

A warning: This is a REALLY old joke. Actually, this is a REALLY old joke about REALLY old jokes!

It seems David is an up-and-coming comedian who has the good fortune to get taken under the wing of Sammy, a truly veteran Borscht Belt comic legend. They travel together to one of the hotels, where each has a gig on a Saturday night. Sammy says to David: "Alright - I'm going to bring you in on the biggest secret of this business. It's all about the after-hours show. Come with me!" It's two o'clock in the morning and they go into a back room of the club, and you can hear the uproarious laughter from all the way down the hallway. David enters, and sees the entire room is filled with comic legends, the people he has grown up idolizing. Up on a little stage, there's a comedian, who picks up the microphone and simply says "Number 248." The entire club bursts into hysterics. "Number 42." Again, hysterics. David looks at Sammy, perplexed. Sammy says, "Look, kid. These guys know every joke ever told. To make it a little easier, each one has a number.

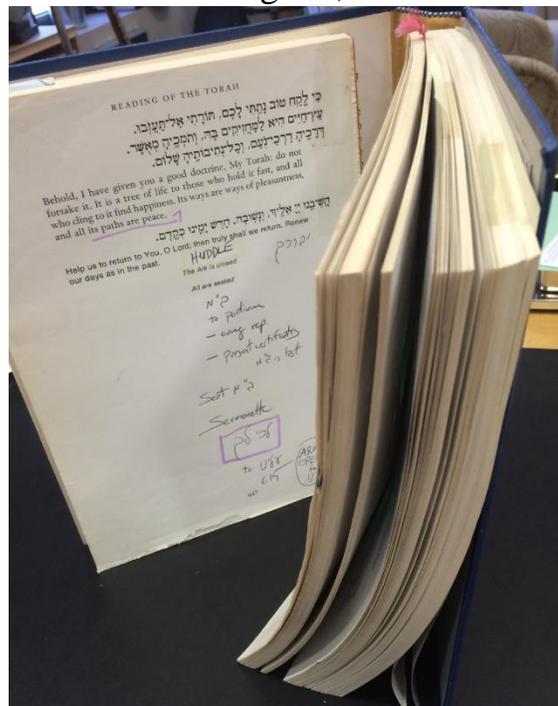


That's all that's needed. You wanna try, kid?"¹ Well, how hard could it be, thinks David. He gets up on the stage, takes the microphone and says "Number 314." Nothing. Crickets. Dead silence. A comedian's worst nightmare. He looks off stage at Sammy and says, "What happened!?" Sammy replies "You know kid, you really have to work on the timing!" [ha. ha. ha.] Then Sammy says, "Why don't you give it another try?" David nervously picks the microphone up and gingerly says "Number 817." The place erupts in laughter. People are falling off of their chairs and gasping for breath. David walks off the stage, proud of himself, but still perplexed. "What just happened, Sammy?" "Oh, kid, you really nailed it. None of us had ever heard that one before!"

I was reminded of this joke several months ago when I started planning these High Holy Days with Cantor Droller. We had just received the advance, advance copies of our brand new *machzor* - *Mishkan HaNefesh*, which you hold in your hands (many of you for the very first time) right now. As Becca and I went through the book, page by page, I was drawn to the beauty of this newest edition of our people's prayers, and terror-struck by idea of planning "from scratch" these High Holy Days services from a book no one has ever seen before, and which I am just starting to learn.

1. Image source: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/03/31/screams>

At the time, I remarked to Cantor Droller that prayerbooks that have been loved and used over time begin to fall open to particular pages. It's sort of the Rabbinic convention version of the joke I started with. In the case of the good, old "1975 Gates of Prayer" - the *siddur* I grew up with, the first book I led from as a rabbi, the page numbers are still ingrained within my heart. 318. 442. 446. 615. 629. There. I just took you straight through the Shabbat morning service at my former congregation. Opening. Torah service. Returning the Torah. *Aleynu*. Mourner's *Kaddish*. As I'm fond of saying to our *b'nei mitzvah* when we do a final run-through of the service "If our services always went this fast, I could probably pack this place every Shabbat!" This "Gates of Blue," which I used on the *bimah* for years, naturally falls open to those pages (as well as some others). In point of fact, the binding is even BROKEN in some of those places.



I can do the same with our relatively-new *Mishkan Tefilah* prayerbook, in use here fully for the last three years. 120. 138. 178. 362. 586. 598. Man! That was a really fast Friday night service! And, our books are starting to fall open to their most utilized pages.

Now, I recognize of course that this is a question of paper, and binding, and heavy usage, and a number of other factors that lead to this physical phenomenon. However, I feel as though there is a deeper, spiritual truth here - one that is worth noting this *Rosh HaShannah*, as we embark on a New Year, with a new *machzor* in our hands. It is this: These books, our well-worn, much beloved prayerbooks begin to "learn themselves." They develop a level of comfort and familiarity. The smooth-worn pages of favorite prayers, corners fraying are a zone of safety and security. The book has learned itself, falls open naturally to the familiar pages, and establishes a well-trod path for us to follow, a familiar road through our worship.

Which is why a new prayerbook, one that has never seen the light of this day before, is so exciting. And so terrifying. New discoveries await us on the road. And old familiar friends will be waiting along the journey, though they might look a little different than they did when last we met.

Over the course of these days of *Rosh HaShannah* and *Yom Kippur*, I will take many opportunities to teach from these books, to try to open up the unfamiliar pages and notice both the differences and the similarities. But, make no mistake: the bindings of these books are stiff; even the scent of new paper and ink and glue in our Storage Closet One where 600 volumes for *Yom Kippur* are being kept is overwhelmingly powerful! These books have not yet learned themselves.²



And to me, that is incredibly exciting. I'd like to extend the metaphor a bit here, to bring the anthropomorphic treatment of prayerbooks I've been dwelling on back to the human level. Because these days, THIS day - *Rosh HaShannah* is a day of change. Even the Hebrew name of this holiday can be accurately translated not only as Head of the New Year, but equally accurately as the Beginning (*Rosh*) of Change (*HaShannah*). Change, growth, expansion, re-direction. All of these things happen not in the well-worn, comfortable path - the place where our pages naturally fall open. No. Change comes from the place of discomfort, of the unfamiliar, of that which is different, even difficult.

A universal truism is as follows: Discomfort often leads to positive growth.

We don't generally change for the better by taking the easy road, or even more so, by sitting back and allowing the world to swirl around us, while we remain unmoved and unmoveable.

This is true in our interpersonal relationships, in our businesses, in our spiritual and religious lives and yes, even in our worship. Comfort leads to inertia. Inertia leads to stagnation. Stagnation leads to deterioration, ultimately to the broken bindings of whatever "book" we are living.

Now, don't get me wrong. There is a place for comfort, for calm, for the familiar. But it cannot rule unchallenged; it cannot exercise the absolute control which brings us to the point of NEVER moving out of our comfort zone.

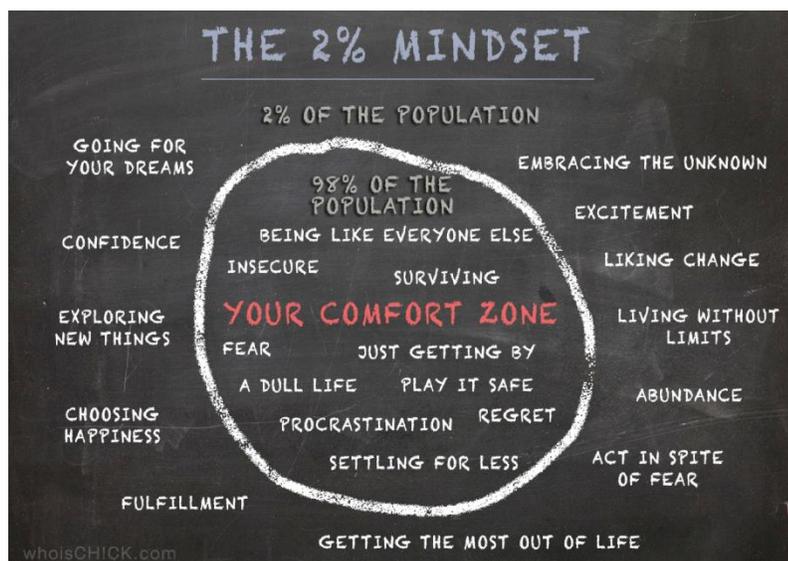
2. Image source: CCAR Press

Kevin Eikenberry³, a business and leadership consultant, writes about the productive value of discomfort. He identifies five reasons to embrace discomfort:

1 - Discomfort allows growth: in the physical, intellectual and emotional realms of our lives “[we] cannot grow until we push the envelope of our comfort zone.”

2 - Discomfort builds confidence: We all know the old argument that you don’t get better at tennis (or anything else) by playing against an opponent who is either worse than you or your equal. We build competency only through the tough, even unpleasant experience of losing, sometimes failing, and getting up to try again.

3 - Discomfort promotes creativity: This point is directly connected to the question of holding a new *machzor* in our hands. The very impetus for the thousands of hours of creative labor that yielded this beautiful book is that our old *machzor* was not reflecting our lives and our age in a way that produced the creative friction necessary to give birth to a twenty-first century Reform *machzor*.⁴



4 - Discomfort overcomes a resistance to change: We all know what it feels like to “live with” something that we know needs to change. We know the ways in which that gnaws at the back of our conscience. Sometimes we can quiet it, even for far longer than is helpful or healthy. We push it to the “back burner.” But it is there, reminding us that change must come. And this persistent discomfort is what assures us that resist as we may, deny as we do, the only constant is change.⁵

5 - Discomfort facilitates the accomplishment of our goals: Eikenberry says that this is the end point of all of the former rationales for embracing discomfort. We can either do what we know will be difficult in the pursuit of our goals, or we can forfeit those goals, at least for the moment. There really is no middle ground.

3. excerpted from:

<http://blog.kevineikenberry.com/leadership-supervisory-skills/get-uncomfortable-five-reasons-to-make-discomfort-your-friend/> - The five reasons are Eikenberry’s. The interpretation and application is mine.

4. Image source: http://whoischick.com/files/2013/05/Your_Comfort_Zone.jpg

5. Heraclitus of Ephesus (5th cent BCE), same philosopher who said “a person does not step in the same river twice”

Now, I will be the first to admit that Eikenberry is a “business and leadership consultant” - part self-help guru and part financial advisor. That said, the wisdom he advocates on embracing discomfort in order to bring about change has distinct Jewish reverberations. It is, honestly, one of the primary messages of the Torah.

Abraham breaks with patterns and familiarity in acknowledging the One God, and certainly moves into the scary unknown when he accepts he call “*Lech Lecha* - Go forth from your native land, your birthplace, from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you.”⁶

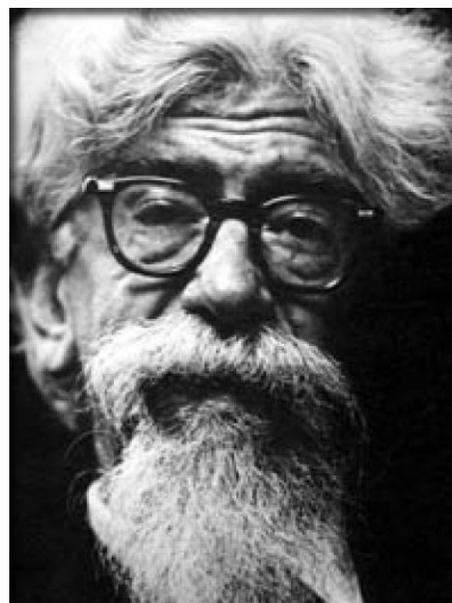
On the continuation of his journey, the text we read just moments ago - The *Akeidah* - the Binding of Isaac is in part about challenging the assumptions of what God might want from us, that is, the sacrifice of our first-born children. In calling down from the heavens, God is saying “STOP! - This may have been what the capricious gods your ancestors believed in asked of you. But I will NEVER ask this of you. Put an end to this practice. It is a worn-out and broken story. We are writing a new book this day, one where our children are our most precious possessions.”

Abraham’s story, again and again, is about the need to challenge old assumptions, and even when it is unpopular, discomforting and perhaps dangerous - replacing them with new Truths.

This becomes one of the defining points of Jewish existence: an ever-questioning people, challenging the status-quo - establishing new Truths and shining that light to the peoples of the earth. But being an iconoclast, smashing preconceptions and cracking open (even writing) a new book comes with the assumption that you will make some uncomfortable.

The great rabbinic conscience of the 20th century, Abraham Joshua Heschel, put it this way:⁷

“Religion is critique of all satisfaction. Its end is joy, but its beginning is discontent, detesting boasts, smashing idols. It began in Ur Kasdim in the seat of a magnificent civilization. Yet Abraham said, ‘No,’ breaking the idols, breaking away... Well-trodden ways lead into swamps.



6. Genesis 12:1

7. Image source: http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/5545.Abraham_Joshua_Heschel

There are no easy ways, there are no simple solutions. What comes easy is not worth a straw. It is a tragic error to assume that the world is flat, that our direction is horizontal. The way is always vertical. It is either up or down; we either climb or fall. Religious existence means struggle uphill.”⁸

Even the ultimate defining symbol of Rosh HaShannah, the sounding of the shofar supports the argument that positive change may be the result of discomfort. The sounds we have heard just a short while ago truly are not - no matter how expert our shofar blowers at Temple Isaiah are - what anyone would call pleasant or comforting. They are intended to be the exact opposite.



Tekiah, *shevarim* and *teruah* - each is meant to be a cry of the heart, the unfiltered prayer of brokenness that calls out for repair. The great sage Maimonides says that the purpose of this voice is to cry out: “Awake, you sleepers, from your sleep! Rouse yourselves from your slumber!... Examine your deeds, and return to God!”⁹

Over the years, we could have chosen another instrument to use on our holiest of days! It’s understandable that our biblical ancestors relied on the crude horn of an animal to produce this call. But we live in an age of trumpets, and oboes; bassoons and french horns. We have digital reproduction of sounds that would allow us to bring the keyboard in so that each of the calls could sound like a symphony on its own! And yet, year after year, we choose the heart-rending, disquieting sound of the shofar.¹⁰



8. in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, pp. 265-266.

9. in *Mishkan HaNefesh* in the Malchuyot Shofar service on p.203

10. Image source: <http://www.artsmidwestworldfest.org/blog/2010-10-26/why-so-many-instruments>

In our new machzor, on page 205, we read the following:

“Dwell on each sound of the shofar; contemplate its meaning.

T'kiah -

One whole note

Sh'varim-T'ruah -

Three broken notes; nine staccato notes.

T'kiah -

One whole note

My return to the right path has the power to make me whole again.

T'kiah -

Once I was whole.

Sh'varim - T'ruah -

In the wear and tear of living, I became broken and shattered.

T'kiah -

My *t'shuvah* has the power to make me whole again.”

So, as we open the stiff spine of a New Book, as we enter the unfamiliar territory of a New Year, may we open ourselves to changes that might yet await us.¹¹



May our journey through this year of 5776 be one of insight and discovery.

May discomfort lead us to challenge assumptions that need to be questioned; and may we find solace in the places of familiarity that balance our need for growth with the grounding presence of habit and routine.

As our gathering for prayer here is blessed by the confluence of Novel Words and Ancient Prayers, by a New Book and an Age-Old Tradition - so, too, may our lives be a blessing of new and old, of novel and ancient.

May this year of 5776 bring Wholeness and Opportunity, Discovery and Peace!
And may each and every one of us be written and sealed in the Book of Life for Blessing and Growth!

11. Image source: <http://tamidnyc.org/jewish-holiday-explorer-yom-kippur-holiest-day-year/>