

## **Rosh Hashanah 5775 – First Day**

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### **Holy Impatience**

Growing up in Minnesota, there were two things that I never did. I never crossed a street when the traffic light said “DON'T WALK”, even if there was no car in sight. And I never pushed the close-door button in an elevator unless it was taking an extremely long time.

It took only a few months of college out east for that to change. My first summer home, I worked in Downtown St. Paul. I was the only one crossing the street during lunch when the light said “DON'T WALK.” I came to the office building where I was working and pushed the close-door button as a matter of course on my way in if the doors didn't move within a second.

I don't know if this is a cultural difference – I know when my parents come to visit me, they seem to fall right in and cross the street whenever it's safe, “walk” or “don't walk.” I had a friend in college from the Northeast, and while I was finishing rabbinical school in New York he was starting law school. We were walking together one day, and he insisted on stopping if the light said “DON'T WALK”, out of respect for the law. This was Manhattan, where there is a light on every block! I ran into him a few months ago after many years and remarked on what an impression this had made on me... He told me he had no recollection of ever doing that!

I suspect that a lot of us push the close door button in an elevator. I am certain that

there's no one who enjoys waiting in line at the supermarket. There is, in fact, an academic field in psychology called “queueing theory” – the science of waiting in lines. The prime disciples are the designers of Disneyworld. If you stand in line at Disney, you're likely to feel more patient than in any other line in the world. You're entertained on monitors, and you might see an estimate of how much longer you'll be waiting. And apparently you'll always get there sooner, because the fix is in: the estimate is purposely rigged, and your last experience of the line is that you moved faster than you expected!

This was supposed to be the idea behind the hourglass or spinning rainbow pinwheel on your computer. It was put there so you wouldn't think your machine had crashed forever. Instead, I think we all agree that when you see the hourglass or the beach ball, you are in fact alerted to the fact that you now will be waiting, unable to do *anything*, and you have absolutely *no idea* how long you'll wait. In fact, even it's for just a second, you get a jolt of that feeling of impatience.

So let's think about impatience. What's it really all about?

On a small scale, impatience is when you and the world aren't operating at the same speed. You're all dressed and ready to go out to the movie, but I haven't found my wallet or put on my shoes.

If it was just once, you're not likely to be that impatient. But chances are, this isn't the first time. How come you're *never* ready on time? Why do we *always* have to be late?

Impatience, at first glance, is the frustration of being out of sync. Operating at a different rhythm, too much of the time. Wanting to arrive somewhere before someone else is prepared.

When it's just about getting out to a movie, it's a practical problem, and there could be practical solutions. Lately, as a father, when the kids are dragging, I find myself planted impatiently by the front door. So I try, instead of hollering up the stairs, to read the newspaper for a minute, since the mail table is right where I am. To do some constructive with the result of my impatience. Usually, I know that no one is actually trying to make me late, and my calling up the stairs isn't likely to make any difference at all.

But I don't want to dismiss impatience, because impatience can be a clue to things that are very important. Impatience isn't necessarily just a personality difference between people, going at a different speed to the same place.

In English, the adjective “patient” is related to the noun “patient” – a person who is suffering pain. One of the terms in Hebrew for patience is *savlanut* – putting up with suffering.

Impatience with another person means waiting, in frustration or even agony, for someone to be where you want to be, or where you want *them* to be. Waiting for someone to conform to your expectations – or your hopes.

Impatience, in a deep sense, can be worry that time is running out for something important.

We experience this emotionally. In the Torah, the metaphor for God's impatience is *charon af*, which means a “hot nose.” When God is patient, the term is *erech apayim* – “long nosed.” We sang this phrase when we prepared to take out the Torah today.

Patience and impatience are really forms of the essential question of this time of year – the expectations we have of each other and ourselves, how *much* we should expect and when. When to demand and when to wait. Or when to let go, for now or for good. Impatience is how that dilemma gets into our bones and our kishkes and causes us pain.

The impatience of getting to the movie on time may not be worth holding on to. But the impatience of getting to a friend's house on time for dinner might well flow from a more profound source. It's respect, for someone who is being generous and may well have organized their day around doing something special for us, and with us. It could be about savoring the never-enough moments we have with our friends, the time we need to get beyond niceties and casual conversation and really talk. If we're late, it could throw off the food, and they'll be nervous and have to scurry around, and we might just run out of this precious time together, time that we don't have nearly enough of.

And impatience can be about more than not getting to a place today on schedule. The hardest impatience is when we care about people in our lives, and we feel that they aren't living now as well as they could be, today or this year, or at this point in their lives.

We might be impatient with a parent who is older, and wish they could be more flexible, or show more affection, live more actively, or live with hope even in the face of losses or limitations.

We might be impatient with a child who is struggling to find a direction in life, or the motivation to move forward in relationships or a career.

We might be impatient with a spouse or partner. We might be impatient with a friend, who we enjoy spending time with but who is not kind or gracious enough to other

people in our circle.

We might be impatient about someone who is just not well, impatient with the world or with God for suffering that isn't going away fast enough.

These are examples of *sacred impatience* – holy impatience. It's hard to be patient, knowing that another day or, we fear, another year of unhappiness in another person's life means more suffering for them – and for us, watching or involved, and not knowing if there is anything we can do.

This holy impatience, and the frustration that goes with it, flows from our great love for people in our lives. When we're impatient about suffering, we follow in the footsteps of Moshe, who the very first moment he saw the suffering of his brothers and sisters, took matters into his own hands, standing up to the Egyptian taskmaster. When even God seemed to be patient, Moshe was impatient for an end to suffering. Indeed, when the Torah describes Moshe's action, it uses the same word we use for patience and impatience. *Va'yar b'sivlotam*, related to the word *savlanut*. He saw their suffering, and *he* suffered as a result, and he wanted to make it go away. And it didn't, not right away.

Holy impatience points also to the expectations we have about other people. Reb Mimi Feigelson, spiritual guide at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles, says that the more you expect from someone, the more potential you see, the more impatient you might be. The more angry when things are not as they might be.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the whole Torah is about patience and impatience. About expectations and hopes that take so long to unfold in the world. Our ancestors imagined God creating the world, and right away finding out with Adam and

Eve that while people are in the image of God, they are not going to live as God wants us to right away. The Sages say that God waited patiently, for ten generations, until he found Noah and there was a chance to make Creation work better. When it didn't, God's waited patiently for another ten generations, until Avraham.

God let the Israelites live in slavery for centuries. And then suddenly, God was impatient for Pharaoh to let the people go. And when it happened, it was up and out, right now in the middle of the night, and let's get to the promised land. Except even that slowed down, for forty years.

Avraham's life seems to be a tutorial from God in how to experience life as God does. According to the midrash, Avraham had insights into the truths of the universe as a boy, but had to wait until he was an old man to hear a call from God. Avraham received promises from God, of having a family and building a great nation – and these promises were put off for years. As we read today, and will read tomorrow, his two sons survived narrow escapes from death. Yishmael, out in the desert, and Yitzchak, almost sacrificed to the very same God on a mountain. And Avraham learned that the purposes of his life would really only be fulfilled by his distant descendents.

You could say: How does God know when to be patient and when to be impatient? And if it is so hard for God, how will we ever learn it? God has presumably all the time in the world. But we, our lives are short. We don't have forever to wait: For someone we care about to change their lives. For someone we love to feel better.

I have been meditating the past few months on a teaching about patience from the Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical tradition. Kabbalah is a different way of looking at the Torah. It sees the Torah not as a story about God out there and us down here, but as a

metaphor, a mapping of divine energy, how it is present and how it flows in the world.

Rabbi Moshe Cordovero lived in Tzfat, in the hills of northern Israel, in the 1500s. He was part of the community that gathered after the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492. They were impatient for redemption, and one of the things that Rabbi Cordovero explored was God's impatience with a world that was not ready to be redeemed. But his real genius was to take his descriptions of God's energy and teach them as a model for us.

He begins his teaching about God's patience not with the usual expression, that God is *erech apayim* or “slow to anger.” Instead, he works off a different phrase, which is from one of the prophets – that God does get angry, but does not hold on to anger. *Lo hechezik la'ad apo*.

What would cause God to be angry, obviously, is when we do not live up to the *mitzvot*. When we don't live our lives well enough. Rabbi Cordovero says that in that situation, we experience God's energy as it were as punishment, but only for a brief time. The divine flow is not able to flow without end in that negative way. Even then, God moves from anger to love, because God's force is always a hopeful force. God knows that lasting change in us only comes from inside. God holds on always to expectations, but is both anticipating and merciful – *m'tzapeh u'm'rachem* – even God has to figure out when to be hard and when to be soft, whatever the people of Israel need for their good.

Rabbi Cordovero compares this to a person who is the single eyewitness to a crime. In Jewish law, even though you are absolutely certain what you saw, and your testimony is impeccable, and there is physical evidence – one witness cannot do anything. Even if that witness is God. So there is no place to bring the frustration. The only possibility is

to respond with love, with a focus of love, in different forms. Perhaps that love will make a difference, will help release someone from the forces that hold them back. Imagine that we are held in some kind of equilibrium with other people by rubber bands, and all the energy is usually exerted keeping them taut, by pulling away. Perhaps when one person decides to act differently, to stop pulling back, everything can change.

And then, Rabbi Cordovero comes in completely from left field. He quotes a verse from the Torah, that commands us: When we see someone we hate, and his animal has collapsed under a burden, we should go and lift it up with him. I'll come back to this.

I think there are some remarkable insights in Rabbi Cordovero's teaching. First, patience doesn't mean never being impatient. It's a dynamic – of feeling impatient and frustrated with someone, of trying to know where to channel it. Sometimes, he says, we can act on our impatience, and should, if we can in fact channel it directly and quickly toward an effective change – something that will last for the other person.

But Rabbi Cordevero also says that the real source of our lingering impatience, our frustrations, is when we feel powerless to do anything. Being the one witness when you need two.

So he has two answers. One is to find a way to turn impatience back into the love it really flows from. Impatience comes from our high hopes of other people; it is love in a different form. So look, if it's there, for a place in the relationship where that love is not blocked, by the thing that makes us so impatience.

And if all else fails, find an animal to lift up. Reb Mimi, who I mentioned earlier, says the animal is something related to the person you are impatient with, but not identical. I

had an insight while talking with a couple people lately, who were frustrated about family members whose behavior after so many years doesn't change, who can't seem to express love in the ways we all hope for. It's hard to let go of the expectations, which are good ones. And one place to put that energy is to find a *mitzvah* of love with the same theme as an expectation you have or you wish, and do it for someone else entirely. A friend, or someone in the community.

When we notice ourselves becoming impatient, feeling impatient, we should ask: Where is this coming from? What can I learn from it? And is the frustrated response a useful one?

If it's really about nothing important, then impatience is a habit we should try to conquer. The energy we waste in mere impatience can divert us from being able to feel *holy impatience*. It pays to work on habits that fight off mere impatience. Stop fully at the stop sign, or let the other car in ahead of you whenever the lanes are merging. Notice how you want to hurry, and train yourself not to.

If there's something real at the root of impatience, acting frustrated might not be the answer. Our toolbox can be pretty thin. We harangue, we cajole, we raise our voice. Or, we sulk, we withdraw, we stop trying. I know that since I began working on this talk, I have noticed all the little times that I raise my voice, just enough that I know I'm doing it. But it's a shortcut – it's impatient, but doesn't engage. So I've been making a practice to repeat myself, to say the same words again in a regular tone. And I've asked myself what the real issue is, the one that requires thought, and figuring out, and a longer view, more time. In a word: patience.

If there is something important, something worth being impatient about, in any of our

relationships, we should do more than push the close-door button, over and over like the staccato *t'ruah* of the shofar, hoping each time for an instant response. The most important things we expect, we expect because we love. May this be a year when we learn better to distinguish between mere impatience and holy impatience. May it be a year when we find, from time to time, the sweet rhythm and the long, clear *tekiah*, where our impatience disappears into love, and patience – and sometimes even into change.