

Rosh Hashanah Day 1 Sermon: Option B

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inspired by Sheryl Sandberg & Rabbi Deborah Wechsler

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Raise your hand if your life is turning out exactly the way you thought it would. Raise your hand if your life has followed the trajectory that you expected & there have been no surprises (pleasant or unpleasant) along the way.

I thought so. If we all had the lives we had hoped for, we might have little need for the introspection that is so central to the High Holidays experience. We could come to shul, offer a few prayers of thanksgiving and gratitude and call it a day. We'd probably be home eating apples and honey by now.

On May 1, 2015, Dave Goldberg, the CEO of Survey Monkey, died suddenly at the age of 47 while on vacation in Mexico with his wife and friends. Thirty days after his death, to coincide with the end of *sheloshim* Dave's wife, **Sheryl Sandberg**, who is the Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, wrote a FaceBook posting in which she wrote about what she had felt in those 30 days, hoping that her reflections might help someone else who had experienced a tragic loss, just as others had helped Sheryl and her children deal with Dave's untimely death.

Sheryl closed her remarks with the following story, one that is now included in the book she recently co-authored (2017) with Professor Adam Grant of the University of Pennsylvania (Professor of Psychology in the College & Professor of Management in Wharton).

"Just weeks after losing Dave, I was talking to Phil about a father-child activity. We **came up with a plan to fill in for Dave [at this father-child activity]. I cried to him, "But I want Dave! I want option A."** He put his arm around me and said, **"Option A is not available. So let's just kick the _____ out of option B."**
(page 13 in book, "Option B")

What struck me in reading Sandberg's powerful words was the very concept of Option B. If you think about it, dealing with Option B is actually **a major theme of the High Holidays.**

We come to High Holiday services with a variety of different emotions, not just because we are a variety of individuals but because, even as individuals, we have within us a multiplicity of emotions.

Many come with variable degrees of gratitude, so thankful for the gift of our lives and the precious lives of those whom we love. We come here grateful for our blessings, even though they may be meager for some of us in some years.

Many come with some sadness, that despite our gratitude and those with whom we sit, we are ever so conscious of those with whom we no longer sit.

Many come with some disappointment that our lives have not turned out the way we thought they would.

Interestingly enough, one of the strategies that seemed to help Sheryl Sandberg in dealing with the death of her husband was "**focusing on worst-case scenarios**" (book p. 25). In her words, "Predicting a bad situation was usually easy for me; it's a fine old Jewish tradition, like rejecting the first table offered in a restaurant. But during the early days of despair, my instinct was to try to find positive thoughts. [My friend] Adam told me the [very] opposite: that it was a good idea to think about how much worse things could be. "Worse?!" I asked him. "Are you kidding?! How could this be [any] worse?" His answer cut through me. [He said], "Dave could have had that same cardiac arrhythmia [while] driving your children." Wow. The thought that I could have lost all three of them had never occurred to me. I instantly felt overwhelmingly grateful that my two children were alive and healthy—and that gratitude overtook some of the grief."

There is a famous [Yiddish folk tale](#) that illustrates this point in a somewhat humorous way. One of the versions of this story is a children's book called "It Could Always Be Worse" by Margot Zemach that Elisa Juros has read to the kids in Mini-Minyan and that I have read to our preschool students when teaching [the Jewish value of "sameach b'chelko"](#) (striving to be content & happy with what you have).

As the story goes, there was once a farmer who lived with his wife and children in a small house... a very, VERY small house. They used to live in a much larger home on a farm with many acres, but the previous year, a fire had destroyed their farm, including their home, most of their animals, and acres of land and crops that they had been planning to sell to make a living. While they were never rich before the fire, at least they were comfortable. But now, having to start their farm all over again from scratch and having to live in a tiny little house was very uncomfortable, to say the least. It was bad enough dealing with their financial hardship; they also felt that they barely had enough space to move around inside their home.

One day, the farmer felt so exasperated by the clutter, chaos, and noise at home that he went to his rabbi for some advice. He described his cramped living conditions and asked the rabbi, "What should I do?"

The rabbi responded, "I can help you. But first, tell me, do you have any animals on your farm, or did they all perish in the fire?" To which the man responded, "All of the animals perished in the fire. But I was able to scrape together some money to buy some new chickens, a couple of sheep, and one cow."

To which the rabbi responded, "When you go home this evening, I would like you to bring your **chickens** in to the house."

The farmer looked incredulously at the rabbi and said, "What?! Did I hear you correctly?! You want me to bring my chickens into my already-crowded little house?!"

"Yes", said the rabbi. "Bring your chickens in your house, feed them there, and let them live with you. And you'll see--- things will get better for you, your wife, and your children."

The farmer went home and did what his rabbi advised. No surprise, the addition of the chickens, with their clucking all over, walking on the tables, and being underfoot all of the time only seemed to make matters worse.

After a couple of days of living with the chickens, the man went back to his rabbi. "Rabbi", he said, "I did what you said and I have to tell you that things seem to be much, much worse. Now what?"

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The rabbi thought for a moment and said, "Go home. When you get there, I bring the **sheep** into your house."

The farmer looked at the rabbi like he was absolutely *meshugenah* & said, "What?! I should bring the sheep inside too?!"

"Yes", said the rabbi. "Bring the sheep into the house, along with their feed, and let them live with you and your family and the chickens. Let them sleep on the floor in the corner of the house."

As incredulous as the farmer was, he had faith in his rabbi, so he went home and did what the rabbi suggested.

And again, matters got worse. The smell and the noise and the clutter, not to mention having to clean up all of that animal poop. Well, everything just seemed much more awful than before!"

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The farmer returned to the rabbi again. This time, the rabbi said, "Now, bring your **cow** into the house."

By now, the man was exasperated, but he truly believed that his rabbi was wise, and he was sure that there must be a method to the rabbi's seeming-madness. So, the man went home and brought the cow into the house.

In a few days, matters were completely out of control. The situation was absolutely miserable. The man, his wife, and his children couldn't even turn around; they had no room to move. The man went back to the rabbi and said, "Rabbi, my wife is ready to kill me; my children are climbing the walls. Your advice has caused terrible dissension and strife in our home. This can't be what you had in mind."

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The rabbi looked at the man and smiled, "Ah.... Now I want you to go home and remove the cow, and the sheep, and the chickens from your house. Then see what happens."

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The man went home and did as the rabbi suggested. Suddenly, the house felt as spacious as a mansion. The man, his wife, and children couldn't believe just how much room they had. The house didn't feel so small after all. Soon, peace and prosperity were returned to the house and the family lived happily ever after."

In this story, the farmer and his family would clearly have preferred **Option A** (the big house and successful farm that they had before the fire). However, the reality that they had in front of them was **Option B** (the small house and a new farm that they had to start from scratch). What the rabbi helped this family realize is that there was an **Option C** out there that was much, much worse than Option B (the same small house made even more crowded by the addition of animals).

For some people, a way of dealing with Option B is to imagine an even worse Option C, just as the farmer's family does in this story. Personally, one of the mantras that I have repeated in my head (and sometimes out loud) in times of crisis in order to remind myself to **keep things in perspective** is, "Just remember. It's not the Holocaust. And it's not cancer."

Even though imagining worst-case scenarios might not be a strategy that works for everyone in trying to deal with Option B, the story is still valuable in conveying the idea that **we have no choice but to deal with adversity that comes our way.**

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**Families** are the **great training ground for living with Option B**, for it is in our families that we encounter **some of our greatest challenges and disappointments – the death of loved ones, other losses, infertility, adultery, divorce, bankruptcy, and betrayal.** Perhaps this is why the **Torah readings for Rosh Hashanah** focus on a family who faces some Option B challenges.

This morning, our Torah reading featured the story of **Avraham and Sara**, who tried desperately to have a child but were unable to do so for almost 90 years. So Avraham went to Hagar his maidservant to serve as their surrogate. So, **Hagar** conceived and gave birth **Yishmael**.

Today's Torah reading began with God remembering Sara ("*V'Adonai pakad et Sara*"), who after 13 more years of struggling with infertility, conceived and bore a son to Avraham in his old age, the beloved Yitzchak. At first, it seemed as if Avraham & Sara's story would have a happy ending. But then, there was a plot twist. Sara felt that Yishmael would be a bad influence on Yitzchak, so she begged Avraham to cast out both Yishmael and Hagar from their home. Avraham conceded to Sarah's wishes and banished Hagar & Yishmael to the wilderness of Be'er Sheva.

Avraham's whole life was a series of Option B choices, even when he failed to realize that he, like all of us, was living in an Option B world. He was so focused on Yitzchak, his Option A, that he literally kicked Option B out of the house.

God had to remind Avraham to live, "*ba-asher hu sham*" ("from where he is.") God heard the cry of the boy and called to Hagar from heaven, "Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy *ba-asher hu sham/ where he is.*"

The Rabbis ask why the Torah added these words, "*ba-asher hu sham*" ("from where he is"), and they comment that what these words signify is that God wanted Avraham to respond from where he actually was in life, as opposed to responding from where he would have preferred to be, or where he thought he should be.

I wonder if **Avraham's father, Terach**, also dealt with his own set of Option B challenges. After all, according to the Midrash, Terach owned an idol-worship shop back in 'the old country' & might have had grand hopes for his son, Avraham, taking over the 'family business' one day. But, we know that Terach never saw the realization of his Option A. Not only did Avraham go into a different business than his dad, but he also rejected the very premise of that business and of his father's whole worldview. After receiving the "*Lech L'cha*" call from God, Avraham rejected the whole concept of idol-worship. The idea of monotheism was considered iconoclastic at a time when people were serving multiple gods, many of which took the shape of animate objects. In fact, the word "**iconoclastic**" literally means "smashing icons (idols)" ; according to the Midrash, that is what Avraham actually did to the so-called 'divine' statues in Terach's idol shop one day.

But Terach, Avraham & Sara, and Sheryl Sandberg are not the only human beings to have had to face the loss of an Option A. If you are not living an Option B yourself right now, it is possible that you may have to face an Option B at some point in your life in the future. The truth is that **we are "those people."**

**Most of us are just one paycheck, one serious illness, one drug-addicted child, one mental health diagnosis, one text message while driving, one night of unprotected sex, one affair, or one divorce away from Option B.**

We **can't help yearning and praying for Option A** as we begin the New Year and recite the following words upon returning the Torah to the ark, words that we are going to repeat in earnest many times during the "*Shema Koleynu*" section of Musaf on Yom Kippur, "***Hashiveinu Adonai eleikha v'nashuvah,***"

" Turn us towards You, Adonai, and we will return to You;

"***Chadesh yameinu k'kedem***" "Make our days as they once were."

We want things to be like they used to be & we grieve for what might have been.

Yet, many of us may have to face the reality at some point or other that Option A may not be available to us and that we may have to find a way to find happiness, be productive, and rebuild our lives with Option B.

As the author **Joseph Campbell** once said: "We must be willing to let go of the life we planned so as to have the life that is waiting for us."

And as **Albus Dumbledore** said in Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone- (the first book in the Harry Potter series, published in 1997): "It does not do to dwell on dreams and not to live."

It does us no good to dwell on and wallow in the loss of an Option A that is no longer available to us. We have **no choice but to live with Option B.**

My colleague, **Rabbi Deborah Wechsler**, made the following relevant analogy to a **Japanese art form** called **Wabi Sabi**. This aesthetic emerged in the 15<sup>th</sup> century as a reaction to what had been the prevailing aesthetic in Japan at the time, the idea of **lavish perfection**. Before the invention of this new art form, if a white bowl would break, one would glue it back together with white lacquer to disguise the breaks, making it look as original as possible..... Then along came Wabi Sabi. The word "Wabi" means harmony and tranquility; the word "Sabi" means rusty and weathered. With the Wabi Sabi technique, when something unexpected and undesired happens to a bowl, it is glued back together with lacquer, then sprinkled with gold to **highlight the cracks and imperfections**. Essentially, Wabi Sabi is an artistic expression of the philosophy of **Option B** and it is beautiful because it is **imperfect and broken**, just like us.

Another expression of Option B that we experience during the High Holidays is the sound of the **shofar**. The shofar may be considered a kind of **Option B instrument**, because it is constructed from a ram, the animal that emerged from the thicket to replace Avraham's sacrifice when things on Mount Moriah didn't go as anticipated according to Option A. (That's a spoiler alert for tomorrow's Torah reading about *Akedat Yitzchak*/the Binding of Isaac).

The *shevarim* and *teruah* blasts of the shofar are sometimes described as the sounds of something breaking or shattering. In every set of shofar blasts, these broken

sounds serve as the prelude to the "*tekiah*", the clear, unbroken sound that represents "wholeness." In a sense, *shevarim* and *teruah* may represent the painful brokenness that we feel when Option A is taken off the table. The *tekiah* that follows the *shevarim* and *teruah* shofar blasts reassures us that it is possible for us to live with Option B. No matter how broken we may feel when Option A slips out of our grasp, there is **always the possibility of rebuilding** and finding **wholeness** again with Option B. Just as the shofar-blower may feel a bit tired-out after blasting so many sets of *shevarim* and *teruah* shofar-blasts on Rosh HaShanah, so too may we feel tired and spent after failing to achieve Option A. However, the *tekiah* comes to remind us of the Jewish philosophy, "*Gam zeh yaavor*" ("This too shall pass.") **After the brokenness**, there is always the **potential for each of us to achieve wholeness once again.**

On this Rosh HaShanah of 5778,

- I pray that we all have the courage, tenacity, and faith in God to **deal with the Option B situations** that may come our way.
- I pray that no matter how bad things get, we remember that we can always do ***teshuvah***; we can reflect, repent, & refocus on **charting a new direction in our lives.**
- I pray that each of us can **find strength in the camaraderie of community**, and **the blessing of being able to share with others** our challenges and pains along the journey of our lives.
- & I pray that no matter how **broken** we may feel when Option A is no longer available to us, that we find our way to **wholeness** with Option B.

*Ken yehi ratzon.*

*L'Shanah Tovah Tikateyvu.*

Another Option B book about college career counselor who got into accident after texting & driving, losing vision on left side: Left Neglected by Lisa Genova

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/8492768-left-neglected>