

Rosh Hashanah 5779: The Power of a Pause
Rabbi Leah A. Citrin, Temple Beth Or, Raleigh, NC

The violinist looked bored. As the Philharmonia Orchestra of London rehearsed Mahler's Ninth, the conductor, Benjamin Zander, noticed, and he was not pleased.

How could someone in such a prestigious orchestra show so little enthusiasm for what she was doing? Zander grew more and more frustrated. Instead of focusing on the piece, he focused on her. Finally, at the end of the day, he confronted her and asked if anything was amiss.

She told him "the music goes too fast for all these bow changes. I just cannot get into the string."

They talked some more and soon, Zander realized that the story he had invented was wrong. In fact, she DID care about the piece; she cared a great deal. But Zander had placed too many technical demands on her and the other violinists. She was more frustrated than he!

Zander went home, studied his score, and made changes based on the violinist's feedback. The concert the following night was a smashing success. And what had he done? Reached out to the one person who looked like she cared less than anyone else. Because Zander had decided to be curious, everything had changed.

How many times do we jump to conclusions as we navigate the chaos of our day to day lives? How frequently does our underlying fear of the unknown lead us to expect the worst in others? How often do we make assumptions instead of asking questions?

Rosh Hashanah gives us the opportunity to make beautiful music out of the cacophony in our lives. In fact, these 10 Days of Awe, *Yamim Noraim*, are a built in opportunity for us to pause and reset. What would happen if we took a moment, like Zander did, to pause and reset? To stop inventing the truth and seek it instead?

Even God understood the power of the pause. In the very first chapter of Torah, we read that God created light and darkness, land and sea, animals and humans. And then what does God do? God pauses. We call this pause Shabbat. On Shabbat, we create space to replenish and re-energize. We shift our focus from “the results of creation to the mystery of creation.”¹ We accept the invitation to pause and marvel at the world.

We find other places in Jewish tradition where we are taught to pause: the sound of the shofar calls us to pause and listen, different blessings invite us to pause and appreciate something beautiful or unusual, and Jewish rituals around grieving encourage mourners to pause their life and appreciate the person who has

¹ Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

died. Without a doubt, pausing is a Jewish thing to do. And the power of the pause does not end there.

In 2016, Jonathan Bartels, an RN and palliative care liaison at the University of Virginia Medical Center, began a practice that has grown and expanded beyond his hospital. In the moments after a patient dies, especially after unsuccessful resuscitation attempts, the entire medical team stops and gathers around the patient's bedside.

“Before [the patient] came here,” he described, “they had a life, and they had family. They were loved, and they loved other people. [We need to] take time to recognize that, and also take the time to honor and recognize the efforts we put in to try to save them, and [we] do that in silence so that we can each have our own voice.

A pause gives honor to the patient, and it also benefits the medical team. “It allows for closure” and helps his team move forward.

What does pausing look like? It can be a deep breath, a sip of water, or counting to three in your head before you speak. And while we are in that moment, we can do to give meaning to our pause when we assume good will, act from a place of curiosity, and consider alternative perspectives.

In Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of our Fathers, we read “

וְהָיִי דָן אֶת

”כָּל הָאָדָם לְכַף זְכוּת”.

In English, it can be translated as, “judge every person favorably.” Rabbi Rami Shapiro adds, “at some level everyone is a stranger to you, so do not presume you know all there is to know about someone. People do what they do because at that moment, that is all they can do.”² In other words, Pirkei Avot teaches us to assume good will in others. When we practice *kaf zachut*, we give everyone the benefit of the doubt.

For example, let’s imagine I return home from work and find food, pots and pans, and cooking utensils sprawled across the counter. When I don’t practice *kaf zechut*, I get annoyed at the mess that my wonderful husband Brian left for me to clean up. BUT, if I approach the situation with *kaf zechut*, I assume that Brian had a reason for leaving everything the way it was. Maybe he received an emergency phone call. Maybe he forgot something at the store. Maybe he even got sidetracked doing something nice for me!

Another way we might think about this idea is through the lens of “Giving an A,” a practice that conductor Zander uses when he teaches. On the first day of

² Page __ of commentary on Pirkei Avot

class, he tells his students that he's giving them all an "A." Then he asks each student to write a letter to him about why they earned that A. It's a wonderful practice, because "Giving the A" drives people to rise to the occasion and meet their own expectations. "Giving an A transports our relationships from the world of measurement into the universe of possibility."³

What if we each gave ourselves an A today, as we start the new year? What if we "give an A" to all the people we encounter as well? Imagine what our world could look like; how positive our interactions could be.

When we pause, we open space to ask questions. We shift from judgement to curiosity. Instead of reacting off the cuff, we respond in a way that enables us to be open minded. To ask 'why?'

We just heard the story of Hannah in this morning's haftarah portion. In her despair and sadness, she prayed to God; her lips moved but she made no sound. Eli the priest, who had been watching her, confronted Hannah, "How long will you persist in drunkenness? Put away your wine—get rid of it!"⁴

He did not pause. He did not ask questions. He was not curious because he had already invented an explanation for Hannah's behavior: she must be drunk.

³ Page 26 [The Art of Possibility](#)

⁴ | Samuel 1:10-14

What would have happened if Eli approached Hannah and acted from a place of curiosity? What if Eli had asked Hannah what she was doing or why she was so disheveled and distraught?

On a recent episode of the podcast “Hidden Brain,” social scientist Francesca Gino talked about how asking questions can expand a person’s way of thinking at a critical moment.

You remember Captain Chesley Sullenberger, better known as Captain Sully. Soon after he took off from LaGuardia airport, his plane was forced to make an emergency landing when a flock of birds flew into the engines.

“Most of us would go to the obvious answer,” Gino explained, “We are under a lot of pressure. We have no time. And what our mind would do very naturally is to narrow our way of thinking,” she continued,

“[Sully] kept his mind open. Rather than going to the obvious answer of landing at the nearest airport, he thought creatively about the problem and came up with this idea of landing in the Hudson River.”⁵

When we respond out of genuine, authentic curiosity, we open up and expand our thinking. Being curious allows us to stay in difficult conversations instead of turning away in anger. When we are curious, we humanize and stop demonizing each other.

⁵ <https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=631524581>

Each of us views the world through the lens of our own life experiences. What we have seen, heard, and done impacts how we perceive others. When we take a moment to pause, it allows us time to reflect and consider alternative perspectives.

Imagine walking down a street in Downtown Raleigh late one evening. Out of the corner of your eye, you see someone on the opposite side of the road. The person has their hands in their pockets and their head down inside their collar. You glance over at this person and see that they are also looking around, checking out the street. Now stop.

You are alone on a dark street and you are scared because someone is looking at you. But what about the other person? The other person also sees themselves alone on a street except for you. And they see you looking around frequently and walking more quickly. They could just as easily make the same assumptions about you that you are making about them! But when we take the time to consider alternative perspectives—and I am not saying we should endanger ourselves, I'm saying we need to check what drives our fears—we may see another human being who is just as scared as we are to be on a lonely, dark street.

When we react without knowing the whole story, without considering alternative perspectives, we can quickly become outraged. When we act in outrage, events escalate, and it becomes too late to scale them back.

This summer, we saw an example of this at a Chicago Cubs game. Video clips showed a young Cubs fan reaching out for a foul ball. The adult man who sat behind him scooped up the baseball and gave it to the adult woman sitting next to him instead. Social media exploded. This man was vilified: how could he steal a baseball from a kid?! “Don’t be this guy” some posts advised.

But what was the whole story? The video clip showed the fourth foul ball hit to the same section. The adult man had also caught three others and given each one to a kid sitting near him, *including* the young fan shown on TV. The fourth one, he gave to his wife, because they were at the game on their wedding anniversary.

How many people retracted their outrage after finding out the whole story? Not many.

When we are in relationship, and especially when we experience conflict, or when we are in a heightened emotional state, we need to pause. I know, I know, some of you are thinking “Easy to say, Rabbi. Harder to do.”

Yes. It is difficult; it requires practice; it takes risk; it necessitates discomfort. That is why I want to invite you to come practice the pause this

Thursday, from 7:30-9:00pm. Our monthly Adult Education session will be dedicated to it. So take a risk and join me!

When we pause, we remove negativity and replace it with something more meaningful. And active. And positive. In fact, taking a pause in our lives could actually make us happier.

On this Rosh Hashanah, let us find our own way to take a moment and pause. Let us strive to act kindly, compassionately, and patiently in that pause, and let us work towards assuming good will, being curious, and considering alternative perspectives.

Ken yihe ratzon, may these words be worthy of coming true.