

**Sitting With Not Knowing**  
*Erev Rosh Hashanah 5784/2023*  
Rabbi Lisa S. Greene  
North Shore Congregation Israel

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I used to visit my mom's kindergarten class. When I was in college or grad school and had a day off, I'd come visit with my guitar.

When I entered the classroom the conversation went something like this:

"Who are you?"

"I'm Mrs. Greene's daughter."

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to sing with you."

"How old are you?"

"23" – or whatever age I was.

And then they would reply, rightly or wrongly, that their parents were older or younger than me.

Mom taught Kindergarten for over 30 years. Her classroom was a sanctuary of order – to her. But to the untrained eye it appeared that in the old fashioned classroom with a loft, dress-up corner and upright piano no one knew what was going on. Kids all over the place, noise, nonstop movement, someone tugging at their teacher, someone else antagonizing a classmate.

On many occasions, I was that untrained eye. When I entered from my basically adult world I was quickly overwhelmed – I didn't know what was going on. I would sit on the rug and watch the movement around me. Mom, on the other hand, was in complete control – calm and soft-spoken – she never raised her voice. She was that teacher – who did not raise her voice!

When she retired, Mom did the same on a smaller scale with her five grandchildren. She had the order down, and knew what was going on, even if to the outsider it appeared otherwise. My sister and I might sit without knowing – but Mom knew how to foster creativity and get those kids to clean up, set the table, and chew with their mouths closed.

For most of my life, my mother was all in with calm, to-do lists, a grounding structure and focus on the next task to solve. How she got there, I took for granted – and I wish I'd asked. I always figured it was a combination of being a great teacher, the wife of a rabbi who worked 24/7, and the daughter of my beautiful Grandma Rose who had what Mom called

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a nervous breakdown when Mom was early in high school. To Mom, you always moved forward, and did what you had to do.

This changed, of course, when she got sick. Mom's illness wasn't a sudden one, but the gradual creep of Parkinson's and Lewy Body Dementia that for many years was unrecognizable. Increasingly, her body was out of sorts, and the things that we counted on her for – keeping the calm, knowing how to figure it all out, maintaining order at home, and planning large family meals, became increasingly out of her control.

Grasping for next steps to problem solve, my sister Jackie and I sought calm somewhere, anywhere, as we moved from doctor to ER to caregivers to upset calls and exhausting visits with someone who looked like our mom, and had her gentleness and warm smile, but, in so many ways, was not her. Whether in our homes miles away, or in Mom's in New Jersey, we were, in the words of singer/songwriter Carrie Newcomer's song: "learning to sit with not knowing." Newcomer writes:

*I'm learning to sit with not knowing  
When I don't see where it's going  
Cool my heels and start slowing  
I am learning to sit with not knowing<sup>1</sup>*

Learning to sit with not knowing – how difficult it was! What did we do? Where should we be? How could we best help Mom? What did we tell her when she called upset? The not knowing loomed large and consumed our thoughts, days and nights. We felt so alone and at sea, but, at the same time, we knew we were not the only people in such a hellish corner of the world for those fourteen years.

Every one of us lives through times of not knowing – times when it feels urgently like we need to know, but when we don't. Like:

- When we are looking for confirmation about a professional or financial future;
- Waiting for news about the health of a loved one –  
or ourselves;
- Holding our breath watching a relationship on shaky ground with an uncertain future;
- Entering a new status of life we'd not intended  
like being divorced or widowed;

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<sup>1</sup> Carrie Newcomer, *Learning to Sit With Not Knowing*, on *Point of Arrival*, 2019.

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- Watching the effect of climate change before us and in the headlines.
- Fearing looming antisemitism and violence
- Or thinking about unwanted moves and departures.

not knowing is a common reality for us all. In his book *Life Is in the Transitions*, bestselling author Bruce Feiler talks about disruptors, or “sources of conflict, upheaval or stress,” voluntary or involuntary, that we experience in our lives. Disruptors do just that to our lives, disrupt, and they cause us to not know. Feiler interviewed over 200 people for his book, and concludes that “The number of disruptors a person can expect to experience in an adult life is around three dozen. That’s an average of one every twelve to eighteen months.”<sup>2</sup> That is, disruptors are surprisingly more typical than we would expect – or want – and yet, they catch us off guard repeatedly.

We don’t like not knowing – it’s discomfiting and upsetting – and leaves us feeling off balance. And because of this, many of us will go to great lengths to move from a place of not knowing to a place of knowing: move, leave jobs and relationships, stop talking with people, avoid visiting, run far to escape or deny our not knowing.

But while most of us may see places of not knowing as utterly undesirable or purposeless, of note is that Judaism actually sees them as gifts, embracing not knowing as a necessary part of our lives, and taking it head on. Put more simply, sitting, living, journeying with uncertainty is a Jewish thing.

This rich history of entering the unknown starts in Torah. Remember Abraham and Sarah, then Avram and Sarai – God tells them: “*Lech I’cha*” – go to a place I’ll show you. In other words, they did not know where they were going. When our ancestors leave Egypt, they walk through the Sea of Reeds...to where? What’s a Promised Land? They did not know. And they did not know about food and water – and complained a lot – or that they were traveling a circuitous route and that there was a direct route that would have been much quicker. And, a bit later, when Moses goes up Mt. Sinai and is there for forty days, the people have no idea what to do or expect – what’s he doing, when he’ll come back, who this God they can’t see is...so, in their not knowing, they make a golden calf. Again, not knowing.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce Feiler, *Life Is in the Transitions*, 2021, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> All citations from Genesis.

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And then there are the countless journeys of our people, walking into the unknown throughout Jewish history, as poet Marge Piercy writes:

“mapless, walking into the wilderness,  
going barefoot with a canteen into the desert”

Piercy says,

“We Jews are all born of wanderers,  
with shoes under our pillows  
and a memory of blood that is ours raining down.”<sup>4</sup>

In her words, we have been wanderers fleeing persecution, oppression and death in Egypt, Israel, Spain, Russia, Poland, Yemen, Ethiopia, Germany, and so many other places.

And, for us as Jews there is NOW, aka the big not knowing. We are precisely IN the season of not knowing. These 10 days from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur emphasize this clearly. Here we are at the start of the new year, the start of ten days of not knowing.

Tomorrow we will hear and speak the prayer that makes us all tremble, *Unetaneh Tokef*, which says:

On this holy day, God, we come before you,  
humbled that we don't know what will happen –  
who will live and who will die;  
who will grow old, and who will die before their time;  
who will be tranquil and who will be troubled;  
who will be calm and who tormented;  
who will live in poverty and who in prosperity;  
who will be humbled and who exalted<sup>5</sup> –

These words hit hard, every year, and even harder some years. How many conversations have I had with you about this prayer – how difficult it is for us to hear each year. Why is this litany so difficult to hear? Because, whether we want to admit it or not, we all know

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<sup>4</sup> Marge Piercy, "Maggid," in *The Art of Blessing the Day*, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> *Mishkan Hanefesh Machzor for the Days of Awe Rosh Hashanah*, CCAR Press, p.179.

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that the words speak to the reality of our lives – this is what we live with every day – we just don't know. Our lives, every day, are about not knowing.

As Feiler teaches, “The smartest minds today...have come to understand that the world no longer adheres to predictable, linear mandates. Instead, life is filled with chaos and complexity, periods of order and disorder, linearity and nonlinearity. In place of steady lines, observers now see loops, spirals, wobbles, fractals, twists, tangles, and turnabouts.”<sup>6</sup>

While our instincts may tell us to turn – even run – from the discomfort of not knowing, to seek knowing and comfort and certainty, Jewish tradition tells us to lean in – to sit in the not knowing. Embrace it. Live in it! Be present, - and certainly don't run. But, make no mistake, embracing the unknown is not, though, giving in or giving up. It's responding to it and learning from it.

Author, therapist and teacher of Jewish mysticism Estelle Frankel has studied, as she calls it, “the wisdom of not knowing” for over a decade [and she] practices the meaningful embrace of not knowing – and what we can learn from it. In her book *The Wisdom of Not Knowing*, she is clear, “The unknown forms a deep current that runs throughout Jewish mystical thought and practice.”<sup>7</sup> She points to how much wisdom we can gain from not knowing. Frankel moves us from seeing “not knowing” as a negative to viewing its potential and possibility. She encourages us to be present, see where we are, and sit in that space.

It's not easy. Indeed, embracing the unknown – sitting without knowing – is often the most difficult thing to do. And it can well feel like we are giving up, or doing nothing. But, with a perspective change, we can come to see it as a source of exploration, growth and profound personal, relational and even spiritual change. As Rabbi Robyn Tsesarsky explains, “embracing the unknown [is constructive], [and] not walking off a cliff in the dark. To venture into the unknown means there is something out there...Stepping into the unknown is an act of faith. Stepping into the unknown means living.”<sup>8</sup>

We see growth and faith from embracing and living in the not knowing in so many instances:

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<sup>6</sup> Feiler, p.14.

<sup>7</sup> Estelle Frankel, *The Wisdom of Not Knowing*, 2017, pp. 2-3.

<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Robyn Tsesarsky, September 2023.

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- We see growth in the couple who became closer during her illness.
- We see growth in the career change of the trader who took time between jobs to consider what mattered to him
- We see learning of the artist who moved across the country to different scenery and people.
- We see learning in the embrace of Judaism by the person who had always worked with Jews and took time to reflect on her values
- We see learning and inspiration of the inventor who sat amidst the unknown of her parents' failing health and realized how she could create for others.
- We see growth in the confidence of the person who's always felt insecure at work and took time to reflect on their patterns over the years.
- We see connection when the parent who wanted to be home more changed their schedule.
- We see connection when moving to a new place brought the newcomer to reach out to old friends she'd lost touch with.
- And so so so much more...

Feiler, too, emphasizes the potential of such times: "Transitions are filled with tumult and unrest, but they're also filled with helpful purging and dazzling creativity. In other words, they're chaos. And as a new generation of scientists has taught us: Chaos is not noise, it's a signal; disorder is not a mistake, it's a design element. If we view these periods as aberrations, we risk their becoming missed opportunities. If we view them as openings, we just might open up to them. Transitions are not going away..."<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, transitions are not going away, and they're more frequent than we'd like to admit. Learning to sit in that not knowing provides powerful openings for us.

Openings:

- An opening to be where we are right now, present in today, not looking ahead at next week or next year
- An opening to express aloud that we don't know – to say, simply: I don't know. I'm scared. I'm overwhelmed
- An opening to see that all those other people we think have it all together are also sitting with some kind of not knowing

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<sup>9</sup> Feiler, p. 313.

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- An opening to sit with prayer and take in words or melody and see where they move us
- An opening for quiet self reflection to learn about ourselves –
  - how do I feel right now – how do I want to feel? – and maybe even to gain understanding and patience for ourselves
- An opening for creativity – to explore how art or writing gives us freedom of expression
- An opening for learning about who we need as a resource – maybe someone with a listening ear or a person in a similar situation
- An opening for finding how we can seek self-care.
- An opening to share with the people around us how we *really* are instead of replying “I’m fine” and moving on
- An opening to share our experiences of not knowing with one another.
- And thus an opening to connect with others and feel less alone.
- An opening for faith – faith in God, faith in ourselves, faith in other people, faith in kindness...
- An opening to see how we have dealt in other times of not knowing – and how we can apply that understanding now.

The thing about sitting with not knowing you’re doing something but it may not look like action in the traditional sense of the word.

It doesn’t need to be. Nor does it mean we can change the not knowing. But the potential in sitting in the uncomfortable space of not knowing is great, if we let it be. Sitting without knowing we can find those openings and in them we can grow, we can learn, we can change, we can connect.

These coming ten days give us yet another opening. Tomorrow we will hear those words of *Unetaneh Tokef*, together, in the same room, and speak them in one voice with others who wrestle with the not knowing, too, even if they don’t look it, or we didn’t know it. As we start this new year, let us embrace the potential of not knowing. Together let’s learn to sit with not knowing.

*I’m learning to sit with not knowing  
When I don’t see where it’s going  
Cool my heels and start slowing  
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*I'm learning to sit with what's next  
What if and my best guess  
Be kinder when it's a process  
I'm learning to live with what's next*

*I'm learning to sit with not knowing  
When I don't see where it's going<sup>10</sup>*

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As I wrote this sermon, I heard my parents' voices clearly – the clarion call of my father, Rabbi Barry H. Greene, who continues, 15 years after his death, to ask: “Is this High Holy Day-worthy?” and demand that my ending could be stronger, and the firm insistence of my mother, Betty Greene, that I thoughtfully tell every story as a good Kindergarten teacher might, and that I write in a timely fashion, because you never know what will happen around the holidays. My sister Jackie took on my folks' encouraging role in this our first year since Mom's death, and Noa, David and Talia patiently gave me space. Thanks to Rabbis Robyn Tsesarsky, Shira Joseph and Wendi Geffen, dear friends and colleagues for invaluable wisdom, reading & editing. And the deepest of gratitude to all who inspired this sermon – I do hope you see yourself in its words and message. –LSG, September 2023

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<sup>10</sup>Newcomer.