

Yom Kippur Morning

It's often said of the Holocaust, we shouldn't think of the number six million - we should think of one plus one plus one plus one until we get to six million. Every person killed was an individual, a world unto themselves.

I have often found myself uncomfortable with Holocaust commemorations. I have been to many. Very often, they say more about their composers than about the victims. Sometimes, they seem to exist to display a type of vocal virtuosity of the service leader; sometimes, they exist to show how creative the rabbi is in creating new ritual; sometimes, they exist to show off a person's Yiddish fluency. They rarely involve lists of names, because the number is overwhelming, and so many of them are inaccessible to us. My college Jewish center would read lists of names aloud, but the lists were incomplete, just a pittance of all of those who have died.

The problem is - if you make the memorial beautiful, then you're missing something - that the Holocaust was not beautiful but was horrific beyond the ability of our art to capture. If you make it easy or superficial, then you're missing something as well.

If you make it political, you abuse the memory for your own purposes, and that is crass. If you label the victims as martyrs, you betray something core of the secular millions who were senselessly murdered and did not want to be martyred. There are many ways it can go wrong.

But one thing I think it should do is: it should make us uncomfortable. We should

not go to a Holocaust memorial and feel comfortable. We should, on the contrary, feel a sense of discomfort. If we are leaving with a sense of catharsis, or healing, or closure - something has gone wrong. We should leave feeling uncomfortable.

But I'll be honest: discomfort is not a popular feeling in the 21st century. We feel deeply entitled to our comforts. To eating when we are hungry, to calling on our phone those we want to talk to, to doing mitzvot or coming to shul when we want to - comfort is one of the watchwords of our culture, and it has been to our detriment.

Today, I want to talk about the paradox of discomfort: namely, that resilience involves being present for discomfort, rather than trying to alleviate it. I am also to lead us in an activity of mourning for Oct. 7 that is not going to make us feel comfortable, but will give us a chance to be resilient in our discomfort.

The Yom Kippur Mussaf Service contains a large section that retells the rituals of the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest, in the ancient Temple before its destruction in the year 70 of the common era. Following that beautiful liturgical moment, the service goes into something called the Martyrology. That's a complicated word - it just means, "Prayers about Our Martyrs." Now, we Jews often think we don't have martyrs - martyrdom seems like it belongs to other religions. But that's not really accurate. It's more like, we invented the concept of martyrdom, and our sibling religions of Christianity and Islam took the concept and really ran with it, and we have felt since then, a little bit like, "Uh, this feels kind of Christian / kind of

Muslim," when this stuff comes up, but we still have it there. We just kind of brush it under the rug.

A martyr in Judaism is someone who dies al kiddush Hashem – literally, whose death serves as a testimony to God in the world. In the traditional Martyrology service, we read graphic descriptions of the deaths of ten Mishnaic rabbis martyred in Roman persecutions. Usually, for that component of the service, I let you thumb through the machzor on your own for several pages.

The idea of martyrdom being testimony to God in the world essentially means – these people were killed for being Jewish.

Today, during the martyrology service, I am going to read the list of names of all the victims of the attack on Oct. 7. It's about 1200 names. I have timed it, and it takes 26 minutes. I know you don't have lunch plans so it's okay.

It will not be comfortable. You hear the names that are clearly family members. You hear names that you recognize. You hear many names that you have never heard before.

Some of you will think – why are you not talking Palestinians, who have suffered horrifically in the past year? My answer to that is that I think it is important that a synagogue on Yom Kippur be a space where we can focus on Jewish suffering Jewishly, but I don't need that answer to be persuasive: instead, I ask you to be there with your discomfort, be resilient with your discomfort.

Some of you will think - Rabbi, this is a lot of names. It's going to make people want to leave. You are maybe right. But I have never been able to read all of the names of the victims of the Holocaust. I don't plan to redo this ritual here at BEKI again. But once, just once, let us give voice to all of their names in this space on the holiest day of the year. It's okay to be uncomfortable for this and say, I'm glad we're doing this, and I'm glad we're only doing this once.

Some of you will think - Rabbi, I'm hungry and tired and achy. You are right. But I have no better place to be and these names should be uttered today. If you feel ill, you can lie down, or walk around to stretch. The goal here is to center these names, and not our reactions to these names.

Some of you will exchange glances with each other while I read these names - glances that say, "this is really cringey, he's just droning on, and doesn't know that this is not meaningful, it is just a list of Hebrew names and none of them mean anything to me." But the names meant a tremendous amount to the people who had them, and to their families. On one day, let's read their names.

I have heard so much Oct. 7 commemoration. Speeches and songs and prayers. But I have not heard someone read the names of the 1200 victims. I think that is because people think it will provoke discomfort, and they don't believe people are resilient enough to handle it. That's a shame. I believe that we are resilient enough to handle this.

Beyond this ritual, I want to talk about discomfort, resilience, and our spiritual lives.

I think that we all struggle with experiences of discomfort. We have so many words for discomfort - revulsion, disgust, angst, shpilkes, awkward, cringe, I could go on.

When we are naming an emotion and coming up with so many shades of gray for it, it's a sign that there's need for a deeper spiritual focus.

Often, when we encounter discomfort, we immediately think: how can I change this?

How can I fix this? That is a very common feeling. But sometimes, we have to recognize that the situation we are in is actually one that should not be comfortable.

Discomfort is actually a normal part of life.

Instead of focusing on our discomfort, we need to focus on our resilience. Because the paradox of discomfort is that, in trying to make everything smoother, to make everything easier-to-digest, we lose our resilience. We become less and less able to brook even the smallest discomforts. When we treat every discomfort as if it must be ameliorated, we actually weaken ourselves and harm our resilience.

Remember the paradox of strength that Ben Zoma cited? Who is strong - one who overcomes their urge. Hakovesh et yitzro.

That certainly means overcoming your urge to become angry.

But it also means, true strength is found in resilience in the face of discomfort.

Allowing ourselves to, through discomfort, hold onto our sense of self, of priorities, of mitzvot. Resilience is an important value. And I see so many of you living with

such resilience in your lives – you are strong people, and so many of you have born so much. You are good at resilience.

But practicing resilience is swimming upstream in our society. We are so often told that discomfort is something to always be avoided.

I am speaking about this on a fast day on purpose. Fasting is not fun. But we all know that we should not respond to its discomfort by giving up – we should tap into our resilience. We can see it as a chance to practice our virtue of kovesh et-yitzro, overcoming our urges.

We also have to work on our virtues of resilience to be able to live in community with each other.

I know that at BEKI, people do not all make the same choices about what prayers to say, how to say the prayers, what words to include or exclude. Sometimes, that leads people to feel discomfort. That's a discomfort that we have to develop resilience about, because we are always going to be a community that has diversity. What we want is to be able to encounter something that makes us uncomfortable and respond with resilience. And I'm using BEKI here as an easy example, but obviously we have to increase our resilience to hearing different perspectives and voices in this country and world, or things are going to get worse. In fact, what that getting worse would look like – if we don't build our resilience – is that we'll get even less resilient and everything will become more uncomfortable. That's not a good way to live.

Resilience means recognizing that there isn't always something to fix (remember how I spoke on day one Rosh Hashanah about how fixing things doesn't do what you expect it to do?). Resilience means that maybe you don't have to kvetch about it (remember how I spoke on day two Rosh Hashanah about how kvetching about things doesn't do what you expect it to do?). What if we try accepting discomfort as part of life, and resilience as an important spiritual goal?

There will always be discomfort in community - for it is inherent in community that you are in it with people you don't choose. Otherwise it's not community - it's just a little club. There is discomfort in Judaism - this is a hard religion that asks a tremendous amount from its practitioners - because if it did not have discomfort, it would just be saccharin nothingness. There is discomfort in learning new things - if there wasn't discomfort there, it would mean that we are only learning the same thing again and again.

This year, I want you to try to grow in your spiritual resilience. I don't know what your specific goal should be - maybe it's accepting the discomforts of aging (I know, easy for me to say, maybe, but I think it's important), or the discomforts of having to act like a grown-up (that's more my challenge). Or the discomforts of practicing mitzvot, or coming to minyan, or spending more money than is comfortable on charitable donations. These are important discomforts.

And there are bigger ones, too - the discomforts of recognizing that a person who

matters to you is not going to change, and you need to find a way to accept their flaws; the discomfort of realizing that you haven't been who you want to be; the discomfort of accepting your own flaws and realizing that they might not change, but that they can be treated lovingly.

Today, we'll start with something small. The discomfort of hearing the names of many people - too many - killed on a dark day of October 2023. We can do it. We can sit through it. With resilience, and with an openness to all the complicated feelings we will have.