

**Yom Kippur 5779 – Kol Nidrei Sermon**  
**Thou Shalt Acknowledge All of Your Feelings!**  
**Rabbi Michael Mishkin**

Good Yantiv!

Tonight – on the holiest night of the year, I want to share with you one of the greatest midrashim – rabbinic stories – of all time!

Why is it so great?

First, it's long and detailed.

Second, it's completely surprising.

Third, it's chock-full of wisdom.

But before I share it with you. Let me give you some background.

Psychology is, in part, the study of the inner life. Understanding that we have an inner life, and that it has great influence over us, are crucial for understanding human behavior.

I recently watched a TED Talk by Dr. Susan David. Dr. David is a Psychologist on the faculty of Harvard Medical School, and the author of a best-selling book called, *Emotional Agility*.

Her TED Talk can be found at the following link:

[https://www.ted.com/talks/susan\\_david\\_the\\_gift\\_and\\_power\\_of\\_emotional\\_courage?language=en#t-6633](https://www.ted.com/talks/susan_david_the_gift_and_power_of_emotional_courage?language=en#t-6633)

Professor David, says that “How we deal with our inner-world drives everything. Every aspect of how we love, how we live, how we parent, and how we lead.”

She continues, saying “Life’s beauty is inseparable from its fragility.”

“We are young, until we are not; we walk down the street sexy, until one day we realize we are unseen. We are healthy, until a diagnosis brings us to our knees.”

“The only certainty [in life] is uncertainty – and yet we are not navigating this frailty successfully. . . ”

The reason we are not navigating life in a healthy way—she says—is because it is very common to categorize our feelings into “good” feelings and “bad” feelings. The feelings that fall into that second category are sadness, anger, frustration, and even grief. Of course, these feelings are **NOT** bad, they are natural, and an important part of being human -- but in one of Dr. David’s studies, she found that as many as 70% of people view these feelings negatively, and/or try to avoid them.

To make matters worse, we live in a society that puts a premium on being happy and being strong. Therefore if someone—God forbid--has a terminal illness, or suffers a major loss, often that person feels like she is not able to truly share her feelings with other people, and because of that, often won’t share them with herself.

This is more than a bit unfortunate, because “Research on emotional suppression shows that when emotions are pushed aside or ignored, they get stronger. Psychologists call this amplification.

We might think we’re in control of unwanted emotions when we ignore them, but, in fact, they control us.”

Seeing our feelings in this binary way—positive or negative--is rigid. “And rigidity in the face of complexity –[doesn’t work].”

Dr. Susan David’s solution to this is that “we need greater levels of emotional agility [in order to be resilient and to thrive].” Emotional agility means accepting and being attuned to **ALL** of our feelings, because they all have something to teach us. Each emotion provides us with data—we don’t have to act on that data, but we should experience it and try to understand it. Then we should take that information and compare it against, or align it with, our values to determine how to move forward.

And, it’s important to note -- This process only works if we are truly honest with ourselves.

Although much of what Dr. David says is not exactly new, it is authentic and powerful in the way that she presents it.

Our Sages—going back 1,500 years to the time of the Talmud--were deeply attuned to this wisdom.

The Torah presents our biblical heroes as people who had great faith, strength, and wisdom – but also as fallible human beings. This is a beautiful aspect of Torah because it

makes our heroes more accessible to us, and enables us to identify more with them—since they too make mistakes.

Our Sages looked up to the biblical heroes, and continued to humanize them. Through midrashim—rabbinic stories—they present the biblical characters in more complex ways than the Torah does.

Even with all of this as background information, the midrash, I'm going to share with you is striking. (This midrash is found, with variations, in several rabbinic collections. It occurs in its fullest form in *Midrash Tanhuma* and *Deuteronomy Rabbah*, both of which are over 1,000 years old.) The story in this midrash is about Moses' angst and anger at God's decree. At first, it seems that the angst and anger are directed at the decree that Moses will not enter the land of Canaan, but quickly, the Midrash shows us that Moses' angst in this story is due to the fact that God has decreed he will die, and Moses says he is afraid to die.

Our Sages did not have to tell this story about Moses. It's certainly NOT the way that the Torah presents the end of Moses' life. But our Sages wanted to tell it. And the reason they wanted to tell it is that—through this story—they are able to instruct us to acknowledge all of our emotions, and not bury them. Even when our emotions are very painful. Even when we are reflecting on the most difficult issues of life—the loss of our loved ones, and the knowledge that, we too, will one day die.

In this story that I'm going to share with you--Moses may not be fully aware of all the different feelings he experiences, and how they affect him, but our Sages are saying that **they** are aware that these are the types of feelings we all can have—especially when we think about our mortality.

The Midrash opens with Moses making a request of God, saying: "Listen to my song, do not avoid my prayer."

God responded, asking: "What is your request?"

He answered: "Master of the Universe, You called me Moses My servant, I am your servant . . . [and ] you have written in Your Torah: If a slave says, I love my master, he can stay with his Master. I have loved You, and your Torah, and your children, and do not wish to go free. I do not want to die! [I want to continue being Your slave—Your servant!] Yet, You have not followed this Torah teaching with me—[You are unwilling to keep me on], so now I implore you, Listen God, to my song—listen to my request."

God said to him: "Impossible. Enough. . . even if a slave were purchased for 1,000 gold coins, [and stayed with his master, after his time of servitude was up], when his time to

die comes, his master cannot say to him, 'You are my servant [and you stay with me],' for the slave must die, and in his death he is freed from his master."

Moses said to God: "Is it worth nothing that my feet stepped on the clouds [when you brought the heavens down on top of Mt. Sinai, and gave me the Torah]?!  
Is it worth nothing that I ran before you [as a loyal servant], and now I will [die] and decay in the ground?!"

God said to him: I have already decreed death in the world—**everyone** dies. . . [Even] Abraham, who sanctified My name in the world--died.

Moses said: Abraham begat Ishmael, whose descendants provoke you.

God said to him: Isaac who was willing to be sacrificed—died.  
Moses responded: Isaac begat Esau, whose descendants -- [the Romans] -- destroyed the Temple and burnt your sanctuary.

God said: Look at Jacob who had 12 sons, none of whom were unfit.

Moses said to God: Jacob did not step on the clouds [like me]. . . You did not speak to him face-to-face, and he didn't receive the Torah from you.

God said to Moses: "Enough! -- do not continue."

But Moses continues anyway, saying: "If it be Your will, may I enter the Land of Canaan and spend two or three years there -- and then die? God said to him: It is a decree before Me that you shall not enter.

Moses then asks: If I can't enter in my life, then may I enter after death? God said: Not during your lifetime, and not after your lifetime.

Moses continues with a crying plea that is familiar to us, because we use it on the High Holidays. Moses cries out: "Master of the Universe, arise from your throne of judgment, and sit on your throne of mercy, so that I will not die."  
. . . But God was unmoved.

Now Moses became desperate and he goes looking for someone or something to argue on his behalf. He goes to heaven and earth and asks them to appeal to God. . . They refuse. Moses then goes to the sea, which has protected him before, and begs for it to intervene. The sea, which had also been struck by Moses' staff, [when he made the sea

split for the Israelites], refuses to comply, and instead, cruelly **mocks** Moses for having lost his strength and power. At this point, Moses cries and laments his fate, saying:

“Who will bring me back to the months of yore? [To my past glory?] When I passed before [the sea, in my great strength] I was king in this world -- and now I lie powerless - and no one listens to me.

As Moses grieves, he comes closer to accepting his own death.

God then invites Moses to see his death in entirely natural terms, saying:

“This is the plan -- and this is the way of the world. Each generation has its teachers, each generation has its providers, each generation has its leaders. Until now it was your portion to serve me. Now you have taken your portion, and it is time for Joshua your student to serve.”

Moses, however, misses the point. Hearing that it is now time for Joshua to take over the reins of leadership, Moses comes up with a new proposal for God—he will give up his leadership and allow Joshua to take over. As long as he can continue living.

God agrees to this plan – knowing it won’t work. And when the plan fails, Moses says, “Master of the Universe, until now I have asked for life, now my life is given to You.”

Faced with a life that he could not bear living, Moses accepts death.

Once he accepts his death, Moses forgives the Children of Israel, and they forgive him.

In his last act, before he dies, Moses praises God.

That’s the end of the midrash.

This midrash is so amazing because it makes Moses so human – he’s filled with chutzpah, pain, and fear—and, in the end, he finds peace and meaning.

But it is even better than it seems.

Rabbi Allan Kensky, the former dean of the Rabbinical School at the Jewish Theological Seminary, and my mentor, discovered that the different stages, which Moses goes through in this midrash, follow the stages of grief as laid out by the great psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. (Rabbi Kensky beautifully lays out the parallels in an article entitled, “On Death and Dying and the Last Days of Moses,” *Reconstructionist*, Spring

1992.) In 1969, Kubler-Ross published a groundbreaking work called, *On Death and Dying*. The book, which was based on her work with terminally ill patients, identified a series of stages that most terminal patients go through. This process is known as the 5 stages of grief—and they are: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

All but the first stage—denial—can be found in this midrash (Moses' denial of death is found in other midrashim). In this midrash, Moses gets angry at God, then he bargains with God, next he becomes depressed, and finally, he comes to acceptance. Once Moses accepts his fate, he is able to reconcile with the Israelites and with God.

The 5 stages of grief are not only for a terminally ill person facing his or her mortality, they are also a pattern that many people go through when they lose a loved one.

Dr. Kubler-Ross provides important insight on this when she says:

“The five stages . . . are a part of the framework that [help us learn] to live with the one we lost. They are tools to help us frame and identify what we may be feeling. But they are not stops on some linear timeline in grief.”

In other words, she is saying we don't go through these stages in a neat and orderly way. We also don't necessarily go through them in chronological order nor in a straight line. When it comes to grief, people usually experience it as a wavy line—going up and down.

This sermon would be good to deliver tomorrow, before Yizkor—but I am delivering tonight, because it's also a relevant sermon for Yom Kippur in general.

One of the motifs of Yom Kippur is death. There are prayers, rituals, and symbols which are related to death. The prayer which directs us to death most intensely is the *Unetaneh Tokef*, which has the section, “On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and Yom Kippur it is sealed. The prayer then lists numerous ways we can die.

In addition, on Yom Kippur, we abstain from things that give us physical joy—most notably food and water. So, on a small level, we're supposed to experience death.

The morning Torah reading opens with the words “Va'yi'dabeyr Adonai el Moshe, acharai mote sh'nei b'nei Aharon,” which means, “And God spoke to Moses, after the death of the two sons of Aaron. . .” (Leviticus 16:1)

Back in the *Mahzor*, we have a Yizkor service, in which we remember our loved ones who have passed away. And we have a group of prayers in a section called,

“Martyrology,” in which we remember heroic Jews who died, sanctifying God’s name, while standing up for their principles.

Why are there so many signs and references to death on Yom Kippur?

The reason is that our tradition is sharing some wisdom with us—reminding us that when we acknowledge the fact that our time is limited—that recognition, should inspire us, to make the most of the time we have here, on earth.

This idea was articulated, in a powerful way, by Steve Jobs, when he delivered the commencement address at Stanford University, on June 12, 2005.

While Jobs is not an exemplar of moral behavior, he did have some great insight into life, including this one. Jobs said:

“Remembering that I’ll be dead soon is the most important tool I’ve ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything — all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure — these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important.”

Jobs continued: “Your time is limited, so don’t waste it living someone else’s life. Don’t be trapped by dogma — which is living with the results of other people’s thinking. Don’t let the noise of others’ opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary.”

In thinking about death, our tradition offers us another nugget of wisdom. It says, for many people, it’s not actually the fear of death that makes them anxious and upset, but rather it’s the fear of dying, without having lived the life that they wanted to live.

Rabbi Naomi Levy – who served as a Scholar-in-Residence, here at TBI last year – shares this wisdom, in the following teaching. She writes:

There is a verse in Psalms (118:17), which says: “*Lo Amut Ki Echyeh*,” which is usually understood as a plea to God saying: “Let me not die, but live.”

However, a Chassidic teaching, understands it as:

“Let me not die, while I’m still alive.”

Rabbi Levy continues: “Death is a great tragedy. But the greater tragedy is to die while you’re still alive. Too often, we suffer from that problem. We become dead while we’re still living. If there is one teaching we can take from Judaism, it would be ‘*Bacharta Ba’Chayim*’– ‘Choose Life’\* –every day.” (\*This comes from Deuteronomy 30:19)

I'd like to conclude with some final words from Dr. Susan David. She says:  
"You don't get to have a meaningful career, or raise a family, or leave the world a better place, without stress and discomfort.  
Discomfort is the price of admission to a meaningful life."

Being aware of your discomfort, identifying it and understanding it, helps make us whole.

May we choose life. May we choose to be honest about our feelings. May we choose to listen to our feelings and hear what they are telling us. And may we put all of this together, so that we can live life with authenticity, and make the most of each precious day that we have here on earth.

And let us say: Amen.