**Yom Kippur’s Complicated Narratives**

I want to begin by telling you the story of the day I first met the woman who would become my wife. Deborah and I were both selected to be Wexner Graduate Fellows in the second group of fellows to help promote Jewish leadership across the denominations. There was an opening reception planned for our cohort at the Upper East Side of Manhattan townhouse of Leslie Wexner. Deborah and I sat next to each other on the couch under a painting by Picasso. By the end of that day, when Deborah got on the train to go back to Philadelphia, she said to a mutual friend: “I’m going to marry David Krainin.” Seven weeks later, we were engaged.

That first meeting always held a special place in our origin story…that is, until, years later, some of the sordid details began to be revealed about the Manhattan lair that Jeffrey Epstein used to lure underage girls. Much to our horror, we would learn that the very townhouse in which we had we had first met would later be deeded by Leslie Wexner to Jeffrey Epstein—and would be the place that underage women would be sexually abused. Needless to say, the narrative about what that place meant to us became more than just a little bit tarnished…

Sometimes, a place can hold real complexity in our lives—it can have more than one association in our hearts. A few weeks ago, when we read the Torah portion *Ki Teitzei*, we encountered one of the most surprising verses in all of the Book of Deuteronomy: “You shall not despise an Egyptian, for you were a stranger in that land.” (Deuteronomy 23:8).

Wait—not despise an Egyptian? Not hate the thought of the land of Egypt? This seems almost impossible to comprehend. Egypt, throughout our Torah, represents the very essence of Jewish suffering. Egypt conjures up Pharaoh's decree to drown Hebrew boys in the Nile. Egypt was the site of backbreaking labor under the whip. Egypt—*Mitzrayim* in Hebrew—literally means “the narrow place,” the place of constriction from which we needed divine intervention to escape.

Yet when we read that verse at the end of *Sefer Devarim* as the Torah is coming to a close, it is now forty years after the Exodus. And yet, here is Moses commanding the Israelites **not** to despise the Egyptians. Rashi captures the tension perfectly in his commentary: “You may not despise an Egyptian—despite it all, even though they threw your boys into the Nile. Why? Because they were hosts for you in a time of need.”

The Torah is forcing us to live with *multiple narratives*. Egypt is both the place of slavery and the place of sanctuary. It is both Pharaoh's Egypt, where Hebrew midwives risked their lives to save our children, and Jacob's Egypt, where Joseph's wisdom saved not only his family, but an entire region from famine. Egypt is both the place where our ancestors cried out from bondage and the place that offered them shelter when Canaan could not sustain them.

The Torah resists our human tendency to create *simple narratives*, to divide the world into places of pure good and pure evil. Instead, it insists on something more difficult and more honest: the recognition that most places, most people, most experiences, exist in the complexity of *multiple narratives*.

We are living at a dangerous time in history where we seem—as a nation, as communities, as individuals—to be unable to hold the complexity of *multiple narratives*. Instead, more and more of us are only able to hold the narrative of our own side, our own perspective, our own pain.

Not only are we increasingly unable to see the narrative of those with whom we disagree, but some are willing to use violence—physical, emotional, or spiritual violence—as a remedy against those who challenge their simple stories.

This phenomenon has a name: **partisan blindness**. When **our** opponents do something wrong, we say, “That's emblematic—that's just what **they** do, that's what **their** ideology leads to.” But when **our** allies do something wrong, we say, “That's exceptional—every orchard has a few bad apples. How dare you compare **us** to that **terrible person**?”

The results are predictable and devastating. No matter the facts of the moment, we end up angry at the opposition. If someone from the other side commits an act of violence, we're angry because “they” are violent. If someone from our side commits an act of violence, we're angry because “they” are trying to blame “us” for what is obviously an individual act.

Online algorithms magnify this problem exponentially. They recognize that we are hungry for content that amplifies every bad act by our political enemies, and that we resist any form of criticism of our allies. And so, we live in carefully curated false realities: echo chambers that confirm our biases and blind us to our own failures.

But here's what I want us to understand on this holiest of days: this isn't just a political problem. This isn't just about Democrats and Republicans, progressives and conservatives. This is a **spiritual crisis** that strikes at the very heart of what it means to be human, what it means to be free, what it means to do the work of *Teshuvah*—the work of return and repentance.

Moses understood something profound when he commanded the Israelites **not** to hate the Egyptians. He understood that to be free, you must let go of hate. If the Israelites continued to hate their former oppressors, Moses would have taken them out of Egypt, but he would not have taken *Egypt out of them*. Mentally, they would still have been there, slaves to the past. They would still be in chains—not chains of metal, but chains of the mind, and chains of the mind are the most constricting of all.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks once said: “You cannot create a free society, a free soul, or a free heart on the basis of hate. Resentment, rage, humiliation, a sense of injustice, the desire to restore honor by inflicting injury on those who have wronged us—these are conditions of profound *spiritual slavery*.”

Those who are held captive by anger against their persecutors are captive still. Those who let their enemies define who they are, have not yet achieved liberty. Those who cannot see beyond their own narrative of victimization, have not yet done the work that this day demands of us.

This is why Yom Kippur exists. This is why we fast, why we pray, why we beat our chests and recite the *Vidui*, the confessional prayers. Because the hardest person to see clearly, the hardest person about whom to experience in *multiple narratives*, is our own self.

If we are honest—and Yom Kippur demands nothing if not brutal honesty—each of us exists in our own *multiple narratives*. We are not simply good people or bad people. We are not purely righteous or wholly wicked. We are, each of us, complex beings who have caused harm **and** offered healing; who have spoken words of kindness **and** used words that cut; who have acted with generosity **and** with selfishness; sometimes on the very same day, sometimes at the very same moment.

The work of *Teshuvah* is not about pretending we are saints, nor is it about wallowing in shame as sinners. The work of *Teshuvah* is about learning to see ourselves in *multiple narratives*—to hold both our capacity for goodness and our tendency toward failure, our moments of wisdom and our episodes of foolishness, our acts of love and our failures to love—as part of the totality of who we really are.

This is perhaps the hardest thing about genuine self-reflection: it resists the urge to create a simple story. It would be much easier to say: “I am a good person” and ignore the ways we fall short. It would easy to say: “I am a terrible person” and ignore the kindnesses we've shown. But neither of these stories is true. The truth exists in the *multiple narratives* of the complexity of what it means to be human.

And here's where real spiritual courage is demanded of us. If we truly want to break free from the chains of hatred; if we truly want to do the work of *Teshuvah*; we must be willing to call out the extremism not just on the *other* side, but on our *own* side.

We must be willing to say: “When people who share my politics, my religion, my identity commit acts of hatred or violence, that is **not** exceptional—that is something I must confront and condemn.” We must be willing to say: “The capacity for evil exists not just in **them**, but in **us**. The tendency toward extremism exists **not** just in their ideology, but in ours.”

This is not *moral relativism*. This is not saying that **all** sides are equally bad or that there are no meaningful differences between different political or moral positions. This is saying that the human capacity for hatred, for violence, for reducing others to simple stories, exists across all human communities—including our own.

The prophet Natan understood this when he told King David the parable of the rich man who stole the poor man's lamb. David was outraged by the injustice—until Natan said: “You are that man.” The power of the story wasn't just that David had done wrong, but that David could see wrong clearly **only** when it was *someone else's* story; but he was blind to it when *it was his own*.

Even Yom Kippur itself exists in *multiple narratives*. It is a day of judgment **and** a day of mercy. It is a day when we confront our failures **and** a day when we celebrate our potential for renewal. It is a day of fasting and affliction **and** a day that the Talmud calls one of the most joyous days of the year.

The Talmud teaches that God created the world with two divine qualities: *din v'rachamim*—justice and mercy. Perhaps this is because the world itself, we ourselves, exist in *multiple narratives*. Justice sees our failures clearly and demands accountability. Mercy sees our potential and offers the possibility of return. Both are needed. Both are true. This is the spiritual work that this day asks of us: to see ourselves and others with both justice and mercy, to resist the temptation to reduce ourselves or others to simple narratives.

When Moses commanded the Israelites not to despise the Egyptians, he was teaching them—and us—that true freedom comes **not** from *defeating our enemies*, but from *refusing to be defined by them*. True freedom comes not from *perfect justice*, but from the *ability to transcend the limitations* that hatred places on our souls.

The entire structure of biblical law flows from the experience of slavery in Egypt, but not as a reason for revenge. Instead, the Torah says: “You shall not oppress the stranger, for you know the heart of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.” The message is clear: you know what it feels like to be the victim of persecution, therefore do not persecute others.

This is the alchemy that the Torah demands of us: to transform our pain into compassion, our suffering into service, our memory of injustice into a commitment to justice for all. This is what it means to truly let go of hatred—not to forget our pain, but to refuse to let our pain become the source of others' pain.

As we prepare to close this Yom Kippur, as we prepare to break our fast and enter into a New Year, let us take seriously this lesson from our Torah. Let us practice seeing ourselves and others in *multiple narratives*—acknowledging both our shadows and our light, both our failures and our potential.

Let us have the courage to call out extremism wherever we find it, including in our own communities, our own movements, our own hearts. Let us remember our failures—not to shame ourselves, but to motivate genuine change. Let us remember our moments of goodness—not to excuse our shortcomings, but to remember what we are capable of becoming.

The commandment not to despise the Egyptian reminds us that **even** our enemies are complex, that **even** those who have caused us pain may also have offered us gifts. How much more so should we extend this compassion to ourselves? How much more so should we resist the temptation to reduce ourselves to simple narratives of pure goodness or irredeemable failure?

In this season of return, may we find the courage to live in the *multiple narratives* of who we really are. May we see ourselves with clarity and compassion. May we acknowledge our full humanity—both our capacity for harm and our capacity for healing.

And may we remember that the goal of this day is not *perfection*, but *transformation*. Not the *elimination of all failure*, but the *commitment to keep growing*, *keep learning, keep returning* to the best of who we can be.

For in the end, it is only by seeing ourselves and our world fully—with all its contradictions and possibilities—that we can truly **return**: to ourselves, to each other, and to the Holy One who calls us toward freedom, toward justice, toward love.

*G'mar chatimah tovah*—may we all be sealed for a good year, a year of growth, a year of healing, a year of letting go of the hatred that diminishes us and embracing the love that makes us whole. Amen.