

A Wholeness that Limpes and Kvetches

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I recently saw the film *Anomalisa*. For those who haven't seen it, which is most of you, because it did so poorly at the box office, it's a strange film by Charlie Kaufman. It follows Michael Stone, an expert in marketing with an interest twist. He teaches the importance of seeing each individual, noting their uniqueness, engaging with them as human. But all his in order to sell them stuff.

As we watch the film, we see Michael, a sort of reincarnation of Babbitt, having increasing problems with intimacy. At the beginning of the film, a plane is landing in Cleveland. The person sitting next to Michael says, "I'm sorry that I've grabbed your hand. It's just the I'm used to travelling with my wife. So it's a habit. And I hate flying."

Michael, always polite and always unpleasant, says first, "It's fine," but then, snarling, "Now we've landed. Take your hand away." And so in turn the taxi driver, the hotel clerk, all try to establish a connection and each time are rebuffed. Gradually, we see that something is wrong with Michael. In this animated film aimed at adults, everyone has different clothing and body shapes, but they have the same voice and face.

Michael lives in a hell where he is the only individual surrounding by automatons all nearly identical. Until he meets Lisa, the *Anomalisa* of the film. Lisa's voice is unique, seducing Michael who in turn seduces her. The next morning, as they sit and have breakfast, he professes his undying love. That he will leave his wife and son so they can move together to Los Angeles. But as they talk, he finds himself annoyed by the way she chews. She ask him to go to the zoo- and now that a demand is placed on him, her voice starts to resemble everyone else's.

Michael can't handle vulnerability. He needs people to fulfill his desires, but when asked to share of himself he shuts down. In shutting down, he loses his ability to even note the uniqueness of his son or wife.

Michael diagnoses a great deal of what's wrong with us today. We too must confest:

Al Khat: We have used our intimate relations to advance our personal agendas.

Al Khat: We have manipulated when we should have lovedaf

Al Khat: We have refused to share of ourselves when we could have forged a connection.

And the results are evident. I wake up early, concerned about the burdens of my day, unable to fall back asleep again. We self-medicate. My favorite are the chocolate chips in my kitchen cabinet, though I know there is stronger stuff out there. And we feel alone, purposeless, seeking connection and meaning.

Yom Kippur is a hopeful day. The whole notion of teshuvah, of returning to our best self, means we can overcome destructive habits and acquire healthy ones. Today I'd like to explore the way we can change and reorient ourselves and the whole Kol Emeth community towards fostering wholeness, encouraging joy, and stimulating gratitude.

What gets in the way? What are the destructive habits that keep us from uncovering our hidden wholeness?

First is our busyness. The ancient Israelites were oppressed by Pharaoh. He gave them work that was so intense they were left in a state of kotzer ruach, shortness of spirit. They were so exhausted from the slave labor they had no room in their lives for moral or spiritual growth. Today, in one of the most affluent moments in Jewish history, we are doing it to ourselves. We wear busyness like a badge of honor, because it shows how important we are. We run around from scheduled event to scheduled event with little time or energy left for moral or spiritual growth. We have afflicted ourselves with kotzer ruach.

I heard a story about a five year old whose father worked very hard. One day his Dad came home and was talking with his son. The son then asked, "Dad, how much do you make an hour?" At first, his father was upset. Why was he asking him how much he made?? But he took a breath, and gave an answer his son could understand, "I make \$20 an hour." The son thought for a moment and then said, "Okay. In that case, can I borrow \$10?" "GO TO BED!!"

The son brushed his teeth and got into bed. Meanwhile, his father rethought his anger and followed the son into his room. "Here's \$10," he said, at which point his son lifted up his pillow to reveal a plastic Ziploc bag with coins and bills adding up

to \$10. “If you had \$10 this whole time, why did you need more???” Again a breath. “Okay. What do you need the money for???”

“Well you see, before I only had \$10, and now I have \$20. So Dad, can I buy an hour of your time?”

In our rush to do, what are we leaving undone? In our busyness, who are we forgetting?

Related to busyness is loneliness. Our Rabbis remind us that friendships require work and effort, which is they teach us to acquire a friend. We have to work at it. I worry that with our carefully curated images of the self on facebook and tumblr and elsewhere that we have become very good at friending people but are losing the knack for being friends with people.

It was the night before my daughter Naomi started her senior year. I’ve discovered one of the challenges of being the parent of teens is that they go to bed after I do. So Naomi came up to tuck ME in. I was tired, reading something, settling down for the night. So the truth is, I didn’t want to talk right then. But Naomi came in and said, “I’m worried about tomorrow.”

Since I wanted to end the conversation, I jumped into my know-it-all mode. “I know. Every year you worry about the academics, and every year you do fine.” But my daughter, who is sometimes wiser than me, said, “No Dad I need you to listen.”

So put down my book and engaged. “I’m worried because all summer I haven’t thought about what I wear or how I act. But now I’m worried: what will people think of what I wear tomorrow?”

I told her: “Naomi, how many people do you think are going to bed tonight worried about what you are going to wear? That would zero. And how many people are going to bed tonight worried about what you will think of what they are wearing?” She laughed.

We worry about what other think, we are afraid to show ourselves lest we be found wanting. And as a result, we make neither the time nor the effort to acquire friends.

Third is purposelessness. The most basic Jewish commandment is to be a blessing. We are commanded to find our purpose and contribution to the world. I often think of those ancient Israelites. Moses had it easy because God told him his mission and purpose. He knew he was uniquely suited to lead the people and bring them out of Egypt. But how did the average Israelite feel? And wasn't it worse living in Moses' shadow? But even so, they had to find out their own way to be a blessing.

I have a dear friend who spent several years trying to find his own path to blessing. He tried a number of different jobs, until finally he realized his calling was to be a nurse. That realization let him find his own purpose and to be such a blessing in the lives of his many patients and clients. It took courage to set out, but it has become much of the joy and meaning in his life.

And this related to my fourth damaging practice, our readiness to accept what others think of us. When my friend became a nurse, that wasn't something guys did. It would have been easier in some ways to never even consider nursing. But the truth is: almost no one cares. And he now often counsels young men on what a meaningful career nursing can be.

If he had worried about what others might think, or more to the point what he imagined they might think, he never would have done it.

These habits of busyness, of loneliness, of purposelessness, of worrying what others think, make our lives more empty. Today is Yom Kippur. We are reminded that we can change, that we can uncover meaning and purpose. So what are the practices that can foster meaning and joy?

First is gratitude. The Hebrew here is so important. Hakarat Hatov- noticing the good. We are so busy, so lonely, that we forget to see the good around us. We need to acquire an intentional practice of noticing the good.

My son Josh, about whom I spoke last year, is doing better. There is still a long road in front of him but he is living with his boyfriend in Seattle taking a couple of colleges at a community college. He was home for a bit in August. While here, my wife, in tears, told me about a lovely moment. My youngest, Maytal, was showing him some of her art portfolio. And he was listening, and asking about how she used color or shape, noticing improvement in how she drew hair. My

wife, was crying because he had the energy to notice, to be aware of and giving to someone else. That is what I call a modeh ani moment, a moment to say I am thankful for this.

I want to proscribe to you 10 such moments every day. Maybe it's a moment with a loved one, or a beautiful sunset. Maybe it's a nice meal, or moment with friends. If we take the time to have 10 modeh ani moments, we are creating a practice that invites wholeness.

The second habit is joy. We are commanded to serve God in joy. Here too there is a practice and an effort. Our culture conditions us regularly to be afraid of joy. I'm grateful to the great sociologist Brene Brown for pointing this out. If you watch a movie and see people having a great meal together as a family, you know something bad is about to happen. You see a couple happily driving down the road, something awful is in front of them. And so we are conditioned to be afraid of joy, to worry when we could instead be treasuring.

A few Shabbatot ago Kol Emeth had a morning in which a couple was celebrating their upcoming wedding, someone who had just converted shared some words of Torah for the first time, a child was bat mitzvah. Our Lady of Perpetual Simchas indeed. And it was great. Great to appreciate the joy others felt in these moments and to be part of a community that could hold and treasure such a moment.

I proscribe to you one moment of joy at least each day. Be happy, because happiness also leads to wholeness.

The third habit is to change how we engage time. Shabbat has taught me some new habits. When I light the candles on Shabbat, shut off my media for 25 hours (I know, the horror!!) I can breath again. I sleep the best the whole week on Friday nights. And I spend time with kids in a different way. We aren't drawn to something else, or worrying about what is next. We are all able to be wholly present.

A friend of mine told me a story about her son. This son has some developmental challenges and every year goes on a 10 day camp with other children with similar conditions. He loves it. One year he returned home on a Wednesday night. As he got off the bus and ran to hug his parents he said, "Lets go home and make Shabbat."

Now, my friend's son knew it was Wednesday. But he loved the feeling of connection and presence they had on Friday night. So that's what he wanted to feel when he went home.

I proscribe to you more Shabbat, to create some time without being pulled by your calendars or by your media, but to shut it all off and be with the people you love.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, is to practice vulnerability. Paradoxically, in order to be whole we need to be vulnerable. We need to share our failings as well as our flaws. To focus on being whole rather than being perfect. To move away from success and achievement and towards fulfillment and purpose. God notices need in Adam, saying "It is not good for Adam to be alone." And so God creates a partner, Eve. Mark Twain retells the story in his own inimitable style, making Adam into a lazy guy who feels his wife is always nagging him and who talks too much. But at the end of his life, Adam has a startling realization:

After all these years, I see that I was mistaken about Eve in the beginning; it is better to live outside the Garden with her than inside it without her. At first I thought she talked too much; but now I should be sorry to have that voice fall silent and pass out of my life. Blessed be the chestnut that brought us near together and taught me to know the goodness of her heart and the sweetness of her spirit.

Adam accepts Eve for who she is and is in love with her including her flaws. He too realizes that he is lovable in part because of his own flaws. We need to bring our failings into the story.

The only biblical figure described as whole is Jacob. And it's strange, because Jacob is the one patriarch with a limp. He is visibly imperfect, and yet Torah says he is *Shalem b'kol*, whole in everything. And it gets worse. After decades of being estranged from Joseph, he is reunited and appears before Pharaoh. Pharaoh is impressed with his age and evident holiness, and asks for some wisdom. Jacob then proceeds to kvetch. "I'm old, and my life has been filled with struggle and turmoil."

It's disappointing. I want to shake the guy – please say something about being holy, about wisdom. But maybe that for which I am searching is in plain sight right

in front of me. By owning his own kvetchiness, by saying, “This is who I am right now” he owns the wholeness as an authentic part of his self. My holiness, and wholeness, stem from being able to limp and kvetch.

I met with a woman of middle school age children diagnosed with cancer. Like many people with cancer, she lives in a state of medically induced anxiety as she goes for new scans every three months to see if she remains cancer free. We sat and talked. I asked her to share her deepest hope and deepest fear. She told me they were the same. She so wanted to be present at her daughter’s bat mitzvah, to be at her children’s wedding. And she is terrified that she won’t live to see those milestones.

She has shared her fears with her children. They know about her illness. And so I know that whatever happens, she is an amazing example of wholeness to her children. Her love and example will be with them at these key moments. And I know they are blessed with a mother who truly loves them.

Wholeness is the work of a lifetime- I still get worried I’m supposed to have all the answers which never leads to anything good. I still wake up too early, too worried and get driven into busyness. But if we work towards joy and gratitude and time for what matters, maybe we can find the courage to be vulnerable.

Our mission isn’t to change the world but rather to change ourselves and our community. Kol Emeth can be part of a change, towards sanctifying time, of vulnerability, of wholeness. How can our religious school foster wholeness and holiness? How can our services inspire gratitude and joy? What would it look like for everything we do as a congregation to support acquiring a wholeness that limps, kvetches, and enlivens? It is a hard task, because it moves so differently from so many messages, but I feel it is the key teshuvah moment of our time.

In our fasting, may we find a new kind of wholeness.

In our prayer, may we find a new kind of gratitude

And in our meals tomorrow, a richer joy that opens us to purpose and wholeness.