

## “In the Wilderness”

Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon

Rabbi Erica Asch

Temple Beth El

September 6, 2021

I have a confession to make. I absolutely *love* the Olympics. I love watching all the sports, especially ones that I know little about, like handball and diving. And I am a total *sucker* for inspirational stories. I love hearing about athletes overcoming hardship to reach the games and being so extraordinarily happy to be there.

During the recent Olympics, I was particularly enthralled by a story not of an athletic hero overcoming incredible odds to make the Games or win a medal, but about a different kind of courage. Simone Biles, the greatest gymnast in history, withdrew from almost all of the Olympic competition, citing what gymnasts call “the twisties.” This rather innocuous name belies a serious problem of losing one’s spatial awareness in the air. Biles said she could “literally not tell up from down.” This is a possibly fatal problem for a person who hurls herself through the air, twisting and turning multiple times before finally landing. Biles explained that she had this feeling midair and had no idea how she landed on her feet.<sup>1</sup>

Over the past year and a half, we have all had the twisties. We were doing things we had done hundreds, even thousands of times—going to the grocery store, getting our hair cut, sending our kids to school, traveling to see friends—and then suddenly, we didn’t know what we were doing anymore. We didn’t know how to land our feet. Even a grocery store trip presented a myriad of decisions. Do I get my groceries delivered or physically go to the store? If I go to the store, what time do I go? How often should I go? Is only one person from our family going? What will I do if they don’t have the things I want? For each task that had been routine, we had to make decision after decision. We, like Biles, could not tell up from down.

We all, of course, adjusted after the first few months of the pandemic. We got used to arrows in the grocery store aisles. We learned to use Zoom. We got accustomed to wearing and washing masks. And, after we were vaccinated, we learned to adjust to another new normal. It felt like we were coming out of it! Public events started happening again; kids were getting ready to go to school five days a week; we could run into the store for only a few things and not have to worry; we could travel. And then, the twisties hit again as the Delta variant tore through the U.S. and suddenly we were talking not about opening up, but about closing down. Again. Masks went back on and many of us became more cautious. That dreaded sense of uncertainty and disorientation seeped back in.

Many people have written about what the past year and a half has done to us. Naming that is important. The New York Times recently crowned “languishing” as the dominant emotion of 2021. Psychologist Corey Keyes coined the phrase to capture that feeling of stagnation many of us have experienced, that sense of fogginess and disorientation. “Languishing dulls your motivation, disrupts your ability to focus, and triples the odds that you’ll cut back on work,” writes Adam Grant in the *Times*.<sup>2</sup> Back in 2020, a lifetime ago, the American Psychological

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/olympics/what-are-twisties-simone-biles-explains-gymnastics-struggle-tokyo-olympics-n1275460>

<sup>2</sup> Adam Grant, There’s a Name for the Blah You’re Feeling: It’s Called Languishing,” *The New York Times*. Updated July 29, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/19/well/mind/covid-mental-health-languishing.html>.

Association had an article about ambiguous loss. This is a loss without a single definition or point where it occurred. These losses include our sense of predictability, control, belief we can protect our loved ones, safety, social connections and more. It has no starting point—when exactly did you lose your sense of safety?—and no ending point—when will it come back? Professor Robert Neimeyer explains that we will continue to experience these losses going forward and we don't know when they will end. "We're talking about grieving a living loss—one that keeps going and going," he says.<sup>3</sup>

We have a Jewish metaphor for what we are going through—it is the period of the wilderness, the wandering we did for forty years before finally reaching the Promised Land. But here's the thing about our time in the wilderness. First, although it looms large in the imagination, it only takes up a tiny piece of the Torah. Our forty years of wandering begin in the fourth of five books in the Torah, appropriately named *Bamidbar*, in the wilderness. The story of the spies, when we are told we need to wander for forty years, occurs in chapter 13 and only 20 chapters later there we are on the cusp of entering the land. Those chapters of wandering include a few highlights—a talking donkey, the earth swallowing up Korach and his followers, the death of Aaron's sons, but they are short. The actual travelling gets barely a mention in the narrative. It is found in just one chapter. One chapter for forty years of travel!

But, for the people who were in it, that journey must have felt eternal. At the same time, the wilderness wandering was finite. They were told at the beginning how long it would be. Unlike our ancestors, we don't know when this is going to be over, if ever. We are in the midst of an indeterminate period of wandering and we cannot look back on this pandemic experience as something we lived through and overcome. We don't yet have the perspective or the tools to tell this story. We are still in the middle of the desert.

This time of wandering is really, really hard. It is made harder by the fact that many of us thought this would be over now. After vaccines were approved in record time, and then given to people free of charge, we thought that the end was in sight. Summer was coming, it was a time to be outside, to enjoy life as it was, and to look forward to a return to normal.

It turns out that being on the cusp of returning to normal is the most difficult time. The *end* of a period of isolation, not the beginning, is the worst for people. This so called, "third quarter phenomenon" is still theoretical, but anecdotal evidence and research suggests that feeling withdrawn, anxious and vulnerable often strike people about 75% of the way through an isolating event. An article from *Time* magazine in late February 2021 shares that those who live in the arctic, work on submarines, and even do Mars simulations find that the most difficult time is 75% of the way through. Dr. Shannon Rupert, who runs the Mars Desert Research Station, posited that for us this syndrome could cause people to give up preventative measures like masking and social distancing.<sup>4</sup> That makes sense. We are all tired! We are sick of being in the wilderness.

Their advice? Focus on the mission. In this case, reducing the spread of Covid-19 and keeping those who are too young to be vaccinated or are immunocompromised safe. At our best, this might work, but the fact remains that focusing on the end goal is difficult because we don't know when this will be over.

---

<sup>3</sup> Kristen Weir, "Grieving life and loss," *American Psychological Association*. June 1, 2020, <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2020/06/covid-grieving-life>

<sup>4</sup> Tara Law, "We're in the Third Quarter of the Pandemic. Antarctic Researchers, Mars Simulation Scientists and Navy Submarine officers Have Advice for How to Get Through It," *Time*. February 26, 2021, <https://time.com/5942577/third-quarter-covid-19-pandemic-advice/>.

Last Yom Kippur I shared the story of Admiral James Stockdale. Admiral Stockdale, you may recall, was a hostage during the Vietnam War for seven and a half years. He said that the optimists were the ones who did not make it out. “They were the ones who said, ‘We’re going to be out by Christmas.’ And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they’d say, ‘We’re going to be out by Easter.’ And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart.” Admiral Stockdale reminds us that, “You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”<sup>5</sup> Last year, I used this story to talk about how to find hope.<sup>6</sup>

This year, I’m struck by the wisdom of not getting too tied to a date when this all will end. The way to get through this pandemic is not to picture a normal Thanksgiving, or even having people over for Passover. The way to survive it is to have faith it will end at some indeterminate point and to confront the fact that we are in the wilderness.

Fortunately, Jewish tradition brings us some wisdom about what to do in a situation when we are wandering and the end is uncertain. First, Judaism teaches us that we must acknowledge our pain and vulnerability. Our tradition does not shy away from difficulty. Tomorrow we will read in the haftarah of Hannah who prayed so fervently for a child she seemed drunk. We’ll read about Sarah casting out Hagar and her son Ishmael and Hagar wandering in the wilderness, thinking Ishmael will die. Wednesday we’ll read about Abraham’s near sacrifice of his son Issac. All these stories carry trauma and pain and they are laid out in the open on some of the most important days of the year.

This pandemic is hard. It is frustrating and maddening and makes us sad, lonely, confused, depressed, hopeless, and angry. All that is okay. We can’t hide from what we are going through. This is hard. We have to continue create and nurture a community where we can be open with one another when we struggle. It has not been an easy year for me. My work has been more challenging than ever before and it seems to be never ending. Almost everything I have done has been entirely new. My children were at home three days a week meaning my days off were spent home schooling all them. I found it hard to make time for exercise and to find the time by myself that I need to be stay healthy. I missed out on seeing friends in person and most of my friends were similarly struggling. Given the last year, it is no wonder that many of us are not okay. I invite you to be open about that in your conversations during this high holiday season and into our year together. Let’s be a community where we can be open about our struggles.

Second, Judaism teaches we must show compassion for others. Rabbi Sari Laufer brings a story from the Talmud about being in mourning. When a mourner goes to offer sacrifices, they have to enter the Temple not to the right, where they normally would, but to the left. “[When asked,] ‘Why do you go round to the left?’ [he answers,] ‘Because I am a mourner’. They reply, ‘May God Who dwells in this House comfort you’.”<sup>7</sup> This text lifts up the importance of recognizing that a person is in mourning and then offering words of comfort. Those words don’t

---

<sup>5</sup> Boris Groysberg and Robin Abrahams, “What the Stockdale Paradox Tells Us about Crisis Leadership,” *Harvard Business School*. August 17, 2020, <https://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/what-the-stockdale-paradox-tells-us-about-crisis-leadership?fbclid=IwAR0I6Et6MBw6PtMWthITnJnQdEldXozmW0eoth8WJLrfG2Z2g9uPyAbrqTs>.

<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Erica Asch, “Hope,” September 28, 2020. <https://bethelaugusta.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/71/2020/10/Yom-Kippur-Day-Hope.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Semachot, 6:11

come from a close friend or even someone who knows the mourner, they come from the guard at the Temple—someone who might never see the mourner again. If this guard has an obligation to offer comfort, how much the more so do we have an obligation to hear the pain of those we know and offer words of comfort. In Judaism we take cues from a mourner. If they want to talk, we engage them in conversation about whatever they want to say. If they want to sit in silence, we sit in silence. That individual reaction is at the heart of compassion and is one of the reasons that our mourning rituals are so powerful. We are all, in some ways, in mourning. Let's take our cue from others about how to respond compassionately.

Finally, Judaism teaches we have to let go. Ecclesiastes Rabbah says, “a baby enters the world with hands clenched, as if to say ‘The world is mine; I shall grab it.’ A person leaves with hands open, as if to say, ‘I can take nothing with me.’” (5:14-15). When we come into the world we try to control everything, but eventually we learn that we cannot. That, of course, is one of the lessons of these High Holidays. We do the best we can; we pray; we try to be better; we reflect; and finally we let go. We don't know what the next year holds for us, we just do the best we can to prepare ourselves and to be the best version of ourselves we can.

Of course, over the year we forget we are not in total control. We think we have to power to do so many things. When times were tough for our ancestors, they cried out to God. They cried out when they were enslaved in Egypt. They prayed when they were exiled. It was their way of trying to find a source of help.

That might not work for us. Some of you may be thinking, there is no way I am crying out to God or there is no way God will answer me. Fine. You don't have to “let go and let God,” but you have to let go and let something. . . . For our ancestors, God was their source of strength and prayer was a way to lessen their worries.

What do you do to get rid of your worries and anxiety? How do you find peace in an uncertain time? How do you remember to let go; that you can't control everything?

This looks different for different people.

A Gratitude journal.

Exercise.

Helping people.

Mindfulness and mediation.

Connecting with others.

Find something that helps you to let go of all that anxiety, fear, and anger. We aren't responsible for changing the entire world. We aren't responsible for convincing everyone to get vaccinated, or for keeping the entire world safe. We can't be expected to be able to change everything.

The Choftez Chaim, a giant in the mussar tradition and one of the most influential Jews of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was once asked how he such a great impact. He said, “I set out to try to change the world, but I failed. So I decided to scale back my efforts and only try to influence the Jewish community of Poland, but I failed there too. So I targeted the community in my hometown, but achieved no greater success. Then I gave all my effort to changing my own family, and failed with that as well. Finally, I decided to change myself, and that's how I had such an impact on the Jewish world.”<sup>8</sup>

Be the best *you* that you are able to because we are all in this period of uncertainty. We did not have a choice about being a part of the upheaval of the past couple years. And we, unlike our ancient ancestors, don't know when this will end. Unlike Simone Biles, we cannot take

---

<sup>8</sup> Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Musar*. (Boston, Trumpeter, 2007), pp 15-16.

ourselves out of this situation. We will all experience the twisties in the coming year. But we, like Biles, can decide how we react to our time in the wilderness. Biles looked after herself and then supported her teammates on their journey. We can do that as well. We can look after ourselves. We can seek and offer support. We have one another—a community where we can share our anxieties and fears and be heard and supported. We have the ability to let go. And we have the wisdom of Jewish tradition to guide us. As we wander into the unknown of 5782 may we take care of ourselves and one another during our journey through the wilderness.