

TZIMTZUM

Erev Yom Kippur 5778 — Saturday, September 29, 2017

Congregation B'nai Jehudah — Overland Park, Kansas

Sermon by Rabbi Arthur P. Nemitoff

I was stuck. I couldn't get loose. I began to panic.

The year was 1981. I was a brand-new rabbi, living in my very first apartment. I had gone out and purchased my first desk – a massive old oak desk. It took three guys to carry it up to my second floor apartment. Later that evening, as I was putting in the drawers, my watch caught and fell off my wrist behind and underneath one of the drawers.

Reaching down and back, I stretched to reach my watch, extending my arm and fingers as far as I could. My fingertips just touched it and I was able to slowly snake it into my hand. I pulled back.

But I couldn't. My arm was stuck. I couldn't move. I couldn't pull it out. There was no way to get my arm out unless my arm got smaller or the opening was bigger.

That's when the panic set in. The desk was too well built for me to break it or wiggle parts around. How could my arm get smaller? In fact, all the pushing and pulling had aggravated my arm. It was swelling, getting larger. And I was beginning to feel my fingertips tingle with numbness.

I must have been there 20 or 30 minutes but it seemed like hours. Fortuitously, my next-door neighbor saw that my front door was ajar and knocked to welcome me and to say hello. Even more fortunate, he happened to be an EMT. He went into the kitchen, grabbed some ice and olive oil, spread the oil on my arm, placed the ice around the arm

to reduce the swelling, and after a few minutes gently – ever so gently – extracted my arm from the jaws of my desk.

Whew...I still sweat thinking about that moment.

* * *

In the 16th century, a mystical master named Rabbi Isaac Luria, presented to the world a version of creation that merged mysticism with ethics. Many here know the phrase, "tikkun olam – healing the world." Its origins are found in Luria's midrash...a story some of you already know. Permit me a moment to recall it.

Before there was anything, there was God. God was everywhere. God filled all space...all time. God decided to create this world. But God couldn't because there was no room, for it was full of God. In a Divine act of love, God withdraws within God's self – similar to my neighbor reducing the swelling on my arm or to a person inhaling in order to let someone pass in a narrow corridor. In withdrawing, God leaves an empty space in which our world might be created. That contraction or withdrawal is called "tzimtzum." God voluntarily got smaller, so to speak...God contracted in order for the world to be created.

We will hear more of the midrash tomorrow morning but let me add this one piece: After the tzimtzum, once that empty space existed, a stream of Divine light and goodness flowed from God. It

was that light that created the world and the miracle we call humanity. Only by God pulling in and becoming smaller could the world and all its beauty come into being.

Tonight, as we stand ten days into the New Year, as we shine the harsh glare of an examination light upon our selves and our souls, perhaps we might consider a bit of tzimtzum, some shrinking, some getting smaller, some withdrawal...as a way of discovering the value of humility...of giving space to others...of letting goodness shine through where only we and our egos once stood.

* * *

Like some of you, I began to fast after dinner tonight. In Hebrew, the word for fasting is "tzom," not unlike "tzimtzum." And both come from the Hebrew root, tzadi-mem, meaning "to cover your mouth." For what is fasting if not a type of contraction, of self-limitation? Fasting opens ourselves up by limiting who we are and what we take into our bodies. It seems like a tradition. In truth, it is a meditative and spiritual growth opportunity, a means by which we can reduce our footprint in the world, so that something else can come inside of us...some may say "God," others "spiritual connectedness," or perhaps just, "thoughtful reflection." Fasting is a first step towards tzimtzum. It makes us smaller and thereby opens us up to the hard work we are asked to do.

* * *

The next step? Three brief examples will illustrate. All true stories with names changed to protect the guilty.

Sam did not want to tell her mother anything. Every time she let her guard slip and shared something personal, her mother would inevitably fall into the same behavior pattern. First, she would

tell Sam exactly what was wrong with her, how she was responsible, and how she was going to get into trouble or get hurt. And second – even more annoying – her mother would tell her best friend...who happened to be Sam's friend's mother. Yep, you got it. Sam's mom would tell her best friend who would then tell her daughter who would then go to Sam and start asking all types of questions. So much for something being personal, right?

George detested his manager. Because he wasn't a manager. He was a micro-manager. It didn't matter what George said. His manager would probe and ferret out every detail of every conversation George had with a client. His manager had been a great sales person but really never learned how to support George or anyone else on his sales team. In fact, he just got in the way. He wanted to be on every call, to opine on every negotiation, to tell George – at least from George's perspective – how to do his job. Pardon me for saying this but if George needed to go to the bathroom, his manager would want to "manage" that, as well.

Terry was a latecomer to the group trip but the rabbi welcomed her warmly. However, Terry was the kind of person who knew everything. If there was a question the guide asked, Terry would pipe up, whether she really knew the answer or not. She hounded the guide with incessant questions. So much so that others weren't able to ask theirs. When the rabbi took Terry aside to point out the need to tone it down, her response was: "Hey, I signed up for this trip. I have as much right as anyone to ask questions, to give answers, to say whatever I want. This is my one vacation all year long. I am going to make the most of it that I can."

* * *

As I said, these are all true stories. Perhaps...just perhaps...we can see a bit

of ourselves in one of them? In each case, the protagonist had no sense of tzimtzum, of self-limitation, of withdrawing a bit to leave room for another.

It's easy to see what might have happened had Sam's mom, George's manager, or Terry had practiced tzimtzum. In each situation, someone else could have had space to be more expansive – whether Sam, in sharing her feelings; or George in demonstrating his salesmanship skills; or the others in the tour group, contributing their own gifts to the travel experience. Clearly, in each of the stories, the individual was subconsciously fearful that they were not important. By acting as each did, it was saying, "See ME. Listen to ME." If they could have responded differently, they would have gotten the results they hoped for, but in a more positive productive manner. When we practice tzimtzum, the world responds. It really does pay it forward.

Not only do we get more of what we need, tzimtzum opens the possibility of expanding our own emotional bandwidth, our ability to be the very best "we" possible.

Did we ever consider the people who reached out or asked us for a shoulder when they were crying were not there to burden us but really in our lives to broaden our abilities to love, feel compassion, and care?

Did we ever consider the people we think talk too much and drive us crazy are really in our lives to help us learn how to listen?

Did we ever consider the people who asked us for a handout or a hand up are really in our lives to teach us it's not our place to judge?

Did we ever think the people who upset us or made us angry were really put

there to help us work on our own patience?

When we practice tzimtzum – when we withdraw a bit and permit our egos to shrink and leave space for something or someone else to enter...that's when God's light and goodness can expand...and we grow through tzimtzum.

* * *

I'm sure you are wondering why you were handed a butterfly when you came in to services. Here's the reason.

Leslie planted a number of butterfly bushes around our house. Caterpillars have made their homes on many of the leaves, and have begun to form their chrysalises.

What happens inside a chrysalis is an object lesson for us regarding tzimtzum.

"[Once the chrysalis is formed,] the caterpillar digests itself, releasing enzymes to dissolve all of its tissues [into a kind of]...caterpillar soup...But certain groups of cells known as imaginal discs survive the digestive process. Before hatching, when a caterpillar is still developing inside its egg, it grows an imaginal disc for each of the adult body parts it will need as a mature butterfly...discs for its eyes, for its wings, its legs and so on. In some species, these imaginal discs...begin to take the shape of adult body parts even before the caterpillar forms a chrysalis...Some caterpillars walk around with tiny rudimentary wings tucked inside their bodies, though you would never know it by looking at them.

Once a caterpillar has disintegrated all of its tissues except for the imaginal discs, those discs use the protein-rich soup all around them to fuel the rapid cell division required to form the wings,

antennae, legs, eyes...and all the other features of an adult butterfly.²

Sometimes all we need to do is look to nature to figure out how we – as nature’s guardians – should behave. This is one of those examples.

First, I couldn’t believe the scientific term, “imaginal discs!” Literally, discs that we imagine can exist. Only when the caterpillar reduces its body contents can the imaginal discs begin to grow. That is what happens with tzimtzum. By permitting our egos to contract just a bit, to have a smaller footprint emotionally in this world, we can imagine what can fill in that empty space, what sparks of God’s goodness can be exposed because we allow another person to have room to express their own selves.

The second and equally powerful lesson? Within the caterpillar, all it needs to be a butterfly is already inside. It carries it around, just waiting for the time to emerge. That is the goal of Yom Kippur. To realize that goodness IS already a part of us. We are created “b’tzelem Elohim,” in God’s image – whatever we imagine God to be. There is goodness and blessing within. All we need to do...and no, it is not easy...is to contract within, to practice a bit of humility, to exercise some tzimtzum. And, in the process, to allow our imaginal discs to expand ourselves, our friends, our world.

* * *

“In the summer of 1986, two ships collided in the Black Sea off the coast of Russia. Hundreds of passengers died as they were hurled into the icy waters below. News of the disaster was further darkened when an investigation revealed the cause of the accident. It wasn't a technology problem like radar malfunction--or even thick fog. The cause was human [pride and] stubbornness. Each captain was aware

of the other ship's presence nearby. Both could have steered clear, but according to news reports, neither captain wanted to give way to the other. Each was too proud to yield first. By the time they came to their senses, it was too late.”³

If these two captains had practiced tzimtzum, their passengers would have never died.

We are those captains. We pilot our ships. We call them “our lives.” If we are unable to withdraw a bit, humble ourselves, and recognize that the other is as valuable as us, that within the other – whomever that might be – is a spark of God’s divinity waiting to shine through – then we will be lost. We will be caterpillars who never change. However, if we can open ourselves up and leave room for that other ship – a person, an idea, or an emotion – we will be like God...and allow a world and all its beauty to come into being...just like a butterfly.

May tzimtzum be our blessing in the coming year.

¹ <https://www.values.com/your-inspirational-stories/2366-sandpaper>

² http://www.jewishpsychology.org/about5_e.php

³ <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/h/humility.htm>