

Is Life a Game or a Story?
Yom Kippur, 5783
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True confession: I play wordle almost every morning. In case you were wondering, my current score is 97% with 150 games played. Why, you might wonder, do I do this and look forward to it? I think it's a way for me to begin each day with a doable task. Wordle challenges are in a defined universe and the results are clear — either you get it in six guesses or you don't. I get a little endorphin rush when I solve the puzzle and the message to self is, "You did it. Now go slay dragons..."

I know that there are a million more games out there — but please don't tell me your favorite — I think I'll stick to my wordle a day. I recognize my risk for addiction. My question, though, is what happens when we play life as if it were a game or we play life as a game and we don't even know we're doing it.

The writer, William Storr, in a new book, contrasts games with stories and argues that the story version of life is an illusion. Instead, he says, people are driven by status or the Status Game. The Game, he argues, isn't about being liked or accepted but about being seen as being better than others. And about getting more. It might start with the high school game, then the college game. The game to make partner in a law firm. The finance game to make the most money and so on. According to Storr, high-status people are healthier, get to talk more, have more relaxed postures, are admired by their social inferiors, and have a sense of purpose. Who wouldn't want high status? Storr says that even altruism or deeds of lovingkindness are games — we want others to see us as kind or generous.

We have all played these games, consciously and unconsciously. Most of us competed in high school to be popular. Many of us helped our kids figure out which colleges to apply to or whether to apply Early Decision, what activities to highlight, which references look best, in hopes of winning the college game. Advancing on the corporate ladder or in an academic setting has its own set of rules, and it feels important to master them. Sometimes, looking at social media, it's easy to feel that people are competing to have the best marriages, demonstrated by moving, public tributes to their spouses, the best photos of the most handsome and successful families, the most exciting vacations with the nicest hotel rooms and the best views, even the most appetizing meals or desserts.

I imagine that you, like me, have occasionally looked at facebook and felt a little sickened. Is that person's life really so much better than mine? I imagine that many of you, like me, have checked how many likes or retweets you got on a post and then wondered why you're doing this. Are 243 likes really worth anything? Why do I care? And we all know the kid who did everything perfectly, went to all the right schools, had all the right internships, opened all the right doors, only to wonder where those doors led and if they even wanted to go there. Maybe that kid was — us. It's hard to feel like we are winning the game when everyone, particularly young people, are more anxious and depressed than ever before.

Game theorist C Thi Nguyen says that although we think we're playing a game, the game is actually playing us. The game defines our goals: money, likes, Ivy League acceptances — points, as it were. Unknowingly we take up the game, we strive to achieve those goals losing sight of what we really wanted, allowing the points to tell us what we want instead. We're trying to win before we consciously even realized we were were playing. Lots of likes or sales or retweets or money or cars seem to confirm the worth of our accomplishments.

Games — I mean real games, like Wordle and baseball — are enjoyable because they define a discrete universe of goals and challenges and rules. Life, though, even if we take it on as a game and try to play by some set of rules, is much more messy, complicated, and wonderful than that. Yes, more wonderful. When we play life as a game, we risk accepting watered-down values — or significantly compromising our values — forgetting or losing sight of what we truly hold dear, and competing for things we don't really want. Games make life seem like it is quantifiable. But the things in life that matter most are not quantifiable.

Think about some things that I truly hold dear but that can't be measured. What I feel when a student "gets it" and I see all the lights go on, how I feel and how they feel and how both of our lives are changed. We diminish and demean this when we think of learning as what shows up on a report card. I can't measure the pleasure of sitting in my backyard on a late summer day under a blue sky with the buzz of cicadas filling the sound field — and this does not relate to how much Zillow says my house is worth. A fitbit will tell me how many steps I have taken but it can't measure the pleasure I got walking them or even describe the feeling of seeing a blue heron take flight during my walk. In fact, the measuring itself seems to take something away from being present to life itself.

We need to ask deeper questions about how I am really showing up in my life: How am I doing as a mother? a spouse? a rabbi? a person? Am I growing in compassion? in wisdom? in humility? in my relationship to God? None of these can be quantified, and when we focus on the things that can be quantified, we lose something essential.

The Talmud has a fascinating discussion about measuring life's worth. The rabbis are discussing what blessing a person should say when entering the barn to measure the new grain. One blessing is prescribed on entering the barn; another, once the farmer has *begun* to measure. But the rabbis say: if the farmer recites the blessing after completing the counting, the blessing is invalid. "Blessing," the rabbis say, explicitly, "is not to be found in anything weighed, measured, or numbered."

What exactly does this mean? After all, I can count my apples and I can count my children. But I hear the rabbis saying that if I am to experience them as blessings, I need to see their inherent value, their unique and magnificent qualities. The blessing lies in an appreciation of the fulness that is in one apple or one child — in recognizing where the fruit or the child comes from, how it is sustained, and how it nourishes us— rather than in the counting. To say it differently, measuring, counting, owning, going for "likes" on facebook — separate us from the flow of life, but the blessing inheres in the flow. Not how many breaths you take but how often life takes your breath away.

What might the Torah have to teach us about how to live into life's fulness? On one level the Torah is a book of commandments and we could see it as another point system; we rack up mitzvah points and God checks the big book to see where we're doing. Viewed differently, however, our Torah is a book of stories — the story of Abraham and Sarah's encounter with God and the birth of their son Isaac in their old age, Abraham nearly killing Isaac on the altar at what appears to be God's command; Jacob fleeing from his murderous brother, dreaming of ladders to God, falling in love, trading divine aspirations for wealth, wives, and progeny, wrestling with an angel to discover his true identity, returning home; Joseph favored by his father, despised by his brothers, ultimately forgiving his brothers, meting out justice in Egypt as Pharaoh's second in command; our people suffering and enduring centuries of slavery, a miraculous escape to freedom, Moses struggling to lead a band of discontent and wayward souls, exhausted by their every demand, burdened by his own speech defect, uncertain about his message and in need of reassurance from the One who sent him. Why do we tell these stories?

The Torah's aim is neither history nor a catalogue of commandments nor an explanation of how things got to be the way they are. Instead, what these stories convey are the struggles of flawed human beings, trying to live out their lives and connect to something greater than themselves. In the words of biblical scholar Robert Alter, "What is it like, the biblical writers seek to know through their art, to be a human being with a divided consciousness — intermittently loving your brother but hating him even more; resentful or perhaps contemptuous of your father but also capable of the deepest filial regard; stumbling between disastrous ignorance and imperfect knowledge; fiercely asserting your own independence but caught in a tissue of events divinely contrived; outwardly a definite character and inwardly an unstable vortex of greed, ambition, jealousy, lust, piety, courage, compassion and much more?"¹ In other words, stories about characters more or less like us, working out problems more or less like our own. We read the Torah ultimately to understand what it is to be human, to locate our stories within theirs. If the Torah is a tree of life, then we are its roots digging deeper, its trunk standing taller, its branches spreading wider.

These stories captivate us not because they are historical and not because they tell us what to do or how to rack up points with God, but because they awaken our imaginations and help us identify the intensity, passion, and sorrow inherent in our own lives. Stories, unlike legal codes, "have endless facets of meaning; they gain admission into our inner world because they are polymorphous, plastic, familiar and strange at the same time. Once within, they begin their work, turning around and around, inviting us to play with their meanings."² Telling stories, we imagine new worlds and then we can walk toward them

For many decades now I have lived within these stories. Each week, as I consider the parasha, I listen for the resonances with my own life. It is parashat Ki Tavo — what are the blessings and curses of my life? Can I find the blessing in the obstacles? It is Parashat Noach — the world being destroyed. What is my level of responsibility for its destruction? Can I build an ark? It is Parashat Lech Lecha — what journeys will I set out on this year? Will I be brave enough to answer God's call? We walk in this world but also in the Torah's world and in the world of the rabbis and the world of the Zohar and the world of our own grandparents. Time is multi-dimensional. The Torah is read anew each year — what story will speak to me today? How will an old familiar story strike me differently? Who will I become this year?

In similar ways, we live our lives through the seasons and the holidays. For me, the changing colors of the leaves, the newly felt chill in the air, are tied up with memories of going to shul with my father, the unique music of the holidays, wearing my new wool dress, always too warm for the season, sitting beside him playing with his tallit. Now the holidays are also tied up with other happy memories — our anniversary — and with painful ones — Howard's death last year and others who died in this season. Living inside these stories, our lives take on texture and depth.

When I sit with a family after a loved one has died, they rarely speak of their mother's accomplishments or how much money their father made. They tell stories about the quirky passions that made this human being uniquely themselves, the things they loved and hated, the funny things they said and did. Mostly they talk about how they felt in the presence of their loved one, the ways they made them feel loved, cared for, and safe. I'm not saying we

¹ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Basic Books, New York, 1981), 176.

² Avivah Zornberg, "The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus (New York: Doubleday, 2001), p. 122.

shouldn't accomplish things, only that in the end, the important questions will be: have you loved deeply? have you made a difference? have you lived with joy and wonder?

How do we live lives worthy of the gift we have been given? How do we ensure that our children, when we are gone, tell stories of our love, of the difference we have made?

Yom Kippur's answer is HaYom. Today. Hayom Harat Olam. Today the world was created. Not some distant day in the past, thousands or billions of years ago, but today, this day, the world is created anew. Hayom Harat Olam — This day is pregnant with eternity.

This means first, I think, that we live in the moment. That what matters is the texture of each day, our presence to that which is in front of us, to one another, to God. It means sinking deeply into this moment — the chill of the air, the hoot of the night owl, my cat butting my face with his nose to wake me in the morning. Every day I begin my day with a to-do list — after my daily wordle — and then I go at it fiercely trying to accomplish what is written. But at the end of the day or somewhere along the way when I diverge from my path of progress, the tasks on the list fade. I can hardly remember what I supposedly accomplished. It is as if I set out to create an excel spreadsheet and ended up with an impressionist painting — what did the day feel like? what were its colors? what were the small interactions that surprised me? when did I turn away from to-do list because there was a person in front of me that needed my attention? because beauty overwhelmed me? because my feet called me to go outside? It is the texture of life, our presence to the moment, to the day, Hayom, that matters.

Perhaps we might need a better to do list, although I acknowledge it is hard and the taxes still have to be filed and the electrician called. Nevertheless, one that says, Check in on some folks who you think might need a call. Call your brother and apologize for what you said. Write postcards to get out the vote. Volunteer with JCARR. Write a note to someone you love. Stick it in their lunch. Weed the garden. Make a delicious dinner. Put the finishing touches on that paper that will contribute to our collective understanding of the world around us.

The story of the day will not just be one of pleasantries. Think about the liturgy for a moment — some of us will live and some of us will die, some of us will find rest and some of us will wander, some of us will be at peace and some of us disturbed. I don't the prayer is telling us that we should strive to live on the right side of those equations. I think it is telling us that all these will happen to us over time. Just as with the stories of our ancestors in the Torah, life is profoundly messy, our motives are mixed up, and our choices often unclear. To be present to the moment is not just to be present to life's beauty, but to present to its fulness, in all the mess, all the savagery, all the wildness, all the exhilaration that is life itself.

Life is profoundly mixed and some of our work is to sit with that and not pretend otherwise — or, to say it differently, forget about the points and get comfortable with the mess. Sitting in the mess, though, we also become aware of what's wrong — things we are unhappy about, places where we have messed up, places where the world is profoundly broken. If we notice that we are sitting in a pool of resentment, perhaps we need to stop pointing fingers and look more carefully at our own role in our suffering. If we have let a friendship go because of anger and hurt, perhaps we need to find ways to soften, to take responsibility, to voice our own hurts and to seek forgiveness. Sitting with what is, also means we open ourselves to the pain of the world. Our lives are not separate from one another, from the world. If we feel anxious about our loved ones in Florida, if we read the news of the hurricane and sit with the pain of lost homes, lost lives, and lost livelihoods, then we also need to take action to save our ailing planet. If we feel the pain of our broken democracy, then we need to take action to preserve everything that we value that has made America a great nation. If we want to tell the story of having made a difference, then we need to make a difference, today, hayom.

When we sink into the moment, we can also notice the stories we tell. Some are empowering, some are stories of our victimhood or our failures. The question we ask today on Yom Kippur is can we write a new story? I am struck by how often in the Torah a person chooses to act differently than they have in the past, to give up an old script, and how that shift makes possible a whole new story: Jacob gives up his habitual pattern of dissimilating and becomes Israel; Ephraim and Menashe give up competing for the blessing and all future generations are blessed through them; Jonah is forced to contend with a God who cares about all God's creatures — can Jonah also open his heart?

The story we tell about who we are is ultimately the story we live; when we make different choices, we are freed to write a new story. My friend tells the story of washing a pot, feeling tons of resentment that she was spending her life, or so it seemed, washing filthy pots, when she realized how much resentment she was carrying and how it was changing her into a person she didn't want to be. She wasn't transformed in an instant but she began a long process of looking at herself and the ways she was blaming others for her own suffering. I think that is what the Torah intends when we are enjoined to choose life, to choose the blessing. We are invited to change our script, to write more empowering stories, to find the blessing, and to live into life's fulness.

The psalmist writes, לִמְנוֹת יָמֵינוּ כֵּן הוֹדַע וְנִבֵּא לִבְבַּי חֵכְמָה Teach us to number our days that we may attain a heart of wisdom. I don't think that the psalmist is telling us to count our days, but rather that we should make them count. "Teach us how short our time is, let us know it in the depths of our soul...Show us how precious each day is; teach us to be fully here."³ On this sacred day of Yom Kippur, may we be truly here. Between this Yom Kippur and next, may we find ourselves more truly present. And when we forget, may we, with compassion for ourselves, wake up again to this life in all of its blessing and mess. Hayom Harat Olam. This day is pregnant with eternity.

³ Stephen Mitchell, *A Book of Psalms: Selected and Adapted from the Hebrew* (Harper Perennial, New York, 1993)