Sacred Uncertainty
Kol Nidre 5784
Rabbi Wendi Geffen

Since its release in 2020, one Apple TV hit show has drawn an all-time record breaking viewership, with more than 25 billion minutes of it streamed in the United States alone.[1] Who could have ever imagined that a light-hearted show about the antics of an American football coach seemingly in over his head leading a UK soccer team would become a true cultural phenomenon and touchstone. More than providing much needed comic relief, *Ted Lasso* has served as a much needed balm for our society, an oasis in the parched desert of vitriol and harshness that has come to characterize so many other aspects of life today.

One episode from the first season of the show has stuck with me. The scene opens with the earnest, gentle, and seemingly unassuming Ted facing off against his vindictive, self-absorbed antagonist Rupert, the prior owner of the soccer team Ted is coaching. Their encounter isn't on the soccer field; instead, they are in the local pub, playing a game of darts, with a significant wager on the line. Everyone, including Rupert, seems pretty certain that Rupert will win. Ted, notably behind in the game, steps forward to take his final throws. Just before the first dart, Ted shares that people have underestimated him his entire life, and it used to really bother him. But then, one day while driving his son to school, he saw a quote painted on a wall that said: "Be curious, not judgemental." And that stuck with him. He throws his first dart, and then returns to his story, sharing that of all the people who used to belittle him, not one of them was curious. "Because if they were curious," he says, "they would've asked questions. Questions like, 'Have you played a lot of darts, Ted?'" At which point he throws his second dart and continues: "to which I would have answered, 'Yes sir. Every Sunday afternoon at a sports bar with my father from age ten.'" His final throw is the game-winning double bullseye![2] End of scene.

Perhaps you remember this particular episode. My family watched it when it came out during the pandemic, and I can still remember how heartened I felt to see the values of kindness, respect, and curiosity best the forces of cynicism, self-interest, and certainty. I get that same feeling now, even just talking about it.

So I wonder: Why is it that values like kindness and respect are so countercultural? How is it that curiosity, in particular, has become the most precious of rare gems?

After all, curiosity is a natural response to uncertainty. And given that so much in our world proves so uncertain, one might rightly assume that we would be living in a time of

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[1] Porter, Rick. "'Ted Lasso' Finale Hits Series High in Streaming Rankings." *The Hollywood Reporter*. June 29, 2023.
[2] "The Diamond Dogs." *Ted Lasso*. Season 1, Episode 8. Apple TV, 2020.

abundant curiosity. But as Rabbi Greene shared in her profound message on Erev Rosh Hashanah, all too often, when living in a state of not-knowing, of uncertainty, we respond differently. Rather than embracing the unknown with curiosity, we double down on adamant certainty instead.

Last year, I received a pointed email from someone I respect who was offended that we were hosting a certain speaker to address a contemporary issue, concluding with the demand that the speaker be canceled. I responded by calling to learn more about their concern. For nearly twenty minutes, though never having met nor heard the speaker in question, the person detailed for certain why the speaker was wrong. When I asked: "Would you like to know a little more about the speaker or perhaps why we are addressing the topic?," the individual answered honestly and with deep certainty: "No."

Now, I'm intentionally not naming the topic, and, just to clarify, I'm not trying to vilify the complainant either. I have "conversations" like that one all the time. The truth is, pick any topic about which we have strong feelings, and each of us, if we are honest, can likely see ourselves as the complainant, utterly disinterested in learning about a different perspective.

In situations like this, we fall right into what sociology professor Ilana Redstone calls "the Certainty Trap"—"a resolute unwillingness to consider the possibility that we're wrong or that we're not right in the way we think we are," in particular "... for problems that touch on topics related to identity, intent, fairness, equality, and various forms of bigotry—many of the most sensitive and controversial issues today …"[3] Of note is that the Certainty Trap doesn't discriminate. There is no race, class, gender, age, or political party immune to its enticements. It is an equal opportunity vice.

Consider these everyday occurrences when we learn:

- that someone we respect supports the "other" candidate or political party
- or that person understands the root of an issue, any issue, as different than the one we identify as causal
- or that person sees real validity in a matter that we see as irrelevant or distracting.

Whether on matters political or personal, public or private, profound or petty—let's be honest—at the crossroads of cultivating curiosity or sinking into our certainty, how many of us possess the wherewithal to choose the former? To consider for even a moment that

[3] Redstone, Ilana. "Breaking Out of the Certainty Trap." *Sapir Journal*. Volume 6. Summer 2022.

perhaps there is something to be learned from the other's take? Instead, settled in our certainty, more times than not, our simple reflex tends to take us to a place of judgment: Not only is the other wrong, but also their wrongness says something about who they are—they must be, at best, inept, or at worst, morally bankrupt.

Redstone again: "Certainty often leads to a tendency to be dismissive or disdainful of ideas, positions, or even questions that one doesn't agree with—particularly when those ideas, positions, or questions touch beliefs we hold dear. The most difficult problems set in when we hold them so closely that we cease to realize they're personal beliefs at all."[4] The Certainty Trap reinforces our mistaken belief that certain questions have definitive and clear answers, that the matters are settled, when in reality, they most certainly are not.

And while we might then assume the Certainty Trap is a uniquely modern phenomenon thanks to today's political polarization, social media, and identity politics, it turns out that it is not new at all. In fact, Judaism has been concerned about the matter for a very long time, a concern expressed explicitly and abundantly in particular on Yom Kippur!

Think about it for a moment: of all our human shortcomings listed in the Yom Kippur *vidui*, that central-most confessional part in our liturgy, there is only one sin that is repeated, and in this case, it's repeated three different times! We say it in *Tavo Lifanecha*—the piece we read just before the alphabetical acrostic of our sins called *Ashamnu*—it's in that prayer too. And it appears again in the litany of *Al Cheit* confessions for good measure. It is a character flaw known in Hebrew as *kishinu oref*—what, for now, we'll call the quality of being "overly certain."

When it is translated literally, though, *kishinu oref* means having a stiff neck. Think about that: if a person is stiff-necked, then they are unable to physically turn their head to see anything or anyone outside of the perspective and posture they have already taken—according to Rashi, they literally cannot turn their head back.[5] Sixteenth-century commentator Sforno takes it a step further: "Such a person will reject even theories which have been proven beyond doubt if they conflict with what [one] deems good or convenient for [one]self."[6] And one fifteenth-century teaching reveals the real danger of the Certainty Trap—then and now—noting that this quality of *kishinu oref* blinds people to their relationships, causing them to go so far as to shame their friends, the socially vulnerable,

[4] Redstone, Ilana. "The Certainty Trap." *Tablet Magazine*. May 9, 2022.
[5] See Rashi on Ex 32:9.
[6] Sforno on Deuteronomy 9:6.

even their respected teachers and mentors—concluding "this evil quality can remove [the one possessing it] from the world."[7]

But why? What are we so afraid of? Kathryn Schultz, author of the fascinating book *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error*, offers an explanation: "A whole lot of us go through life assuming that we are basically right, basically all the time, about basically everything: about our political and intellectual convictions, our religious and moral beliefs, our assessment of other people, our memories, our grasp of facts. If we relish being right and regard it as our natural state, you can imagine how we feel about being wrong ... it leaves us feeling idiotic and ashamed."[8]

Our Jewish ancients warned us about this human predilection for certainty nearly 2,000 years ago. They understood that any time we attach ourselves so firmly to our certainty that we place our rightness over our relationships, we set ourselves up for a fall. To this end, they instructed us to intentionally release our certainty. Listen to their powerful directive: "Unless you forget a little, the world cannot endure."[9] Listen to that for a second and let its nuance sink in: Unless YOU forget a little, the WORLD cannot endure. If we allow *our* certainty to take up all the space, then there's no room for *anything* else. Why does this matter? Because societal advancement emerges not from our certainty, but rather from the places where we are not so sure—when we give ourselves permission to be wrong. And for our purposes on this Yom Kippur in particular, if we allow *our* certainty to take up all the space, there will be no room for any*one* else either—ironically, even for our *fullest* selves.

Schultz again: "Far from being a moral flaw, [being wrong] is inextricable from some of our most humane and honorable qualities: empathy, optimism, imagination, conviction, and courage … it is ultimately wrongness, not rightness, that can teach us who we are."[10]

This is the exact reason we chant Kol Nidre at the very start of Yom Kippur. Listen to the translation. It says: "Let all our vows and oaths, all the promises we make between this Yom Kippur and the next, be null and void should we, after honest effort, find ourselves unable to fulfill them. Then may we be absolved of them."

[7] Orchot Tzadikim 4:5.
[8] Schulz, Kathryn. *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error*, 5.
[9] Genesis Rabbah 39:6.
[10] Schultz, *Being Wrong*, 6.

Kol Nidre is saying: for all those things we're so sure are certain, and around which we base our lives and our promises, should it turn out that we're wrong about them, it'll be okay. Why? Because any hope we have of becoming better people, this day or any day, demands the hard work of *teshuvah*—the repentance and returning that starts with the operational assumption that we got something wrong. Rabbi David Stern puts it well: "Kol Nidre grants us the gift of sacred uncertainty: the chance to begin this new year with a sense of what we do not know, rather than a narrow certainty about what we do … What if every time I were ready to proclaim some self-evident truth, I allowed Kol Nidre to whisper in my ear: 'Says who?'"[11]

As great as *Ted Lasso* is, at the end of the day, it's just a show. The truth is, no matter how much we might otherwise want to, we can't outsource our desire for a kinder, more respectful and curious world to a TV show, or politicians, celebrities, internet memes, or anybody else. That responsibility lies with each of us, and the heart of these High Holy Days beckons us to remember that change starts with how we approach one another, in the regular, everyday encounters we have with the people in our lives: from our parents and grandparents to our kids and grandkids, from our spouses and partners to our colleagues and friends, from our family members to fellow community members, and especially from anyone and everyone around whom we know we don't see things the same way.

It could be any of these:
- That person we try so hard to avoid at our break-the-fast because we just know what will come out of their mouth.
- The one who always tells us that we're doing it wrong, or could do it better "this way!"
- The one who knows everything about everything.

What if we tried responding to any of the encounters which normally trigger the Certainty Trap's sharp teeth for us with a simple, three-sentence script, not from Hollywood, but from our hearts instead?

"That's different from how I see it."
"Maybe I'm wrong."
"Would you please tell me more?"

In his piece about the High Holy Days entitled "Proven Wrong," entrepreneur and author

[11] Stern, Rabbi David. *Mishkan haNefesh: Yom Kippur.* 17.

Derek Sivers sums up the potential of this approach when he writes: "I want to lose every debate. My favorite moments in life are when someone shows me a new perspective—a way of thinking I had never considered … These conversations are … the most life-changing— because … I get to understand their reasoning. Then those people I thought were wrong, stupid, or crazy suddenly make sense. Thinking that people are stupid is not thinking. Understanding them is … It's more interesting to assume that they are right."[12]

Remember the script:
"That's different from how I see it."
"Maybe I'm wrong."
"Would you please tell me more?"

May 5784 be for each and all of us a year of curiosity over judgment; of embracing our wrongs over elevating our rights. And precisely because of that, may it be a year of more respect, more kindness, and more blessing than ever before. *Gmar Chatimah Tovah*.

[12] https://www.jewelsofelul.com/2023/09/12/elul-27-derek-sivers-proven-wrong/.