

Spiritual Boredom

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Saul Bellow wrote that “boredom is the shriek of unused capacities.”

Boredom can be a killer. It can overwhelm us, drag us down, keep us from finding what might be valuable. When we are bored, we become obsessed with how bored we are. We are unable to function; all interest has been quashed. Perhaps some of you even came here this evening expecting to be overcome with just that emotion.

When I was growing up in Rochester, the High Holy Day services were so boring! Not at all like ours. It wasn't only the teenagers wandering the halls and taking up residence in the lounge part of the women's bathroom, it was the adults too. My rabbi had to take a long pause before beginning his sermon so that the room could empty before he began. Then they made a rule that the doors would be shut from the time the sermon started until it ended, so once you were out you were blessedly free until it was over. It's not like there was anything to do outside of the room where services were being held, all we did was wander or sit in the ladies' lounge, but that was infinitely less boring than sitting through services. I have to say as a rabbi with that memory, every time people start leaving the second I finish the sermon, I say a little prayer of thanks that you all waited until I was done. Of course I would prefer that you stay until the actual conclusion of services, I do appreciate that you stay for the sermon too.

Unfortunately, I'm not the only one who comes to adult Judaism with a childhood memory of a boring Jewish experience. Many of us overcome these experiences, but many of us don't. Many of us can't imagine a Judaism that isn't boring and repetitive at every turn. Oh how I hate it when I hear a parent say to a child, "I had to suffer through religious school and so you do too." The parent was bored, and that experience has colored every interaction the adult has with Judaism and when the child announces the same thing, the two nod in understanding and agreement. And no reason other than the importance of suffering is given. So often I hear from adults that their teachers made religious school so boring, that their rabbi's made everything Jewish so boring. And we can't stand to be bored. We have created a society that is devoted to the notion that a person should never experience a moment of idle thought or an instant of boredom. We demand that we, and our children, be entertained all the time.

There is a very interesting book called, *Spiritual Boredom*, by Dr. Erica Brown.¹ In it, she explores the phenomenon of boredom in contemporary religious life. According to psychologist Dr. Bruce Leckart, boredom is "a feeling of uninvolvedness, a lack of concentration, absence of motivation, a feeling of emptiness, and above all, no excitement or enthusiasm for what is happening." And too often, this describes our feelings toward Jewish life.

Wonderfully, happily, after many a Bar or Bat Mitzvah service, our members come up to tell me how amazed their Jewish guests were by how wonderful our services were. How exciting, how not boring they were.

¹ Erica Brown. *Spiritual Boredom: Rediscovering the Wonder of Judaism*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2009.

And how surprised their guests were that such a thing was possible. Of course it is always wonderful to hear such nice things said, and I do believe it's true that our services and especially our Bar and Bat Mitzvah services are wonderful. But it is always kind of upsetting that this was a surprise. I know a lot of the rabbis out there, and I can't imagine that all of them or even most of them are boring. That all or most of them lead services without spark, and that the congregation lets them. How could that really be? What is it that has Jews everywhere expecting boredom every time they walk into a Synagogue?

Of course boredom isn't just a Jewish problem. We become bored in every aspect of our lives, our jobs, in our lives at home, in our families and marriages. And that sense of boredom creates a spiritual pain that we seek to escape any chance we get.

We try to escape boredom with entertainment, But its not really the cure. It's simply an analgesic, a pain-killer, a distraction. We play ridiculous games on the internet, and channel surf for mindless television, wander shopping malls, shove headphones into our ears and drown out the silence. For it might be that in silence, just a moment of silence, we might get bored. The fact that all the entertainment in the world is available on our phones our computers, our TVs any time we want it. Any book we want to read available on our kindles in a moment's notice, the fact that even with all that, we are still bored suggests this boredom might not be an external problem. It might just be more of a personal internal problem.

Dr. Erica Brown writes, "The 18th Century German philosopher Immanuel

Kant believed that had Adam and Eve stayed in the Garden of Eden, they too would have suffered boredom. Even paradise was not enough. With few responsibilities, no search for meaning, and no complications, primordial man and woman also got restless. German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche even claimed that God was bored on the seventh day. Having created so much so perfectly and so quickly, God ran out of ideas. Fortunately or unfortunately, these problems resolved themselves when the Garden became a place of disobedience and challenge.”

What is the source of our boredom? Our boredom with Judaism I think is symbolic of the greater malaise we feel in general. Boredom comes when we have lost a sense of wonder or intrigue. Long before I was ever married, I had a conversation with a woman who said to me, “You know even after 30 years, I am constantly surprised by my husband. Every time I think I know everything there is to know about him, I learn something new, or he does something I would never have expected of him.” Even then without knowing anything, I was able to recognize that is what a good relationship looks like. 30 years with the same person and still there is surprise and excitement. For others 2 years is all they can take before the boredom sets in.

We get bored at synagogues I think, because we don't always understand what's going on. We get bored with art museums because we don't understand how to look at art. We get bored with our marriages because we stop understanding each other. We get bored with our lives because we don't understand our selves, our purpose in life, or our mission.

There is some good news about boredom, there is evidence that suggests that boredom helps us figure out how to spend our time. The New York Times reported that, “Some experts say that people tune things out for good reasons and that over time, boredom becomes a tool for sorting out information—an increasingly sensitive spam-filter. In various fields including neuroscience and education, research suggests that falling into a numbed trance allows the brain to recast the outside world in ways that can be productive and creative at least as often as they are disruptive.” This of course explains why all my best ideas come while washing my hair. The boredom I experience while doing a routine and mundane activity allows my brain to charge forward creatively. We sometimes need boredom as a way to push us out of boredom.

We often think that boredom is a result of what is presented to us, but the fact is that boredom is often a choice. We can choose to be bored or choose to be engaged. It all depends on a simple decision – will we choose to be engaged? To what will we be committed?

There is a famous parable about three stone-cutters who are building a cathedral. The first is asked: what are you doing? He looks up with a scowl – “What does it look like?” he says. “I’m cutting these boulders into blocks, one foot by one foot by nine inches. I’ve been doing this ever since I was old enough to work, and I’ll be doing it until the day before I die.” The second is asked: what are you doing? He looks up with a smile – “I’m making a living. With the money I earn by cutting these boulders into blocks, one foot by one foot by nine inches, I can keep a roof over our heads, put clothes on our backs, and put food on the table.” The third is

asked: what are you doing? He looks up; his face is radiant. “I am building a house for God,” he says. “By cutting these boulders into blocks, one foot by one foot by nine inches, I am helping to build a place where people will come to find shelter and comfort and to commune with the Master of the Universe. And it will stand for a thousand years.”²

There is nothing that is, in and of itself, boring. Boring is what we choose it to be. An art museum, a family, this Rosh Hashanah service can be, either fascinating, engaging, or painfully boring. It all depends on how much of ourselves we choose to invest.

And these days, we are very conservative investors of our selves. We are wary of commitment, careful before we sign on the dotted line, anxious to keep our options open and to make sure we can get out of our commitments. But our inability to jump in with both feet is a major source of our discontent. We become so totally focused on our own personal experience, on our individual cares and feelings, that we limit our possibility of experience, and thus invite boredom. As Richard Winter wrote in his book *Still Bored in a Culture of Entertainment*, “One of the reasons why boredom has become so much more common is because we have become too preoccupied with looking after ourselves, making sure our needs are met and, to put it bluntly, we have become too selfish.”

When we are interested only in what interests us, we are inevitably bored. We limit our potential for finding something new and surprising. Lillian Daniel, a United Church of Christ minister recently wrote on her blog about

² Rachel Naomi Remen. *Kitchen Table Wisdom*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1996, p. 161.

her annoyance with people who tell her they are spiritual but not religious. It's titled, "Spiritual but not Religious, Stop Boring Me." She wrote how these folks especially bother her on airplanes when they hear she is a minister and they tell her that they find God primarily in sunsets and hilltops but never in a religious institution. She says, "Being privately spiritual but not religious just doesn't interest me. There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by oneself. What is interesting is doing this work in community, where other people might call you on stuff, or heaven forbid, disagree with you. Where life with God gets rich and provocative is when you dig deeply into a tradition that you did not invent all for yourself.

Thank you for sharing, spiritual but not religious sunset person. You are now comfortably in the norm for self-centered American culture, right smack in the bland majority of people who find ancient religions dull but find themselves uniquely fascinating. Can I switch seats now and sit next to someone who has been shaped by a mighty cloud of witnesses instead? Can I spend my time talking to someone brave enough to encounter God in a real human community? Because when this flight gets choppy, that's who I want by my side, holding my hand, saying a prayer and simply putting up with me, just like we try to do in church." Her answer to boredom, to those who find services and organized religion to be dull, is to dig into it. Learn more, and get involved with other people. It's not really such a surprising answer, it's just that sometimes we need to be reminded.

Our very own Jewish tradition also has a remedy for boredom. Judaism ultimately is based on a covenant. A covenant is a commitment, an

agreement to which we pledge ourselves, not for a limited period of time, but for the rest of our lives. And it is this notion of covenant, of sustained commitment, that I sometimes think has gotten lost in our world today.

On the whole, we are commitment averse. Studies have shown that young people today are postponing all kinds of commitments, marriage, career, home, or community. Just ask someone to volunteer for a project or committee, and you may very well hear, “You know, I just can’t make that kind of commitment.” Where we used to be able to rely on the commitment of corporations for lifetime employment, or on the loyalty of an employee, now all bets are off. As we have seen in the last several years, many corporations look only at the bottom line and their responsibility to shareholders, whereas employees will look out for number one.

Thinking of commitment can be scary, because it seems like we are limiting our freedom, and in some ways, it would seem contrary to what Judaism would teach. After all, isn’t freedom what Judaism is all about? Don’t we tell and retell the story of the Exodus year after year because we are a people who celebrates freedom?

The answer is yes. We are a people who celebrates freedom. But we celebrate freedom not simply for freedom’s sake, but because our freedom has a purpose. And that purpose is for us to be free to commit to a life lived for higher and holier purposes than our selfish needs and concerns. We celebrate freedom because an authentic and true commitment can only be made by someone who is free.

Erica Brown asks us to think about the story of our people’s Exodus from

Egypt. The trek through the wilderness was anything but entertaining. It was difficult and challenging, and probably extremely boring. In the book of Numbers the people grow bored of their journey and the Manna, the food from heaven that God has given them to eat. “Now our souls are dried up;” they complain. “There is nothing at all, nothing but this manna before our eyes.” The tedium of life in the wilderness has made it impossible for them to appreciate the miracles they experience every day.

Now imagine, she says, that Moses would have taken the Israelites seriously. Imagine if Moses had said: “Okay this clearly isn’t working out. You’re all right. I’m wrong. Let’s go back.” We would never have made it to the land of Israel, never have been, as the Israeli national anthem Hatikva claims, “a free people in our land.”

Happily and proudly I can say that here in our congregation we have many people who have committed themselves in some way to their personal Jewish experiences which then enrich our community’s Jewish experience. Every year I am pleased to look out into this room and feel that the vast majority of you are not just slightly familiar to me, but people I see on a regular basis, people who are engaged in some way on a regular basis. Our community is enriched when more of us decide to engage, when more of us decide to commit. Each of us is here tonight because of the commitment our people has made to each other and to generations to come. Each of us is here tonight because instead of succumbing to a sense of alienation and boredom, generations of our ancestors chose instead to look harder and to seek out the fascination and wonder that Judaism teaches us to foster inside. It is through commitment that we find

our path to wonder and awe, and through that energizing of the spirit, a greater understanding of life's meaning and purpose.

Tonight we begin a new year. Rosh Hashanah is an opportunity to start fresh, to recommit. Maybe this can be the year of engagement. The year that we commit ourselves to finding something of interest inside ourselves and out. This year we can commit to approaching old situations in new ways. Seeing things that have been boring in a new light, looking for a spark. Some of us were bored as kids, and so we disconnected, let us reconnect and search deeper for meaning in all areas of our lives.

If you need a place to begin, start with your Judaism and your connection to Jewish study. Do this for yourself, and if you have kids do this as an example to them of the ongoing lifelong nature of Jewish study. There is always more here to learn. The secret of Jewish study is to realize that there is always much more than meets the eye in a piece of text or tradition. Each story and law, when we examine it very carefully, has the capacity to give us an extraordinary depth of wisdom and understanding. The famous philosopher Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that if we invest ourselves in Jewish study, and open our hearts and minds in a posture of wonder, our boredom will be replaced with a sense of awe and fascination, of spiritual joy and ecstasy, a renewed sense of passion and compassion for life, and ultimately a greater sense of peace in our hearts. Torah study is every Saturday morning at 9:00, we will begin another Melton class for adult study in Vancouver this year, you can go to the Union For Reform Judaism's website and easily sign up for the "10 minutes of Torah" email that will come to you daily. Throughout the year

there will be so many other opportunities to increase your learning and knowledge about Judaism in an adult way.

If we live a life of commitment, of active interest, and of delving deep into those things we do not yet understand, we will stop the flow of boredom. We will stop the malaise that can be so destructive.

In this New Year 5772, let us reclaim our sense of awe and wonder, and cast off the boredom we bring to our Jewish lives. Let us reclaim a sense of passion and joy in our ongoing commitment to our own lives – lives that are filled with love and excitement, fulfillment and peace.