

Happy Last Day of 2022.

In the holiday spirit, I have a gift for all of you!

But before we open that gift, I want to take a brief trip down memory lane together.

If you recall back, for those of you who were here on my interview weekend almost a year go, this past February (and WOW how does time fly), that weekend I gave a sermon about how our framework for how we look at our own lives, and how we speak to ourselves about our own lives, really, really matters.

I used an anecdote about a silly decision I made as a four year old, and we talked about how we can take the same story, and the same facts, and simply by recounting it either full of bitterness and self-criticism, OR telling it with a lens of forgiveness and self-compassion, we can completely change both our own relationship to our history AND the way that any listeners connect to that story.

Part of the big takeaway from that sermon was just to remind us all (myself included) that we have a choice every day, both in our private lives and when we relate to our shared Jewish tradition: a choice to be intentional and loving in the attitudes and lenses that we perpetuate. The way we talk to ourselves, and to our children, leaves a mark. The angle matters. The focus matters.

And today, I want to build off of that sermon, and I want to again revisit what it means to tell stories.

But today, I want to focus on how the *part* of the story we immerse ourselves in can also make a huge difference. I want to talk about beginnings, about middles, and about ends.

First, let's take our most famous story-- our Torah. Think about it-- let's take the Torah as a whole, all five books.

If we dwell on the beginning-- literally, Bereishit-- even knowing what came afterwards, even knowing our own human history and the stories in our scrolls, every time we reread Bereishit, we can't help but feel the sense of incredible potential as the universe was created. Potential is the essence of beginnings.

We can't help but ask-- what could have been? What would have happened, if Adam and Eve had ignored the serpent? If they hadn't eaten the piece of fruit? What would have happened if Cain hadn't killed Abel? What would have happened if God had given us the Knowledge of Good and Evil from the start? How could we have turned out, as a species and as a world?

It can be really entertaining to think about our Torah this way, to just focus on the potential. Our imaginations can get quite a workout when we think about what might have been.

But it can also be really, really painful to think this way, to ask ourselves questions like: Were we really banished from safety and happiness because of one mistake? Is this fair? Did we throw away our only real chance for peace? Can we ever, as a people, make full teshuvah for those first lies, and first betrayals? Are we condemned to repeat them, over and over?

That's if we focus on the beginning. But conversely, if we instead focus in on the middle pages of our Torah, on the individual stories of our ancestors that we read each week, on the detailed anecdotes, on specific Torah portions that happen in between the Creation of the World and our peoples' arrival in the Promised Land-- if we focus on these middle stories, we are given a different type of meaning-- we might not to ask ourselves the giant questions about what might have been, but instead to glean personal morals that we can directly apply to our own day-to-day lives.

By focusing on specific stories, we learn the importance of good communication in family lives as modeled (or not modeled) by Isaac and Rebecca, the value of welcoming visitors into your home with generosity à la Abraham and Sarah, the ability of a single person to save a situation through faith or courage like Miriam or Moses, or the destructive power of a malicious lie, especially when it spreads from person to person like it does between Joseph's brothers and other family members.

These personal stories touch us. They invite us in. From these stories in the middle of the Torah, we learn concrete life lessons about the importance via specific characters and their lives. This is the beauty of focusing on the middle, instead of the beginning or the end.

But then, there is the end. The end of the Torah. The part we reach each fall, where instead of continuing forward into the prophets and other writings, we immediately turn back the clock and choose, yet again, to start over at Bereishit, to re-embrace the potential of the beginning, to

revisit where we were. Our ending becomes our beginning, over and over, reaffirming our peoples' incredible potential.

Each secular year, too, each December 31st, we also stand on the cusp of starting again. We are ready to re-focus on January. We are bombarded with news and media telling us about New Year's Resolutions, about all of the ways that we can tap into the potential of the coming 12 months and be the best person we can be, the healthiest ever, the happiest ever, yadda, yadda, yadda.

We are about to start over. Just like we do at Simchat Torah. Just like how when we end the Torah we say 'chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek'--> with this strength, we will continue to strengthen ourselves! → in the secular world, on December 31st we look ahead, as a culture and as individuals, and try to become even better.

But I think it's important, though, that that's not all we do. I think it's important, just like how we sometimes need to focus on beginnings and potential, and just like how we need to focus in and learn the morals of the stories in the middle, that we also take the time, at the end of a year, or at the end of a story, or at the end of the Torah, and at the end of a chapter in our lives, to sit with that end, and to sit with the unique gifts that the end, the Sof, brings.

Instead of an ellipses, what would it mean to sit with a period?

Instead of turning back the pages, what would it mean to put down the book?

I promised you at the beginning of this sermon that I was going to give you a gift, and here it is: I want to share with you a practice, an emotional tool, that I have developed within my own personal life, through years of ups and downs and therapy, to re-ground and re-focus myself

when life gets too overwhelming or painful, or when I lose focus of who I want to be.

The practice, simply put, relies on the power of endings. It would not work if life went on forever. It is a practice that does not work if I always focused on potentials and beginnings. It would not work if I only ever lived in the moment.

Again, I want to gift you this practice today, to share it with you, and invite you to try out this tool. It goes like this:

First, when I feel overwhelmed, or I feel lost,

I imagine myself, God willing, as an old woman, on my deathbed. Wrinkles, aches and pains, liver spots, the works.

I imagine myself, looking back on the life I have lived, in the full knowledge that it is almost over, in the full knowledge that there is no option to go back and change what I have done, or the choices I made over the years.

And in this scene that I am imagining, in this thought experiment, there, at the end of my life, I will ask myself: when I look back on my life, what will I wish I had spent more time doing, and what will I wish I had spent less time doing?

That's it.

This seems so simple, but it is so powerful. Because no matter what the challenge is that I am facing in my real life, imaginary old-woman me on her deathbed can usually, confidently tell younger-me, with great clarity, what I will wish I had done more of and less of.

That old lady in my mind, that embodiment of my own mortality, has become an incredible source of moral and personal clarity. For example:

Because of this exercise, because of this tool, I am fairly certain that, on my deathbed, the following will be true:

I will wish, that I had spent less time comparing myself to others and feeling in competition with others, and more time celebrating others' accomplishments and joys.

I will wish that I had spent less time disliking or not loving the body that I was given-- the only body I will ever have-- and instead, that I had spent more time taking care of it, moving it, reveling in it, and loving it, as it is.

I will wish that I had been quicker to apologize, quicker to forgive, and readier to listen.

I will wish that I had lost fewer days on grudges and bitterness.

I will wish that I had spent more time in nature, and much less time on the Beltway.

I will wish that I had spent more time with my grandmother, of blessed memory, while she was still alive; that I had reconnected with old friends; that I had told those I loved that I loved them again, and again, and again, with actions and with words.

In the end, I will wish that I had never stayed silent when I heard an insult or a hurtful comment pass me by; I will

wish I had been more proactive in helping others and myself heal.

I will wish that I had spent more time choosing joy and silliness, and less time worrying about things I could not control.

It may sound macabre or sad or morbid to think about my own end, but actually, i've found this practice of imagining the end of my life to be deeply liberating; to not always focus on the what-ifs of beginnings, on the what could be, but to instead face the reality that there will come a time in my life when it will simply be too late to go back and change anything. A time when I have heard Bereishit for the last time.

And it is my job, when I get to that moment, to NOT be surprised by it: to have tried my best to have lived up to the values that I hold most dear. To have tried to be the person I want to be remembered as.

Of course, I still have moments in my life where I lose this perspective. I have moments where I compare myself to others, where I don't take care of myself, or where I see injustice happening and I don't speak up. But then, I try to remember this exercise, and I imagine my own end, and I use the knowledge of my own mortality to galvanize me and to energize me. To reconnect myself to being the person I want to be.

That is the power of endings.

That is the power of not starting over.

That is the power of the gift of mortality that God has given us.

So, here we are, at the end of 2022. And I see this as an invitation:

Because we will never get to live this year of our lives again. Next year is not a re-do; it is a new year, a new chapter, one that, God willing, we will make the most of.

This year is over, our choices have been made, our actions, completed.

But, as we stand here at the end, to look back at 2022 with our eyes and hearts wide open, we should take the time to honor it and learn from it and then to truly say goodbye to it before we pivot to making resolutions, before we pivot to what comes next, before we throw ourselves into 2023.

To this end, I invite each of you to try employing the emotional practice, the tool that I use, and to ask yourself:

Looking back at 2022, what do you wish you had spent less time doing, and what do you wish you had spent more time doing?

Or, to put it another way: in 2022, what were the moments where you came closest to being the person you want to be remembered as when you're gone, and what were the moments you were farthest from being that person?

I can't promise that I will have the next 12 months to try again, or even one month, or even a week.

But what I can promise you is that you are here in this moment, and that this moments matters.

As we saw in this week's Torah portion, as Joseph and his brothers reunited and demonstrated how even after years of mistakes and pain, it's still worth improving ourselves, still worth adding a chapter of redemption to our lives, still worth working on our relationships in the time we have left--

We can learn that regardless of how much time we have left, before we reach our respective ends, it is invaluable-- it is PRECIOUS-- it is a gift-- to not lose sight of the fact that the end will come some day. And to honor it: to celebrate the unique power of not going on forever.

And to use the existence of that ending

To help us live the rest of our lives in a way that we can be at peace with.

This year, let's be the people that we want to be remembered as when our end comes, be that today, or tomorrow, or far in the future.

Shabbat shalom,
And a Happy New Year.