

# MOSHE'S IMPOSTER SYNDROME

*Tzav 5779*

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## I.

Ruthy's path to her PhD was somewhat unorthodox. Students typically take a year or two between college and graduate school to do research, but Ruthy went straight into her PhD after college. She also started off doing two PhDs at the same time until a dispute between the cognitive and clinical department heads changed that. And, to make matters worse, she ended up leaving the lab and advisor she was working under after her first year. It left her with four years to complete a five-year program and an entirely new specialty to learn: immunology, her Achilles' heel in college.

And this led Ruthy to develop what psychologists call "imposter syndrome," the fear that, at any moment, someone would burst in on her lab and scream, "you're not supposed to be here! You're supposed to have taken a year or two before this to do research! You're not a neuroimmunologist! You can't do this in four years!" It's the debilitating feeling that one day the truth will out, and you will be exposed for the fraud you are. People will realize you aren't qualified to do what you do.

The best example of imposter syndrome I've ever read is by Neil Gaiman, the British author and creator of a whole host of brilliant things. In a blog post, he describes his own battle with imposter syndrome and tells the following story. He had been invited to a gathering of, in his own words, "great and good people: artists and scientists, writers and discoverers of things. And I felt that at any moment they would realise that I didn't qualify to be there, among these people who had really done things."

And then, Neil Gaiman mentions how he was standing at the back of the room, unwilling to be a part of the main crowd, "talking to a very nice, polite, elderly gentleman about several things including our shared first name. And then he pointed to the hall of people and said words to the effect of, 'I just look at all these people, and I think, what am I doing here? They've made amazing things. I just went where I was sent.'"

And Neil Gaiman responds to the other Neil, "Yes. But you were the first man on the moon. I think that counts for something." Neil Gaiman concludes: "And I felt a bit better. Because if Neil Armstrong felt like an imposter, maybe everyone did."

## II.

And I wonder how many of us, at some point in our lives including right now, suffer from a particular form of imposter syndrome: religious imposter syndrome. Because, if there's one environment that might make us feel a fraud, it's a *shul*. You walk in here and, for starters, we're speaking a different language. You pick up the *siddur* and, even with all the page announcements in the world, you notice everyone around you confidently flipping back-and-forth. There's a lot of sitting then standing, standing then sitting. There are brief moments of standing. Times when some people stand and others sit, and that's before we even talk about the bowing. I speak and, even with all the translations in the world, there's still a lot of inside-baseball. Whether I say *Vaykira* or Leviticus, offering or *korban*, the concepts are still alien.

And even if all of those things are familiar to you there's still the nagging fear that maybe today is one of those special days when we do something different. To this day, whenever I am asked to be *shaliach tzibbur*, to lead the services, there's part of me constantly fearful that this is the one time in the year or month something is added or skipped – and that, if I don't do it, I will be exposed for the fraud I am.

If you don't want to be *shaliach tzibbur* because you're worried you won't know what to do you have religious imposter syndrome. If you refuse Shabbat meal invites because you fear missing cues everyone else reads you have religious imposter syndrome. If you won't enter a different *shul* because you worry things will be different there and you'll stand out, you have religious imposter syndrome. We all have it. We all suffer from it. But we need to free ourselves from it, because it prevents us from fulfilling our religious potential.

## III.

Fortunately, there is (part of) an answer and we read it this morning. Actually, that's a lie: we didn't read it, we heard it. For those of you familiar with the *leining trop*, the cantillation, the specific notes that dictate how the Torah reading should be sung, this morning was exciting. Because our *parashah* contains the greatest note there is, the *shalsholet*. For those of you unfamiliar or, if you missed it, let me read for you the verse in which it appears and then I'll sing the *shalsholet*, which is found on the first word of the verse.

וַיִּשְׁחָט | וַיִּקַּח מִדָּמָיו וַיִּתֵּן עַל-תְּנוּךְ אֶזְרוֹ-אֶהָרֶץ הַיְמָנִית וְעַל-בִּזְיוֹן יָדוֹ הַיְמָנִית וְעַל-  
בִּזְיוֹן רַגְלוֹ הַיְמָנִית:

and it was slaughtered. Moses took some of its blood and put it on the ridge of Aaron's right ear, and on the thumb of his right hand, and on the big toe of his right foot (Lev. 8:23).

The first word, *va-yishchat*, is read like this.

Awesome, right?

But it's not just the fact that the *shalsholet* is so fun that make it so great, it's also one of the rarest notes we have in the Torah. It occurs only four times. In fact, today was bittersweet because it's the last time we'll hear a *shalsholet* until we restart the Torah because all of the other occurrences of the note are found in *Sefer Bereishit*.

The first time we hear it is in *parashat vayera* on the word *va-yitmahmah*, "and he delayed" (Gen. 19:16). Lot is unwilling to leave his home in Sodom even when it's about to be destroyed. The second time is the following *parashah*, *chayyei sarah*, on the word *va-yomer*, "and he said" (Gen. 24:12). Avraham's servant, commonly identified as Eliezer, is praying to God to help him find a wife for Yitzchak. The last time it appears in *Sefer Bereishit* is the story of Yosef, on the word *vayma'en*, "he refused" (Gen. 39:8). Despite her attempts to seduce him, Yosef resists Potiphar's wife.

The thing about the trop of Torah reading is that it's not just a tune, it's also an interpretation. And the *shalsholet* is understood to indicate a particularly lengthy passage of time. As we're hearing the story, the image we're creating is aided by the note. The obvious example of this is the story of Lot. The Torah tells us he delayed leaving his home, and we *feel* that delay through the elongated note. It takes time for that word to finish. It takes time for Lot to leave – in fact, he has to be dragged out.

Similarly, we get a better feeling for Avraham's servant's prayer. It's not a quick "help me, God" but a lengthy prayer. We get a sense of his emotion. He takes his time. He has a lot to pray for. Once again, we *feel* it. The servant speaks to God – and he says a lot.

Finally, we get Yosef's refusal. And the *shalsholet* not only helps us imagine the story but also complicates our understanding. Yosef refuses to sleep with Potiphar's wife, but it's dragged out. As *Chazal* themselves note in the *gemara* in *Sotah* (36b), Yosef is tempted. The *shalsholet* gives us a window into that inner struggle. Yosef doesn't just refuse and walk out, he's hesitant. Part of him wants to stay. And we *feel* his hesitation.

#### IV.

All of these instances of the *shalsholet* make sense. They depict a delay in the action, and they add a layer of complexity to our image of the narrative. But why is there a *shalsholet* in *parashat tzav*? Why here, in the middle of the intricate laws of *korbanot*?

The answer, I believe, is simple yet profound. And it begins by noticing that the 8th chapter of *Vayikra* – the one in which the *shalsholet* is found – is actually a narrative. After spending seven chapters instructing Moshe on the various types of sacrifices, Moshe must now do some as part of the public anointing of Aharon and his sons. First, Moshe slaughters a bull; then, he slaughters a ram. Now, it's time for another ram. And here we get our *shalsholet*:

וַיִּשְׁחָט

and it was slaughtered. (Lev. 8:23).

But it takes a long time. The other two animals were dispatched quickly, a simple *va-yishchat* with very ordinary notes. But here, it takes longer. Why? It's because of what he's about to do. For the first two *korbanot*, the blood is used on the *mizbeach*, the altar – effectively to cleanse and anoint it. But, for this *korban*, it has a different purpose:

וַיִּקַּח מִשָּׂהָ מִדָּמָו וַיִּתֵּן עַל-תְּנוּרָה אֶזְרִי-אֶהָרֵן הַיְמָנִית וְעַל-בֶּהֶן יָדוֹ הַיְמָנִית וְעַל-בֶּהֶן רַגְלוֹ הַיְמָנִית:

Moses took some of its blood and put it on the ridge of Aaron's right ear, and on the thumb of his right hand, and on the big toe of his right foot (Ibid.).

It's to anoint the *kohanim*. In other words, Moshe must now slaughter a ram in order to consecrate the actual professionals. The people who will spend their lives slaughtering animals for purposes inside the *mishkan*. All of a sudden, his confidence flees. All of a sudden, it becomes a lot more difficult to slaughter an animal. He's not sure what to do. We feel his hesitation, his uncertainty, his awkwardness. The *shalsholet* drags on. Because the people now looking on intently are the very same people who are the real deal. And, any moment now, they may point out something Moshe did wrong. Expose him for the fraud he is.

At the moment it matters, Moshe is overcome with imposter syndrome. Surrounded by the people who will *actually* do this in the place where it will be done, he begins to think "I don't belong here." And reading the Torah this way, hearing the Torah this way, makes us want to respond to Moshe the

way Neil Gaiman did to Neil Armstrong, “you *are* Moshe Rabbenu. The person God chose to be his truest prophet. The only person to have spoken to God face-to-face.”

V.

The truth is that there is no solution to religious imposter syndrome – save the realization that it happens to everyone. Even the greatest Jew to have ever lived, Moshe, wasn’t certain of what he was doing in the *mishkan* when surrounded by others he thought knew better.

And so, the next time you refuse to be *shaliach tzibbur* because you’re worried you won’t know what to do, or you refuse Shabbat meal invites because you fear missing cues everyone else reads, or if you won’t enter a different *shul* because you worry things will be different there and you’ll stand out, remember that Moshe Rabbenu, the man who brought down the Torah from heaven, felt the same way.

And, to paraphrase Neil Gaiman, feel a bit better. Because if Moshe Rabbenu felt like an imposter, maybe everyone does.