

In these powerful moments, as we prepare to hear the shofar, every year, my mood can best be described by the title of a book published a few years ago about the High Holidays, titled “This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared”, by the late Rabbi Alan Lew, a contemporary leader in Jewish spirituality. I stand here, I sit in my seat, and I think, how did it come to be Rosh Hashanah? I am just not ready. We are here, and it is definitely real, but I am not ready.

Where do I take that feeling in this moment? Can I prepare, can I cram now, for this Day of Judgment? Or do I say, “I am not in my best spot, and I’ll try to do more in the coming week, and then be more ready for Yom Kippur”? And why do I never feel prepared, as much as I may try?

I want to take a cue from an unlikely character for today, someone we might not be thinking about on Rosh Hashanah. We are thinking about Avraham and Yitzhak and Yishmael, about Sarah and Hannah, about models of prayer and repentance. But the Talmud suggests we think about someone else today, a figure who most represents who we are and where we are in this moment. The Talmud in Tractate Rosh Hashanah, mentioning the childless women who were remembered on this day, then says, surprisingly:

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ראש השנה דף י:

תניא, רבי אליעזר אומר: ..., בראש השנה יצא יוסף מבית האסורין...

It was taught, R' Eliezer said, ... on Rosh Hashanah, Yosef went forth from prison.

Of all the Biblical events the rabbis described happening on Rosh Hashanah, why is this what the Rabbis tell us about? What is the connection between Yosef going free from prison, and Rosh Hashanah?

Roll back with me a few millennia to a very resonant moment. Because if there was ever a moment of “This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared”, it might be this one. Picture it with me.

You are wasting away in your prison cell, despairing of ever getting out. Two years have passed since your last best chance of freedom, when you helped a prisonmate who was freed, and then promptly forgot about you. Suddenly you hear a jangling of keys, and the guards burst into your cell and begin to rush you out. You barely get out the words, “What’s happening? Where are you taking me?” And a few simple words come forth from the guards’ lips. I can’t say never in your wildest dreams - because Yosef was a wild dreamer - so let me say *only* in your wildest dreams, could you have imagined their response:

“You’ve been summoned to see the king”.

You don’t even know why you have been called. It sounds utterly bewildering.

But the Torah tells it just this way:

בראשית פרק מא

(יד) וַיִּשְׁלַח פַּרְעֹה וַיִּקְרָא אֶת יוֹסֵף וַיְרִיצֵהוּ מִן הַבּוֹר וַיַּגְלַח וַיַּחֲלֵף שְׂמֹלֵתוֹ וַיָּבֵא אֵל פַּרְעֹה :

Par’oh sent for Yosef, and they rushed him out of the pit. He shaved, he changed his clothes, and he came to stand before Par’oh.

There are two words that jump out of this verse to really give us a sense of the significance of this moment - what makes it epic, and why we really need to pay attention to it today.

The first is ויריצהו, they hurried him out of prison, connected to רץ, running. It was a complete rush, no time to think, no time to adjust. One moment in prison, the next moment en route to the throne room of the palace. The only stops along the way were a shave and a change out of the prison uniform.

And then there is a deeper word. The Torah, throughout its narrative, describes the place where Yosef is imprisoned as משמר, the guarded area, or בית הסהר, jail. But Yosef always calls it something else. He calls it בור - the pit. Readers of the Yosef story know what בור represents. We know the echo that Yosef can never escape when in prison in Egypt: I'm back in the pit into which my brothers threw me. I am cast away, abandoned even by those who love me.

And so when the text says Yosef is rushed out of the pit we understand that this unexpected moment represents the possible turning around of Yosef's fortunes, which have been in flux now for over a decade. It is a moment of ultimate hope, ultimate possibility. A chance of a lifetime.

So we commemorate, today, a moment in which one of our great ancestors, his life a revolving wheel of fortune, was suddenly thrust out of the vicissitudes of that wild journey for a face-to-face encounter with the King. The person who controlled the fates of every Egyptian. Who would determine the course of the future of Yosef and of entire nations. A face-to-face encounter with The King.

Now we understand why Rosh Hashanah is the anniversary of Yosef's getting out of prison. Of his being rushed from a pit to stand before a King.

For isn't that where we are right now? I don't mean to say we are perpetually in a pit. But I do mean to say that *life is filled with ups and downs*, and we are always just in the midst of it, rarely pausing long enough to take it in, and trying to stay a step ahead of what life throws at us, or at least not two steps behind. And then today - Rosh Hashanah - comes.

We're rushed out of that busy place, out of work, out of home, and we get a haircut, change our clothes, and we show up for a face-to-face encounter with the King.

And even if we've done it for 20, 40, or 80, or 90 years, we never quite know what to expect, or we shouldn't quite know what to expect, from that encounter with the King. Why have we

been summoned? What is ahead? Could today symbolize a reversal of our fortunes? A new path ahead? So what should I do? What should I say? It is real, and we feel completely unprepared.

This is a piece of Rabbi Lew's thesis in his book. We are always unprepared. All we have is our realization that this is real, and our unpreparedness, and our broken hearts. Because once we contemplate that we don't really know which book we are being written into for the coming year, once we hear the fleeting nature of our lives depicted in the most graphic and real ways in the Unetaneh Tokef prayer, once we are shaken by the shofar blasts, then we know we are hopelessly unprepared. What a paralyzing feeling.

So we know why the rabbis connect Rosh Hashanah to Yosef getting out of prison. He models the unpreparedness we so often feel on this day. But what do we glean from Yosef in this moment? How did he **handle** this sudden and shocking moment of unpreparedness?

The truth is the Torah doesn't tell us. But Yosef's performance is amazing. He affirms that God will interpret Par'oh's dream, and he proceeds to hear it, interpret it, and offer, based on the interpretation, sage advice to Par'oh that immediately wins Par'oh over. As if he were not unprepared. As if he were not, verses earlier, despairing in jail.

All we can suggest, here, it seems to me, is that Yosef didn't let his unpreparedness stop him from being in the moment. Maybe he had no choice. But he seemed to embrace this moment, shocking and unexpected as it was, and be his best self in it. And he didn't stand down, or worry about his unpreparedness. He took it as an opportunity – a chance to fulfill a dream. He didn't worry about what he hadn't done. He focused on where he was, and what he could do with the chance he was being given. And of course, even more than he even realized – he was prepared. His life journey up until this point gave him the tools to handle the situation if he came into it with the right attitude.

In fact, I think this explains a peculiar choice of language in the Gemara we read at the outset. The Gemara which discusses the things which occurred on Rosh Hashanah says that Sarah, Rahel, and Hannah *were remembered*, that slavery *was abolished*, and that Yosef *left* prison. Why the turn to active voice for Yosef? Wasn't he taken out of prison, exactly as we read?

No. He left. He was caught in a moment of unpreparedness, but he owned it and turned it into an opportunity. He said - this is my life right now. I will be my best self right now. Even if I don't feel prepared, being in this moment is the best way of being prepared.

This is a central lesson for today, for the unprepared encounter with the King.

But not just today. Isn't a lot of life filled with these moments?

We're going about our business, expecting the world to follow along a certain path, based on our own frail human calculations, and then we're pulled out of that place and are face to face with the most unexpected things. Unexpected losses, unexpected joys, people in need, opportunities to help, risks of hurting. *I would suggest that most of our life is spent encountering things that simply don't go as we planned, that we're not expecting and are, whether in small or large ways, just not prepared for.*

And indeed, that was this year, as every year. A year of moments that caught us unprepared. Unprepared for forest fires in northern Israel, and truly unprepared for the uprisings of freedom that formed the Arab Spring, with all its hope, and the anxiety left in its wake. Unprepared for the brutal killing of the Fogel parents and children in Itamar, for the loss of tens of thousands of lives in instants in the earthquake in Japan, unprepared for the surprise assassination of Osama bin Laden, and for the havoc wreaked by tornados and hurricanes in our country and in our neighborhoods.

Unprepared for personal losses of loved ones, and there have been many, and many fresh losses, in our Bayit – we are never prepared. Unprepared for financial struggles, for

disappointments, for the unraveling of personal relationships. And for the indescribable joy of births, marriages, moments of success and happiness – they, too, catch us unawares.

These are the countless moments where we face the Melekh, the forces controlling the universe that are far beyond our understanding.

And the Zohar builds the bridge from the Yosef story to every moment. It notes that the verse begins, וַיִּשְׁלַח פַּרְעֹה וַיִּקְרָא אֶת יוֹסֵף, and Par'oh sent, and He - HE! - called for Yosef.

Who is that second subject when it says וַיִּקְרָא? It is not merely he. It is not Par'oh. It is the presence of God. That moment of summoning, that unexpected unprepared encounter, is an invitation from God to live in the moment.

Yosef teaches us the lesson of what to do in this moment. Don't worry about what we haven't done to get ready. Don't get bogged down in the fact that all we did was cook, shave, and change our clothes, and not practice our script and apologize to everyone and become our best selves while we were waiting for this moment. Don't focus on that. First, remember that as hopelessly unprepared as we may feel, there is so much in us that can respond to what is unexpected. And then – focus on where we are. We are out of the pit. We are in the presence of God. We are at the moment of a possible reversal of fortune. Anything can happen, if we stay in the here and now, on what could be right now, not on what hasn't happened until now.

So here we are, in this moment of supreme unpreparedness, the paradigm of most of the moments of our lives. Let us see it as Yosef did – an invitation, an opportunity, to make the most of being summoned by the King. To grab that moment and be our best selves as Yosef did. And may it be a year of blessing.

Shanah tovah.