Judaism. In this fictional world, because of the paradox I just described, God has contracted Himself so that our universe can exist. Apparent *tzimtzum*.

*In short: God decided that, if He wants to create us, and the story called "Life", He can't be His 'usual' limitless Self ***He has to try on another personality***.*

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So what does this have to do with my artfully-named sequel: *Quit-Taking-Yourself-So-Seriously- Joel (And-Other-Such-Matters)*? I'm getting there.

So, I've been listening to the teachings of Herminia Ibarra² lately, who writes about **authenticity**. She's an organisational behaviour professor at London Business School.

Over the last 10 years, she says, the term 'authenticity' has **tripled** in Google searches. On Amazon, **20,000** books are available about how to be 'more authentic'. There are ~ **4million online** workshops you can buy on authenticity.

You could say this shows we have a crisis about 'who we truly are'. But I'd say we actually have a crisis about **searching** for who we truly are.

What are we searching for exactly?

What most people are doing when searching for their authentic selves, is looking **back**; looking for some skerrick in their upbringing, their childhood, their golden years, their learning, their expertise, their qualifications. A clue for what they **have been** to help them be who they **want** to be

To this, Professor Ibarra says one thing:

What got you *here*, won't get you *there*.

....what got you *here*
won't get you *there*....

She calls this **The Authenticity Paradox**.

The paradox that many of us face is that the 'self' that got me here has done a pretty good job at it - kept me alive, maybe gotten me some good jobs, some respect, some money, some friends, a good relationship, a family, grandkids. But I'm now facing something that I wish were different:

² Ideas here drawn from this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CljI3TmEzrs>

that job I have, it's not going well
that respect I'm used to, it's dwindling
those friends I used have, they're not around much anymore
that family I used to be so connected to, it's not what it used to be.

When facing challenges like these, we often turn to people we trust and love, and unsure how to take the next step, we ask them for advice. And what's some of the most common advice we get?

Just be yourself.

Just. Be. Yourself.

And here's the paradox: We say that 'being yourself' is an ideal ***always*** worth striving for - after all, who else could you be?! But we ***also*** want to change our lives; not make the same mistakes we've made before; get out of the ruts we're always in. And Professor Ibarra's research confirms that: what got me *here*, won't get me *there*.

So do I have to give up my 'true self' to get where I want to go?

Do I need to be, chas ve'shalom, ***ina***uthentic?

Well it turns out we have authenticity all wrong.

The word 'authentic' comes from the Greek, *authenticus* "***coming from the author***" - or *authént(ēs)* "***one who does things themselves***".

Person-centred psychologists like the great Carl Rogers say that: ***an authentic person is his or her own 'author' in relationship to themselves, and in relationship to others.***³

The paradox of authenticity is also, therefore, an irony. All the things we think comprise our 'authentic' selves, are in fact often the works of ***other*** authors. The *conservative* me, the *impassioned* me, the *worrying* me, the *over-preparer*, the *under-preparer*, the *joker*, the *thinker*, the *doer*.

³ *Authenticity: the Person as His or Her Own Author. Dialogical and Ethical Perspectives on Therapy as an Encounter Relationship. And Beyond.* Peter F. Schmid

How often are these so-called 'authentic' traits in ourselves merely the products of circumstances in which we found ourselves - perhaps as a child, a teen, a young adult, a trauma, an experience, a relationship?

Conversely, how rarely are they self-authored traits?

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So why did God create the make-believe story of the world? [you thought I'd forget about that ol' chestnut of a question] Why create a world that to Him is like light to the Sun, but to us, is as real as ever?

Sam Lebens says: the same reason an author writes a story, God created the world. That's what authors do - they write stories.

In this story of our lives, both God and humankind are authors. Both of our jobs are to self-author in order to create the world and relationships that we want to exist.

And I hear those Joel hecklers at it again: *Nice idea Joel! Easier said than done. Go back to your love stories.*

Professor Ibarra agrees that it's easier said than done. Which is why she also says that you cannot think you're way out of the challenges you face. Because those thoughts that you think, are all in your mind; the same mind built by your past Self - the Self often authored by others, the Self that will always find a way to continue being the same.

Rather, the only way out is by acting your way out.

That's why this sequel is called *Quit-Taking-Yourself-So-Seriously-Joel (And-Other-Such-Matters)*.

Because to act my way into a new self requires me to let go. Self-authoring is about trying on new Selves; seeing how they fit, walking around in them a bit. Throwing them back in the closet, folding a cuff a big higher, pulling up a sleeve, adding a beret.

And above all, seeing what happens.

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This is where my confession from 2018 continues. It dawned on me that, ***with love***, what got me ***here***, wouldn't get me ***there***.

What got me ***here*** - into a wonderful relationship with my partner Leora - was an assortment of pre-existing traits, and ways of relating to myself and her. ***But*** it couldn't get me ***there*** - to the relationship that I wanted and needed; of fullest vulnerability, fullest communication, fullest risk of hurt - and fullest reward. To get ***there***, I had to ***try on*** a way of loving that I had never done before. No amount of thinking and analysis would get me out. The only way out was ***acting*** my way out - saying out loud, to myself, to her, that I would ***try*** being such a person. *A person who loved in the way that my life demanded.*

It felt odd at first; in some ways not the 'authentic me'. But in time, it became a part of me that is now continually accessible. Not necessarily easy, but ***always*** accessible when I want to try it on.

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When ***you*** are again faced with the challenges, mistakes or frustrations you faced last year, and that ***usual*** self that got you ***here*** doesn't seem ***able*** to get you ***there***, I invite you to think to yourself:

What kind of person ***would*** succeed in this moment?

What kind of person would give the love, patience or gentleness that is needed here?

Or the determination and confidence that this situation demands?

And when you ***visualise*** that person - it may even be someone you know, or a character you've seen on TV, in a book, in a movie - try that character on. Don't be too serious about it. Don't question if you're being 'true', or worry that this is not 'who I am'. Be playful about it and *author* that self for an hour, or a day, or a week. To worry about whether others think this is the 'real you', is to let ***them*** be your authors, thereby condemning yourself to being the same person you've always been.

...what got you *here*
won't get you *there*...

We've now come so far, but have one final challenge to overcome.

Why do we find this 'trying on' of a different self, this kind of ***play***, so difficult?

Two clues are in our Yom Kippur dovening. And two answers.

One is buried in the list of 44 wrongs we recite in the *Al Chet* prayer, and in the *Ashamnu* prayer. It's quite an obscure wrong for which we ask forgiveness, and it sits behind some of the more Heavy Hitters like *mirma* (deceit) and *shochad* (bribery).

The wrong is: *kashiut oref*. Obstinacy. *Forgive us for being obstinate.*

The sin of refusing to change.

The sin of being precious about our 'authentic', ***unchanging*** self.

The sin of refusing to play.

I have compassion for those who commit this type of sin; when we try things on, when we play outside a defined boundary - we're at risk of screwing up. Anyone who's been to, or acted in, live theatre, knows that fear.

But, notice that Yom Kippur has no listed sin about ***trying***, or ***failing***, or ***stuffing up***, or ***being less than perfect***.

There is only the sin about ***not*** trying.

The second clue as to why we find it so hard to 'try on' a different Self, is in Kol Nidre - the arcane and opening passage of the day in which annul any vows and promises we've made over the last year. Judaism considers self-imposed promises as sinful.

But why? Surely a promise suggests an opportunity to display integrity, reliability and commitment?

R. Shimshon Rafael Hirsh of 19th C. Germany, father of Modern Orthodoxy, explains: what use is promising to do something in the ***future***? With only what you know ***now***, you could not possibly,

and ***should*** not, commit to do something in a future you know nothing about. Rather, your obligation in life is simply to do what is right in any given moment.⁴

The fact that Yom Kippur begins with Kol Nidrei is an affirmation; that before this day can go ***any further***, we must ***first*** cancel any commitments we have made to be a future Self. Such a commitment is a recipe for repeating the past.

Before we can go on, Kol Nidrei tells us: *next year, simply be what each moment needs you to be*. Be like God, who the Kabbalists say had to be ***someone else*** in order to create the very World.

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As you step into Yom Kippur and Kol Nidrei this strange year, I invite you to think of a key challenge you face - in your personal or professional life - and answer this question; even write it down if you need to:

Who do I need to be to succeed in the face of this challenge?

Describe the traits and behaviours that person would need.

And when you're done, finish your paragraph with:

I'm going to try that on.

⁴ On Berehsit 28:20.