



Little By Little, Step By Step

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A few years ago, I found myself standing in a small living room—my wife on my right, and her mother and her cousin to my left. We all listened as a letter from our “grandma” was read aloud to us, vaguely suggesting that her recent disappearance was planned and that she had left us a rather large inheritance but couldn’t tell us exactly where it was or how to access it. We looked around the room and saw a small kitchenette with some cabinets, a fridge that wouldn’t open, a tv displaying static snow, and some picture frames along the wall with name plaques underneath—many of which were missing. The front door closed, locking us inside; the clock was ticking.

I’m not going to spoil how we did it, but we did solve Grandma’s Master Plan and ended up with a bounty of riches at the end of our escape room. And that’s the whole point of an escape room—to take on a themed challenge presented as a series of clues to be solved in a specific order within a given time limit.

Regardless of whether the room is themed like a speak-easy or a pirate ghost ship, when the clock starts you jump from item to item in the room looking for hints or a key to unlock the next clue—seeing if a picture frame swivels on the wall to reveal something behind or maybe there are small details such as paper weights or wallpaper patterns that are subtly pointing at something in the room.

When you first begin an escape room it can feel overwhelming as all you’re given is the initial room you find yourself in. You know that you’re working towards the common goal of solving a series of clues in order to escape, but you don’t necessarily know what you’re looking for or how the clues will ultimately be solved. But you don’t have to solve the entire escape room all at once. That happens little by little, step by step.

None of it makes any sense...until it does. And gosh does it feel good when you find a clue or unlock the next step. Similar kind of satisfaction as to when you put that last jigsaw puzzle piece in place, or when you solve a clue and fill in the answer for a crossword in the Sunday paper.

But what happens when our personal, and perhaps unspoken understanding of order is questioned? How do you feel when there’s a puzzle piece missing? Or when you walk into your regular meeting room or classroom and someone is sitting in *your* seat?! What do you do if someone cuts the line? Have you ever walked into the market with no grocery list? Have you ever been left frustrated by a movie or tv show that just ends on a cliffhanger—no resolution to some of your biggest questions?

What happens when our collective and communal expectations of order are questioned: in the wake of a tragedy...natural disasters....a global pandemic?

When our expectations aren't met, when our values are tested and our sense of justice is challenged, we begin to believe that the order we once knew—or hoped for as an outcome—is no more. Chaos enters the equation and causes us to question whether what we initially committed to is even worth the effort.

We like to feel a sense of control over our lives as this is how we can derive meaning from our experiences—that we can expect a level of certainty and predict what will happen based on past events, that we can cross things off of our list so we don't have to worry about them anymore, that we understand how things work, that people—including ourselves—are consistent—that the universe is reliable.

The regular prayer book we use throughout the year is called a *siddur* which comes from the Hebrew root for "order"—same root as our Passover meal which we call a *seder*—this is all because our ancestors put together a series of prayers and blessings we are to recite and offer in a specific order. This creates tradition, and it also helps us familiarize ourselves with the service—to begin learning what part of the service we are in and know which prayer or song comes next.

Even when we change up our regular prayer book for the High Holidays, we use a *machzor*, which comes from the Hebrew root for "cycle" or a "return"—again, highlighting the importance of repetition and familiarity.

We have rituals for this very reason. We assign a certain action to be enacted or a sequence of words to be spoken at a specific moment in time to provide a framework to a given experience we want to acknowledge as distinct. A ritual can be lighting and saying the blessings over *Shabbat* candles on Friday evening, or it could be one's morning routine.

Our daily routines were disrupted this year as we all went into lockdown to help prevent the further spreading of the coronavirus. The order of the world we thought we understood devolved into a state of chaos: people were stocking up on foodstuffs and toiletries since we didn't know how long we would be in quarantine for; everyone was working or attending school from home and, outside of a handful of people who were already onboard with the current state of technology, we all had to learn and re-learn how to use zoom and other video conferencing programs. Zoom fatigue became a reality as we all had to navigate being on devices for longer stretches of time and were now managing our time in totally new spaces.

Being in our homes for as long as we were, forced us to develop new routines. Some of us used online fitness classes to find a sense of order, while others were perfecting their sourdough bread recipes. My wife and I started making tahini chocolate chunk cookies every few days which gave us a consistent and pretty delicious ritual. Personally, I really enjoy driving—I find it to be relaxing—as I take advantage of the time by listening to music, but with nowhere to drive to this year I took up walking as a regular activity to give me that same bit of time to listen to my tunes.

Many have said that the word that sums up this past year is “pivot”—to fully shift our expectations to adapt to the ever-changing cycles that became this pandemic year.

We joked last year at our virtual Passover *seders*, and then at the High Holidays, and then again at this year’s Passover *sefer*: “NEXT YEAR IN PERSON!” And we’re kinda there. Is it the big and full and “normal” High Holiday experience we have known to be true in year’s past? No, but that’s ok. It’s fairly remarkable that we are able to be in-person with any of you and that so many more can join via the live-stream.

But what is a “normal” High Holiday experience? We live our Jewish lives via a lunar calendar, so the holidays are seemingly always changing dates per the Gregorian calendar we live out in our secular lives—it seems as though High Holiday season only officially begins when we start having conversations about whether we feel like the holidays are early or late this year.

When *Rosh HaShanah* begins, we are thrown back into the deep end of tradition and are faced with some big questions that the text of our prayer services highlights for us: who lives and who dies; do I hear the still small voice; do I even connect with the image of God as *Avinu Malkeinu*—a judge and a protector, a father and a king? Will I be forgiven of my past sins? Will I achieve some level of repentance?

Every Jewish new year we are extended an invitation to find ourselves, wherever that may be, and to do this work alongside community—whether in-person, virtually, or in the global collective experience of meaning making. Over the next 10 Days the words of our various services will reveal to us that we sit between *din v’rachamim*, between God’s judgment and mercy, wanting to prove ourselves worthy of being written *baSefer Hayim*, in the Book of Life before it closes on *Yom Kippur*.

These questions are heavy and this task of proving ourselves can feel overwhelming, but we don’t need to answer all of this at once. The kind of reflection this season asks us to engage in does not happen merely because we want it to—forgiveness and repentance don’t just come about because we read some words in our prayer book, rather we manifest these outcomes through our actions.

Little by little, step by step.

We have all probably heard the story of the child on a beach which was covered in what seemed like an overwhelming amount of starfish. An adult saw the child walking over to one starfish, picking it up, and tossing it back into the ocean. After seeing the child continue to do this for about 20 more starfish, the adult finally walked over and said: “what are you doing wasting your time out here—there are probably thousands of starfish! How could you possibly think that you are making a difference?” The child walked over to another starfish, picked it up and tossed it into the ocean. Turning to the adult, the child said: “Well, I made a difference for that one.”

The unknown seems chaotic until we wrap our minds and hearts around how we need to organize it all. We often place a much stronger emphasis on the end goal, rather than the journey. We want to beat the escape room, we want covid to just go away, we want our personal shortcomings from this past year to be forgiven.

Our sages taught:

לא עָלֶיךָ הַמְלָאכָה לְגִמְרָה, וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶן חוּרִין לְבִטּוֹל מִמְּנָה

It's not your responsibility to complete the work, but neither are you free to excuse yourself from it entirely.¹

We shouldn't lose sight of these goals—we must continue to make plans, dream big for that place way over yonder, hope for change—but we must also learn to acknowledge and appreciate the small steps that help us make those larger concerns of ours a reality—that our actions make a difference.

Retired US Navy Admiral, William McRaven, advised that "If you want to change the world, start off by making your bed [every morning]."² He is speaking to a domino effect that our actions have—completing a simple task like making your bed can set you up for success—it gives you a small sense of pride which can help to push you to work on the next task, and then the next.

It doesn't need to be making the bed—it doesn't even need to be a daily habit or a new routine—but think of something that you can accomplish. Maybe it's something you're already doing that you have overlooked—not yet acknowledged as a small piece to the puzzle of your life. What small steps feel manageable for what you need of the High Holidays this year?

May each of us be blessed as we embark on the journey of these *Yamim Noraim*, these Days of Awe. We'll get there; little by little, step by step.

¹ Pirkei Avot 2:16

² Admiral William H. McRaven, commencement speech delivered May 17, 2014.