

Barbie, Oppenheimer & The High Holy Days
Rosh Hashana Sermon 2023/5784
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I spent my Summer break working at a sleepaway camp that was located in Denver, Colorado, right on the edge of the Rocky Mountains. Located at 10,200 feet, this small, secluded camp came with its own set of rewards and challenges, the biggest challenge of all... was the lack of wifi.. For about an hour every day, in one particular building on site.. the wifi would connect and immediately my eyes were glued to my phone screen. I would frantically answer emails, send a few text messages, and then would log into all of those social media accounts I had been so desperate to connect to. What I found when I logged on to Instagram, Facebook, or TikTok were not videos or photos of my friends, but instead, my screen was filled with the biggest Summer cultural phenomenon. The main topic of discussion... Was I Team Barbie? Or Team Oppenheimer?

The two movies, Barbie and Oppenheimer, were released into theatres on the same day, July 21st, and Barbenheimer, was invented. The idea of Barbenheimer was to see both films back to back on the same day.. but, which movie would come first? And WHAT would people be wearing? Were you Team Barbie? Dressed in your neon pink and glitter? Or were you team Oppenheimer, dressed in black. Seemingly, the movies two plots were vastly different. Oppenheimer, followed the story of physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer who worked on the top-secret Manhattan Project, which led to the development of the Atomic Bomb. While Barbie, followed the iconic Mattel doll and her friends to Barbieland, a bright, sparkling alternate reality universe while the Barbies learn of the real world, and everything that humans have created there... including Patriarchy. Team Barbie and Team Oppenheimer fans took movie theatres and the internet by storm and the dichotomy of the emotional undertones of the two films made for social media posts that felt like it was a world divided.

A GQ article¹ written this Summer explains that this is not the first time in history that two diametrically opposing films went toe to toe in the box office. Fifteen years ago, in the Summer time as well, Mamma Mia! And The Dark Knight were also released into theaters on the same day. A New York Magazine article² from the time, said that this simultaneous release was a battle “for the very soul of America”. The GQ article explains that “Strikingly similar contrasts were zeroed in

¹ <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/mamma-mia-the-dark-knight-barbenheimer>

² https://www.vulture.com/2008/07/this_weekend_mamma_mia_and_the.html

on: “Are you a happy person, or a sad one? Do you see the glass as half-full, or half-empty? Do you prefer your toast with strawberry jam, or do you like it sprinkled with shards of broken glass?” All of these questions ring true of Barbenheimer as well”

All of these questions, happy or sad, glass half full or half empty, pink or black, feel so starkly dissonant. These differences are big, and the emotions flip flop so quickly and feel so heavy. Modern pop culture is full of these types of dichotomies and we as a people are encouraged to choose one side of the coin.

Judaism, and our holidays too, are SO full of these types of stark differences and this time of the year brings it all the more to the forefront of our minds. This evening is the beginning of the Yamim Noraim. In these next 10 days, we have Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, and the time in between. We go from Rosh Hashana, the day of apples and honey, sweetness and blessings of the new year, to Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, where we fast and apologize for our wrongdoings. These days are intense and the emotions that come with them are too. It’s not only in the way we observe these holidays that can feel extreme, with Tashlich - casting away our sins and then for many of us fasting on Yom Kippur. But also, the words of the liturgy and our prayers contribute to the intensity feeling even stronger.

Unetaneh Tokef, the poem that we will read aloud in English and hear Cantor Jenna sing, is one of the most striking texts of our high holy day liturgy. The text reads, “Who will live and who will die, who by fire and who by water, who by rest and who by struggle..” These are just some of the words, and each couplet consists of a sequence of opposites. Each couplet presents an idea and then flips it on its head. We are faced during the high holy days with differing ends of the emotional spectrum even in the core of the prayers that we say aloud. The melodies of our prayers are more grand and call for attention, and even the way we talk about God is different.

God can be referred to in so many different ways, and during the High Holy Days, there are specific words that appear more often. During other times of the year, we speak of God in a way that is much more gentle. God is creator, healer, redeemer; but during Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, God is *avinu malkeinu*, our father, our king, God is a judge, and the one who can write us into the book of Life. This change in language around how we talk about God during this time of year can feel harsh, and dramatic, impersonal and different from how we refer to God during the rest of the year. These modifications to the liturgy are purposeful and are meant to be thought provoking in this way. If everything about the way in which we prayed during the high holy days was the same as it is during the rest of the year, then

nothing would be different, and we wouldn't have any motivation from our tradition to turn towards Teshuva. These stark differences in the prayers and our language for God, is meant to stir up our hearts and make us feel and really think.

We are charged with the task of looking into our past and reevaluating our patterns of behavior. This takes brutal honesty, judgment and self-reflection, just to then propel ourselves forward. We have decisions to make. Do we continue moving our lives forward with the patterns that we exhibited during the year behind, or do we make Teshuva, and turn our hearts to repentance, apologies and a change of our behavior. It is up to each of us, whether we exist in our current state of being or if we embrace what is new and unfamiliar.

Last week's Torah portion, N'tzavim nears the end of Moses' speech to the Israelites as they prepare to cross the Jordan without him into the new land. Moses poses a new charge to his people, and they have a big decision to make. He says to his people "I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life"³. Choose Life in the face of all its challenges, Moses says. He tells them to keep going without him, and embrace the new life they are about to lead. These instructions must have felt so daunting for the Israelites.

It is a difficult task, to just simply choose, and to be confident about those choices. To just choose one team to be on. What if, we are both teams? Team Oppenheimer, and Team Barbie? Team Dark Night, and Team Mamma Mia? One day is one, and another day is the other, and some days, both at the same time.

Life comes with both blessings and curses, it comes with all of those differing feelings and intense moments.

Modern scholar and Professor Deborah Lipstadt, who is an American Historian and Diplomat, comments on this very verse of Torah and says "We do not control life and death, but we can control the kind of life we lead". According to her, we don't necessarily have to choose a team. We just have to choose to keep going, and to adapt and change as necessary.

Her words are relevant on this Rosh Hashana eve as we each embark on the next ten days of Teshuva. All of the intense moments of life and the emotions that come with them will happen, and it is about embracing them and moving along with

³ Deut 30:19

them that makes our lives what they are. It's the ebb and flow of these split feelings that make the dichotomy feel less intense.

This flow, from one end of the emotional spectrum to the other, is familiar in our Jewish Calendar. In Israel in the spring, Yom Hazikaron and Yom HaAtzmaut fall directly after one another. The day of remembrance for fallen soldiers is immediately then followed by a day of large celebration for the Jewish state's establishment and independence. These two days are full of wildly different emotions and they are designed specially with that in mind. These two holidays happen in combination with one another purposefully to help with the transition of emotions. From the depths of sadness and remembrance, we Jews can pull ourselves up to reclaim and celebrate life. It is through embracing those feelings of vast difference that the bridge between them feels shorter.

This is what the high holidays and the human experience is about, it's about having the freedom to not have to choose one way of being and stick with it forever. But instead, take time to think, and reevaluate, to grow and to adapt. It's time to embrace the dichotomy that is these big feelings in this world, in a beautiful, confusing, emotional, twisted mess that is being a human.

Now, back to Barbie. If you haven't seen the movie yet, I would highly recommend it. I will give you all a spoiler alert right now, but I promise I'm not revealing everything.. Remember that patriarchy quip? That you'll have to figure out on your own.

By the end of the movie, even Barbie learns what it means to have big feelings that feel all too dichotomous and how to navigate them. Throughout her journey, she learns what it means to feel sad and angry, and what it feels like to cry. She experiences joy and friendship in a new way than before. And, she learns that being a human in the real world means that not every day is the best day ever. That is the kind of life that Barbie wants, one that is full of emotions, high and low, and she ultimately chooses to embrace humanity and become fully human.

We don't get that kind of choice, to be human or not. We do get to choose, though, how to live our lives, and how to experience everything that the real world has to offer. Being human means that we get to feel each end of the emotional spectrum and everything in between. Some days we can feel one way, and the next we can experience the complete opposite, and other days, it'll be a mix. Either way, it's okay to not have to choose one thing and stick with it.

If these 10 days and the process of Teshuva teaches us anything, it's that we are an ever-evolving people, and embracing the opportunity for growth is always welcomed. Even when the emotions of our lives feel overwhelming and intense, we have the power to hold ourselves in that and move forward. By experiencing one state of being and propelling forward into the next, we can find the balance. This high holy day season, we have the ability to assess our past behaviors and make room within ourselves to process our emotions so that we may turn inward and make Teshuva. We can reflect, learn, and adapt, because that is what being human is all about. Even when we are experiencing the dichotomies in the world around us, and within ourselves, we can stay grounded with the understanding that we are not stuck in one way of being. May we remember to feel and experience our emotions deeply these High Holy Days, to inspire growth within ourselves; and, may we remember that there is more balance in the differences than we may think. Shana Tova.