

*Lessons from a Very Strange Yom Kippur*  
*Fear, Breath, Humility, Humor, and Compassion*  
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A year ago, if you were here for the late service of Kol Nidre, you may remember that we had a security incident. I realized recently that we never really processed what happened as a community. So tonight I want to share with you my experience of that night, what followed, and some insights that I hope can be meaningful for us as we move forward.

I had just finished the silent Amidah when Benjamin, our executive director, handed me a note: “Security Situation: Lockdown.” He whispered that everything was under control, that the police were on their way, and that there seemed to be an armed man outside the synagogue. We needed to stay inside. I took a deep breath, took out the security notes we had prepared specifically for an emergency, and made the announcement.

My voice was shaky, but I was determined. I told everyone that there was a security incident outside and that the safest place for us was here in the sanctuary. I asked everyone to stay inside as we continued with the silent Amidah and some singing.

Then I received another update: the person had been apprehended, and we were ok, we were safe. I invited everyone to take a deep breath. And we did. It was a deep, sounding breath.

That night, we learned that the person outside was a neighbor with a BB gun who had been shooting at rats in his backyard. Later, as we learned more about what had happened, I discovered that this was actually his strategy for dealing with the infestation: he would shoot at the rats—not to kill them, but to scare them back into their holes, which he would then fill with cement. I have no idea whether this is an actual rat-control strategy, but apparently this was what he had been doing for a while. It was a terrible coincidence that he decided to do this that night: a man with what looked like a rifle outside a synagogue with security guards at its doors, filled with people on the busiest night in the Jewish calendar.

This situation appeared to be very scary, and our security guards responded exactly as they had been trained to do. The police came, the situation was resolved, and eventually we laughed a bit about the absurdity of the situation and continued with the service.

But unfortunately, the story did not end there.

We learned that the person outside was our neighbor, Carlos Portugal Gouvêa, a professor of human rights law at Harvard University who lived nearby. The details of what had happened became clearer, and we were ready to move on. But just a few days later, the story appeared in the news.

But now it was a different story.

The report described what had happened as an antisemitic attack on a synagogue on Yom Kippur. That story traveled far beyond Brookline, going national and international after a social media post from StopAntisemitism, which frequently amplifies unverified claims of antisemitism, received millions of views and shares.

But there was a problem.

It wasn't true.

Tonight, I want to explore five dimensions of the experience of that night and what followed, and invite us to take in these lessons for our lives.

## **Fear, Breath, Humor, Humility, and Compassion.**

Let's begin with **Fear**:

Fear is real. That night, we were afraid. We did not know exactly what was happening. We felt unsafe.

And Jewish fear today is real.

For the North American Jewish community, this experience of fear is, in many ways, new. I grew up with security guards at our synagogues in South America, and then moved to Israel where my bag was checked before entering any store. When I came to Boston over two decades ago, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that anyone could walk into a house of worship at any point. No security, just trust and openness.

But things have changed. Since the Tree of Life shooting in Pittsburgh in 2018, we have had security guards at TBZ. And in the past few years, the sense of threat has risen. We have upgraded all our security measures, and our budget line for security has grown immensely. When I speak to Christian colleagues whose churches have no need for any security protocols, they are in shock at everything we need to put in place. It is a devastating reality that we live with.

Antisemitism is real. Jewish pain is real. Our reality as a Jewish community has changed. We have every reason to take threats seriously, to protect ourselves, and to be vigilant.

But when we are afraid, we also want certainty. We want a story that tells us what happened, who is responsible, what it means, and what we should do next, and sometimes we lose our perspective.

We see this in the story of the Golden Calf. After four hundred years of slavery, the people are finally free. They have been led by Moshe through the desert toward the promised land, a land of milk and honey. But first they have to make a stop, to seal their covenant with God. Moshe goes up the mountain, and the Israelites wait.

The Torah brings us into that moment of uncertainty:

וַיֵּרָא הָעָם כִּי־בָשָׁשׁ מֹשֶׁה לָרֶדֶת מִן־הָהָר

“When the people saw that Moses was delayed in coming down from the mountain...”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 32:1

Notice what happens. In their experience, Moses is delayed. The people do not know what has happened. They do not know where he is. They do not know what will happen next. And they cannot tolerate that uncertainty. Not having Moses present with them, as the days go by, makes them anxious.

So they say:

קוֹם עֲשֵׂה-לָנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יֵלְכוּ לִפְנֵינוּ

“Come, make us a god who will go before us.”<sup>2</sup>

They cannot bear not knowing, so they create something concrete. Something they can see. Something they can hold onto. Their uncertainty becomes fear. That fear becomes a need for control. And that need for control produces an idol.

This shifts our perspective on how we understand the story of the Golden Calf. It is not only a story about worshipping the wrong god, but also a story about what human beings do when we cannot bear not knowing. We create certainty. We make up stories. That is the essence of the idol.

And this feels painfully contemporary to me. We live through frightening events and moments of uncertainty and waiting. We receive breaking news, social media posts, images stripped of context, and competing accounts of what is happening. And in those moments, there is often pressure to make sense of it immediately — to decide what happened, who is responsible, what it means, and what we should do next.

Fear can make us want that certainty. It can make us reach for a story before we actually know the whole story. And that, too, can become a kind of idol: something we create to give us certainty and control when we cannot bear not knowing.

Which brings me to the second dimension: **Breath:**

One of the clearest memories I have from that night is breathing. I remembered to take a few breaths, and I invited us all to breathe. Breathing did not make the danger

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<sup>2</sup> Exodus 32:23

disappear. It did not tell us what was happening outside. But it created a tiny space between what was happening and how we would respond to it.

I shared this with my *bevrutah*, Rabbi Josh Feigelson, CEO of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, and he reminded me that this response from our community was only possible because we practice this all the time. Not every community would have responded the way we did when I said, “Let’s take a deep breath.”

We practice breathing here at TBZ. We practice mindfulness. We practice noticing what is happening in our bodies, slowing ourselves down, returning to the present moment. Every week on Shabbat, we make the connection between the words *nesbama* and *neshima* — soul and breath. And I invite you to check in with your *nesbama*, to check in with your soul, by breathing, by allowing yourself to be fully present. Breath gives us a moment in which fear does not have to make the next decision.

This is one of the spiritual practices we most need right now: creating a little space between stimulus and response. Between the headline and the repost. Between fear and judgment. Between what we see and what we decide it means.

A few days after the incident, one of our members told me that when I said, “The safest place to be right now is here,” she believed me. Not only as a physical safe place, but as the sanctuary we have created.

And I came to understand something: The safest place is not necessarily the place where nothing frightening happens. It is the place where, even when something frightening is happening, we can breathe. Where we can stay present with one another. Where we can trust each other. And where we can move through uncertainty together.

As I go back to that night, there was another part that was deeply personal for me. My children were sitting in the Sanctuary, and I could see them while I was speaking. I was speaking to the community, but I was also speaking to them, trying to reassure them that they were safe. Somehow, knowing that they were listening helped me find the steadiness I needed to hold the moment for everyone. It reminded me to breathe. And then there was **Humor and Joy**:

It may seem strange to put humor into this story, but that night we also laughed. And we laughed afterward, too.

We laughed when I let you know that we were no longer in lockdown and that you could leave, but then suggested that you should stay and said, “My sermon is pretty good.”

We laughed when we learned that this was, in fact, a situation involving rats. At one point I said, “And there are too many rats in Brookline.”

And the biggest laugh came when I announced to a full room that my therapist was in the room, and that she would help me process this later.

The humor did not mean that the situation was not serious. It did not erase the fear. It gave us a way to breathe inside it. It reminded us that even in a frightening moment, we were still human beings together in a room. We could laugh. We could sing. We could feel relief. We could experience joy together.

And we did. We continued with our service, singing, dancing, jumping, the way we do things here at TBZ, fully immersed, fully present, bringing our whole selves.

I think it is important to say that joy is not the opposite of fear. Joy is one of the ways we refuse to let fear have the whole room.

And that is what we did that night.

And that brings me to **Humility**:

Sometimes the three most difficult words to say are: “I don’t know.”

After the incident, people who had never been inside this sanctuary that night told me exactly what had happened here. When I tried to correct the story, I was told that I did not understand antisemitism, that I was not taking antisemitism seriously enough.

It really bothered me that they were so attached to their own versions of the truth that they left very little room for curiosity.

But sometimes the most important thing we can do is leave a little space between what we know and what we think we know. That space is humility.

I remember my teacher Melila Hellner-Eshed saying that in difficult times, we need more people willing to put question marks at the ends of their sentences instead of exclamation points.

I love that.

This is what happened! (exclamation point!)

This is who is responsible! (exclamation point!)

This is what it means! (exclamation point!)

Exclamation points!!!!!!

Humility invites us to consider the question mark.

Could there be something I do not know?

Could I be wrong?

What else might be true?

*Mussar* is a Jewish spiritual practice of cultivating particular character traits, or *middot*, by paying attention to how we act and how we respond to the world. In the practice of *Mussar*, *anavah*—humility—is not about making ourselves small. Rabbi David Jaffe teaches that “Humility is knowing the proper amount of space to take up in any situation and not rigidly holding on to one’s predilection to take up a lot or little space.”<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes humility requires us to step forward boldly. And sometimes it asks us to step back. Sometimes we must speak. Sometimes we must listen.

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<sup>3</sup>Rabbi David Jaffe, *Changing the World from the Inside Out: A Jewish Approach to Personal and Social Change* (Jewish Lights Publishing, 2016), 129.

Humility is the capacity to ask: What does this moment actually require of me?  
Humility does not ask us to stop making judgments. It asks us to become more discerning about how we make them. Humility allows us to pause, to look more carefully, to distinguish between what we know and what we assume, between right and wrong, truth and falsehood, danger and safety.  
And that discernment matters especially when we are talking about antisemitism. We have to be able to name antisemitism clearly.

When a synagogue is attacked because it is a synagogue, that is antisemitism.  
When Jews are targeted because they are Jews, that is antisemitism.  
When neo-Nazis and white supremacists promote antisemitic conspiracy theories or threaten Jewish communities, we need to name it.  
And when antisemitism appears in institutions, political movements, or communities with which we otherwise identify, places we have called home, as painful as it is, we need to name it there, too.

But discernment also means being willing to say: This is not antisemitism when it is not; even if it would be more convenient to say, yes, it is.

If we claim antisemitism without precision, we weaken our ability to recognize the real thing when it is right in front of us.

That does not make Jews safer.

It makes us less safe.

This discernment, which is a product of the practice of humility, asks us to resist two temptations at once: the temptation to minimize genuine danger, and the temptation to see danger everywhere.

Both are failures to see clearly.

That is why **fear** needs **breath**.

Breath creates room for **humility**.

And **humility** makes **discernment** possible.

And finally: **Compassion:**

A couple of months later, after the legal proceedings were over, I met Carlos — the man who was shooting at rats — for coffee, just around the corner at Café Athan's. We talked for a long time. There were tears in his eyes. He expressed genuine regret for the fear and disruption he had caused, and he was deeply grateful that no one had been hurt. He recognized that he was lucky that this happened next to TBZ and not at another institution that might have treated him and related to him differently. We even talked about the possibility of him coming to TBZ to speak with the community.

That meeting reminded me that the story had a person behind it. Carlos was no longer an abstract threat. He was no longer a headline. He was no longer a symbol in someone else's story. He was a human being sitting across the table from me. He had done something irresponsible and frightening. And he regretted it.

And then, the story took another turn, one that horrified me.

The next day, after we met, Carlos' visa was revoked without his knowing it, in connection with the Department of Homeland Security's response to what it described as an antisemitic shooting outside a synagogue on Yom Kippur, and he was detained by ICE.

ICE agents were waiting for him outside his house, in a van, here, next door to us, as he was coming back from dropping his children off at Driscoll School. Eventually, after several hours in ICE custody and without access to counsel, he chose voluntarily to return to São Paulo.

And suddenly the story was much bigger than what had happened outside TBZ. It asks us to wrestle with some difficult questions.

What happens when the language of Jewish safety is used to justify actions that have little to do with protecting Jewish communities?

What happens when our real fear of antisemitism becomes part of a story used to justify someone else's detention, deportation, or suffering?

We have seen this kind of weaponization of antisemitism in other places, too — when accusations of antisemitism are used to justify attacks on academic institutions, silence legitimate criticism of the Israeli government, or advance policies that have little to do with protecting Jews from antisemitism.

Jewish safety matters deeply.

Precisely because it matters, we have a responsibility to be careful about what we call a threat to Jewish safety—and what we justify in its name.

And this is where compassion enters.

Compassion does not mean pretending that harm did not happen. Compassion does not mean pretending that there is no danger around us. And it does not mean abandoning accountability.

Compassion means refusing to reduce another human being to the worst thing they have done. It means keeping our hearts open to love rather than allowing them to close around hate.

It means leaving room to see the story differently. Leaving room for what we do not know. Leaving room for the possibility that there is more to the story than what we first thought.

And this is what all of these practices have been preparing us for.

To **breathe**, so that **fear** does not guide the next decision.

To be **humble** enough to say, “I don't know.”

To find **humor** and **joy**, even in difficult moments.

The story of the Golden Calf does not end with the broken tablets.

When Moshe comes down from the mountain, he breaks the first tablets. He is angry and impatient, too. But there is more. He goes back up the mountain. And new tablets become possible.

“Carve for yourself two tablets of stone like the first ones.”<sup>4</sup>

According to our tradition, these second tablets are given on Yom Kippur<sup>5</sup>. And these tablets are carried through the desert together with the broken ones. The broken tablets symbolize what happens when fear leads to anger and arrogance. The second tablets carry with them possibility, breath, and compassion.

This is what compassion looks like. Not erasing what happened. Not pretending that the broken tablets were never broken. But making room for another chapter, without denying the first one.

A year ago, standing here, I told you, “The safest place to be right now is here.” At the time, I meant physically in this sanctuary. But there is more. I also believe that the safest place to be is with each other. Together. Because none of us can face our fears alone.

We cannot build a community in which nothing frightening ever happens. We cannot create a world in which we are never afraid. And we cannot promise one another that we will always know exactly what is happening or that we will always know what to do.

But we can build a community that can meet fear. A community that breathes. A community that laughs. A community humble enough to say, “I don’t know.” A community discerning enough to distinguish genuine danger from the stories fear creates. And a community that extends compassion — without abandoning truth, accountability, or justice.

This is one of the deepest forms of safety we can offer one another: when frightening things happen, we will hold onto our humanity.

So this Yom Kippur, I want to invite us to carry these practices with us:

to acknowledge fear without worshipping it,

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<sup>4</sup> Exodus 34:1

<sup>5</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Ta’anit 30b.

to breathe before reacting,  
to keep our sense of humor,  
to be humble about what we know, to discern carefully what is true,  
and to leave room for compassion — for ourselves and for others.

*Chatima Tova.*