

Tell me if any of these thoughts apply to you:

"I'm bored, the service is too long, the service is too slow, we do everything twice, it's boring, we did the same thing 10 years ago, we've done the same thing for the last five years, we're going to do it again tomorrow, it doesn't make sense, it moves too slow, it doesn't mean anything to me. Saying all these words doesn't do anything for me, I don't understand all the Hebrew, ... it's Boring with a capital B!

Did I miss anything?

When we are bored, 30 seconds can feel like a lifetime.

I am interested in the phenomenon of boredom, because the same people who find tremendous boredom in High Holiday dovening, may be able to sit for 3 or even 6 hours watching baseball, hockey, football, or golf. Those who find sports boring might be able to sit for a 2 hour symphony concert, a ballet, or an opera. Some enjoy sitting through a day long seminar or lecture series, or sitting and reading about art, architecture, cooking, gardening, principles of business, the history of the Peloponnesian war, or any obscure topic for hours. To others, any of these experiences are boring. From a purely objective point of view, any experience in which you are sitting passively, absorbing a slow, quiet experience, could fall into the 'boring category.'

So objectively, it is true that services are in fact boring. I - and the traditional Jewish liturgical experience - are asking you to sit for a long period of time, listening and thinking, reading and praying, and occasionally singing.

The question I want to pose is this: Is boredom always bad?

We all take classes or sit in meetings that we recognize as ultimately productive, yet at the same time the experience does not always provide very much external or mental stimulation. Our perception, therefore, is of boredom. Nevertheless, we might accept the boredom, and when the experience is over, we might even acknowledge that it wasn't so boring, because something starting happening inside that allowed us to tolerate the lack of external stimulation.

So I am not going to protest the charge that our services are boring. Rather, I want to embrace the boredom. I want to suggest that it is the most important experience of boredom that you will ever have. I want you to think of it not as simple boredom, but as Sacred boredom. Sacred Boredom!

The question you're going to ask though is this: What's in it for me? What's the benefit to me of being bored? What's the benefit of boredom?

My answer is this: The sacred purpose of liturgy is to provide a setting in which one turns inward. Liturgy contains the great and powerful ideas that can expand our minds and transform our lives.

The only way that we can expand our minds is by giving our minds room to grow. In the normal course of things, we fill our minds with endless details. We run away from quiet with radio, music, television, Xanga, Youtube, Myspace, playlists, sports, many, many distractions.

The quiet, undistracted mind is a rarity.

According to Lurianic Kabbalah, in order for the Universe to expand into creation, God first had to make room for the universe. God had to contract and make space. The imperfection of the universe could not exist in the same dimensional space as the absolute perfection of God. New things could not come into existence without the empty space in which to put them. When the space is full, there is no room for anything else.

Dr. Watson once observed about Sherlock Holmes:

His ignorance was as remarkable as his knowledge. Of contemporary literature, philosophy and politics he appeared to know next to nothing. My surprise reached a climax, however, when I found incidentally that he was ignorant of the Copernican Theory and of the composition of the Solar System. That any civilized human being in this nineteenth century should not be aware that the earth travelled round the sun appeared to be to me such an extraordinary fact that I could hardly realize it.

"You appear to be astonished," he said, smiling at my expression of surprise. "Now that I do know it I shall do my best to forget it. ... You see," he explained, "I consider that a man's brain originally is like a little empty attic, and you have to stock it with such furniture as you choose. ... [T]he skillful workman is very careful indeed as to what he takes into his brain-attic. He will have nothing but the tools which may help him in doing his work It is a mistake to think that that little room has elastic walls and can distend to any extent. Depend upon it there comes a time when for every addition of knowledge you forget something that you knew before." ("A Study in Scarlet," Ch. 2)

Sherlock Holmes, or Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, didn't realize that in fact the walls of our brain-attics can stretch, and that our minds do always have space for growth. Nonetheless, Sherlock Holmes' image of the brain is instructive. To learn something fundamentally important about ourselves, to learn something that is new, we need to find the empty space. When we begin to experience boredom, we are beginning to approach the emptiness, to sense the emptiness. Most of us, when that sensations approaches, attempt to chase it away. We fidget, move our arms, hands, legs, fingers, eyes, head, we find itches to scratch, and dozens of thoughts suddenly demand our immediate attention.

Why do we chase away boredom?

I suggest we're afraid. We're afraid that if we embrace the boredom, if we look within the emptiness of our selves, we might see something we don't like. Difficult or uncomfortable questions might arise. We are afraid that we might question our priorities, the purpose of our lives.

These are exactly the questions of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur that loom before us in our mahzor:

"What are we? What is our piety? what is our righteousness? What is our attainment, our power, our might?" . . . **What good are any of these things?**

The quiet, undistracted mind, the bored mind, is open to an experience outside of

itself. The bored mind experiences waves of thoughts and sensations which demand attention and action, but is compelled to remain still without following up. So what happens? You learn to release the thoughts, to let go of the sensations, to acknowledge the demands without getting caught up in them. Eventually, your mind becomes quiet and open enough for the *kol d'mama daka*, the "still, small, voice," to be heard. This is the voice that answers the questions of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

This is the voice that reminds me that I have to practice patience and understanding - especially during stressful times in my life when louder, more immediate demands make me short with my family.

This is the voice that tells me to watch what and when I eat - to satisfy my desire to eat with healthier foods in moderation.

This is the voice that reminds me that engaging in regular prayer is healthy, both physically and spiritually.

This is the voice that reminds me that I have a responsibility to the world beyond the walls of my house - to the environment, to Israel, to those who are hungry or homeless.

What would happen if you asked yourself some questions during services or on your way out the door afterwards. What would happen if you asked yourself, right now -- What am I doing inside? Where am I inside my head? What am I thinking about right now? What am I experiencing in my soul right now? What did I learn about myself today through prayer and study?

You might have answers for these questions, and you might be surprised when you pay attention to what is happening to you. However, if nothing is happening, that's actually OK as well. You can't make an experience happen. You have to let go of the urge to act, let go of the urge to control, and let the sacred boredom take hold.

This is how you change your perception of boredom. Understand that *hayom harat olam* - literally, that today is pregnant with eternity. Anything can happen today. Let your mind be blank, allowing the sacred boredom, the prayers, the words, the melodies, to work on your mind as if it were *tabula rosa*, a blank slate.

The *maḥzor* suggests that tefillah and teshuvah and tzedakah, prayer, repentance, and charity and other acts of righteousness, avert or transform the severity of the Divine decree against us. Rabbi Alan Lew, in his book "This Is Real and You are Completely Unprepared" writes that tefillah, teshuvah, and tzedakah don't really change events, nor do they change who we are. Rather, they change our perspective, the way we see things. (Page 131)

The next time you feel boredom here in shul, don't run away from it. Embrace it as an occasion to look within, and see yourself from a completely different perspective. Treat those moments as opportunities for tefillah and the self-examination of teshuvah to see the boredom as sacred and allow it to transform your soul.

May you find the awareness to live each sacred moment fully in the present; may you find each moment pregnant with eternal possibilities; and may your present be full of life and blessing.