

Yes, And... Standing in the Cringe

Kol Nidre 5780

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This past June, during a rabbinic conference in Chicago, I spent 3 hours with my colleagues in a building I would have never set foot in on my own. Chicago is home to the world's premier school of improvisation, called Second City, where many a famous comedian, talk show host, and improv theatre troupe has trained since the company's inception 60 years ago. Our Fellowship of 20 rabbis was to take part in an improv training session at Second City with one of their expert coaches. For those not familiar with the term, "improv" has been described as "a form of live theatre in which the plot, characters, and dialogue of a scene or story are made up in the moment." It involves speaking in front of a crowd without preparation, planning, or script—something which, for most of us, is the stuff of nightmares. It should totally be on the U'netaneh Tokef list: *Who shall live and who shall die, who by fire, who by improv... the day is fearsome and full of dread.* I did *not* want to do this.

Nevertheless, through our Fellowship program, we'd visited many a nonconventional venue in pursuit of new ways to think about our role as clergy. Our trip to Second City was not about teaching rabbis how to do improv theatre; it was about learning improv *concepts* and how they might help us to lead nimbly in the face of rapidly changing conditions on the world stage, which sometimes feel out of our control. So I signed up, and tried for the next few weeks not to think about what the actual experience would feel like.

As the session grew nearer, my discomfort came flooding back. I imagined the scene, full of moments I'd look back on in horror. *Cringeworthy* moments where I'd say something that came out wrong or wasn't funny enough, or that would make people laugh but for the wrong reasons—that they'd actually be laughing *at me*. I imagined that our coach would then say something conciliatory but patronising like, "Good job, mistakes are part of learning," and then people would laugh at that too. I imagined that I'd make a fool of myself and that forever after my colleagues would remember *only this* and nothing else about me. Picturing all this in a cold sweat the night before, it became clear to me what I really needed to learn. I needed to learn to *stand* in that scene and not want to curl up and hide. To inhabit the tortured space that lingers after making a regrettable mistake and remember that it needn't define me forever. I needed to learn to stand in the cringe.

Cringing is a curious response to a mistake, be it one like I was imagining, or something much more serious that harms another person, or imperils our station in life—our career, our reputation, a relationship... Think of a moment you wish you could take back, when you were clearly at fault—that feeling when you look back on something you said or did that did not reflect the you that you like to project – that's a cringe, and it's somehow both physiological and spiritual at the same time. Our horror at something we did or said consumes both body and soul. We lose sleep as we ruminate over it in the wee hours of night. And in those hours, we forget that we ever

did anything right, in our *whole* life, as though our whole *existence* and all our actions were leading only to this downfall, and now it's all over for us.

Radio host Ira Glass found the cringe such a dramatic human response that he devoted an entire episode of his show to it. A doctor he interviewed said “that a cringe is basically the human body cowering in fear for an instant... He said that one of the most fearsome, stressful things we can encounter... is the thought that we are not who we think we are, the thought that the world sees us differently than we see ourselves, and not in a good way... You cringe in that moment of revelation,” he concluded, “when you suddenly see... yourself as others see you. And it is not pretty.” The cringe, in other words, is not mere embarrassment at something that happened accidentally; it's a painful recalibration—when a view of ourselves that we've come to believe is undermined by something *we did*—the rug pulled out from under us *by our own actions* of which we are ashamed.

Each year on Yom Kippur, we stand in the cringe. Beginning on Kol Nidre, and for the next 25 hours, we're asked to call to mind those scenes when a side of us that we usually keep in check somehow got the better of us, revealing something about us that we'd rather forget. We all have our cringeworthy moments. The question is, how do we stand in those moments when we'd rather disappear than face the world again with this act on our record? When we'd give anything to rewind the past and do it over, how do we stand in the cringe?

What I learned at improv training is that it helps to have a coach. Someone who knows what it is to stand in a cringe, and remind us there's a job to do. Yes, we messed up. Yes, our mistake revealed something of us we'd rather forget. Yes, something in us needs to change and we may not be able to change it, and yes the damage is done. Yes, to all of this, *and*... there's a job to do. Yes to all of this, *and* we mustn't disappear. Yes to all of this, *and* no one else can do what we alone were put on this earth to do, whatever that is. Every human life is a script-less drama, and no one else can live yours out. The best improv coaches teach “Yes, And” thinking as a life skill. They know what it is to stand in the cringe, and they know that whatever was revealed, the show must go on, and you're needed on stage.

Thankfully, long before there was ever a Second City and formal improv training, there was our Yom Kippur liturgy—the words, melodies, prayers, and choreography of our services for the Day of Atonement. Our liturgy, passed down to us through generations, is an age-old lesson in “Yes, And” thinking. Yom Kippur services aren't just something to endure; they are our coach. Imbued with wisdom and insight, and crafted by sages, they usher us through the 25-hour cringe, focusing first on the humiliating “Yes” but culminating in a magnificent “and.” Kol Nidre is no “night at the improv,” but it is the start of a day that returns us to life's stage.

The coaching begins as we're greeted by the haunting strains of the cello, reminding us of the seriousness of the day and why we've come. We begin to recall our cringeworthy offenses and, without words or activity on the bimah to distract us, we're forced to reflect on them. We cower a little. We've entered the cringe.

We stand in it, then, as we rise for *vidui*, reciting our alphabet of woe. Which shameful trait or act weighs most on our conscience *this year*? Temper, jealousy, greed? There's always one that jumps off the page. We confess. We ask forgiveness. We cannot do either without standing in this cringe. We stand when we chant *Avinu Malkeinu, inscribe us in the book of life and redemption*. We ask God for redemption because we don't know how to redeem *ourselves*—how to move forward from this uncomfortable place. What if we mess up again?

In the morning, too, we stand in the cringe. *Unetaneh tokef k'dushat hayom ki hu nora v'ayom*. "The day is fearsome and full of dread." We feel judged. Our actions do matter. They did cause hurt. Our worthy deeds may temper their consequence, but not their impact.

In the afternoon, the pain grows harder. The fast wears on and our bellies shrink, along with our pride. At Yizkor, we remember with longing those who believed we could never do ill, and those who departed before we could ask their forgiveness.

"Yes," our liturgy on Yom Kippur makes us stand in those scenes we'd rather forget, reliving hard moments of unwelcome revelation. Yes, it forces us to view those scenes from every possible angle, however painful. Yes, because of these scenes, the day *is* fearsome and full of dread. Yes, to all of this. *And*, says our coach, there's a job to do.

The "and" to our "yes" finally comes in N'ilah, the concluding service before we break fast. The N'ilah service acknowledges our mistakes with its own *vidui*—its own confession—but then reminds us that we're here for a purpose, and the show must go on. There's a job that only you can do. Through the liturgy of this concluding service, the sages impart this message to us in a masterful way: by giving us a role model. They remind us of someone who stood in the cringe long before we did, and then took a step. At N'ilah, we meet the prophet Elijah.

Elijah keeps a low profile throughout the *yamim nora'im*; perhaps the sages didn't want him stealing the show from Abraham and Isaac, or Jonah and the whale. But when it comes to "Yes, And" coaching, Elijah's the one they chose to show us the way. They gave him the final word, literally. The last words we speak before the final sounding of the shofar come from *his* story: *Adonai Hu HaElohim*—"Adonai is God." The Israelites repeated this phrase twice; we repeat it *seven times*. At the end of a day spent standing in the cringe, the sages wanted us to remember that story. But why?

The words with which we conclude Yom Kippur, *Adonai Hu HaElohim*, were uttered at Elijah's proudest moment. The prophet had just orchestrated a magnificent showdown to reveal the futility of worshipping false gods. And in that showdown, *his* God—*our* God—proved Elijah right, and the people twice exclaimed *Adonai Hu HaElohim!* "Adonai is God!" Elijah was on top of the world. But in what today we'd call a "career limiting move," Elijah's zealotry got the better of him. He committed a massacre, slaying all the other prophets, enraging the Queen who then threatened to kill him. Elijah quickly lost his adherents and, fleeing for his life, soon found himself all alone in the wilderness, cringing at the revelation that he'd gone a step too far. The bible says he cowers under a broom bush, praying to die. "I'm no better than anyone

who came before me,” he cries. Stuck in the cringe, an angel has to coax him to eat and drink and continue his journey. Elijah comes to a cave but hides inside. He’s made a grievous error and wants to just disappear. How will he learn to stand in this cringe?

In the depths of this dark cave, Elijah hears God’s voice. And God asks him what we each must ask ourselves whenever we get stuck in a cringe, afraid to show our face and continue life’s journey. God asks, *Mah l’cha po?* “Why are you here?” Twice God asks this of Elijah—*Mah l’cha po?*—“Why are you here?”—until the troubled prophet finally steps out of the cave, realizing there’s a job to do, and only he can do it. God’s got great plans for Elijah, not the least of which is heralding the messiah—ushering in the messianic age—so *Mah l’cha po?* “What are you doing here,” cringing in a cave? Yes, you messed up, *and* there’s a job to do. Elijah’s error *was* a career limiting move—God makes him pass his mantle onto a new prophet, Elisha. But someone’s got to visit all those Pesach seders, and watch over every bris. Someone’s got to sit at the gates binding the wounds of the poor, and adjudicate all the world’s impossible conundrums. These are all roles ascribed to Elijah in our tradition. Yes, he messed up, in the worst possible way, *and* there’s a job to do; so get back on stage.

In N’ilah, God speaks to us through the prophet. One day, Elijah may usher in Moshiach; today he ushers us out of the cringe, his story a piercing reminder to us of God’s question: *Mah l’cha po*—Why are you here? Every moment we stand too long in a cringe, is a moment the world must make do without our unique contribution, and that was not God’s plan. Our life is unscripted, but it still needs an actor. So come out of the cave and stand up on stage.

Every Yom Kippur, we all become actors in the drama of our liturgy. But unlike theatre, this is practice for life. Yes, “the day is fearsome and full of dread.” Yes, we have to stand in it for a *very* long time. Yes, and. After the final shofar blast is heard, we’ll conclude with Havdalah—that magical moment when everyone in the room approaches the bimah, returning to life’s stage. We’ll bless the wine, the spices, and flames that transition us from “yes” to “and,” and we’ll sing of the prophet Elijah as he ushers us into an easier hour. *Bim’herah v’yameinu, yavo eleinu*—“May he arrive speedily and in our day.”