

Jonah

J. M. Siegelau – Yom Kippur – 5 October 2022

Where do we go when we're uncomfortable? Yom Kippur is certainly a time of discomfort. Hungry. Tired. Sitting for long hours. It's a good time to bring it up.

Where do we go when we're uncomfortable? Discomfort isn't just on the grand scale of God's command for Jonah to go to Nineveh to declare God's judgment. We feel it in our daily lives. Perhaps on the smaller scale of:

- Talking to friends, partners or spouses, children
- When "I don't know what to say..." after a death, during an illness, a divorce..
- Interacting with someone from a different background, or different beliefs.

We have to protect ourselves from some discomfort – to keep from being overwhelmed by everything around us – and, by the way, by all the thoughts and feelings going on inside us. So we've learned to create and put up armor: techniques we use to filter or stop all that intrusion. Armor to protect us from discomfort. Not quite as obvious as the armor of a medieval knight. It's invisible. Perhaps invisible to us – but often visible to others.

Our supply of armor is for inside as well – to protect us from... ourselves. Those thoughts, feelings, concerns, doubts, questions, situations – that make us uncomfortable. We use that armor when we don't want to deal with them – to block them out or hide them away from ourselves. For me – in the mansion of my mind – I find a room far away from my living quarters, and lock them in. And forget about them. Or I try to forget about them.

We do this instinctively, from the beginning. Without even realizing it. When we're young, our minds are constantly working to help us find our way in the world, to feel comfortable and safe. Finding ways out of unpleasant, uncomfortable situations. We figure things out. We get ourselves out of jams, solve problems.

For me – when I believe discomfort is visiting me from outside, my "go to" response has been flight – running away. Like Jonah.

But, alas, the discomfort comes from within us. And we learn ways to deflect it.

Perfecting our techniques over the years.

Keeping ourselves busy. Finding or inventing things to do. Ways to run away.

Learning to ignore those – thoughts – problems – people – situations...

We find ways to avoid being noticed. Shut down, perhaps.

You get the idea. You've probably invented your own techniques!

We often know what our discomforts are.

There are some we would never tell anyone else. We barely admit them to ourselves!

Some we share communally. Some we wear as badges of honor.

Some are mild. Some gnaw at our guts and won't leave us alone. And in-between.

All of these sit within us. Some – perhaps many – prevent us from doing more of what we want to do with our lives. Of being more. Yet those discomforts ... sit there. Unchallenged. In some ways – perhaps many ways – ruling our lives. From a place of Fear.

So, when a source of discomfort approach, we quickly choose our armor and put it on.

But why make such an effort to evade these discomforts? Well – We may not know how to respond– and we’re too embarrassed or ashamed to ask for help. Or – they’re interrupting what we’re used to. Breaking up our routines.

But most of all they push us to look at – to re-consider – who we are. And we don’t like to do that. ... No. We really do not like to do that!

So we do what we can to escape those thoughts and feelings. Putting on our armor. We find our ways to buy a ticket to Tarshish.

We do not want to listen to those doubts about who we are, The doubts about who I am. About what we’re doing – or not doing. Wanting emotionally un-demanding lives.

Yet – here we are. At Yom Kippur services. An annual turning point in our lives. An annual opportunity to turn. . A reminder that it just might be the time – to consider what we might do ... differently.

But: what alternative do we have to armoring up?
To walking away from – or burying – or deflecting – our discomforts ?

How might I – how might we – change that pattern?

Rachel Naomi Remen reminds us:

“Life offers its wisdom generously. Everything teaches. Not everyone learns. Life asks the same thing we have been asked in every class. ‘Stay awake’ – ‘Pay Attention’.”

Pay attention to that discomfort. Don’t move away from it.
Slow down. Sit with it. Breathe deeply. Lean into it.
Listen to your discomfort.
So I stop – and ask myself: What is this discomfort trying to tell me?
“Why am I uncomfortable? ... What is going on within me?”
For “inside” is where the discomfort resides.

The idea of “discomfort” – which seems absurdly obvious – wasn’t obvious to me. When I was made aware of it – as part of an exercise in a class – I was stunned. I was so unattuned to my responses to discomfort, that I would automatically put on my armor at the first hint –

and I didn't even notice I was doing it. A bit too much like Jonah – getting on that ship to Tarshish without much thought.

Avoiding discomfort could mean missing a lot that is going on around AND within us. A kind of sleepwalking responsiveness – to life. It isn't the sum total of our lives. But I could see where we could miss out on things that we want – and never understand why we aren't getting them.

Viktor Frankl teaches us:

Between stimulus and response there is a space.

In that space is our power to choose our response.

In our response lies our growth ... and our freedom.

We can make an effort to open up the space between a discomfort and our response, so we can examine that discomfort, figure out what is going on, and choose how to respond.

For me, at one time I might have thought: “That person is making me uncomfortable” – and would want to get away from that person. A quick “flight” response – like Jonah !

Except that: no one can “make” us feel anything !

They can't “make” us uncomfortable.

It is our discomfort – coming from inside us.

And only we can examine it – and change how we might want to respond.

This is a major shift in perspective. It isn't about “them” – it's about “me”!

So this time when uncomfortable: dig in – hang in for a little longer.

Step into the discomfort. Try it out. It may not be as bad as anticipated.

We may need some practice, as we learn to look at discomfort differently...

Sometimes it may be difficult.

But – the time may be right to do so. To not walk away from ... ourselves.

There may be something important that's at risk – right now – and – stepping into the discomfort that accompanies it, we may be able to change the course of events.

Make a situation different – or better.

Discomforts with: Family. Yourself. Community.

Changing your life will always evoke Discomfort.

No – it isn't easy! Not at all!

Discomforts – persistently calling out – quietly – or noisily.

We are encouraged to: Stay Awake. Pay Attention. To what is going on within US.

Turn our attention inward.

Avoiding discomfort may be holding us back from finding – doing – something better for ourselves. And for the ones we love.

Why go there? Too much work? More discomfort? Possibly some pain?

But also – possibly

- freedom from the fears bottled up inside
- fears that block us from being our best selves!
- making room for better experiences, a better life.

And here we are in the middle of the Yom Kippur liturgy – beating our chests – repenting.

Let us ... not just say the words of repentance – but let us do the work of Teshuva

And here is a way to start:

Stay awake pay attention to our Discomforts.

Instead of looking away – from our Selves.

Open up the space between a discomfort and your response.

Even an inch makes a difference.

Examine that discomfort, find out what is going on – inside you.

And re-consider your response. Perhaps taking off your armor – or loosening it a bit.

Let us each find our way to Nineveh – to take care of our Lives...

– rather than jumping on the boat to Tarshish.

We are always at choice. We always have a choice.

To re-consider before we put on our armor

And if not now well When?