

Rosh Hashanah 5782: The Octopus, the Toddler, and Us

Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom September 6th, 2021

Something one learns, over the course of eighteen months of a pandemic, is the kind of television the people you live with really like. In our household, we fell into different groupings, in the scarce few waking hours after the baby went to bed. Some of us watched horror films (for the record, not me). Baking shows. Superheroes. Doctor Who. But alas, I had little company in my nature documentary cravings. Which made it all the more special when I came outside one evening to find that Shelley had set up an outdoor movie night to watch *My Octopus Teacher*.

I actually didn't like the movie as much as I expected – with apologies to the Academy, which awarded it Best Documentary. For those who haven't seen it, it tells the story of a South African filmmaker who, feeling distant from his work and family, embarks on a new project: swimming with an octopus in the shallows near his home. I'm not convinced that spending hours underwater is the best way to reconnect with life on land, but let's put that aside. As far as I'm concerned, the octopus was the star.

So, I went down a bit of a rabbit hole – or whatever the octopus equivalent may be. Did you know that the octopus has three hearts, and that the plural of “octopus” is “octopuses,” not “octopi”? But what really blew my mind is the octopus' mind. The octopus has 500 million neurons, 60% of which are actually in its arms. Each tentacle operates separately from the others, and also from the central brain. Developmental psychologist Alison Gopnik describes this as being like a toddler and an adult in the same body: “The head might feel kind of like a preschool teacher on an outing, trying to corral eight wandering children and to get them to their destination,” she writes. “Imagine if your arms were as contrary as your 2-year-old!”ⁱ

The role of children, Gopnik suggests, is to explore and learn. We know they do it physically; Shelley and I had been wanting to put a Fitbit on our toddler out of sheer curiosity, and then I found a book with the answer: the average toddler takes 2400 steps an hour – the length of eight football fields.ⁱⁱ But it's not just

their bodies. The brain of a three-year-old is actually twice as active as an adult brain: “more active, more connected, and much more flexible than ours.”ⁱⁱⁱ As we grow, our brains prune neurons to focus on what we need, but for toddlers, everything is still in play. In the words of journalist – and father – Ezra Klein: “If one defined intelligence as the ability to learn and to learn fast and to learn flexibly, a two-year-old is a lot more intelligent right now than I am.”^{iv} My toddler is surprised by everything and nothing. He could wake up one day with the world upside down and he would find a way to navigate it.

But I’m not just telling you all this because octopuses are fascinating, and because I love – and am exhausted by – my toddler. I’m telling you because both the octopus and the toddler inspire me, and have something to teach us this year.

For the past eighteen months, we have been dealing with change. God knows, it hasn’t been easy. Here we are, adults used to thinking that we understand the basics of the world. And suddenly, we’ve been thrown into a situation where we’d be better off with the brain of an octopus or a toddler.

Living in this way, with so many unknowns, is much more natural for kids – but even for them, it’s not easy. Gopnik again: “Children, perhaps because they spend so much time in [this] state, also can be fussy and cranky and desperately wanting their next meal or desperately wanting comfort.”^v Has anyone else felt that way this year? But here’s the thing: with life constantly changing around us, we are going to be uncomfortable no matter what. Better to embrace our inner octopus or toddler, and try to find a way forward.

This morning, I want to suggest that the greatness of Jewish spirituality and history is that we’ve done this before. Every year at Rosh Hashanah, we are called upon to see our lives, and the world, with new eyes. And at key moments in Jewish history, we have shown the ability to reimagine and reinvent. Rabbi Ed Feinstein says that as a people, “we have a genius for responding to crisis with

creativity.”^{vi} We usually tell the story of the Jewish people as one of continuity, of loyalty between generations, *l’dor vador*, a chain of tradition. Sometimes, though, continuity is not what we need. A changing world calls upon us to use our toddler and octopus brains – brains that are better at change. We’re going to talk about three strategies, three historical moments, and three words: why, how, and wow.

First: Why? Toddlers are notorious for their curiosity: anything from “Why is the sky blue?” to “Why can’t I see my eyes?” from “Why doesn’t that man have a home?” to “Why do people die?” The number of steps that toddlers take is matched only by the number of their questions.

Octopuses don’t do this verbally, but they do seem to question. In *The Soul of an Octopus*, Sy Montgomery recounts her first meeting with Athena, a giant Pacific octopus in the New England Aquarium: “...her arms boil up from the water, reaching for mine. Instantly both my hands and forearms are engulfed by dozens of soft, questing suckers... And she seems as curious about me as I am about her.”^{vii}

Judaism too is known for its questions. As the joke goes: “Why do Jews always answer a question with a question?” “Nu, how else should they answer?” Many Jews by choice say that they are drawn by this aspect of our religion – how we value debate over dogma, and questions over answers, from the “*mah nishtana* – why is this night different” of the Passover Seder, to the “*mah anachnu, meh chayeinu* – what are we, and what are our lives?” of the Days of Awe.

Now, the first key moment in Jewish history was its beginning, with the radical belief in one God. So, what do we know about Abraham, the first Jew? The stories suggest that Abraham was chosen precisely because of his questions. In one, Abraham comes to monotheism because he takes a scientific, philosophical approach, observing the world around him. *If the sun is a god, why don’t we see it at night?* Abraham asks. *There must be something more.* In another story, he

smashes his father's idols, asking: *If these statues are so powerful, why don't they fight back?* In yet another, the questions are even deeper: Abraham sees a house on fire, and asks: *Is there no master of this house? Where is God, and where are we? The world is burning – why is no one putting out the flames?*

We each have our own “whys” from the past eighteen months. I can simply share some of mine. Why did we leave our elders so vulnerable in the first wave, and why are we risking our children in the fourth? Why do we expect our health care workers and teachers to be heroes, without doing more to help them? Why don't more people vote, knowing how much government decisions matter? Why do the oldest and newest peoples in our country – the First Peoples, and recent immigrants – still bear the brunt of illness, poverty, and discrimination? Why aren't we reducing our travel and waste when we know now that we can live differently, and our world is actually on fire? And on a personal level: Why have I missed so many of my children's bedtimes until now? So many everyday moments, and so many firsts? Why didn't we take more date nights when there was someone to stay with the kids, and places we could actually go? Don't get me wrong – my “normal” was plenty good – but I'm not sure we should be so quick to return. We have a window of opportunity to change, and that window is propped open by the word “why?”

Second: How. Toddlers don't just ask about things; they are masterful at figuring them out. In his book, *Beginners*, Tom Vanderbilt describes the “candle problem,” in which:

...people are asked to attach a candle to the wall using nothing more than a box of matches and a box of tacks. People struggle to solve it because they get hung up on... the box as a container for tacks, not as a theoretical shelf for the candle. There is one group, it turns out, that tends to do pretty well on the candle problem: five-year-olds.^{viii}

The more we know, the more possibilities we discount; the fewer “hows” we consider. Kids aren't so stuck on what things are for, and so they are better able to think outside the box. Octopuses too. They can open complicated puzzle boxes

and they can innovate tools. They can squeeze themselves out of tanks and fishing boats, escape artists extraordinaire. They take their very vulnerability – the lack of a protective shell – and transform it to flexibility and strength.

There is a moment in Jewish history when we did exactly the same. The year was 68 CE. Jerusalem was in revolt against Rome, and under a strangling siege. There was no way in, and no way out. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, believing that the rebellion was doomed to end in disaster, found another way. He implored his nephew, one of the rebels: *Show me a solution so I can leave, and perhaps we can have some small salvation; all will not be lost.*^{ix} Like a toddler reimagining the use of a box, or an octopus squeezing through a tiny hole, Yochanan ben Zakkai smuggled himself out of the besieged city in a coffin. He got an audience with Vespasian, leader of the Roman army and soon-to-be emperor. *Give me the city of Yavneh and its students,* he asked, and his request was granted. This becomes the founding story of rabbinic Judaism, the Judaism that enabled Judaism to survive and thrive when the Temple was destroyed; the Judaism that we live to this day.

But Yochanan ben Zakkai's strategy was controversial. He was condemned by his peers for not asking for more; perhaps if he had asked Vespasian to spare Jerusalem, his request would have been granted. There would have been no destruction, no exile, no need to reinvent.

Who was right? It is impossible to know. From this, we learn two things. One: We can never know the path not taken. Two octopuses escape from their tanks; one makes it to the open ocean, the other dies on the aquarium floor. Two: The more questions and answers, the more ways of figuring out how to move forward – the better it is for us all. That is the brilliance of the Judaism that Yochanan ben Zakkai helped create. He didn't edit out the people who thought he was wrong. Like the octopus with eight tentacles, each exploring a different direction, we keep as many voices in the conversation as possible. Rabbi David Hartman called this "making a heart of many rooms."^x

What does this mean for us? It means, I think, that we resist the urge to block or ignore the people who have different views from us, whether on vaccination or social policy, politics or religion. We stay in conversation. Rabbi Micah Goodman argues that the echo chambers of social media are the opposite of Talmudic debate, in which the heroes are those who have enough humility to listen and change their minds, to preserve opposing opinions in case a time comes where they are right.^{xi} This too is how we find our way not back to normal, but forward to better. We make a heart of many rooms.

First: Why. Second: How. Third: Wow. I don't know if octopuses experience joy. I'm certain that toddlers do. They both inspire it. Part of what made *My Octopus Teacher* such a hit was the breathtaking beauty of watching these creatures move, full of colour and fluidity and grace. Toddlers aren't quite so graceful, but they are equally amazing. Listen Alison Gopnik's take on the world through toddler eyes:

Think of some completely ordinary, boring, everyday walk, the couple of blocks to the local 7-Eleven store. Taking that same walk with a two-year-old is like going to get a quart of milk with William Blake. The mundane street becomes a sort of circus. There are gates, gates that open one way and not another and that will swing back and forth if you push them just the right way. There are small walls you can walk on, very carefully. There are sewer lids that have fascinatingly regular patterns, and scraps of brightly colored pizza-delivery fliers. There are intriguing strangers to examine carefully from behind a protective parental leg. There is a veritable zoo of creatures, from tiny pill bugs and earthworms to the enormous excitement, or terror, of a real barking dog. The trip to the 7-Eleven becomes a hundred times more interesting, even though, of course, it does take ten times as long. Watching children awakens our own continuing capacities for wonder and knowledge.^{xii}

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel had a phrase for this: he called it "radical amazement." "Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement," he wrote.

“To get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed.”^{xiii}

Heschel too was responding to a crisis in Jewish history. A time in which the ghetto walls had fallen down and the world of the shtetl had been obliterated by the Holocaust; a world in which Judaism could not longer be commanded, and had to be compelling; in which all of us are Jews by choice. A Judaism which opened our eyes to the preciousness of humanity and the world. Heschel marched with Martin Luther King and said his legs were praying; he saw a world that was desperately in need of healing, and also full of wonder.

That radical amazement, those moments of “wow” – all of these reawaken us to why we are here, to who we are and what kind of world we want to create. A world in which the wonder of nature is protected, in which our most vulnerable are cherished, in which caring for one another is valued as our highest good.

Why. How. Wow. As we enter into this new year, may the octopus be our teacher. May the toddler be our teacher. May we teach – and learn from, each other – and may we hold each other in hope.

ⁱ Alison Gopnik, “The Many Minds of the Octopus,” *The Atlantic*, April 17, 2001,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2019/07/why-did-octopuses-become-smart/593155/>.

ⁱⁱ Tom Vanderbilt, *Beginners: The Joy and Transformative Power of Lifelong Learning* (New York, 2021), p.53.

ⁱⁱⁱ Alison Gopnik, Andrew N. Meltzoff, Patricia K. Kuhl, *The Scientist in the Crib: Minds, Brains, and How Children Learn* (New York, 1999), p.186.

^{iv} Alison Gopnik and Ezra Klein, “The Ezra Klein Show,” April 16, 2021, [Transcript: Ezra Klein Interviews Alison Gopnik - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/16/ezra-klein-interviews-alison-gopnik/).

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Ed Feinstein, “The Day After – Rebuilding Judaism After Catastrophe,” Hartman Rabbinic Torah Seminar, July 15, 2021, <https://www.hartman.org.il/rebuilding-judaism-after-catastrophe-a-high-holiday-sermon-seminar/>.

^{vii} Sy Montgomery, *The Soul of an Octopus: A Surprising Exploration into the Wonder of Consciousness* (New York, 2015), pp.4-5.

^{viii} Vanderbilt, p.30.

^{ix} Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 56a.

^x David Hartman, *A Heart of Many Rooms: Celebrating the Many Voices Within Judaism* (Woodstock, VT, 2001).

^{xi} Micah Goodman, “A Zionism for Tomorrow: A Government of Possibility?” Hartman Rabbinic Torah Seminar, July 13, 2021, <https://www.hartman.org.il/a-zionism-for-tomorrow/>.

^{xii} Gopnik, Meltzoff, and Kuhl, p.211.

^{xiii} Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York, 1955).