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Less is More

Remember learning how to ride a bike? Or teaching your kids how to ride a bike?

Most adults learned to ride a bike in childhood by first plugging along on tricycles, then wobbling around on bikes with training wheels. Thanks to Ryan McFarland, kids today have it better. In 2007, McFarland found himself frustrated that the products he was using to teach his son to ride a bike were “too large, too heavy, and too complicated.” His insight was that kids would learn better not on contraptions that were like bikes with added parts — namely, extra wheels for stability — but on ones with fewer parts. After experimenting, he settled on a low-set two-wheel bike without pedals or chains. Now, many children learn the basics of balance by zipping around, Fred Flintstone-style, on one of McFarland’s Strider bikes.

For parents of children who have been liberated from clunky contraptions, they are grateful for McFarland’s ingenuity. Across a series of studies that published recently in the journal *Nature*, it was demonstrated that, when asked to change or improve something, people tend to overlook the option to subtract parts. Investigators asked research participants to make changes to designs, essays, recipes, itineraries, structures, and even miniature-golf holes. The studies showed that people’s first instinct is to change things by adding. When they are able and willing to think a little longer, they are perfectly capable of finding subtractive changes. But they usually don’t think longer. They quickly identify an additive idea that is good enough, put it into action and move on. Overlooking a whole class of ideas is problematic. Imagine all the advantageous subtractions we might be missing. We’ve all heard reminders about this category of improvements: “omit needless words,” “less is more,” “keep it simple, stupid.” But the advice is worth little if we don’t think of it at the right time. By understanding the underlying psychology, though, you can set people up to consider all the options.

“What can I add?” appears to be a cognitive default. It’s a shortcut that people use when, in the phrase popularized by the Nobel Prize-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman, they’re “thinking fast.” Learning to ask, what can I subtract, teaches us the value of less can be more.

Undivided attention also helps. Distractions, be they tech, stress, or well-meaning others, can also keep us from seeing the best course of action.

Finally, external reminders can be useful; it is always hard to break a habit with no habit. So, establishing a discipline of minimalism can be the way forward to a better life.

In the Torah portion today, we read about choices that we must make. Choices are a blessing and a curse. The responsibility is placed upon us. My hope is that, from today on, we will make choices more based on the idea of less is more.

One way to practice this philosophy is to listen to the message of the prophet Isaiah, whom we heard read today. When he tells us to make Shabbat a delight, he is not speaking out of the desire to guilt us into observance but to remind us that the more we complicate our lives the less we can enjoy our lives.

Saying no to experiences is hard. Fomo is real. But so is fatigue. This pandemic has been a terrible curse but also offers us a blessing of perspective. We can live simpler lives.

In the traditional mystical conception of God creating the world, taught by Rabbi Isaac Luria in the sixteenth century, God decides that the only way the world can exist is for God to relinquish control over the world. This willful letting go of control is called in Hebrew *tzimtzum*.

What is *tzimtzum*? To make a complicated thing as simple as possible, imagine that God created the universe, and that God was absolutely everywhere. There was no inch that was not filled with the divine spirit. How could anything else exist? In order to create space for the rest of creation (including you and me), God voluntarily withdrew from much of the universe, leaving room for us.

Students of Rabbi Isaac Luria, the sixteenth-century sage who devised this theory, have debated whether this imagery should be taken literally or metaphorically, but for our purposes it is the metaphor that suffices. In order for good things to happen (e.g., creation), space must be made.

Ever find yourself in a conversation where you cannot get a word in edgewise? It's really frustrating, no? Or attend a party where one person clearly dominates the room? How quickly does that get tiresome? They used to say of Theodore Roosevelt that he had to be the bride at every wedding and the corpse at every funeral. Such solipsism is exhausting. However, when one willingly contracts his or her personality in order to allow others to communicate and even shine, then energy seems to multiply.

I once had a teacher at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem who said that *every good teacher needs to learn how to cheat*. By this he did not mean grade inflation or some other questionable practice but rather that teachers have to hold back in order to give only a part of what they know. After all, the idea is for the student to learn, not for the teacher to pour out everything he or she knows.

The complex details of the philosophical/mystical teachings of Isaac Luria are beyond the scope of today so please allow me to "cheat" and share with you only one aspect of *tzimtzum* as it appears in one Jewish text.

The specific source is the great Chasidic Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (c. 1772). A great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chasidic Judaism, Nachman of Breslov placed great emphasis on living with faith and joy. Rejecting hereditary authority, he left no physical heirs, but his teaching still garners great respect. He wrote:

Now when God decided to create [the world], there was no place in which to create a world; everything, everywhere, there was but Endless God. So God withdrew God's light to the sides in the process of *tzimtzum*, thus creating an empty space.

This *tzimtzum* or the empty space cannot be easily understood by our human minds because two contradictory statements must be made concerning it: an "it is" and an "it is not." For the empty space comes about through *tzimtzum*, through God's withdrawing God's self from there.

There is something of a Zen koan about this teaching. A Zen koan is a paradoxical statement designed to move the initiate out of left-brain thinking. A classic example: "We know the sound of two hands clapping; but what is the sound of one hand clapping?"

Reb Nachman's teaching reminds us that God is everywhere and yet if God is everywhere, how can we be anywhere? The answer is that God removed God's self from creation so we can exist. And yet God is still everywhere. This contradiction cannot be resolved with logic but for Nachman it is nonetheless true. The empty space is not devoid of God and yet must be empty for us to exist. In order to solve this contradiction we will have to wait for the messianic era.

True life must involve denial of the many so we can enjoy the precious few. This is in part the teaching of the mystics. It can be our wisdom too.

For us, *tzimtzum* means not responding to everything that comes our way. It means keeping silent more often. It means forgiving more. It means remembering that old saw: in life, to *take-away is the take-away*. Ultimately, it means being like God: Just as God must withdraw to create room for us, so do we withdraw to create room for others and for our most genuine selves.

In a world of seemingly scarce resources, *tzimtzum*—making room for what matters most—is wise, efficient, and fool-proof. And the best part? We can start right now.

Henry David Thoreau's well-known commentary on a disciplined life deserves to be revisited here: "Our life is frittered away by detail Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million, count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumbnail Simplify, simplify, simplify! Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one; instead of a hundred dishes, five; and reduce other things in proportion Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life?"

I once heard it said that human beings spend the first three years of their lives thinking that they are the center of the universe, that they can have everything they want, and then they spend the rest of their lives trying to cope with the fact that they cannot.

Growing in wisdom allows us to lament the gap between wanting it all and having to make choices but also to mature into a state of far lower expectations. The notion of *tzimtzum* is especially helpful in this regard because we are placed in the seat of control. We get to make the choice to contract, to limit what we do, based on what matters most. We all have limited resources, especially when it comes to time (the same 168 hours a week for everyone), and

therefore there may be nothing more important than determining what matters most to us and releasing our hold on everything else.

I once spent five days on a silent retreat. The silent part was not too hard for me but the idea of not checking emails or enjoying my iPad instilled terror in my heart. In the end, I realized that I needed to create more opportunities to be unplugged. Saying no to the temptations of modern technology is so very hard, and many of us are ensnared by the seduction of always being connected to the outside world. But at what price?

My New Year's Message is this: Find the space in your life to discover what are your core values and, through that discovery, what you want in your life—that is, what matters most. Second, identify the things you therefore cannot pursue, the opportunities you must willfully deny for the greater good. Third, practice the discipline of adhering to your choice. (No really means no.)

A Lesson from Mt. Everest

At 29,028 feet high, Mt. Everest's weather is seldom ideal for long, but the longest windows for ascent normally occur in the spring, from late March to the first week in June. This means that all those who want to climb the highest real estate on earth need to make their attempts within that time frame. The extended time near the summit also increases the likelihood that people will succumb to other maladies related to high altitude, such as cerebral edema.

When climbers are near the peak—and often have spent tens of thousands of dollars on the expedition—some persist in their summit attempt despite the threat—or actuality—of dangerous changes in weather conditions and the warnings of guides. They expend so much energy getting up there that when conditions turn against them on the descent, they don't have enough energy to deal with getting down.

In his book, *Great By Choice*, Jim Collins recounts the story of the IMAX team that was filming a movie on Mount Everest. In 1996, when many climbers died during a freak storm, no one in the IMAX crew was killed. Why not? Their leader had practiced the art of *tzimtzum*. At least that is what I would call it. He knew that making this movie was very important, but he also realized that keeping everyone safe was more important. When he had to make a choice between risking the movie or his people, he relinquished the pursuit of the movie. At 2 pm (a previously determined time), he ordered everyone down from the final approach to the top. The weather was picture perfect, and millions of dollars might be lost if the team did not push on to the summit. The team leader, however, knew that what mattered most was the lives of his crew, so he said no to any other desire. *No really meant no*. It could not have been an easy call.

Without such a dramatic challenge before us (I would hope, anyway), still we all make choices every day that entail saying no. *Tzimtzum* as a practice can help us ensure that we are aware of the choices we are making, and it can also help us find the discipline to keep saying no when it is the right thing to do.

One more thought: Ever wonder why lion tamers take into the cage a chair as well as a whip and a gun? The whip makes sense (and also the gun). But why the chair? Remember that the chair is always held with the bottom of the four legs facing the lion. Because the lion tries to focus on all four points at the same time, he does not have the ability to attack. In other words, because the lion cannot get focused, he cannot do what he might like to do. This is good news for the lion tamer but also instructive for us. We cannot accomplish our goals, we cannot become the people we are intended to become, if we cannot focus our lives. And the only way to do so is to learn to say no and let go.

Soon Yom Kippur will be over. And we will be asked to sit for several days in a primitive hut. Sukkot is a strange holiday. It is about being grateful, but we don't celebrate our gratitude in a palace. Gratitude can be found in the simplest of places.

It is a strange joy, but it is real.

On Sukkot we read from the biblical book of Ecclesiastes.

I conclude with his timeless words:

"Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind." (Ecc. 4:6)

To which I would add:

Better is the simple life than to keep enslaving ourselves to the craziness of our daily existence.

Better is making choices and giving our attention to what matters more than running to and fro with no discernible end.

And better is relinquishing some of what we like so we can give our best to all that which we love.

We have all been given choices. May we make them well and may the New Year be a little bit less and a whole lot more. Amen.