

Teach Your Tongue to Say “I Don’t Know”

Sermon

Rabbi Zoe Klein Miles

Yom Kippur Morning 5781 – September 28, 2020

I don’t know.

I don’t know.

I don’t know.

I really, really don’t know.

I find myself saying this a lot lately. Sometimes to myself, shaking my head and saying quietly, with a sigh, “I don’t know.”

I find myself saying it to my children when they ask, “When will we go back to school?” “I don’t know.”

I find myself saying it when listening, incredulously, to the news, “I-don’t-know-I-don’t-know-I-don’t-know.”

I find myself saying it when I contemplate what the world will look like a few months from now. “I don’t know.”

Not knowing makes us feel uneasy, anxious.

When Moses disappeared into the clouds of Mount Sinai, the people didn’t know when, or if, he was coming back. And when he had been gone already a month, they channeled their anxiety into building the golden calf.

Uncertainty makes us grasp onto whatever we can that feels familiar. The Israelites saw idol worship in Egypt, and although they witnessed God’s plagues and power, they resorted to building an idol when they felt lost.

The Israelites were so uncomfortable with the uncertainty of the wilderness, that they cried out, “If only we could return to Egypt! There we used to eat all the fish we wanted...and cucumbers, melons, leeks and onions!” (Numbers 11:5) Yes there was the back-breaking servitude, the lack of freedom, and oh yes, seeing all of our baby boys drowned in the Nile, but at least it was predictable, you know? Dependable. And, oh, that onions, fish, melons stir fry.

Many of you know the Passover tradition of lashing one another with scallions while singing *Dayeinu*, as a way of reminding us not to turn back in longing, not to fetishize the past out of our anxiety over the uncertain future.

Professor Svetlana Boym defines “nostalgia” as “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed.”

She explains that nostalgia appears to be a longing for a place, but is actually a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. Nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress.

Nostalgia has a utopian dimension, only it is an imaginary utopian past.

People are so afraid of the unknown, they want to turn back, to a time when life was simpler, omitting from memory all the hardship. “When I was young I had to walk three miles to school, uphill both ways, but those were the best days...the onion, fish and melon sizzling in the pan after a long, earnest day of work.”

Lot’s wife turned back as Sodom and Gomorrah burned, and became a frozen pillar of salt, encased in grief and tears, unable to leap into the unknown.

And I don’t blame her!

Therapist Deborah Ward writes about the “familiarity principle of attraction” saying, “even when someone’s behavior or personality is hurtful, on a subconscious level, some part of us may find comfort in the familiarity of that behavior.” Someone who grew up with an alcoholic parent may be attracted to the familiarity of an alcoholic partner.

It is also a phenomenon with trafficked girls rescued out of brothels, or people released from prisons. Many return to the familiar, despite its trauma and terror.

We are fundamentally uncomfortable with uncertainty, sometimes even when our life depends on it.

And yet:

20th century Jewish philosopher Martin Buber wrote: *All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveler is unaware.*

In other words, even when we think we know where we are going, the true destination is always unknown to us. We may intend to reach achievement and instead arrive at humble. We may intend to make a name for ourselves, and instead arrive at grace.

14th century Rabbi Yehudah Bedersi said: *The ultimate purpose of knowledge is to know that we don’t know.*

Estelle Frankl, a psychotherapist and teacher of Jewish mysticism, in her book “The Wisdom of Not Knowing”, wrote:

The wisdom of not knowing – that deeper wisdom that emerges out of the silent, white spaces between the lines of our stories. Expanding our awareness of life’s great mysteries enables us to connect with unknown parts of ourselves. This openness is the key of all learning and creativity. It is the gate that unlocks our wisdom and courage.

The unknown is at the center of the world’s religious traditions. *It is the realm where faith operates.*

A couple of years ago during the High Holy Days, I had shared that the difference between academic teaching and religious teaching is the difference between expanding what you know, and becoming more aware of what you don’t know.

In academic teaching, there is a subject, and the goal is to increase your knowledge of that subject. In religious education, the subject is you.

That is what we are doing here, exploring the mysterious you, and how your you intersects with countless other yous, and ultimately the great unknowable mystifyingly unfathomable capitol Y blessed are You.

Estelle Frankl writes:

There is beauty, a poetic allure, to the unknown. It is the deep, endless well, the vast blanket of space that is the source from which all mystics, artists, and poets draw their inspiration and creativity...

In the wilderness, amid uncertainty, and arguably perhaps *because* their uncertainty made them open to receiving, the Israelites experienced revelation at Sinai, the miracles of manna and the splitting of the sea. In the wandering wilderness they found Torah, they met God, they birthed themselves as a nation.

Irwin Kula and Linda Loewenthal wrote in their book “Yearnings: Embracing the Sacred Messiness of Life”:

What if we were galvanized, rather than paralyzed, by uncertainty?

The Talmud contains twenty volumes of recorded debates about how to live... sages agreeing and disagreeing... for over four hundred years. Many people [who study Talmud] are struck by the fact that 75 percent of all the debates and arguments are left unresolved. No final decision is ever reached. This is unique in sacred literature.

A religion of questions rather than answers.

In Judaism, the preservation of the questions, and the exploration of and wrestling with the questions, far outweighs the answers. Questions are labyrinthine wonderlands, eternal springs, geneses, while answers are period, full stop.

Writer Edmond Jabes said: *Certainty is the region of death. Uncertainty is the valley of life.*

Did you know all this time that we've been struggling with uncertainty... when will air travel feel safe / when will there be a vaccine / when will I be able to have friends over / how long will my children be homeschooling / when will things go back to normal...that we were living in the valley of life?

I didn't know that. It doesn't feel that way.

Socrates said: *The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing.*

And there is the famous saying in the Talmud, "Teach your tongue to say, 'I do not know'" (Brachot 4a).

Rabbi Toba Spitzer wrote about this:

As I contemplated a new year of programming given the reality of many more months of the pandemic, as I wrestled with what it means to become an actively anti-racist community, I found myself getting decidedly anxious. At some point I realized that I just didn't know... I can't know how to meet challenges that haven't even arisen yet. I just don't know.

With that realization, I felt like I'd been released... My spirits lifted, and my energy returned. I printed up signs that said, in Hebrew and English, "I Don't Know" (aini yodea) and put them up all over my home office.

Taking on "I don't know" as a spiritual practice does not mean that I have abandoned planning. "I don't know" is simply a way of acknowledging the reality that [any] plans we make, at any time, may go awry. "I don't know" celebrates the possibility of new and exciting options opening up that we may never have been able to foresee.

"I don't know" is a release from the illusion of control, the illusion of certainty, that in the end just makes us miserable when things don't go as we had expected.

Rabbi [Gil Steinlauf](#) also wrote about the Talmudic saying, "Teach your tongue to say 'I don't know'". [He wrote:](#)

This is one of my favorite teachings in the Talmud.

I love not knowing! When people come up to me and ask me a question about Judaism—or anything—I'm happy to admit when I don't know the answer. I'm grateful. That person has given me an opportunity to look something up and to learn. I even love it when I say something incorrect or confused, and someone points out to me that I was wrong. That's the best of all! How else can I find the Truth?

Teach your tongue to say, "I don't know." And there's a difference between saying, "I don't know" with that dismissive, deflective tone, and saying, "Huh, I don't know," as an invitation to explore, play, learn and grow.

Yom Kippur, arguably, is when we appear before God to confess that while we may have tried, to varying degrees, to walk a right path, we don't know how well we succeeded, how far off the trail we strayed.

20th century theologian Rabbi Abraham J. Heschel said this of Yom Kippur, *"We are all failures. At least one day a year we should recognize it ... It would be a great calamity for humanity if the sense of embarrassment disappeared, if everybody was an all-rightnik, with an answer to every problem. We have no answer to ultimate problems. We really don't know. In this not knowing, in this sense of embarrassment, lies the key to opening the wells of creativity."*

The embarrassment of not knowing is uncomfortable. But we are here to stand before the Unknowable. To befriend the unknown. To open ourselves to the wells of creativity, to step into the wandering wilderness to encounter our own revelation, renewal, rebirth.

It takes courage to step into the unknown. Estelle Frankl writes: *[Courage] is the single most important virtue for navigating the uncertain terrain of our lives.*

Social psychologist Erich Fromm wrote: *Creativity requires the courage to let go of certainties.*

Our forebearers, Abraham and Sarah, had that courage, when they ventured away from the familiar into the unknown.

Teach your tongue to say, "I don't know," for that is the beginning of wisdom. That is how we exercise a growth mindset. Cultivate our curiosity. I think the greatest answer to the question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Is "I don't know." You don't know? Fabulous! How could you know?

We are a culture of know-it-alls. We have a problem when the highest leaders in the land model wrong behavior. When the president boasts knowing more than anyone in the history of the world about technology, money, courts, ISIS, renewables, infrastructure, taxes...

Historian Daniel Boorstin taught: *The greatest obstacle to discovery is not ignorance, it is the illusion of knowledge.*

And Nietzsche said: *Convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies.* Think about that for a moment. Convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies, because at least with lies, you know what you don't know.

Teach your tongue to say, "I don't know."

A line from a poem by 19th century poet Rilke reads:

*I've been circling for thousands of years
And I still don't know: am I a falcon,
A storm, or a great song?*

The mysterious you. What am I? A falcon, a storm, a great song? Am I a butterfly dreaming I am a person? Am I a shattered urn, a dream soon forgotten? I don't know.

Sir Isaac Newton's final words before he died were: "I don't know what I may seem to the world. But as to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore and diverting myself now and then in finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than the ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me."

We are all playing on the seashore, collecting shells, while the great ocean lays all undiscovered before us. Ah, the first time my family ventured out of our home together since the initial quarantine was to go to the beach at night to see the bioluminescent waves, so strange and exciting. So much undiscovered all around us.

The future is uncertain. That is not new. That has always been true. And while our tradition calls us to work toward change, to fight injustice, to end oppression, at the same time, we must teach our tongues to say, "I don't know."

Practice becoming more comfortable with those words. Notice how saying "I don't know" can bring people closer, can open a door, can invite a new conversation, can jumpstart imagination, can take you outside of yourself, make you a student of life. Notice how saying "I don't know" can tap you into wonder, make you a more honest, accessible parent, partner and friend. Saying "I don't know" can quench you from the fountain of youthful amazement.

Poet Dorothy Walters wrote:

*Reality is always
Soft clay
Ever shifting and changing
Its shape.
Fire it
Into form, and at
The very moment you are
Hailing it as final truth
It will break in your hands.*

I don't know what this new year will bring. I don't know, and every day, I am becoming aware of how much less I know than I thought.

We didn't know what these High Holy Days would bring, and together we tried something brand new, and out of our not knowing, we shared something rare, beautiful and meaningful.

I don't know what this new year will bring. None of us know. Perhaps God knows. But, how grateful I am to explore, with you, that great ocean, that wandering wilderness, collecting its pebbles and shells, diamond insights and pearls of wisdom, together.