



Yom Kippur 5779: The Game of Life

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Have you ever played the Game of Life?

I was introduced to it just a few years ago by my kids. The basic idea is that you go around the board with a combination of decision-making and dumb luck, and see who wins at the end.

Apparently, it's a competition.

The Game of Life, it turns out, has existed in many versions, from its introduction as "The Checkered Game of Life" in 1860, full of virtues and vices, to the version we have at home, with the plastic cars and pink and blue plastic babies, which you collect based on what you roll and where you land. Earlier, similar games had the goal of getting to heaven; now, the one who retires with the most cash wins.¹

But Rabbi Larry Kushner has a different take. He describes a Game of Life with five rules, as follows:

1. You cannot decide when to begin playing.
2. You cannot decide when to stop playing.
3. Each player is issued apparently random, undeserved gifts and handicaps throughout the progress of the game... The question... is not whether you deserve the hand you were dealt, but how you choose to play it.
4. Points are awarded whenever you can discern the presence, or the signature, of the Creator, and then act so as to help others see it too.
5. Everything is connected to everything else... Throughout all Creation, just beneath the surface, joining each person to every other person and to every other thing... we discover invisible lines of connection.

"Now *that's* my idea of a game."²

Last night, I spoke about the importance of care in how we judge one another; how we should give the benefit of the doubt, and not be too quick to judge. Today, I want to tell you the story of an actual judge, and a story of connections – those invisible lines, which sometimes, we see.

My friend and colleague, Rabbi Lila Kagedan, shares this memory of her father:

We were frequently cycling through nurses when my father was sick... One week after several nurses had quit, a woman rang the doorbell one hour before Shabbat. She was wearing a long skirt, long sleeves and a hijab... Before she even came in the door I said to her "the patient is my father - a male." She said "I know. The prohibition around

¹ Jill Lepore, "The Meaning of Life," *The New Yorker*, May 21, 2007.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/05/21/the-meaning-of-life>

² Lawrence Kushner, *Invisible Lines of Connection* (Woodstock, VT, 1996), pp.25-27.



touching a member of the opposite sex is lifted in the cases of caregiving, and if he doesn't mind, I could also wear gloves." I smiled and remarked how the more different we think we are the more the same we truly are. I shared with her some of the same concepts from Judaism.

I welcomed her into the back sunroom where my father sat in his wheelchair. As always, he had a look about him that was inviting and warm and gentle, and as always he was wearing a kippa on his head. The nurse's mouth dropped... I immediately jumped in and [explained that] my father had a neurodegenerative disease, ALS. She stopped me and said, "That's not what I am reacting to. I know him."

I couldn't imagine how that could be possible.

She began to explain to me that as a little girl she came to Canada, and as she attempted to claim refugee status with her family after the genocide in Somalia, she had to come before a court tribunal at the Immigration Refugee Board. She told me that she was terrified. A lawyer had been selected from the Canadian government to represent refugees. Her father and several siblings had been murdered in Somalia and she was with her mother and a few of her younger siblings. The day was tense and nerve-wracking. When they walked into the courtroom, her mother began to cry. She began to pull on the arm of the attorney in fear. She begged for a different trial date even though they had been waiting for this date for many months. The attorney asked her why she was so nervous? After all they had gone over the testimony several times and although there were very painful and personal details, he felt they were ready for the trial. She nodded in the direction of the judge. The judge was wearing a kippa. She was wearing a hijab. She was trembling.

At that moment, the judge came down from his bench. He walked over to the trembling woman and he said to her: "We are all equals here. Here in Canada you and I will be friends. I will care for you and you will care for me. You are safe here. I do not judge you based on your religion and I hope you will do me the same courtesy." The judge then moved aside the lapel of his blazer to reveal a Mickey Mouse figure embroidered onto his pocket which made the little kids laugh and immediately feel more comfortable.

The little girl was the nurse in our home that day. The judge was my father. And indeed many years later they were able to be friends, and she was able to care for him as he once cared for her.³

What an extraordinary story.

We never know which moments matter. My parents often say that the moments they were afraid scarred us as kids are the moments that my brother and I forgot, and the moments we

³ Personal correspondence, shared with permission.



hold them accountable for are the ones they don't remember. Rabbi Eliana Yolkut, in a reflection I shared on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, asks herself what her kids will remember: "Will they remember that we laid with them at night when they were sad or scared? Or will they remember I wanted them to sleep in their own darn beds? Will they remember the myriads of appointments and logistics we managed so they were cared for? Or the times we forgot?"⁴

We want so badly to get it right, this game of life. We want what we do to matter. We rabbis are far from immune. I recently read, and related to, an article with the tell-all title: "Stress Eating, Texting, and Tears: How Rabbis Prepare for the Holiest Days of the Year."⁵ There is not a rabbi I know who doesn't sweat the High Holy Days. Now, most of us could give good enough sermons with one hand tied behind our backs. But we don't want to give good enough sermons. We want to give great sermons. And why? Because we want to save the world. Or at least, our synagogues. We don't want to give the "nice sermon, rabbi" sermon. We want to give the "my life has changed and I'm telling all my friends and rededicating myself to the synagogue" sermon. As one colleague writes:

We believe the idea that because we have hundreds or thousands of people in front of us that we have to change all of their lives...

This, of course, is ridiculous.

Rather, our goal must be to impact a singular person. You might not know their name or where they are seated. You do know who they are in other ways.⁶

How do we know who you are? Because – here's the big secret – every rabbi gives the sermon that he or she needs to hear. We are writing for you, but we are also writing for ourselves. In hopes that we can hear it. In hopes that we too can change.

And yes, we sometimes have the arrogance to think we can do more. Believe it or not, rabbis, like everybody else, have occasional problems with our egos. I always say that what keeps me somewhat humble is I can speak in this sanctuary and a thousand people will listen, and then I get home to my two children, and nobody listens. But religions tend to feed into the idea that if we were just good enough, *everyone* would listen; that we need one great leader to save us.⁷ That's how you get to chief rabbis and papal infallibility, which tend to create more problems that they solve. It's good to want to be a force for good. But it's foolhardy to think we can do it all alone.

Of course I care about the sermons on these days. But I care much more about what we do together, all year round. Cooking for people who are hungry, engaging with Torah, hearing each

⁴ Rabbi Eliana Yolkut, Facebook, August 29, 2018.

⁵ <https://forward.com/life/409506/stress-eating-texting-and-tears-13-rabbis-prepare-for-the-holiest-day-of/>

⁶ <https://therabbismanual.com/your-rosh-hashanah-success/>

⁷ For more on this, see my essay, "First Plant the Sapling: Beyond Messianic Leadership," in Lawrence Hoffman, ed., *More than Managing: The Relentless Pursuit of Effective Jewish Leadership*, pp.82-85.



other's stories. Surely we could outsource these things: buy the food, make a donation to a yeshiva, hire more staff. But there's a reason we ask for volunteers to bake for the oneg; to greet people coming to services or classes; to lead shiva minyans; to mentor Jews-by-choice. As Judge Kagedan said, "I will care for you, and you will care for me." It is a better way to live – within Temple or at home, or on our city streets.

My friend Rabbi Michael Latz shares this simple practice. I've seen him do it countless times, and I've been trying to do it too. It goes like this:

Whenever we go out to eat at a restaurant or buy something at the store and stop at the gas station or the coffee shop, I always introduce myself to the server or cashier or mechanic. I ask their name as well.

Why?

Because we are people. The person serving my food, fixing my car, selling me my clothes, making my coffee—they are a human being. Not a servant. Not a commodity. Not an anonymous creature. They're human.

This is hardly radical or revolutionary.

When we know each other's names, perhaps we will acknowledge that we are all members of the community and will work together to solve the great challenges facing us.

Treating each other with dignity and respect is simply the decent thing to do.⁸

Is it possible that decades from now, that person will come back into our lives? Is it possible that in those exchanges, we will be transformed? That we will care for them now, and they will care for us later? Maybe. Maybe not. We don't do it for our legacy. We do it for our lives. We do it because we are all in it together. We do it, not just because we never know which people and which moments ultimately matter, but because *every* person and *every* moment matters.

At key moments, the story of the Torah is moved forward by an anonymous figure. The man who points Joseph in the right direction, towards his brothers. The sailors, who don't want to throw Jonah in the water.

Yom Kippur is a day of individual reflection. Why then do we recite our sins in the plural? Why then do we gather en masse? One of our Torah school students asked just this week, "How many people does it take to have a religion?" I'll tell you one thing: It takes more than one.

I don't know if you've ever noticed, but we have a minyan of Torahs in our ark. Ten Torahs, each with their own stories. The central Sephardi scroll from Egypt, which is close to 300 years old. The baby scroll, donated by Edna Katz Silver and her family in 1968 – why? Because when her son Robert was twelve years old with a cancerous growth on his spine, the doctors said he

⁸ Rabbi Michael Latz, Facebook, September 15, 2018.



had just six months to live. Robert, I'm glad to tell you, has just turned 62. But at the time, the clock was ticking loudly, and so the family built this ramp up to the bima and got that small Torah so that Robert could come up in his wheelchair, be passed the scroll and become a bar mitzvah.⁹ To this day, that scroll is especially treasured when the spirit is willing but the body is weak. These two scrolls, along with the eight others that came to us from Temple Beth Shalom on Terrebonne and Rodeph Sholom on the West Island, from families honouring loved ones and wanting to build community – without them, we would not be who we are. If any one of them were missing, we would be less whole.

And so it is, not just with the scrolls, but with us. If any one of us were missing, our congregation would be less whole.

One of the first times I played the Game of Life with Shelley and the kids, my little one asked: "Which way do I go to have as many kids as possible, as quickly as I can?" *Buckle up*, I thought to myself. But the more I think about it, I realize: the kid has a point. Not that life is all about having children, and how many – but that what matters most of all is who is on your board. We can't decide when we start playing, and we don't, for the most part, decide when we stop. But we can decide who is with us. What families we form. What communities we join. Which people we turn to, and to whom we respond. The nurse and the judge. The customer and the server. The rabbi and the congregation. The parent and the child. The stranger and the friend.

Rabbi Will Berkovitz shares this story:

Stopping by the grocery store not long ago, I told my sons I had to pick up a few things. Nativ, my seven-year-old, said, "We also need to get something for Margret. Try as I might I couldn't figure out who he was talking about. "Nativ," I finally said, "Who is Margret?" "She is the woman who sells those newspapers on the sidewalk," he replied. Surprised, I wondered out loud, "Nativ, how do you know her name and what she needs?" He looked me straight in the eye and said, "Abba. I asked."¹⁰

I will care for you, and you will care for me, and we will care for each other.

The first step is to ask.

⁹ Personal conversation with Edna Katz Silver, September 17, 2018, shared with permission (and my gratitude).

¹⁰ In a compilation by Rabbi Robin Nafshi.