
IN LIMINAL SPACE AND TIME

Katy Z. Allen

Human beings are generally uncomfortable with fluidity, uncertainty, impermanence, change - and with liminality. Yet, during the holiest time of year, we immerse ourselves in uncertainty and liminality. The process begins with the month of Elul, when we hear the sound of the shofar every morning. The loud blast is a warning, a wake-up call, reminding us to prepare for what is to come. Then, on Rosh HaShanah, the Book of Life is opened - but it is not closed, and most of us enter into a period of waiting:

שלושה ספרים נפתחין כראש השנה, אחד של רשעים גמורין, ואחד של צדיקים גמורין, ואחד של בינוניים. צדיקים גמורין - נכתבין ונחתמין לאלתר לחיים, רשעים גמורין - נכתבין ונחתמין לאלתר למיתה' בינוניים - תלוין ועומדין מראש השנה ועד יום הכפורים וכו' - נכתבין לחיים, לא וכו' - נכתבין למיתה.

Three books are opened [in heaven] on Rosh Hashanah, one for the completely wicked, one for the completely righteous, and one for the those who are in between. The completely righteous are immediately inscribed and sealed for life. The completely wicked are immediately inscribed and sealed for death. Those who are in-between are left undecided from Rosh Hashanah until Yom Kippur. Those who deserve it are inscribed for life; those who do not deserve it are inscribed for death.¹

On Yom Kippur, we anxiously await our fate - will we be written in the Book of Life? Will our sins be forgiven? Will we continue through another year? The Day of Atonement is a liminal time - perhaps the most intense liminal time of the Jewish year. We enter into a liminal state that is reminiscent of death - we do not eat or drink, we refrain from the sexual relations that can lead to the formation of new life, and we wear the white of burial shrouds. Liminal times are full of potential - potential for failure, but also potential for success and change. Thus, the intense liminal time that is Yom Kippur is fraught with danger, and yet it is also a

time when we are able to make *teshuvah*, and to gain forgiveness.

On this Day of Atonement, we read the Book of Jonah, which is awash with images of liminal time and space. In Chapter 1, Jonah seeks to run away from God, and when he fails in this attempt, he tells the sailors to throw him overboard, so that the storm will abate. Does Jonah want to die? Perhaps. He certainly enters into a state of distress. He goes down, and down, in a series of steps, first down to Jaffa and then down into the ship. Once the storm begins, Jonah descends even further in the ship, then from standing to sitting and from consciousness to the semi-consciousness of sleep. Finally the sailors throw him into the sea and he sinks down in the water. Yet, with all this descending, Jonah doesn't die. Instead, he ends up in the belly of a fish.

וימן ה' דג גדול לבלע את יונה והי יונה במעי הדג שלשה ימים ושלשה לילות: ויהפלל יונה אל ה' אלקיו ממעי הדגה: ויאמר קראתי מצרה לי אל ה' ויענני מכמן שאול שועתי שמעת קולי:

The Lord appointed a large fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish. He said, I called out to the Lord from my distress, and He answered me. From the belly of Sheol I cried out; you heard my voice.²

From the belly of the fish, Jonah calls out in distress. It could be argued that Jonah is in a state of depression, of spiritual death. Spiritual death is not actual death, but it is a step toward it, for one who is in this state is not fully alive. Spiritual death is a liminal state of being from which one may re-emerge into full life, or succumb to death. Jonah, in the fish's belly, is also physically in a liminal place and state. For three days and three nights, he lies there between life and death. From a realistic point of view, it is impossible for him to be alive in a fish's belly. Yet, as we read the story, we suspend reality and we believe that Jonah lives inside the fish.

After Jonah's release from the fish, and after walking for another three days, he arrives at the city of Ninevah, where he delivers God's message of impending doom.

ויחל יונה לבוא בעיר מהלך יום אחד ויקרא ויאמר עוד ארבעים יום וינינה נהפכת:

Jonah began to come into the city, a journey of one day, and he called out, and he said, Forty more days and Ninevah is overthrown.³

These forty days are similar to the ten days from Rosh HaShanah to Yom Kippur.

They are a liminal time that may be followed by either grace or punishment; they are a time for repentance. During this period, the people of Ninevah enter into a liminal state: they fast, thus refraining from life-giving sustenance, and they put on sackcloth, a sign of mourning, which is a time of stepping back from fully participating in life, and also a form a depression.

At the end of the story, Jonah builds himself a flimsy hut, a place that is neither totally inside nor totally outside, and there he sits in the shade, which is neither fully dark nor fully light, and waits to see what will happen to Ninevah.

ויצא יונה מן העיר וישב מקדם לעיר ויעש לו שם סכה וישב תחתיה בצל עד אשר יראה מה יהיה בעיר:

Then Jonah went out from the city and sat to the east of the city, and made himself a booth there and sat under it in the shade, until he would see what would happen in the city.⁴

Even if we are written into the Book of Life on Yom Kippur, we do not escape from liminality at the end of the day. Immediately after Yom Kippur ends, we begin to build a flimsy hut - like Jonah's - in which to live for the seven (or eight) days of Sukkot. The Mishnah tells us:

כל שבועת הימים אדם עושה סכתו קבע וביתו עראי. ירדו גשמים, מאימתי מותר לפנות, משתסרח המקפה. משלו משל, למה הרבר דומה, לעבד שבא למוזג כוס לרבו, ושפך לו קיתון על פניו:

All seven days a person makes his *sukkah* a permanent [dwelling] and his house temporary. When rain falls, when is it permissible to vacate? When the gruel begins to stink. An analogy was drawn: to what can this be compared? To a slave who came to fill a cup for his master, and he emptied the jug over his face.⁵

Sukkot happens at a liminal time of year. In Israel this is a season when it may or may not rain. A little earlier in the year, and there would definitely be no rain. A little later, there would definitely *be* rain. But Sukkot is on the cusp between the dry season and the rainy season; the weather can go either way. And during this liminal time, we are to live in a liminal space, a space that is neither fully inside nor fully outside, a space where we may be touched for better or for worse by the fact that this is also a liminal time. While we are sitting in liminal time and space, we hope that God will not be angry with us and throw us out of our temporary but sacred abode.

We experience liminal time and space in other ways at Sukkot as well. The Torah, in the commandments related to the holiday tells us:

בסכת תשבו שבועת ימים כל האזרח בישראל ישבו בסכת: למען ידעו דרתיכם כי בסכות
הושבתי את בני ישראל בהוציא אותם מארץ מצרים אני ה' אלקיכם:

You shall dwell in booths seven days; all the native Israelites shall dwell in booths; in order that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God.⁶

The Torah tells us to remember. Remembering thrusts us into another kind of liminal place - we are not really back in the desert, but through our remembering of that time, we are not really here in the present, either. We are somewhere in between. Also, at Sukkot, living in a simple space without all of our usual material belongings helps us to remember a time when we had nothing. Although we now have many things, we live for a time as though we had nothing. We live between the reality of who we are now and of who we were in the past. In addition, during this time we invite the *ushpizin*, or guests, our ancestors, into our *sukkot*, and in some mystical way we spend time with them. We are not really with them in an earlier time, and they are not really with us here and now, and yet we are together in some way. It is another example of how we put ourselves in between - in liminal space and time - during Sukkot.

On Sukkot, this holiday of in-betweenness, we read the Book of Kohelet. Kohelet tells us to take pleasure from life, and he reassures us that this is acceptable to God, for example:

לך אבל בשמחה לחמך ושתה בלב טוב יינך כי כבר רצה האלקים את מעשיך:

Go, eat your bread in gladness, and drink your wine in joy, for God has already accepted your actions.⁷

In fact, Kohelet says, we might as well enjoy ourselves, because we have no idea what is coming in the future, and in addition, we have no control over what will come:

אין אדם שליט ברוח לכלוא את הרוח ואין שלטון ביום המות:

No one person has mastery over the lifebreath, to restrain the lifebreath; there is no mastery over the day of death.⁸

לא ידע האדם מה שיהיה ואשר יהיה מאחריו מי יגיד לו:

A person cannot know what will be; who shall tell him what will be after him?⁹

Learning to live with uncertainty and the unknown is another way of living in the in-between. We are alive in life, and yet we have no knowledge of what will happen tomorrow, or even in the next minute. We are between knowing and not knowing, for we know what is happening now, but we don't know what will happen next.

Avivah Zornberg, in her book *The Particulars of Rapture*, quotes the following *midrash* to help us understand that *teshuvah* takes place in the in-between places, the liminal spaces:

When the Israelites were in the desert, they acted offensively. Then, they did *teshuvah*, they repented in secret, as it is said, "Whenever Moses went out to the tent . . . and when Moses entered the Tent . . . when all the people saw the cloud . . ." This teaches that their *teshuvah*, their repentance, was in secret. Therefore, God's compassion was stirred and He gave them Yom Kippur for forgiveness, to them and their children and their children's children till the end of all generations.¹⁰

Zornberg focuses on Moses' going out of and into the holy space of the Tent of Meeting, the *Mishkan*, which was the precursor of the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*, the Temple, the holiest of places, saying "The moment of 'secret *teshuvah*' is the moment when the people prostrate themselves, each in the privacy of his tent-flap."¹¹ In other words, *teshuvah*, repentance, happens at a liminal place, at the *petah*, the tent entrance, which is both inside and outside, which is in the boundary between holy and profane.

Kohelet reminds us that we are all fallible:

כי אדם אין צדיק בארץ אשר יעשה טוב ולא יהמא

For there is not a righteous person on earth who will do good and not sin.¹²

And, since we all make mistakes, we all must engage in *teshuvah*. The founder of the Musar Movement, Rabbi Israel Lipkin Salanter once said,

Most people repent during the *Selichot* week preceding Rosh HaShanah; the more pious during the month of Elul preceding Rosh

HaShanah; but I say that one should begin to repent immediately after Yom Kippur.¹³

And in the Talmud, we read:

רבי אליעזר אומר: שוב יום אחד לפני מיתתך. שאלו תלמידיו את רבי אליעזר: וכי אדם יודע איזהו יום ימות - אמר להן: וכל שבך, ישוב היום שמא ימות למחר, ונמצא כל ימיו בתשובה.

Rabbi Eliezer said: Repent one day before your death. His disciples asked Rabbi Eliezer, Does a person know on what day he will die? He said to them, All the more so that he repent today, lest he die tomorrow. And thus he spent all his days in repentance.¹⁴

Both Rabbi Salanter and Rabbi Eliezer are telling us that we should repent every day of the year. And, as we have seen, repentance happens when we are in a liminal place.

The relationship between *teshuvah* and liminality can also be approached from the other direction. Rabbi Neil Gillman says in regard to our collective time here on Earth, "Eschatology...[and creation] . . . provide a frame for the 'in-between,' which, in classic Jewish religious thinking, is understood as the age of history, the age in which we are now located." Gillman is referring to our collective time on Earth, from the creation of the world to the end of the world as we know it. But if we think of this framework individually, we can see that our entire physical time here on Earth is in-between - liminal time; it is a time of constant change and constant *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah* not only occurs in liminal space and time, but being in the process of *teshuvah* is in and of itself a liminal state, between who we are and who we will become. Thus, the sense of being in flux comes from both directions - from life itself, and from the process of doing *teshuvah*.

In Judaism, we continually sanctify liminal moments and liminal spaces. With the *mezuzah*, we sanctify the liminal space between the inside and the outside of our home. By lighting candles, we sanctify the liminal moments when day meets night and when profane time meets holy time. At all of these places and times, God is present, and through our rituals, we attempt to make contact with the Divine Presence, to make God immanent in our lives and our world.

By immersing ourselves in liminal space and liminal time during Sukkot, we are reminded (immediately after Yom Kippur) that repentance is ongoing and change is ongoing. We are also reminded that repentance and change are holy. Kohelet calls out to us to recognize and acknowledge this constant experience of change:

דור הלך ודור בא והארץ לעולם עמדת: וזרח השמש ובא השמש ואל מקומו שואף וזרח הוא
שם:

A generation goes, a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.
The sun rises, and the sun sets, and longs for the place where it rises.¹⁶

At the end of Sukkot, on the holiday of Simchat Torah, we celebrate the Torah, to remind us that during the difficult process of change - which is, in fact, ongoing - we have the Torah to hold on to, to help us stand in the tension of that place of change. Kohelet also tells us to hang onto the Torah:

סוף דבר הכל נשמע את האלקים ירא ואת מצותיו שמור:

The end of the matter, when all has been heard: Revere God and observe His commandments.¹⁷

Thus the Torah is the one thing we have to hold onto, for all else is constantly changing. The word **הבל**, which occurs five times in the second verse of the Book of Kohelet, reminds us of the transience of all:

הבל הבלים אמר קהלת הבל הבלים הבל הבל:

Utter vanity, said Kohelet. Utter vanity? All is vanity?¹⁸

This word then recurs repeatedly throughout the book. One of the ways to understand **הבל** is in a negative way, as a condemnation of how people spend their money and their time. It is a recognition that this is all a waste of one's time and one's life. However, a second way of considering this word is that it means transient. This is neither a positive nor a negative concept. It is simply a recognition of the way life is. Nothing stays as it is very long. Everything is constantly changing.

Transience has to do with change, and liminal space and time are in-between places and moments. They are boundaries. They are neither here nor there. Transience is also neither here nor there. It is always on its way. Both are areas that can feel uncomfortable, they are conditions or places where we humans like least to be. However, if we can accept them, we can open ourselves up to the third meaning of **הבל**, which is emptiness - the great void, the time and place before creation from which all newness comes. Learning to stand comfortably in our *sukkah*, in liminal space and time, requires us to empty ourselves, but it also makes it possible for us to empty ourselves. And once we have done this, we open ourselves up to the possibility that God will fill that space, and the result will be a new cre-

ation - a new creation of who we are. Only then will the process that began with the month of Elul and reached its climax on Yom Kippur be temporarily completed, and only then will we taste the fruits of *teshuvah*; we will be recreated; we will be transformed. This transformation will bring with it true happiness, for only in being fully in relationship to the Divine can we find contentment and peace, and contentment and peace lead to happiness.

¹ BT *Rosh Hashanah* 16b.

² *Jonah*, 2:1-3.

³ *Ibid.*, 3:4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4:5.

⁵ *Sukkah* 2.9.

⁶ *Lev.* 23:42-43.

⁷ *Eccl.* 9:7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.8.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 10:14.

¹⁰ Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus*. New York, Doubleday, 2001, p. 348.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 349.

¹² *Eccl.* 7:20.

¹³ Philip Goodman, ed., *The Rosh HaShanah Anthology*. Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society, 1992, p. 139.

¹⁴ *Shabbat* 153a.

¹⁵ Neil Gillman, *The Death of Death: Resurrection and Immortality in Jewish Thought*. Woodstock, Vermont, Jewish Lights Publishing, 1997, p. 251.

¹⁶ *Eccl.* 1:4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 12:13.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:2.