

Surrender¹
Rabbi Laurie Green
Kol Nidrei 5778
Congregation Bet Mishpachah

One day, the world's leading astronomers spotted a comet and predicted that in 4 days it would strike the arctic, melting the glaciers and leaving 90% of the land on earth covered with water. Rick Warren got on Television and urged all unbelievers to accept Christ and prepare to die in a state of grace. The Pope got on television and implored all Catholics to take communion and to surrender to their suffering, as did Jesus on the cross. The Dali Lama got on television implored all Buddhists to meditate and prepare to accept death in peace. The Grand Mufti got on television and implored all Muslims to surrender to the will of Allah. The Chief Rabbis of Israel got on television and said: "My people, we have only four days to learn how to live underwater."²

Silly joke, but true. We are a culture of *chutzpah*, what Amos Oz called a "civilization of doubt & argument."³ A blessing to be sure, but is it possible we might take it a bit too far? Is it possible that every other major religious tradition contains something we lack?

¹ I'd like to thank those individuals without whom this *drash* would not have been possible. Particularly, I want to thank my colleagues, Rabbis Daniel Greyber, Alan Lew, Rami Shapiro, Shais Taub, and Will Berkowitz, who were so formative in my thinking. I want to thank those who provided their editing assistance. Perhaps most of all, I'd like to thank all my *chevrei*, who wish to remain anonymous, who teach me, daily, what it means to surrender.

² My thanks to Rabbi Daniel Greyber for sharing this joke.

³ A 2/23/15 interview of Amos Oz conducted by Natascha Freundel and posted on publicseminar.org.

There has to be a moment in our lives when Judaism helps us to be surrendered.⁴ That moment is now.

Death is “the final life lesson and the ultimate surrender.”⁵

Today we rehearse our death. For the Talmud tells us that ‘death and Yom Kippur atone.’⁶ We wear white to represent our burial shrouds. We confess our sins in the *Ashamnu*, which is traditionally recited on one’s deathbed. We deny our bodies food, water and all earthly pleasures.

Hayom harat olam – On Rosh Hashanah, the world was conceived. We were reborn out of the intrinsic Oneness. We came into this world, innocent and perfect and inseparable from God.

Kaper lanu – On Yom Kippur, we atone. Tonight we remember that we will die. Our bodies & our sins will be covered over, as we return to the intrinsic Oneness. We will leave this world, innocent and perfect and inseparable from God.

For in birth and in death there is no ego. Our ego is necessary for our survival. It sees itself as separate from that Oneness, so it keeps us from surrendering to it. The Buddhist Ram Dass

⁴ This quote comes from Rabbi Rami Shapiro and is part of a podcast which is available at- <http://www.judaismunbound.com/podcast/2017/5/22/episode-69-holy-rascals-rami-shapiro>. My thanks to Scott Reiter for introducing me to this podcast.

⁵ Berkovitz, William. “God, Life and the Spiritual Practice of Surrendering ‘Complete Control,’” Huffington Post Blog, 02/16/2011 07:25 pm ET Updated May 25, 2011.

⁶ Mishnah Yoma 8:9.

teaches that we experience fierce grace when God ‘tear[s] the last bit of ego-centered hope from our hands, letting us fall to our deaths.’⁷ Ultimately, we all surrender – willingly or by force. The only choice is when we surrender, and how much pain we suffer before we do.

Jews used to understand this. Yet in our modern world, with all its technology and wealth, we think we can predict the results of elections and the paths of hurricanes. We bury our fears in “a ceaseless swirl of activity,”⁸ deluding ourselves into feeling more powerful than we are.

It is true that Judaism never focused on surrender as the primary form of religious expression. We are God-wrestlers. Yet the rabbis certainly knew that few things were in their control, and that being a Jew of faith meant trusting in God.

When we surrender to God, we find pure joy. This is why the Talmud tells us that *Yom HaKippurim* is a *yom* that is *k’ Purim* – a day that is like Purim. So I’m going to speak about Purim.

While there are many Biblical and Rabbinic characters who exemplify surrender to God, perhaps the most relevant to us are Esther and Mordechai. Probably not the way you heard the story. I grew up with beauty contests and the good old “they tried to kill us, we won, let’s

⁷ Shapiro, Rami. *Recovery – the sacred art: The Twelve Steps as Spiritual Practice*, Woodstock: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2009, 46.

⁸ Lew, Alan. *This Is Real and You are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2003, 119.

eat.” How we won, the approach that Esther and Mordechai took, therein lies the lesson of surrender.

Esther & Mordechai have political connections. They are the Jared & Ivanka of their day. When faced with yet another plot to annihilate the Jewish people, their plan was not to exploit their political connections – at least not right away. First, they fast⁹ and pray¹⁰ for three days, and according to the commentators, they gather children to publicly study Torah.¹¹ In Shushan’s equivalent of the National Mall, they create quite a spectacle. In other words, they perform acts of *teshuva*, *tefila* and *tzedaka*. Only after the entire Jewish community repents and prays and fights for justice, only then does the spirit of God descend upon Esther, and then she goes to the king. The rabbis tell us it is only through her trust in God that Esther is worthy of this prophecy – that God shows her what to do every step of the way.

Esther and Mordechai win. They are politicians, but first and foremost they are spiritual activists. They believe that the outcome is entirely in God’s hands. In the end, they don’t rely on a miracle, but they do trust in God. In the Book of Esther, God’s name is never mentioned, in order to remind us that God is hidden, but always present. It is up to us to make God appear, and it is up to God to decide how the story ends.

⁹ Esther 4:16.

¹⁰ Many sources record the words of Esther’s prayers, including *Esther Rabbah* 8:7.

¹¹ Mordechai asks Esther ‘what would she do?’ and she says ‘Lech kenos et kol hayehudim’ – ‘go assemble the Jews,’ which is understood as for a public study of Torah.

So what is the Hebrew word for surrender? If you enter 'surrender' into Google Translate, you get only one word - *keniyah*. That's because Sergey Brin is a Russian-Jew who never studied Jewish mysticism. I'll leave *keniyah* to the generals. I seek spiritual surrender, and that is a different concept entirely.

The Hebrew word for 'surrender to God' is *Hod*. Though the term existed long before the Jewish mystics, *Kabbalah* develops the idea of *Hod* as the eighth of the *sefirot*, the 10 emanations of God. *Hod* means 'acknowledgment,' a derivative of the word *l'hodot* – to acknowledge, to admit. *Hod* is frequently translated as splendor, acceptance, surrender, humility, and gratitude. When we acknowledge the splendor of God, we accept that we are not God. We find the humility to accept what we are, and we gratefully acknowledge that God is the source of our many blessings.

Hod shares its root with the name *Yehuda* – Judah – Jew. The Book of Esther speaks of '*Mordechai HaYehudi*' but we know that Mordechai is from the tribe of Benjamin, not the tribe of Judah. He is not literally a '*Yehudi*.' The Talmud says *Yehudi* means 'one who acknowledges' from *l'hodot*, teaching us that the very nature of being Jewish is to acknowledge only God as the true source of it all.

And yet, more so than most religious traditions, Judaism acknowledges that surrender alone is not a spiritual path. It must be balanced with its partner, the seventh *sefirah*, *netzach* – which is translated as perseverance, zeal, and endurance. In the Kabbalistic imagination, *netzach* is

aligned with *hesed*, loving-kindness, and *hod* is aligned with *gevurah*, God's power. Love allows us to persevere against all odds.

The real power is in surrender – in acknowledging the Reality that is God. We give God our will, and God gives us true power.¹²

Now God is a tricky word. Some of us don't feel comfortable with that term, for good reason. You may call it physics, or chance. You may imagine boundless love or a puppet-master in the sky. Sometimes God is simply a name for Reality.

If God is Reality, surrender to God is "acting in harmony with reality."¹³ "Surrender is not giving up or giving in – it is giving way."¹⁴

In that surrender, we receive freedom from the struggle and hope in the possible. When we surrender, we find serenity. When we surrender, we accept the world as it is, so we can change it into the world as it ought to be.¹⁵ Surrender "means doing what is right, and letting go of the results."¹⁶

¹² Adapted from a quote by Taub, Shais. God of Our Understanding: Jewish Spirituality and Recovery from Addiction, Brooklyn: Ktav, 2011, 87.

¹³ Shapiro, Rami. Recovery – the sacred art: The Twelve Steps as Spiritual Practice, Woodstock: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2009, 120.

¹⁴ The website Kabbalah Experience renders *Hod* as "Giving way," a translation I have not seen elsewhere.

¹⁵ Paraphrase of Taub, Shais. God of Our Understanding, p. 149.

¹⁶ Shapiro, Rami. Recovery – the sacred art: The Twelve Steps as Spiritual Practice, Woodstock: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2009, 119.

When we let go, forgiveness is possible. _When we forgive someone, we surrender the way we wish things had been. When we ask for forgiveness, we surrender to our faults. When we forgive ourselves, we surrender our desire to be perfect.

When we let go, teshuva is possible. Surrender to God is a form of *teshuvah*. It brings us home, wiser, humbler, happier.

When we surrender to our brokenness, we become more whole.

When we surrender we don't give up anything. We just accept the truth.¹⁷ "We are not God. We cannot be. We don't need to be. We cannot control what other people do and what other people do should not control us."¹⁸

When we surrender, we cede power – *u'n'taneh tokef*. *N'taneh* literally means we cede, we give away. We give away that which we never really had, for:

"On Rosh Hashanah it is written,
on Yom Kippur it is sealed...
who shall live
& who shall die?...
Who by earthquake"¹⁹
& who by hurricane?

¹⁷ Paraphrase of Taub, Shais. God of Our Understanding: Jewish Spirituality and Recovery from Addiction, Brooklyn: Ktav, 2011, 152-153.

¹⁸ Taub, Shais. God of Our Understanding: Jewish Spirituality and Recovery from Addiction, Brooklyn: Ktav, 2011, 131.

¹⁹ A direct quote from *U'n'taneh Tokef*.

There has to be a moment in our lives when Judaism helps us to be surrendered.²⁰ That moment is now. Death is “the final life lesson and the ultimate surrender.”²¹ Today we rehearse our death.

When we surrender, we accept the world as it is, so we can change it into the world as it ought to be.²² In the world as it is; ethnic cleansing continues, and we condemn innocent people to death, simply because of where they were born in or what religion they practice. In the world as it is: a Jewish teenager calls in bomb threats to JCCs and a closeted gay man shoots up a gay nightclub. In the world as it is: we cannot hold a single police officer accountable for killing an unarmed black man, and the President of the United States won’t condemn Nazis.

Now, more than ever, it is time to balance perseverance & surrender. When we surrender, we accept the world as it is, so we can change it into the world as it ought to be.²³

This political moment calls for nothing new. Imagine the hopelessness of the Jews fighting the Roman Empire. They believed God would save them, until they watched the Temple burn.

Rabbi Tzadok fasted to the point of collapse. The residents of Masada martyred themselves.

²⁰ This quote comes from Rabbi Rami Shapiro and is part of a podcast which is available at- <http://www.judaismunbound.com/podcast/2017/5/22/episode-69-holy-rascals-rami-shapiro>. My thanks to Scott Reiter for introducing me to this podcast.

²¹ Berkovitz, William. “God, Life and the Spiritual Practice of Surrendering ‘Complete Control,’” Huffington Post Blog, 02/16/2011 07:25 pm ET Updated May 25, 2011.

²² Paraphrase of Taub, Shais. God of Our Understanding: Jewish Spirituality and Recovery from Addiction, Brooklyn: Ktav, 2011, 149.

²³ Ibid.

We are here today thanks to the one man who surrendered. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai was reviled as a traitor for turning himself in to the Romans. His surrender was not unconditional. He saved Torah by establishing an academy. He saved his own descendants' lives. He even got a physician to treat Rabbi Tzadok who was dying from his fast. Only Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai accepted reality, and did something to change it. By surrendering to the Reality of what was, he harnessed the power he had left, and thereby saved Torah and the Jewish people. How's that for the ultimate surrender?

Even Maya Angelou surrendered. She wrote: "At fifteen, life had taught me undeniably that surrender, in its place, was as honorable as resistance, especially if one had no choice."²⁴

Sometimes we have no choice, and so we declare: *Kol nidrei ve-esarei va-charamei v'konamei v'chinuyei v'kinusei.*²⁵ Tonight, we let go of "all our vows"²⁶ and promises, our expectations and our certainties. We ask that they shall be "absolved, released, cancelled, annulled, and made void."²⁷ We acknowledge a simple truth: We "have control over only so much," but *teshuva*, *tefilla*, and *zedaka* transform the severity of the decree. So we surrender everything else!

Certain things just are. Fighting them is insane, "even tragic, like Don Quixote tilting at windmills."²⁸

²⁴ Angelou, Maya. <https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/mayaangelo141965.html>

²⁵ From the text of Kol Nidrei, transliteration and translation taken from *Chadeish Yameinu*.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Taub, Shais. *God of Our Understanding: Jewish Spirituality and Recovery from Addiction*, Brooklyn: Ktav, 2011, 163.

Love allows us to persevere against all odds. The real power is in surrender – in acknowledging the Reality that is God. We give God our will, and God gives us God’s power.²⁹

I’ll conclude with a quote from Eckhart Tolle:

“Always say “yes” to the present moment.
What could be more futile, more insane,
than to oppose life itself... Surrender to what is.
Say “yes” to life — and see how life suddenly starts working for you rather than
against you.”³⁰

‘Surrender, in its place,’ is ‘as honorable as resistance, especially if one’ has ‘no choice.’³¹

Someday, we will say our final confession for real, and then our death will no longer be a rehearsal. Until then we persevere and we surrender. It takes both.

When we surrender to our brokenness, we become more whole. We surrender to the unknown, so maybe, just maybe, we can find the humility to not know, the strength to persevere, and the serenity to find joy in it all.

Imeinu Shechinateinu, surrender us to You, and “return us to You in perfect repentance.”³²

Avinu Malkeinu, “enable us to attain our liberation,”³³ and “inscribe us in the Book of Life.”³⁴

²⁹ Adapted from a quote by Taub, Shais. *God of Our Understanding: Jewish Spirituality and Recovery from Addiction*, Brooklyn: Ktav, 2011, 87.

³⁰ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/222733-always-say-yes-to-the-present-moment-what-could-be>

³¹ Paraphrase of Maya Angelou.

³² From the text of *Avinu Malkeinu*, translation from *Chadeish Yameinu*.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*