

The Cataclysm Sentence  
Kol Nidrei, 5784  
Temple Sinai Stamford CT  
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Good Yontiv,

Quite a world we live in, isn't it? Does anyone else feel like we live perpetually under the weight of the ancient Chinese Curse: May you live in Interesting Times. There is a slight hesitance I feel every morning when I ask Alexa to deliver my morning briefing – who knows what horrific new reality is creating pain and suffering in the lives of people just like me. Not to put too fine a point on it but our democracy is teetering in the balance as we hear about the most recent indictments. Our confidence in the reliability of our system of Justice has been shaken as landmark decisions reversing precedent this past year have left us dizzy. The climate changes have wrought havoc on an increasing number of earth's inhabitants, and we are frustrated by those who are making it worse rather than better as they fight against the cause of climate activists. To say the future is uncertain seems like an understatement.

Well, now that I have cheered you up, I'm going to fast forward and talk about the end-of-the-world. But, before I do, our Jewish tradition believes in giving credit where credit is due. The basis for what is next belongs to Professor Richard Feynman – A super-star theoretical physicist for those of us nerds in the room. He was already a world-famous voice when Caltech invited him to take over the teaching of an introductory course in physics in 1961. That year, he challenged those undergraduate students with the following question: If, in some cataclysm, all of scientific knowledge were to be destroyed, and only one sentence passed on to the next generation of creatures, what statement would contain the most information in the fewest words?

Similar to Hillel's single sentence that articulates the essence of the whole Torah that I spoke about last week, Feynman crafted a scenario which invites us to distill to one sentence, what you believe is the most important thing to know and that *you* would want to pass on to others. As we begin the process, let's admit that, with few exceptions, everything we learn is built upon what others before us have learned. Babies may begin with a bit of instinct for suckling but after that, we start learning pretty quickly from those who've come before us. Parents train us to sit up and walk and use our body. Friends teach us what our behaviors should look like to fit into society. Teachers transmit information and technique to aide our professional survival in the world. Media teaches us about societal ideals and, in so doing, reinforces our insecurities. Religion, through religious school teachers and clergy, communicates tribal values, establishes a sense of history and teaches us about tradition and not to mention it offers forms of belief to organize the world, and so on.

In our working understanding of reality, we really do stand upon the shoulders of all who came before us – metaphorically speaking – some of them giants, most of them just like ourselves. But what if there was going to be a complete break in the transmission of all of this. Some catastrophic situation which would bring an end to humanity and you had the opportunity to write down one sentence to leave behind – what would it be? Some of you pragmatists are trying to imagine how this scenario could realistically come to be – stop it, that's not the point. Some of you are thinking about how the next sentient individuals would come to be here – don't get caught up on the details of the scenario, just stick with me. And don't even start thinking about your answer yet.

We're certainly not the first ones to think about this. When the team of engineers was getting ready to launch the Voyager probes out into space in 1977, they knew that these machines would just keep going. Forever. Meaning, through infinitesimally small odds, they *could* become the first points of connection between whatever species located them and humanity – stuck back down here on earth. In fact, they knew that this interaction might

happen billions of years in the future – long after humanity was gone - so they were asking a similar question. What to transmit of ourselves to those who will never know anything more about humanity than this short message?

Many of you know...they used a golden record – a material that would never degrade and would last through the cold, timelessness of space. Carl Sagan led the effort and his team engaged many thought partners and they chose to share these images to represent our existence. Among many others, they included:

1. Our location in the galaxy
2. Some basics of math the way we represent it
3. Our understanding of DNA at the time
4. Some basics of us as human animals
5. Some of our magnificent achievements
6. Some of our other achievements, too

The also included a few spoken words of greeting in 55 different languages. Then they added a recording of some music and some sounds of life on earth. This set of data is their answer to Feynman's question. This is what they thought was most important to tell others about ourselves.

You might also be familiar with the Last Lecture phenomenon. In 2007, beloved Professor Randy Pausch was diagnosed with a terminal form of pancreatic cancer. Three months later and knowing he was soon to die, he delivered the culminating lecture on what wisdom he wished to leave behind as his legacy. And the world paid attention, after all, what does a man say to the audience who's listening to his final comments? Jewish Tradition teaches us that there are different kinds of knowledge and professors typically communicate *chochmah*, practical information, or *binah*, referential understanding. A professor of computer science, Pausch's lecture had nothing to do with computer science or design. Instead, he chose to teach us the third kind of knowledge, *da'at* or wisdom – that is, what he'd learned about how to get

the most out of life. He titled it, “Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams.” Afterward, when he was asked to distill this impossibly beautiful and personal presentation down to its essence, he said: If I only had three words of advice, they would be, “Tell the Truth.” If I got three more words, I would add, “all the time.” I put a link to the youtube video<sup>1</sup> of his lecture online in this sermon and think it is a great way to spend an hour.

Closer to home, one of our congregants just recently hosted a farewell party. Knowing she had only a little time left, she invited all her friends and family over for a not-so-small gathering at which she addressed them in a poem she’d written for the occasion with her wisdom and gratitude. There was not a person present who was not thinking about the remarkable perspective she modeled and grace of facing inevitably without fear. She died 5 days later but without the sense that anyone was short-changed.

Feynman’s exercise was new to me. I was introduced to it earlier this year through the podcast, Radiolab.<sup>2</sup> The hosts were intrigued by the notion and thought it would be interesting to collect responses from a variety of people. I’m going to share a few of the submissions they received. But first, I’ll give you the response of the man who posed the question to begin with. The question, again, was: If, in some cataclysm, all of scientific knowledge were to be destroyed, and only one sentence passed on to the next generation of creatures, what statement would contain the most information in the fewest words?

Feynman’s own response is as follows: “The atomic hypothesis: that all things are made of atoms — little particles that move around in perpetual motion, attracting each other when they are a little distance apart, but repelling upon being squeezed into one another.” *This* is the most important understanding, in his opinion, that humanity has achieved. In 1977, this is where Feynman and humanity would have left off. How do you respond to this? Do you find it

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<sup>1</sup> Pausch, Randy. Last Lecture: Achieving your Childhood Dreams. Sept 18, 2007.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ji5\\_MqicxSo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ji5_MqicxSo)

<sup>2</sup> Radiolab. The Cataclysm Sentence. June 30, 2023. <http://www.wnycstudios.org/story/cataclysm-sentence/>

beautiful? Myopic? Not what I would have expected but then again, many of the next responses were not, either.

There were several other answers presented by the podcast, but I've selected the ones that stuck with me. You'll have to overlook the fact that some of the next submission eschewed the notion of the one-sentence limit...it's really hard! What I think is most interesting is to ask yourself what you can learn about the individual who offers their response.

Beginning with the writer, James Gleick, he offered the following: "The moon revolves around the Earth, which is not the center of the universe, far from it. But just one of many objects, large and small, that revolve around the sun which in turn, is one of countless stars mostly so far away that they're invisible, even on the clearest night. All traveling through space on paths obeying simple laws of nature that can be expressed in terms of mathematics. Oh and by the way," he says, "there is no God." There is some serious baggage that this man carries and wishes to save others from. He is trying to save the next ones from wasting time with the geocentric understanding of reality and he can't stand the conversation that still takes place thanks to flat-earthers. He does not want them to waste their time on religion and wishes to nip the potential debate about God in the bud – It feels like someone running around telling kids the truth about Santa Claus.

Let's move on to a television producer named Cord Jefferson. He responded with this: "The only things you're innately afraid of are falling and loud noises. The rest of your fears are learned and mostly negligible." Sounds to me like he has learned a great amount about himself – maybe through therapy – and would like to save others from wasting too much time worrying about things that need not leave us afraid. After all, how many of our life's choices are made in reaction to fear that exists in us even when our logic tells us better.

Staying on this matter of fear and the effect it has upon our lives, the next one I'll share comes from a park ranger named Esperanza Spaulding. As a way of setting up her sentence, she told the story about the reintroduction of wolves back into National Parks. She described

the cascade of unpredicted outcomes including the new survival pressure it put on animals further down the food chain. Deer that had grown lazy in their lack of fear, had to move further up into the mountains and away from the rivers. Their absence allowed the riverbanks to firm back up without the traffic which permitted the beaver population to rebound and build new dams which allowed a resurgence in fish populations, etc, etc. It turns out that it was actually healthy for these animals to have to stay on their toes now that their predators had returned. It led Esperanza to craft the following cataclysm sentence: “Cultivate the willingness to respond creatively to fear, without trying to eradicate the source of the fear.” When I sit with this one, I am made to reflect on the Serenity Prayer. There are challenges in life that we won’t be able to alter and we are going to have to live with them just the same. How much better it would be for us to spend our energy crafting a healthy relationship with the circumstances we are in rather than struggling to eliminate our exposure to that which leaves us afraid. Fear is neither a good nor a bad thing – It is a human thing and I think she is speaking to me and wants me to remember that it will always be necessary to make our way through this world that we would certainly change – if we could. Plato taught us: “Necessity is the mother of all invention.” And no, Plato was not a guest on the podcast, this was my addition!

I shared the next one with a few of you as I prepared for this sermon and your initial reaction was really negative but, the more we discussed it the more you came to appreciate it. First, without context, it reads: “All of human effort is meaningless. So... he says... humanity knows nothing at all. There’s no intrinsic value in anything and every action is a futile, meaningless effort.” There is something here that sounds Nihilistic - hopeless and depressing but I there is so much more to it than that. It was spoken by Masanobu Fukuoka – he is known as the “Japanese Do Nothing Farmer.” He has developed and written extensively about the advantages of letting nature do its thing to provide us with food without our use of plowing, tilling or any other powered machines. Fertilizers and weeding are unnecessary and, of course he rejects the use of herbicides or pesticides. It sounds like the way Julie and I gardened our

old abandoned beds in the backyard this year that have yielded surprisingly a ton of beautiful veggies without our doing a thing!

This is a spiritual lesson about releasing our grasp on life and our fanatic need to control everything. He is teaching us that we grow far too attached to our doing little things and convincing ourselves that they are big things. In the great picture of the universe, we are so small that it is crazy for us to get upset at the little things. More than that, everything is counted amongst the “little things.” Earlier this year, I used my sabbatical to attend a silent retreat at a local buddhist center. I’m not a JuBu (a Jewish Buddhist) but their teachings on non-attachment are just the same as our Jewish mystical teachings... the more we struggle to grasp that which we will lose or to avoid the unavoidable – the more we will suffer. Going with the flow is the surest way to avoid angst. Imagine what your life would be like without those attachments to what is beyond your control in the first place! I used to playfully say that, “If you just go through life with your expectations set very low, you’ll never find yourself disappointed.”

So, what do we do with the reality that we are in? Throw in the towel if it’s all pointless? As if in response, we hear writer, Maria Popova’s answer. She says, “We are each allotted a sliver of space-time wedged between not yet and no more, which we fill with the lifetime of joys and sorrows, immensities of thought and feeling, all deducible to electrical impulses coursing through us at 80 feet per second, yet responsible for every love poem that has ever been written, every symphony ever composed, every scientific breakthrough measuring our nerve conduction and mapping out space-time.” I’m going to leave this one up for a moment because there is a lot here. She, too, is recognizing the infinitesimally small space that we each occupy, everything you have ever thought, felt or wanted is nothing more than a tiny spark bouncing around the inside of your noggin. Yet she isn’t suggesting that we throw up our hands and run down the clock. To the contrary, in this small, small life of ours, we are encouraged to assign enormous sacred value to all that available to us.

Similarly, Caitlin Doughty, a mortician – shocked me with the powerful observation she had to share. She would make certain that those who come after us would not fail to appreciate the opportunity they enjoyed by passing on this sentence: "you will die, and that's the most important thing." Phew! As far as we know, humans are the only species on the planet that lives with the knowledge that we are all going to die - and that creates some sense of urgency. One of you recently received a cortisone shot that changed your ability to enjoy life in miraculous ways. And, knowing that the results will likely wear off after a period of time, you told me how grateful you are for this period of comfort, however long it should last. That is what this mortician is reminding us – our lifespan, according to the psalmist is 70 years or 80 if we're lucky but they're going to be hard. So, use them for the best purpose you can while you can.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the response to the exercise that I found most surprising was from a visual artist named Jaron Lanier who said: "I would give them nothing. All the information we could leave them is redundant. Like, all of that kind of information is just the stuff that's out there waiting to be discovered in nature anyway, so we don't have to do anything. If people apply themselves, they'll rediscover all that stuff. So, it's not like we're special. Letting them get it in their own good time might be better for them, so what have we actually added? Perhaps we've only taken away by handing them the secrets we've uncovered." He's challenging the very premise of the exercise. He'd probably agree with the philosophy of the author who wrote the best-selling book, The Blessing of a Skinned Knee.<sup>4</sup> Wendy Mogel encourages us to remember that kids learn by finding their own way and navigating their own experiences, both success and failure. Would we want to, or *should* we give the knowledge to others? Perhaps making them work for it is in *their* best interest?

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<sup>3</sup> Based on Psalm 90.

<sup>4</sup> Mogel, Wendy. The Blessing of a Skinned Knee. Scribner, 2008.



And, on the other hand, if we gave them our advice, would they/*could they* even listen to it? Has anyone, in the history of the world, really been able to take the advice of someone wiser than themselves and enjoy a shortcut in the journey? Last year, I asked a group of adults at Sinai what they would tell the 15-year-old version of themselves if they were able. After hearing really terrific responses, I wondered aloud whether their 15-year-old selves would have been able to do anything with the information in any case. Most agreed, “no, they probably wouldn’t have been able to pay attention and make use of the insight.”

So, we have done away with trying to imagine a realistic scenario where this would happen. And we have chosen to skip the part where we imagine the mechanism where someone who comes after us stumbles upon this piece of paper from us, a long-lost species with a golden nugget of truth written on it. And we can even dispense with the question of whether or not we *should* write something and whether another could benefit from it. I still love the exercise because the value lies not in the actual outcomes for others but in the effort you would undertake to accomplish it.

Part of what makes it so challenging is the brevity required by the single sentence limitation. Mark Twain is supposed to have begun a letter to a friend by saying, "I would have written a shorter letter, but I did not have the time."<sup>5</sup> It is exceedingly difficult to write concisely. Just ask any recent college applicant who has to cut down the first draft of their admission essay by 200 words. And how many of the examples I shared were actually one sentence, after all? To get a response requires considering the question and making a list of the ideas that are contenders for a cataclysm sentence. Then, through a process of reflection, prioritization and elimination, one arrives at a response to the challenge – “*nu*, what have you learned so far?” What defines you? What is at your core sense of self?

Later this year, I’ll be leading a 4-session class on writing ethical wills and many of you will undertake an expanded version of this process with me. It is far easier than this because

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<sup>5</sup> Twain, Mark. Apocryphal?

we will not limit ourselves to one sentence. Ethical wills are the final recorded statements by a person who wishes to go through the exercise of compiling their *da'at*, or acquired wisdom, into one document to be shared beyond themselves. Rather than the bequest of wealth and property, it is the bequest of a document or a video or poem or piece of art that organizes and codifies our wisdom; it is the articulation of one's most essential truths.

These Ethical Wills are akin to Feynman's exercise, but with the pressure of humanity's cataclysm removed and replaced with the impending reality of our own death. We dispense with the imagined aliens or humanity 2.0 as the audience and we insert our loved ones, the partners, children and grandchildren in your life – real presences who will care what you have to say. We take away the eons after our deaths that might have elapsed by the time our cataclysm sentence is received, and we replace it with a personal conversation we have with ourselves *before* our own death.

But I'm not trying to turn this into a commercial for my upcoming class. Let us return for a few minutes to Richard Feynman's Cataclysm Sentence exercise and acknowledge that this is hard – after all, the most consequential tasks usually are! A handful of years back, I spoke to you on Rosh Hashanah and encouraged you to write a story in just six words. It was based on the time Ernest Hemingway won a bet in a bar by composing the shortest complete story in just six words. His story went like this: "Baby shoes for sale, never worn." It was one of my most well-received sermons – you can [read it](#) on the Sinai website. That year, I invited those who were interested in that exercise to return their responses to me after the service and I was deeply moved by how thoughtful they were. Again, I invite you to take up this new challenge. I'll make only one request: please do me a favor and do not submit your own version of the Golden Rule. I know it is at the core of all the best spiritual, religious and civic traditions out there, but I'll challenge you to go further – I know that you can come up with something even better.

The students in Feynman's classroom had time to think about and carefully construct their responses and so did the guests on the podcast, so don't fret if either nothing jumps to your mind immediately or you are overwhelmed by the sheer number of ideas that will compete to be chosen. The answers I shared have come out of personal journeys made as individuals and so will yours. The wisdom that was uncovered and articulated was precious to no one more than those who spoke it. What will your response tell you about your deepest truth?

I will leave you with the wording of Richard Feynman's challenge, but first, I know a few of you would like to hear my response to the question. My core truth, at this point in my life, might be said this way: "First there was a mountain, then there was no mountain, then there was." Explained on one foot, it means that we walk thru life distracted – barely noticing what is around us. Then, we might have an experience that teaches us deep truths about life and reality and finally, we return to our waking life but while holding on to the memory of those truths which we work to integrate into our daily life. If you want to understand more about what I mean by using that Japanese koan, you are welcome to join me in my discussion of theology tomorrow afternoon following services.

As we spend a few minutes in reflection, we consider once more: If, in some cataclysm, all of scientific knowledge were to be destroyed, and only one sentence passed on to the next generation of creatures, what statement would contain the most information in the fewest words? And this year, may we be blessed to live in boring times!

Good Yontiv