

Yashar koach to you both. You did a wonderful job this morning - you showed up so thoughtfully, chanted beautifully, and taught us some really important Torah.

Sophie, you grappled with the harshness of Moses' message to the people - how negative he went, warning them about impending punishments, using the stick instead of the carrot. And you wondered what could be different, if we focus more on the good things that we have done well and so could build on, rather than focusing only on the things we have done wrong and the consequences we will reap.

And Jack, you took on how music weaves its magic into Jewish life, to help us understand the rhythms of Jewish living, the repetitions, and the ways we harmonize the many pieces of Jewish tradition into one song that is not about us, but rather is within us. How Moses' song and how our song helps us see our practice not as a costume we try on and take off, but as part of who we are.

And in many ways, your divrei Torah, your teachings this morning, are a perfect fit for where we are in the Jewish year: a period of time that is a repeating rhythm we return to again and again, ingrained in us in every annual cycle in order to examine our deeds and find a balance between a harsh judgment and compassionate forgiveness. This Shabbat was made for the two of you.

So, yes, we are in the midst of the Yamim Nora'im, the Ten Days of Awe, which if you're a little newer to all this, are the days between Rosh Hashanah, the new year, and Yom Kippur, our Day of Atonement. There are no other days like these on the Jewish calendar and no period of time that asks more of each of us than these very days.

Right now, we are meant to be deep in our cheshbon hanefesh, the accounting we do of our souls, examining our deeds from this past year and asking ourselves hard and honest questions: was I as kind as I could have been? Was I impatient with my parent, my child, my partner or spouse, my aging family member? Was I as generous as I really want to be? Did I bully someone this year? Did I exclude someone so that I wouldn't be excluded? Was I too afraid to stand up for what I believe in? Was I too sure I was right to listen with curiosity to someone else? Did I often roll my eyes or only sometimes? Was I often on my phone at dinner, or only sometimes?

And we think about: Who would I be proud to look at in the mirror and see? And did I live up to being that person? And if I didn't, and if my actions caused others pain, how can I repair that?

And that is our task this week. To figure out where we fell short and to do the teshuvah, the repentance and repair work that we need to do. That could mean apologizing to someone. It could mean forgiving someone else with whom we've stubbornly held a grudge. It could mean promising we will do things differently in the future.

And we learn and relearn and then forget and then RErelearn, that all of this has a particular urgency attached to it. Because time, we discover each year in the liturgy, is always running out.

The Unetaneh Tokef prayer reminds us that we are “a fading flower, a fleeting breeze.” And we don’t have forever, and our loved ones don’t have forever, and so we don’t have the luxury of getting around to fixing our relationships “whenever.”

We are always, these Yamim Nora'im remind us, somewhere between today and our last day. So it puts a rush on our teshuvah. And that can be very uncomfortable and intimidating. In fact, even Moses, here in parshat Ha'azinu, found it incredibly challenging. At the end of this parsha, as you know, in one of the most dramatic moments of Torah, Moses is told by God:

Ascend these heights of Avarim to Mount Nebo . . .

וַיִּמָּת בְּהַר אֲשֶׁר אֶתְּהַ עֲלֶה שָׁמָּה

You shall die on the mountain that you are about to ascend, and shall be gathered to your kin . . . for you broke faith with Me among the Israelite people . . . by failing to uphold My sanctity among the(m). You may view the land from a distance, but you shall not enter it.

And Moses is crushed. While this is not the first time that he learns of his fate, it is the most excruciating, because now it is imminent. And Moses, according to the midrash, does not handle it well. Poor guy. But his experience over the next few hours of his life can be instructive for us.

There are several midrashim about what happens next. In a text called Midrash Petirat Moshe, which was written around the year 1516, Moses protests and refuses to go, pleading for his life and to be allowed to enter the Promised Land.

The text says: “When Moses realized that the decree had been sealed against him, he drew a small circle around himself, stood in it, and said: Master of the Universe, I will not budge from here until you void that decree!” And he donned sackcloth and put ashes on himself, (signs of mourning) and persisted in prayer before the Holy One, until heaven and earth shook.”

If anyone here has ever had a toddler plop themselves down and refuse to move - then you know the moment that God is having. Moses does not want this destiny - he wants more time.

And so in various midrashim, Moses tries to get the heavens and earth to testify for him. He tries to appeal to God's emotions, explaining that he had endured 40 years of seeing the Israelites suffer - hadn't he earned the right to see them experience joy? God says: This is what must be. In another, Moses compares himself to Abraham and says: come on, I must be better than THAT guy! That doesn't go well for him. In still another midrash, he tells God that he's got to get into the land so he can keep the mitzvot that one can only keep within the land of Israel. And that was clever, but no. He asks to be turned into a beast of the field or a bird of the sky and just be near the land, but God says: Enough. And on and on this goes until Moses finally concedes and God, seeing that it's time, prepares to take him. And then something fascinating happens.

Moses remembers himself. He realizes that time is in fact very short now. And there is the one most important thing that he has almost lost the chance to do. It isn't a ruse. It isn't a stalling tactic. And it isn't his very real fear and sadness about having to leave. It is Moses' highest and best self. And he says to God: Wait. Wait until I bless the people. On account of the warnings and reprimands that I heaped upon them, they never found it easy with me. And he turned to the people Israel and he said to them: Because of the Torah and its precepts, I troubled you greatly. Now, please forgive me. They replied: our master, you are forgiven. In their turn, they said to him: Moses, our teacher, we troubled you even more, we made your burden so heavy. Please forgive us. And Moses replied: you are forgiven.

And with that, God takes Moses with a kiss, our tradition says. With almost no time left, Moses does the most important thing - he repairs his relationships. And after 40 years of rift and tension, let us note that they remained eminently possible to repair.

We often do what Moses did when it comes time to say we're sorry, to be vulnerable enough to try to make amends: We procrastinate, we make excuses, we're too busy, we convince ourselves we didn't really do anything wrong, we convince ourselves that we have all the time in the world. But time is always shorter than we'd want.

Moses' last minute decision to apologize and to forgive, to right his relationships can be a model for us. Sophie, we're not meant to self-flagellate and punish ourselves and tell ourselves we are dirt. On the contrary, we must tell ourselves we are worthy, and good, and capable of so much, deserving of happiness. It's the only way to know that we can do better than we did this past year. And Jack, we cannot do this once. We return to the tunes of ashamnu and avinu malkeinu over and over in the liturgy, they vibrate through time and through us, deepening the inheritance of peoplehood that gives us the courage to do this thing that has been done for thousands of years before us.

What will we each do in the urgency that comes with the fragility of life? And maybe more importantly, what will we each do with the six days we still have before Yom Kippur, 7 days until the last prayers of Neilah? Will we plead and cajole and put off and let our fears lead? Or might we be brave enough to remember ourselves as Moses did, and take even one step toward repairing the rifts that have caused us and others pain this year?

Sophie and Jack, on this day, you have become adults in the eyes of the Jewish people, which means these questions now also belong to you. And that is amazing. The power that you have to heal and grow. May 5785 be sweet and hopeful and healing for each of us and mazal tov to the extraordinary work you have done here today.