

Kol Nidre / Erev Yom Kippur 5785
Congregation Or Ami
Houston, TX
Rabbi Gideon Estes
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Erev Tov, Hag Sameach, Shabbat Shalom! It is funny how sometimes everyday idioms and expressions suddenly grow significantly more meaningful. Let me give you an example; have you ever used the expression: "It is what it is."? It seems like an innocuous saying, an off-the-cuff remark expressing acceptance with compromises and the vagaries of life. This past week I have found myself saying it a number of times and hearing it from many different people and have not really given it a second thought. That all changed when I was talking to my dear friend, Oren, on Monday night about how Rosh HaShana went and

my stresses of the upcoming week. During our conversation, I casually contextualized my stresses by saying “it is what it is”. Oren instantly challenged me. He told me that he did not like that expression and that it is not very Jewish. That opinion got me thinking, and I realized that Oren was right; on its face *“it is what it is”*, well, is not very Jewish. Especially at this time of year.

At its core, the idea of “It is what it is” implies that we are passive bystanders in our circumstances. That life just happens to us and we have no agency, no control. But this time of year, we emphasize the exact opposite message. Not only do we play an active role in our own stories, we labor to not accept the injustices we see and instead strive

to not only better ourselves, but also for *Tikun Olam*, to repair the world.

Tomorrow during musaf we will recite for the 3rd time in 10 days *Unetanneh Tokef* (you can find this on pages 315-316 of your maḥzor).

This *piyyut*, liturgical poem, originated in what is now the land of Israel sometime around the early medieval period. It grew in geographic usage during the 12th and 13th centuries spreading to Italy and Ashkenaz, which is modern-day Germany, and has remained a staple in Yom Kippur worship ever since. At its heart, this prayer discusses how all of humanity is judged on Rosh HaShanah and their fates sealed on Yom Kippur. Yet, even as this prayer states how God is deciding our

fate, we are reminded that three actions can affect the decree: prayer, repentance, and righteous acts of charity. In other words, *it is very much **NOT** what it is*. Rather, we have an active and ongoing role in our own destiny.

Yom Kippur is a time to be actively reflective, to think about how our actions have affected ourselves, our relationships, and the lives of others. We are to take stock inwardly and outwardly with deep consideration. But it is also a time to be empowered. We afflict ourselves through fasting. Believing that our going without will help stir God's compassion. We will say at least five times the 13 Attributes of God which opens:

ה' ה' אל רחום וחנון ארך אפים ורב חסד ואמת.

Adonai Adonai, God Merciful and Compassionate, Patient, Abounding
in Love and Faithfulness.¹

These words come from the Torah when Moses is seeking forgiveness
from God following the sin of the Golden Calf and when Moses directly
experienced the Divine Presence. It is a moment when Moses, too, was
fasting and successfully convinced God to grant our people a pardon.

Moses convinced God. Let that sink in.

As with all things Jewish, even fasting is not as simple as just not eating
or drinking for a day; there is meaning to the action. Much like how

¹ Traditional Liturgy one example p.232 Maḥzor Lev Shalem

when we beat our breasts as we list our sins or bow to the ground during Aleinu have deeper meanings than just the physical acts, fasting is not done for fasting's sake. We learn the meaning of fasting in tomorrow morning's haftarah. The prophet Isaiah rebukes the Nation of Israel for fasting but not acting morally. He tells us a fast by itself is not what God wants. God wants us to fast so that we are mindful of those without and work toward making their lives better. Specifically he says:

לָמָּה צָמַמְנוּ וְלֹא רֵאִיתָ עֵינֵינוּ נִפְשָׁנוּ וְלֹא תִדְעֵהוּ בְיָוֶם צָמְמֶכֶם תִּמְצְאוּ-חֶפֶץ וְכָל-

עֲצֵבְיֶכֶם תִּנְגָּשׁוּ: הֵן לָרִיב וּמִצָּה תִצְוֶמוּ וְלִהְיוֹת בְּאִגְרָף רָשָׁע לֹא-תִצְוֶמוּ כִיּוֹם

לְהִשְׁמִיעַ בְּמִרוֹם קוֹלְכֶם:

“Why, when we fasted, did You not see?

When we starved our bodies, did You pay no heed?”

Because on your fast day

You see to your business

And oppress all your laborers!

Because you fast in strife and contention,

And you strike with a wicked fist!

Your fasting today is not such

As to make your voice heard on high.” (Isaiah 58:3-4)

And continues,

“הֲלוֹא זֶה צוֹם אֲבַחְרֶהוּ פִתְחֵם חֲרָצְבוֹת רָשָׁע הַתֵּר אֲגִדּוֹת מוֹטָה וְשִׁלַּח רְצוּצִים

חֲפָשִׁים וְכָל-מוֹטָה תִּנְתְּקוּ: הֲלוֹא פָּרַס לְרַעַב לַחֲמֶה וְעֵנִיִּים מְרוּדִים תִּבְיֵא בְּיַת

כִּי-תִרְאֶה עָרֶם וְכִסִּיתוּ וּמִבְּשָׂרָהּ לֹא תִתְעַלֵּם:

No, this is the fast I desire:

To unlock fetters of wickedness,

And untie the cords of the yoke

To let the oppressed go free;

To break off every yoke.

It is to share your bread with the hungry,

And to take the wretched poor into your home;

When you see the naked, to clothe them,

And not to ignore your own kin. (Isaiah 58:6-7)”

We go a day without food to be inspired to ensure that others do not

go hungry. Another take is that we fast to bring ourselves into a

different headspace. It is a final reminder that we are above our base

desires. Tonight, and tomorrow, we are inspired to think we can

overcome our mistakes of the previous year. We are not defined by

those transgressions; we do not have to accept our old selves.

There is a lot in the world that we cannot control, but what we can control is how we process it. We can name what is in our power to change and what is not. Many of you here have heard the Serenity Prayer, several of you I'm sure have it as a framed piece of artwork on your wall or as a magnet on your fridge, reminding you "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference." And while this is how it is best known today, it actually has a parallel in a prayer authored by 11th century Spanish Poet and Liturgist, Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabriol (also the author of Adon Olam), that says "At the head of all understanding is realizing what is and what cannot be, and consoling

ourselves for what is not in our power to change.”² In other words we can still be comforted even knowing that at times events occur in life that we cannot change. Yet we still have the ability to analyze what is happening and discern if we can affect it or not.

The challenge is to not be so removed that we think we do not matter. My takeaway from the rebuke I received from my friend is that we need to be mindful of our own power. Yes, there are circumstances that we cannot affect. However, we should try and strive to influence

² [Mibchar ha-Peninim (Choice of Pearls), Chapter 17 (Consciousness), verse 2] accessed at <https://judaism.stackexchange.com/questions/92622/idiomatic-serenity-pledge/92625#92625>

all we can. We picture a world as it should be and that motivates us to share that vision with others and to do our part in making that a reality.

In the end, *it is what it is* acts as a simplistic surrender, a way of processing the unknown and the unfortunate through passive acceptance. But this time of year is all about not accepting our fate, our circumstances nor how our lives are set. So instead, I would offer a modification. Instead of *it is what it is*, say in its place *it may be what it is, but that is not what it must be*. We need to remember that we are not bystanders in our own lives. Absolutely, there are circumstances that are out of our control. Those that were healthy become terminally sick. Steady jobs turn to unemployment. Loving families find

dissent. There is heartache. There is strife. There is darkness. But just because those circumstances exist does not mean they must continue to. So let us name the struggle, the pain, the fear, the sorrow and acknowledge that at the moment, it may be out of our control and it is ok to feel sadness and disappointment or any other emotion, but don't let it define you. While there are circumstances out of our control; we can control the lens in how we view what is happening to us. We can choose how to process. That is regaining our own agency. Big or small, we have a role in the world. The world does not simply happen to us.

I want to leave you tonight as we venture into Yom Kippur knowing that you have power in shaping your own destiny and the destiny of the world. This Yom Kippur may we look ahead with hope concerning our ability to make 5785 a better year. We all have power and may we feel empowered.

G'mar Hatimah Tovah!