

## Why Suffer?

After ten years together, this congregation knows that I'm a nerd and love science. So it won't surprise you to know how excited I was with the launch of the James Webb space telescope earlier this year. My kids and I cheered as it left the launchpad and watched over the next couple of days as the scientists unfolded the solar array and then the heat shield. The mirrors were opened up and then it reached its final destination 1,000,000 miles from the planet. Over the next six months we waited while the mirrors were aligned and then the whole thing needed to cool down to an unbelievable  $447^{\circ}$  below zero. And then finally, on July 12<sup>th</sup>, we began to receive the first images from the telescope. And they were incredible! The detail was staggering and even the most analytical mind couldn't help but feel inspired by the awe and meaning of such pictures.

So, what are they seeing? I have no idea! I'm a rabbi, not an astrophysicist. I am a lay person not a professional but, listening to the excitement of the scientific community tells me a couple of things. Already, in the first couple of publicly shared images, they are finding things that should not be there. At least not according to the prevailing theories of the cosmos. The way that black holes are interacting with the matter around them; the presence of galaxies in places where they should not be; and remnants of stars that challenge our theories about the beginning of the universe are all leaving scientists breathless.

To the scientific community, new data presents an opportunity. They return to the theories they had held and test them against the new information. When they find that there is a conflict, then they dispassionately adjust the working understanding of the theory and keep going. In other words, they are not afraid to admit that their understanding of the universe has

expanded with new data which means, what they thought was true before was, in fact, wrong. *They* were wrong. But there is no shame in it because it has allowed them to grow in their relationship to knowledge. Even the Big Bang is being called into question!<sup>1</sup> If something so central to science's model of the beginning of it all may be wrong from the start, then it should prime us to ask some other discomfoting questions: what might we be wrong about?

Scientists teach us that it can be a liberating experience to admit that they think differently now – could we, perhaps use the same attitude in our own lives? Why should we be upset when we realize that we were only using a partial picture and incomplete information? Why can't we celebrate the opportunity to see something in greater clarity and therefore enjoy a more complete relationship to the idea?

Well, for some reason, it hurts the individual to admit that they have been proven wrong. Kasley Killam has written about the idea and tells us that this suffering is related to grief and anger, poverty of spirit and abuse of the inner self. He says it may include physical pain and or emotional disappointment.<sup>2</sup> Phew, not that I would know but being wrong sounds awful!

What is so difficult about admitting we were wrong in the past and that we think differently now? It seems that there is a surrender of the moral high ground required which appears to suggest some sort of weakness. We have introduced a sort of zero-sum nature into our relationships – almost as if there is a scoreboard. If there were a referee overseeing the interactions that we have with others – and our opponent was awarded a point, we would want to contest the call. When you stop and think about the conflicts you have been party to in this last couple of years – I'll bet there was no referee. So, how do we know who won?

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<sup>1</sup> O'Callaghan, Jonathan. [JWST's First Glimpses of Early Galaxies Could Break Cosmology](https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/jwsts-first-glimpses-of-early-galaxies-could-break-cosmology/). on September 14, 2022 <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/jwsts-first-glimpses-of-early-galaxies-could-break-cosmology/>

<sup>2</sup> Killam, Kasley. [How to Find Meaning in Suffering: Useful insights from research on "post-traumatic growth"](https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-to-find-meaning-in-suffering/) <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-to-find-meaning-in-suffering/> . December 15, 2015.

Well, right there is the crux of the problem! We rarely, if ever, when fights with people who really matter to us. Instead, there seem to be four categories of potential outcomes: first, the one with more power gets their way. Second the argument cools down and we simply move on leaving the matter unresolved. Third, we walk away from each other, ending the relationship, deciding that being right was more important than our connection to the other person. Or fourth, one party decides they are able to compromise, change their mind or simply admit they were wrong, and things return to a healthy state in the relationship. Generally, I would argue that number four is both the least likely outcome and the preferable resolution. So, let's spend a little time thinking about how we might achieve that path.

In broad strokes, there are three steps involved: first we have a conflict, second we accept our responsibility and third we apologize. Yom Kippur is good at having us take a look at numbers one and three but, spends perhaps too little time focusing our attention on the second step. The liturgy and our traditions encourage us to beat our chest and say the words in unison but they are very formulaic. We are not really given the space or tools necessary to confess and then even embrace the fact that we have been wrong.

And how did we come to be wrong in the first place? Well, we became certain of our position using information. Either it was good information from a reliable source, or we were fed misinformation. Perhaps it was incomplete information, or it was based on emotional information from our past. Maybe we couldn't even agree on the details of the information. However, we got there, our reaction is based on some sort of information and it helps us to remember that the root of the word is "formation." Information is what we used to help us understand and make sense of our world and as a result, we take a position, assume a posture and our opinions become the form that we take.

Having that challenged can sometimes feel like an attack on our very selves. Naturally, a human will protect themselves from something like that – it is our psychological survival

instinct which is, arguable even stronger than our physical survival patterns. But, as important as they are, those reactions can sometimes get in our way. We entrench ourselves in a place that feels safe and where we cannot be hurt further. In fact, we know that the more forcefully we dig in our heels, the more honestly we probably know that we are at least a part of the problem. To emerge from that space, we would need to release our defenses, allowing for a different script and perhaps even admit that we have been wrong. It reminds me of the poem by the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai called:

The Place Where We Are Right

From the place where we are right  
Flowers will never grow  
In the spring.  
The place where we are right  
Is hard and trampled  
Like a yard.

But doubts and loves  
Dig up the world  
Like a mole, a plow.  
And a whisper will be heard in the place  
Where the ruined  
House once stood.<sup>1</sup>

Being able to admit that we were wrong is a major test of the ego. Am I stronger than this self-defensive champion of my psyche? Can I admit that I was wrong and still maintain the illusion that I know what I'm doing? To this day, I still cannot understand why John Kerry lost the election by admitting that new information had caused him to change his vote on a major funding bill way back in 2004. It seems to me the greatest show of inner strength to say, "at the time, I believed I was right – now, I have a fuller picture and I feel differently." The entire world is sitting in its hope that Vladimir Putin finds the ability to do just this.

Who among us would not want to emerge from this place where we are so shielded, that nobody can get to us? It's so lonely there. I'm sure you can think of some examples of individuals in your life that I am describing. These are people who are so stubborn and so defensive that they have isolated themselves from the world. And, while it is tempting to think of those most extreme examples which come easily to mind, it's really just a matter of degree and all of us express versions of this behavior. Turn the magnifying glass around on yourself – how do you do this? Think about your most important relationships – how do you dig your heels in? In what ways do you refuse to admit your error?

The truth is, we suffer in this place of being unassailably right. Why in the world would we admit that we were wrong and open ourselves to suffering? Nobody would argue that one should suffer for the sake of suffering so allow me to tell you why it is worth it.

The research suggests that there are five outcomes that we can expect from the experience of suffering. The first is personal strength. Brené Brown writes: "A crisis highlights all of our fault lines. We can pretend that we have nothing to learn, or

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for ourselves and others."<sup>3</sup> Which leads to the second incentive: strengthened relationships with others. Civil Rights leader, Valerie Kaur says, "You don't need to know people in order to suffer with

them, you suffer with them in order to know them."<sup>4</sup> Third, scientists find that the bitterness of suffering heightens our awareness of the sweetness of life as well leading to a greater life appreciation. Fourth, suffering allows us to open up and update our set of beliefs. In my own journey, every time I have allowed myself to accept new information and a revision of my

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<sup>3</sup> Brown, Brené. [Quotes](#). On October 3, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Kaur, Valerie. [Seeing no Stranger](https://valariekaur.com/see-no-stranger/). <https://valariekaur.com/see-no-stranger/> on 9/29/22.

beliefs, I have been the better for it. And finally, going through something tough allows us to emerge with a stronger sense of possibility for the future.<sup>5</sup>

When King Ahashverosh, of the Purim Story, was finally made aware of the conspiracy being perpetrated by the wicked Haman,<sup>6</sup> he acted decisively. He had been a puppet and a weak character until that final moment when Queen Esther showed him the truth of the situation. Only then, did his personal strength emerge and ridding himself of the source of his misinformation must have left him feeling cleansed, refreshed and ready for a healthier future. I never thought I would hear myself argue that we should be more like King Ahashverosh!

We are soon to enter the parts of the service in which those words of confession are placed on our tongue. The mechanisms will become automatic as we beat our chest and sing, “ai yai yai yai yai...”. This evening and tomorrow, take them seriously. It isn’t enough to go on to Facebook and post an apology to everyone you know. Utilize the structure of the cheshbon hanefesh. Like the cheshbon, or bill of sale, in a restaurant, when it come and you agree with list of items you have ordered and eaten, then total means you now have an obligation. Do a hard look this day, see clearly the ways you have participated in the breaking of relationships and accept that the total at the bottom of the receipt holds an obligation for you. If you do that with your whole self, then I have no concerns that everything that comes afterward will be authentic and honest. This is why you are here – Come on, let’s get started.

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<sup>5</sup> Schwantes, Marcel. 1 Super Rare Habit of Exceptionally Happy Workers. <https://www.inc.com/marcel-schwantes/1-super-rare-habit-of-exceptionally-happy-workers.html>. On September 15, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> [Esther 7:6](#).