

“Rethinking”
Kol Nidre Sermon
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You all know this is the preaching part of the service. I close my book and dramatically take out my papers brimming with knowledge and insight. You close your books and look at me intently, at least for the first part of the sermon. I deliver wisdom. You receive it. The rabbi in full preacher mode, delivering a sermon peppered with Jewish themes and appealing to Jewish values that lead you to new revelations. change your thinking.

Of course, I don't have to act like a preacher up here. Another approach would be to assume the role of prosecutor. After all, at this time of year we often experience God as a prosecutor making the case against our various sins. I am right, says God, and you, you are wrong. Change your ways or *else*.

Or, I could channel a politician and try to persuade you with my brilliance and eloquence, offering pithy one-liners and recounting heart-tugging stories to win you over.

These three archetypes—preacher, prosecutor, and politician—are all invested in convincing others that we are right. All three rely on certainty. We *know* we are right, we have all the answers, and we simply must find a way to get other people to see the light. Certitude is a trap we all can easily fall into, whether we are preaching from a bimah or interacting with a colleague at the office.

So, instead of preaching at you, tonight I want to try out another *kippah*, that of a scientist. Because this time of year is not about being right, but about *rethinking* things that we may have been wrong about. Looking again at our own habits, beliefs, and actions. Changing them. Accepting where we have been wrong. For this rethinking to occur, we need to be willing to look at ourselves with a little less certainty and a little more openness, the way a scientist approaches a new subject. To test hypotheses and discover knowledge, rather than entrench ourselves and assume we already have all the answers.

Adam Grant explores the topic of how to rethink in his new book, appropriately titled *Think Again*. You may have seen Grant's TED talks or heard him interviewed. He is an organizational psychologist at the Wharton School and has won numerous awards. With a bio like his, you might think he would come off sounding like a pompous preacher or a smart-aleck know-it-all but you would be wrong (see, rethinking at work!) The book is incredibly readable and has interesting charts such as bad motivation bingo and humorous tidbits such as how to conduct an honest interview (here's one example: Why do you want this job? To earn money so I can

buy food so I don't die).¹ Grant looks at individual rethinking (how to change ourselves), interpersonal rethinking (opening others' minds), and collective rethinking (how to change groups and organizations). Tonight, we'll focus on individual rethinking.

How hard do you think it is to change your mind, to rethink in Grant's terms?

Who thinks it is hard?

Who thinks it is easy?

Who is in the middle?

To test this out, let's ask a few questions. In the last five years have you:

Changed your hairstyle?

Changed your wardrobe?

Found a new favorite spot to eat?

Updated your computer operating system?

Changed where the furniture is in your house?

Many people. So, maybe this change thing is easy after all!

Okay, so let's try another series of questions. Raise your hand if you have changed your opinion on any of these topics in the past five years:

Immigration

Abortion

Gun control

Not very many people. Maybe the people who thought it was hard are right.

It turns out that changing our *habits* is relatively easy (that is why not many of us are sporting shoulder pads or mullets, though my husband still might have his old 80s mullet if nature had not intervened) while changing our *opinions* is difficult.

Hey, you might be thinking. Judaism is all about action and not really about our thoughts. We can *want* that delicious and expensive lobster roll, but as long as we don't eat it, we're still kosher, right? So, if we act the right way, why do we need to be so concerned with what we think?

A valid scientific query.

My hypothesis is that rethinking has ripple effects into other parts of our lives. Changing our view on say, whether or not the Temple should collect dues or move to a *terumah* system isn't the important part. What makes a difference is developing a skill that will affect both how we think about a particular issue *and* how we interact in the world on a regular basis. The skill of being able to open up our minds will make us more flexible, spark curiosity, and help us to be kinder. But you don't have to take my word for it. Let's explore three of Grant's arguments and

¹ Adam Grant, *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know* (New York: Viking (Penguin), 2021), 117, 150.

look at some biblical examples (those come from me, not from him) of how we can become rethinkers. Then you can make up your own mind.

First: Define your identity in terms of values, not opinions.

It is actually quite difficult to find a biblical example of people who change their opinions. One such person is Judah. Judah's oldest son married a woman named Tamar, but he died soon after his marriage. Judah, valuing religious traditions, did what was expected and married Tamar off to his next oldest son. Tragically, that son died as well. Judah's third son was not yet old enough to marry, so he insisted that Tamar wait patiently until the boy came of age. After all, tradition. A while later Judah learns that Tamar is pregnant. Tradition demands that she be punished—she was supposed to be waiting chastely to marry the third son. Judah knows Tamar is guilty of a great wrong and is committed to punishing her.

But that is not how the story ends. Judah changes his mind and this rethinking is prompted by Tamar. She sends Judah his staff and seal — the very same staff and seal that he had given to an unknown woman he had intercourse with about three months earlier. Reality dawns on Judah: Tamar is pregnant with his own baby. What should he do?

One response would be for Judah to dig in. Remain firm in his opinion of Tamar and stubbornly insist that she be punished for her promiscuity. Perhaps declare that Tamar is lying, that she must have been with other men, or claim that someone else gave her his staff and seal. Anything to appear firm and consistent in his beliefs.

But Judah doesn't do that. Instead, he rethinks the situation. In light of the new evidence that Tamar presents, Judah changes his mind. He publicly declares Tamar to be more righteous than he is. In doing this he holds onto his value of religious tradition. He does what is right—claim the son as his own and release Tamar from her obligation to marry his youngest son.

When our beliefs – and sticking to our beliefs -- become too much a part of our identity, we can find it very hard to change. Grant suggests practicing detachment. First, we should work to detach our present self from our past self. We are not the same person we were a year ago or five years ago. Thankfully we have grown and changed since then! If we can't look back on ourselves and see where we were wrong, then we are not really growing at all. This detachment will help us see how healthy it is to change.

Second, we should aim to detach our opinions from our identity. What do you value most? Integrity? Fairness? Generosity? If you appreciate those fundamental values rather than specific policies, plans or proposals, you are more likely to change your mind about the best way to enact those values, while still staying true to yourself. Grant says, "You want the doctor whose identity is protecting health, the teacher whose identity is helping student learn, and the police chief whose identity is promoting safety and justice." This means they all can update their practices "in light of new evidence."² We want our doctors to read new studies and treat us

² Grant, 63-64.

based on the latest evidence, not their beliefs from twenty years ago. We, too, should strive to update our beliefs. If we value “curiosity, learning, mental flexibility, and searching for knowledge” then we are more likely to change our opinions and stay true to our values.³ Staying true to our values can help us to act as our best selves in this new year.

Second: Seek out information that goes against your views.

You may know the story about the small, unnamed town in Eastern Europe—they have a dilemma, so they go to the rabbi. The rabbi says to the first person, “You, are right.” The second person presents his case, and the rabbi says, “You, are right.” The third person cries, “Rabbi, they can’t both be right!” The rabbi thinks for a minute and says to her, “You are also right!”

Those maddening rabbis! The villagers came to the rabbi looking for certainty, for a clear answer confirming that their side was right. And what did the rabbi do? Created more uncertainty! Challenged the villagers to consider that the other side might be right! Ugh!

We sometimes behave like the villagers. We seek out information that will simply confirm what we already know, that we were right in the first place. We look to an echo chamber of experts or media sources that will tell us what we want to hear.

But Judaism offers a different approach that is embodied by the Talmud. The Talmud is built on the idea that we should seek out information that goes against our views. Rather than look for certainty, or getting to a quick answer, the pages and pages and pages of arguments represent a dialogue over generations. “Yeah, but how does that fit into what Rabbi Ashi said?” “Wait, what about this line from tractate Ketubot?” “Why did Abaye rule that way?” These debates go on and on, often ending with the phrase: *teiku*, it will stand. That means, that the question stands unresolved. The rabbis are fine with not reaching an answer or with rethinking their initial opinion. Rather than determining one right answer and deleting the rest, the rabbis preserve dissenting opinions, thus encouraging future generations to rethink the questions.

When our own beliefs are challenged, we can often to shut down or entrench ourselves in our own opinions. Grant suggests that we rethink small things all the time (I thought I put the keys by the door but they aren’t here; where did I leave them? I thought this Kol Nidre service was only going to be 45 minutes; guess I was wrong). But, rethinking more deeply held beliefs is harder. When we engage with ideas we don’t agree with, we often look through prosecutor eyes and explain why others are wrong. This entrenches us. But when we look through scientific eyes we think—interesting, why is that the case? Why did you vote that way? Tell me more about why you are skeptical of the Covid vaccine. When we seek out new information and approach it with curiosity, rather than trying to change someone’s mind, we are more open to rethinking. That rethinking can help us to change.

³ Grant, 251-2.

Third: Rethinking can lead to growth, so find joy in being wrong.

There is a famous story from the Talmud about a group of rabbis who are having a disagreement. Although the rest of the rabbis disagree with Rabbi Eliezer, he knows he is right. He calls upon the tree to prove it and the tree moves. The river flows backwards, and the walls of the study hall bend inward to show that God agrees with Eliezer. None of that is enough to convince Eliezer's critics. Finally, a booming voice comes from heaven as God proclaims that Rabbi Eliezer is indeed right. But Rabbi Joshua stands up to God, saying, "It is not in heaven." In other words, you aren't in charge, God. We are. You gave us the Torah, and now we get to decide. Here God does a surprising thing. You might expect God to respond angrily and smite down all those who disagree. But, no. Instead, God laughs and says, "My children have defeated me."

God expresses joy in being wrong. Now for those of you following God through the Torah, you know that God does not always respond so gracefully to human resistance. This is a big change. And if God can do it, so can we!

How do we react when we were wrong? Doubt? Frustration? Disappointment? Grant suggests we should react with joy. Why? Because we've discovered something new, and we are therefore less wrong than we were before.⁴ If we see new learning as a chance to develop and evolve rather than as an attack on our identity, we are more likely to be able to change. Why does this matter? Getting stuck in a rut is not good for us. Change helps us grow and experience the world in new ways. This works in small ways—I used to think I was a morning person, but now I realize I like to sleep in. I used to think chocolate ice cream was the best, but I really like maple now. It also works in big ways—I used to think I needed to stay angry with you. I thought I could not move on. I was sure I would always gossip. I didn't think I could be a better friend. Finding joy in being wrong now means we are more right in the long run. Every discovery of a mistake or misperception gives the chance to correct it and move forward. We *can* change. So, as we think today about ways we have gone wrong, we can be joyful. Each discovery leads us closer to being the type of person we want to be.

That is the case for thinking again both in ancient times and today.

First, be like Judah. Defining ourselves by our values rather than our opinions means we are more likely to change our minds, just as Judah did. If we believe in ourselves but not necessarily our methods, we are more likely to try new ways to become the type of person we want to be and less likely to say we can never change.

Second, emulate the Talmud. Seeking out information that goes against our views means we are more likely to change our minds. When we lead with curiosity rather than try to convince people we are right, it is easier to change our opinions and our actions.

⁴ Grant, 61.

Third, find joy in defeat, just as God did. Being wrong now means we are one step closer to being right in the end. Like God, we can find satisfaction in learning something new. These discoveries open us up to considering new possibilities and put us on a better path.

If you're thinking like a scientist, you probably had some questions about this sermon. Maybe you think an example was unclear. Maybe you disagree with an entire premise. That is good! Tomorrow I'll be in full preacher mode trying to convince you all, but tonight I embrace the power of rethinking, which might mean disagreeing with my sermon. So, after Yom Kippur, come find me and we'll see where I went wrong.⁵ I'm not sure we will change our opinions on everything, but I hope we'll begin 5783 a little less entrenched in our old habits. May we all have a year of rethinking.

⁵ I'm serious about this one. I'm always happy to talk!