

What is the best advice you have ever received? Early on in my rabbinic training, I received some important advice from one of my rabbis. He told me that the most important quality necessary for rabbinic work is not public speaking or fundraising or knowledge of Jewish texts. No, he said. The most important quality for rabbinic work is patience.

Why patience? Because the rabbinic work of catalyzing individual and communal change takes time. Rabbis navigate the relationships among the Jewish people, Jewish tradition, and God, which are not always the smoothest. All of this takes time. Seeds planted today may take many years to bear fruit.

Rabbis are not the only people who need to approach their lives and work with patience, of course. Patience is a virtue, as they say. Indeed, it may be *the* virtue.

Much of the writing about patience concerns the petty annoyances of everyday life: traffic jams, uncooperative computers, or that one family member who always needs five more minutes to be ready to go. The rise of the internet and the easy accessibility of information and entertainment of all kinds may have made us even more impatient. One study, for example, found that people started to abandon online videos if they took more than two seconds—two seconds!—to load,¹ and that faster internet speeds were correlated with reduced willingness to wait for online content. We now expect to get anything we want immediately, largely because we can.

But if there ever were a situation that tried everyone's patience in a deeper sense, it is our present situation. As the shutdowns, which many of us naively assumed would be brief, dragged on and on, as the moment when we could return to normal receded further and further into an uncertain future, I realized that patience has become the essential quality this moment demands of us.

How long will we need to put up with this uncertainty, with this collapse of spaces that has turned our homes into workplaces, classrooms, movie theatres, and, yes, synagogues? How long will I have to try to get work done with my children screaming in the background? How long will it be until I can hug my family, travel, go out to eat? How long? How long? How long?

It's a version of that classic example of impatience: the child sitting in the backseat, asking, "Are we there yet?" The problem, however, is that this time there are no road signs or Google Maps to tell us how many more miles to our destination. Our situation is, to use a 2020 cliché, unprecedented.

So this morning, I want to talk about patience and how we build it. It turns out that patience is actually quite complex. Nothing about patience is passive. Rather, it is the active, moment-to-moment management of our own emotional reactions to a situation.

Jewish tradition offers at least three frameworks for thinking about patience. I want to explore each in turn and consider what it can offer us for our moment.

First, let us consider the story of our people's slavery in Egypt. As we read in the opening passages of the Book of Exodus, our ancestors suffered under the burdens, *sivlot* in Hebrew, of Egypt. This kind of suffering is embodied in the Hebrew word for patience, *savlanut*. These words come from a root that means to suffer, or to carry a literal or metaphorical load.

¹ <http://www.roughlytype.com/?p=2069>

In this frame, patience is about the ability to tolerate a seemingly intolerable situation. It is about having the fortitude to suffer through an unavoidable scenario. There is nothing pleasant about patience; it is not for the faint of heart. This kind of patience only becomes necessary when things are already going poorly.

I should clarify that patience emerges as a coping strategy only when a situation is truly out of our control. People suffering from unjust treatment are right to be impatient with it. When something could be done to alleviate their situation, such people correctly demand it. Advising patience can become a patronizing tool to maintain an unjust status quo that *could* be changed. That is certainly not what I am suggesting here.

Rather, this kind of patience is about coming to accept what cannot be changed, and then suffering through it until it can be changed. Rightly so does the Hebrew language compare this to carrying a heavy load. It is extraordinarily difficult to sustain.

But patience in this situation is about not making a bad situation worse through wasted grief. In such a situation, no amount of anger or exasperation will change the outcome. While sitting in traffic, for example, honking the horn will not make the road clear any faster. Patience, then, is about choosing to let time change the situation, rather than succumb to unproductive emotions like anger.

As applied to our current reality, I want to acknowledge that what we have been asked to do for the last six months, and perhaps the next, is difficult. We have been asked indefinitely to bear even more burdens than we typically do, and we are already tired of carrying them.

This may seem obvious, but it is important to say. Impatience often emerges when people feel that they are not seen or understood. Perhaps that is why people honk at standstill traffic: not because it will make the cars move any faster, but as a desperate attempt to get someone, anyone, to notice their predicament.

The first step, then, toward a more patient approach is to allow ourselves to feel our frustration, rather than pretend that everything is fine. Everything is not fine, not much can be done to change it, and being honest about that is healthy. We can cry out about how not fine things are, as did our ancestors in Egypt.

That acknowledgement of what we face will not, by itself, help us become more patient about it. The next step is cultivating the mindfulness that will allow us to take responsibility for our reactions to suffering, to act deliberately rather than impulsively. This is the task of a lifetime, easy to say but very difficult to do. One teacher calls this “opening the space between the match and the fuse;” another, the “sacred pause.” This is a moment, perhaps even just a second, when we can stop ourselves from reacting in the ways we have been conditioned, and instead respond in a more considered way.

Stepping outside of our own emotional experience, even just for a moment, can give us the perspective to understand things as they really are. It can give us a moment to name our feelings of impatience and anger. It can soften us enough to understand that suffering is inescapably part of the human condition. Then, we can respond with compassion and care, toward others and ourselves, rather than react with anger, nastiness, or frustration.

I had to use this kind of patience during my job search that eventually led me here to KTI. Things took longer than expected in a demoralizing and frustrating way. I had criss-crossed the country, only to be rejected by more than a few communities. Many of my friends already had their jobs lined up as I continued to search, all while finishing up school and preparing for a wedding. Some aspects of this situation were under my control, but others were not. I simply had to be patient, suffer through the emotional ups and downs, and wait for the right match to come along, which it finally did.

So much for patience as suffering. There is a second kind of patience, though, that we learn not from the suffering of our ancestors, but from the Holy Blessed One. Over the Days of Awe, and on Yom Kippur in particular, we turn again and again to God's 13 Attributes, which include *erekh apayim*. This phrase literally means "long of nose," but refers idiomatically to slowness to anger.

We are introduced to this phrase during the story of the Golden Calf, where God almost destroys the Jewish people because of their disloyalty. Convinced by Moses to reconsider, God reveals those 13 attributes of mercy, including slowness to anger. So, when the people err, as they do spectacularly when they worship the Golden Calf, God defers the appropriate anger and punishment in order to create an opportunity for the people to change their ways.

This idea has become core to the theology of the Days of Awe. As the mahzor puts it, God waits patiently, even to the day of our death, for us to get it right. We have done nothing to deserve this precious gift of life. Too often we waste it by not living up to our highest ideals, or by not putting in the work to become the best versions of ourselves. By rights, this should come with consequences.

But God is patient. We do not live in a world where punishment for our shortcomings is instantaneous, total, and leaves no margin for error. Instead, God patiently absorbs the kinds of insults that would send most of us into a rage. God waits, and waits, and waits some more for us to return to a better way. That is slowness to anger. That is patience.

It makes sense that God could be this patient. However you understand the mystery that is our Source of Life, God literally has all the time in the world. From God's infinite perspective, a thousand years are like a day, as the Psalm says. So of course God can afford to wait.

We, alas, are not so lucky. We do not have unlimited time. But we often have more time than we think we do. We could never match God's infinite patience. But we can push ourselves to walk in God's ways and try to exhibit a bit more patience, a bit more slowness to anger.

I once had a boss who wouldn't yell at his family or at his clients, so instead he yelled at his staff. Somewhere deep inside of him was the idealistic young man who trained as a social worker. But that person seemed long gone. His impatience helped get results for his clients, but it also created, at times, a rather tense working environment.

One day, we had an offsite retreat where the facilitator invited us each to share something we had to improve on. "Patience," my boss said quietly, nodding his head. At least he was self-aware. And for all I knew, there were many times when he was about to explode in anger, but stopped himself. Looking back, I have more compassion for him, as someone who is a constant work in progress, as we all are.

For our third type of patience, a patience born of faith, we turn to Psalm 27, the Psalm that accompanies us through these Days of Awe. This Psalm speaks from a place of despair. The speaker seeks out

closeness to and protection from the Divine, only to feel abandoned and vulnerable. At the psalm's end, the speaker says, "Were I not to believe that I would see God's goodness in the land of the living..." and then trails off, unable to even describe how life would feel without that faith. The speaker then says, perhaps to himself, "Hope in Adonai, be strong and of good courage! O hope in Adonai."

Hope. Hope can be hard to find when times are tough. But that is precisely when we need hope. Hope in a better future can help us patiently endure a challenging present. Hope can give us the patience to wait for the Messiah to eventually arrive, even though she tarries.

Faith, in this sense, is an active choice to approach life in a certain way. Faith invites us to look at a challenging situation and, rather than despair, "presume [we] don't yet have all the information, and leave open the possibility of something different happening than [we] expect," as Rabbi Yitzhak Miller suggests². We can choose to believe that there is more to our situation than meets the eye. Such faith can become a source of patience. As the Psalmist did, we maintain our faith that we will see God's goodness in the land of the living, even if we do not see it right now.

Another way faith can nurture our patience is through trying to perceive the world, to the extent possible, from God's perspective. From our own perspective, when we are the main character in our own best-selling novel, we evaluate everything based on how it impacts us. This situation is interfering with *my* plans, *my* goals, *my* needs, we think. Or, we see ourselves exclusively as victims of circumstances beyond our control, subject to a conspiracy of forces that only exist to obstruct us. Either way, we put ourselves at the center of the story, which leads to impatience.

But when we try to see the world from God's perspective, we can achieve humility. We can come to understand that we are just one tiny person in a vast universe. And we can moderate our expectations accordingly. Why should everything always go our way, considering all of the other factors involved that we may or may not understand? When we try to hold that Divine perspective, we can see ourselves embedded in a much larger set of systems and processes that work in their own ways and on their own schedules. We can realize that most of the time, we are actually just a minor character in somebody else's novel.

I think back to my stint as a hospital chaplain and the many times I would pray with patients facing acute, chronic, and even terminal illnesses. I would not pray for God to magically make their illness disappear. Instead, I would pray that God grant them the spiritual gifts of patience and strength that this Psalm asks for. Patience with their own body's healing process, patience with their doctors and hospital staff, patience with their family and friends. Through that experience, I noticed that, in addition to a good support system, what most helped a patient be, well, patient was this faith that one way or another they and their loved ones would be OK, no matter how their illness unfolded. That one way or another they would see God's goodness in the land of the living. They would just have to wait for it.

We sometimes treat patience as if it were a fixed commodity we could run out of, as if we only possess so much patience and have to dole it out sparingly. But the truth is, patience is a way of life. Patience is about carrying a heavy burden that we should not have to bear, but somehow carrying it anyway. It is about walking in God's ways and training ourselves to be slower to anger, even when anger is

² [http://westendsynagogue.org/sites/default/files/site_pdfs/Middot%20Handouts%20-%20Patience%20\(February%202013\).pdf](http://westendsynagogue.org/sites/default/files/site_pdfs/Middot%20Handouts%20-%20Patience%20(February%202013).pdf)

warranted. And it is about choosing to believe that our own journey through the vastness of Creation may develop in a way we cannot yet understand.

When we look out on to this new world of physical distancing, economic upheaval, and social strife, it is natural to want to know, “are we there yet?” The great misfortune of our moment is that no one can answer that question. But what we do know is this: building our capacity for patience can enable us to suffer through the insufferable. It can soften our anger and enable us to respond with intention to whatever is happening around us. And it can help us look up from our present moment and understand just how we are all part of a much bigger picture.

So, this Rosh Hashannah, I bless you: Hope in the Eternal. Be strong and of good courage. And hope in the Eternal.