

Has anyone here ever ridden the log flume ride at an old-school amusement park? It's like a hollowed out tree and you get in and it's like: "oh, that's a little wet, that's nice." And "oh, there aren't any seatbelts, that's interesting." And then it travels slowly through a narrow waterway. One might call it "a river of guaranteed demise" - I don't know what **you** would call it. And then it takes you up an incline until you're at the top. It levels off, and then it tips down and plummets for maybe one or two eternities? I remember thinking on the way down: what if this never ends? It lasted maybe 10 or 15 seconds, but my most acute experience was: please let this be over.

The truth is, that 10-15 seconds is a very specific kind of time. The time after we've left one known place, but before we've arrived at a destination - the inbetweeny time - where we don't have control and we know it. And we don't know how or when this story will end, but we are deeply invested in that ending. Sometimes it's thrilling, and sometimes it can cause us great distress.

I was recently talking to a friend and he said to me: "Waiting for this election is going to kill me." **That's** the feeling. For months now, we've ridden a rollercoaster of debates, and new candidates, conventions, hopelessness to hope, neck and neck polling data, assassination attempts for goodness sake, threats, misinformation, manipulation, and anticipation. Untethered, we find ourselves in that in-betweeny time, and it tosses us around, lifting us up to euphoric highs and dropping us to despairing lows, with an unknown outcome.

This kind of experience is most often referred to as being in a state of liminality. And it may be the **best** term to describe the times we are living in now.

"Liminality" is a term first coined by Arnold van Gennep in France in 1909 (I obviously do not speak French). And he used it to describe rituals of transition, when a person is no longer one thing, but is not yet the next thing - like a tribal ritual of sending a young person out into the wilderness to fend for themselves, hunt their food, face their demons, and grow in their spirit and self through trial, as they shed the identity of "child" and return as an adult. That time that they're out there is considered liminal time. In Latin, limen means threshold, as we picture a crossing over from one state of being to another. But to get to that new state requires us to stay for some undetermined amount of time in the nebulous space - a kind of wilderness, real or metaphorical.

It's a very powerful kind of time, actually. Theologian Richard Rohr writes: "All transformation takes place here. We have to allow ourselves to be drawn out of 'business as usual' and remain patiently on the 'threshold' where we are betwixt and between the familiar and the completely unknown. There alone is our old world left behind, where we are not yet sure of the new existence. That's a **good** space," he says of the liminal, "where genuine newness can begin. Get there often and stay there as long as you can by whatever means possible," he says. "It's the realm where God can best get at us because our false certitudes are finally out of the way. This is the sacred space where the old world is able to fall apart, and a bigger world is revealed."

It's an extraordinary notion, this mystical time, full of creativity, where anything can happen and we can become something more. AND, it can also be very challenging. We may not have to brave the wild animals of a moonless night, but liminal time, with its unexpected plot points, and unwritten endings - It's just the perfect environment for feeling disoriented, anxious, or even anguished.

So let's put a pin for a minute in the notion that liminality is something to seek out, (we'll come back to it soon), and let's spend some time in the part where unless we can make it through a liminal time - we'll never get to what might be desirable about it. And let's note - there are some liminal experiences in life that will just never be desirable - and we need to be able to make it through those, too.

Jewish tradition offers us a deep conversation both about what we can DO with liminal time, and also how we can SURVIVE it. Survival first:

It's not just the coming national election, but we've also been living in liminal time for a year in Israel and Gaza and now Lebanon. Our nerves frayed and our hearts traumatized: we get news of a freed hostage, but then Hersh and his friends are murdered. 750,000 hopeful Israelis in the streets of Tel Aviv, and then ever more Palestinian children are killed. Another hostage deal on the table so close we dare to believe it, but then it falls apart, again. We're tossed about by the storm that swirls around us, as we look ahead for some ending, but find nothing solid to step onto.

And in our homes, too, we face turbulent liminal periods. Maybe your family has lived through this kind of time while struggling to conceive, a first or maybe a second child. My family has lived that story. You agonize, will it turn out the way we want, with the child we're dreaming of? Each month there's a hopeful attempt and then it fails again. And again. And we cannot know or control this ending we are deeply invested in; we have only to live through the storm as it has its way with us.

Or a diagnosis that leads to tests, hope, appointments, and disappointments, but no crystal ball to reveal the ending. A lost job and a journey toward finding a new one, a struggling child, or a difficult patch in a marriage. A tragic loss, letting go of a dying loved one, or wondering if you'll ever find your beloved.

Living in liminal time can be exhausting. We can lose sleep, we can lose a grip on our own identity. We can grow thin of spirit and joy, run out of patience and grow in anger. Pastor Susan Beaumont, author and expert on liminality, asks: "Why **is** the disorientation that we experience (in a liminal time - personal or communal) so intolerable? It stems from the fact," she writes, "that . . . we resist the unknowing - the loss of control in our own destiny."¹ Of course we do.

¹ Beaumont, Susan, [How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season](#), 2019. (With true gratitude to Pastor Beaumont, whose wisdom about institutional liminal periods in congregations inspired me to write about liminality in our own lives, using quotes from her book, including those by Richard Rohr, Victor Turner, and Ed Catmull.)

Now the truth is, liminal experiences are actually happening all the time. We rarely know our endings. And often that is fine. But sometimes - and right now - liminality feels so acute and protracted that we **need** to figure out how to navigate it.

So what do we do when we reach that level of intolerability?

Jewish tradition draws our attention toward Noah and his ark. You might remember that in the generation of Noah, the people of the world had become lawless and corrupt. And God has decided to bring a great flood to destroy everything and start over. But God is pleased with Noah and so wants to save him, his family, (and less critically for this metaphor, two of each animal.) So God commands Noah, saying: *aseh l'cha teivah*. Make for yourself a *teivah*, an ark. And Noah does as God commands and builds this ark and fills it with his family and the animals, and then it rains and rains and rains. The waters rise, the storm is loud, swirling all around him, with pounding waves and punishing winds. But Noah is safe inside the refuge of his *teivah*, his ark. It's not that the storm isn't happening. He can feel it. But it's not penetrating his body, it's not disastrous to his being. He can navigate this storm from his place of refuge, even as it seems to go on endlessly.

In a writing called the Netivot Shalom, Rabbi Sholom Berezovsky found in the commandment "*aseh l'cha teivah*" - make for yourself an ark - the language of *inner* refuge. When there is chaos all around, when the waves are rising, when the storm is threatening to dash you against the rocks, and there is no end in sight, he guides us: *aseh l'cha teivah*, make for yourself an ark - to identify in our bodies, in our center, a *teivah*, a refuge from the tempest swirling around us. He wrote: "Just as Noah's ark functioned with regard to the whole of the world, so too it functions for us as individuals: a protective power that God gave us . . . (a) *pinah t'horah*, "one pure spot amidst all of those things that cause (chaos.)"

As human beings, we have a great many powers, but hastening the end of the story or the storm is not among them. So we need a tool to help us come out whole on the other side, *whenever* that might be. That tool, according to many teachers of Chasidut, is this *teivah*.

Now, maybe the idea of finding a refuge inside of you feels entirely foreign - it's not how you think about God or spirituality, or it sounds a little too woo-woo and you're not feeling it. That's okay. BUT . . . or rather, AND, what if we give it a chance to be true anyway. That just by virtue of being human, you have in you, we each have in us, a refuge - placed in us, that can hold us steady through our liminal storylines.

According to the Netivot Shalom, this *teivah* is always there, has always been there, and once we know that, we cannot unknow that. Rabbi Beresovsky writes: "It is . . . our *teivah* that saves us from the worst situations."

I want to invite you to put a hand on your chest or on your stomach. Somewhere on the core of your body, a place you feel is comforting, grounding. Solid. And close your eyes if you want to. And take a deep breath. Now picture a storm swirling all around you. A real storm with winds and pelting rains and dark clouds sweeping in. But it's not touching you. You are in it. But you have this *teivah*, this *pinah t'horah*, this one untouched corner in you, wherever your hand is - right there. Your refuge is solid. Imagine this *teivah* as a comforting shape to you, it takes up space and steadies you. You recognize this storm. It's unpleasant. It's ominous. It wants to carry you away with it. Into its ups and downs, and thrash you about and take you apart piece by piece. But it can't. Because you have this refuge like Noah had. No matter what is happening outside of you, you are still you, and whole.

(You can open your eyes) The storm itself rages on. It's on the news every day, it sends your phone notifications that you can't figure out how to turn off, it's on your work calendar for tomorrow, or in the next call from your doctor, or in the voice of your loved one. And we still will have to wonder: Will this end well or with a great sadness that I will have to learn to live through? It's not that we'll never be rolled or hurt by the storm; it's just as ferocious and as long, but our *teivah* can hold us through its turbulent waters so that we may not be destroyed by it.

And while we don't have to do anything to earn this *teivah*, there are ways to tend it, and know it more intimately. The Netivot Shalom suggests that there are access points all around us. He says that Shabbat is part *teivah*, that we can find refuge there, in our prayer, our rest, our joy. He says the ancient words of Torah are part *teivah*, securing us to our history, ancestors, and values. And he says being in sacred community is part *teivah*, teaching: "when people of good character bind themselves one to another in unity, it is a form of Noah's ark." Surely for many of us, CBE is also part *teivah*, because that's how you and we have made it. We can grab onto the people and rituals of Jewish life, to steady us until we find dry ground to step onto.

And then. Fortified by our refuge, in some, maybe even many, liminal periods, we may be able to turn toward the next question: "So let's say I can survive this "log flume of life" . . . what might we DO with liminal time?" With a war that seems to have broken everything we know? With an election that is the most consequential of our lifetimes? With a planet warming and changing in shocking ways? Even in **some** (though surely not all) of our own personal liminal stories. What can we DO with that time?

Ed Catmull, the co-founder of Pixar, once said: "there is a sweet spot between the known and the unknown where originality happens; the key is to be able to linger there without panicking." Even as we are developing our *teivah*, what is this originality he speaks of? Where new and bigger worlds begin and all things are possible? Where transformation can happen? And what could we **become**, and **dream**, and **try**, if we linger there?

Jewish tradition also understands liminality to be a time of extraordinary creativity. In as early as 2nd century rabbinic midrash, the rabbis imagine a liminal time called *bein hashmashot*, the twilight of creation - which takes place after the six days of creation are complete, but before the seventh day, Shabbat, has begun. It's a time that belongs to no day - it is the threshold between

the known and the unknown, between creation and rest, between beginning, and everything that would come next. And it is magical.

The rabbis say that in this time, *bein hashmashot*, 10 things were created - and then they tag on a bunch more. Some of them are: the rainbow after the flood, the manna we were fed in the wilderness, the mouth of the earth that swallowed Korach, the tablets, the letters, Moses' grave, Miriam's well, and the *shamir*, which is a teeny tiny worm. The ram in the thicket, the staff of Moses, and more.

How does God use liminal time? God creates the ingredients and conditions that would one day be needed to make the future into the world God most wants it to be - to shape what will happen after the storm subsides. Liminality is not just anxious-time or time to get through as quickly as we can, but, if we are able, it could be a time for extraordinary world and future shaping creativity.

For example: *bein hashmashot*, God dreamt up the *shamir* - which is a tiny worm that one day, thousands of years later, will be used to cut and hew the stones of the holy Temple in Jerusalem. Why? We learn from RaMBaN's commentary on Exodus that in that holy place, where God and humanity will meet, no weapons of war should ever touch those stones. It will be, aspirationally, a realm only of peace. That is the future that God wants for the people and the world, and so in the wide open time of liminality, the *shamir* is born and waits, at the ready, for its use.

God imagined a coming world where all people would be free and so, *bein hashmashot*, God created a staff for Moses to carry into Pharaoh's palace generations later demanding our freedom, programming into the future the conditions needed to stand up against a tyrant who would oppress our people, or any people.

Bein Hashmashot, God creates the ram in the thicket that would stop Abraham's hand from sacrificing his son - to set in motion a world in which there must be an alternative to hurting a child, and the rainbow that would end the flood in Noah's story, a necessary ingredient for a future in which hope is woven even into our darkest times.

I want to propose that what **we** can best do in liminal time is just like this - to begin creating the tools and conditions, miraculous as they may need to be, to shape our future for the shores we hope to land on when these storms finally subside. Liminality, as painful as it can be, is a time to take risks, to dream, to try things we otherwise would never try. To ask questions: What do we want the next chapter to look and feel like? And **what** will need to be in place to pull all that off?

The anthropologist Victor Turner wrote: "Liminality may perhaps be regarded as . . . a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise."

Take this election season, for just one example. I know that so many of our community are door knocking and postcarding and phone banking. Kol hakavod. What if we also leaned into

Turner's assertion and the midrash's proposition, that *bein hashmashot*, "novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise?"

What is the world we want after November 5th? We are living in a time of extreme divisiveness, distrust, and a true inability to see the humanity in people who disagree. That future is a dangerous one. If we don't want **that** when we reach the opposite shore, what **do** we want? And could we begin developing now the ingredients and conditions we will need for that world?

What kind of conversations, what kind of "novel relations," could we try having with people who disagree with us? Could we try to create ears that know how to listen, minds that know how to be curious, hearts that know how to love, even when we fiercely disagree? Could we lay the foundations here, *bein hashmashot*, to care about each other's families or desires for safety or dreams for their future, even if some are blue and some are red? It's radical, I know - but when else should we start talking about it? Ya know, creating a worm that could cut through stone was also kind of a radical move.

And that's just the election, political discourse, and the soul of our country. What if we start creating in the *bein hashmashot* of the Israel/Hamas/Hezbollah war? Of climate change? Of the AI boom? Of rising antisemitism, and hate of all kinds? In these liminal spaces that sometimes feel like chaotic storms - we *could* hunker down and white-knuckle it until it's over, or could we use this liminal time for unparalleled creativity to build for what comes next?

And yes, that will take work. It will take imagination. And discernment. And understanding. And courage. But liminal time - before things are locked in again - could be our workshop.

And in our own lives . . . and more gently now . . . in the midst of our profoundly painful unknowns, what space might we find, even there, to take a risk and build something important for once the storm has passed? How might we transform in the wilderness of the unknown? *Bein hashmashot*, might we come closer to one who is dying, use this time to deepen our trust with our family and friends, look inward to emerge more clear about what matters to us? This is not silver-lining hunting - it's just surviving the storm with our *teivah* and trying to create for the world we want when it's over.

These hours of Yom Kippur are surely a heightened liminal time, too. The Gates are still open, but they're closing. We are invested in an ending that we don't know. And we're nearing the hour when we'll be thrown back into regular time - work, school, projects, making lunches, paying the bills. What is still possible today that will feel less possible tomorrow? What work are we open to right now that maybe after the gates close, the air will feel too rigid to do?

Are there things we might create even now, for a future as close as tomorrow? What's your Yom Kippur *shamir*? Maybe a family WhatsApp group to weave your family together as the year unfolds? It's not a tiny magical worm, but it might change the conditions for your family's future. Maybe it's looking up a therapist's name. It's no rainbow promising hope, but it is a notable commitment to hope. Maybe we create a memory for someone of hearing our voice during Yom

Kippur, saying I'm sorry, saying I love you, that will find its greatest use some many years down the road. We could create miraculous things here *bein hashmashot*.

Miraculous for our lives and miraculous for this world.

I pray that we do. That our creations are unexpected and transformational and surprising and strange and loving and courageous and hopeful and visionary here in liminal time. And that our *teivah* can help us make it this long way through until the time comes to put our creations to extraordinary use. And I pray that whatever storm is tossing you around right now, treats you gently, is no match for your *teivah*, and gives way to a future that you have shaped, that we have shaped. Amen and G'mar Chatimah Tovah.