

# The Gorilla and My *U-Netaneh Tokef* Problem

*Susan P. Fendrick*

IN 1999, PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCHERS AT HARVARD conducted an experiment: Participants watched a brief video in which two groups of people — three people in white shirts and three in black — passed basketballs back and forth. The participants were asked to count the number of passes between the players in white shirts — not very difficult, and most people got the right answer. The researchers then asked if the participants had noticed anything unusual. Most had not.

But when they had a chance to watch it a second time, with instructions to just observe and note anything that stood out, almost all of the participants saw what they had missed the first time — that right in the middle of the video, a person in a gorilla costume walks into the center of the screen, pounds his or her chest, and walks off.

How, you may ask, could anyone miss a gorilla in the middle of a basketball game? The viewers were dutifully focused on their counting task, and that apparently crowded out some otherwise pretty obvious visual input. They saw what they were looking for — and they missed the gorilla.

The Invisible Gorilla Phenomenon is surely familiar to each of us: the disconcerting experience of realizing in retrospect that we've missed something in plain sight — a person, an object, even a sacred task — because we just weren't looking for it.

This phenomenon is also familiar from some of the biblical stories that populate our world during the *Yamim Noraim*/High Holidays. Consider Hagar, sent into the wilderness with some bread, too little water, and her son.

She is so devastated and afraid that she cannot even bear to look at her own child, and she begins to sob. God, the biblical text tells us, hears Ishmael's cry (something of which Hagar — and we as the text's readers — are completely unaware), reassures Hagar about what is to come...and opens her eyes. *Va-yifkach Elohim et eineiha va-teireh b'er mayim/God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water* [GENESIS 21:19]. Her vision so clouded by despair, Hagar had been oblivious to the well right before her.

Consider, too, the story of the Akedah. At its climax, Avraham holds a knife over his son Yitzhak, seemingly ready to slaughter him. At the last moment, the angel of God — as one midrash highlights — has to call Avraham's name twice to get his attention::

*“Avraham. Avraham!! Don't raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you are someone who fears God, and you would not withhold your son, your favored one, from Me.”*

And then, *va-yisa Avraham et einav, va-yahr, v'hinei ayil achar neechaz ba-s'vakh b'karnav / And Avraham looked up and — hinei/whoa! — there was a ram behind [him], caught in the thicket by its horns* [GENESIS 22:13] — horns which, according to legend, became our shofarot for the ages.

Rabbi Avi Weiss points out something about this episode that I confess had never occurred to me before. Rams are not small animals. It's hard to imagine, even if it was *achar*/behind him, that a ram caught in the bushes right nearby could be utterly unnoticed until Avraham looks up, responding to the angel's call — unless we remember that until that moment, he was completely consumed with fulfilling a devastating divine command.

Rabbi Rob Scheinberg, who brought this interpretation to my attention in an email exchange, says about it: “On the one hand, that kind of total focus can be beautiful — like the focus of an artist or an athlete...oblivious to everything else in the world. But in the case of Avraham, this single-minded focus on a task is diabolical...Perhaps [he] knew that the only way he could possibly carry through with this repulsive act would be to be wilfully blind to everything else in his world.”

Avraham's choice to follow through on what he understood God to be asking of him required him to deliberately ignore the mortal harm he would be inflicting on his son, to render invisible the suffering he would likely cause his beloved wife — not to mention the incredible loss he himself would suffer. In that state of mind, is it any wonder that he didn't see the ram either?

What about us? How much do we miss about our own lives, about the people in them, about our world, because of our focus on the task before us, or because of how we frame the questions we do and don't ask about ourselves and the world in which we live? What might make it possible for us to look up, to open our eyes, to widen our vision? And what gets in our way?

Just as for the participants in the study, and for Avraham, singlemindedness can serve a purpose, but can also hide things from us — not just information, but emotions, people, and responsibilities. And just as for Hagar, despair — the feeling that there is no way out, that no solution is possible — can blind us to the possibilities within reach, even within plain sight.

So many other things can narrow our vision: psychologists call it “confirmation bias” when we take in what we are already expecting to see or want to believe, and mentally filter out what doesn't fit with our expectations or beliefs. When we feel defensive or scared, we focus on self-protection, and turn away from seeing other people and the world around us in all its texture. As Rabbi Melissa Weintraub describes it, we seek out evidence that proves us right and ignore what doesn't; we look for evidence that delegitimizes our adversaries and ignore everything else about them; we seek out people who agree with us and avoid those who don't. Researchers have observed a closely related but even more troubling dynamic, whereby direct exposure to evidence that one of our deeply-held beliefs about the world is factually incorrect tends to actually *strengthen* our incorrect perceptions.

Apparently, we're simply bad at allowing in evidence that might prove us wrong — a largely unconscious dynamic that we can change by surfacing it and working on it with awareness. Refusing to let fear and blindness have the upper hand means being willing to look at the outer edges of our knowledge, beliefs, and perceptions, and beyond. As any radiologist will tell you, paying attention to the margins does not always provide good news, but it does provide more usable information. Just beyond the edges of our fields of perception are feelings we've been avoiding, people we've been ignoring or casting as the other, problems we've stopped seeing, and issues we've kind of hoped would just go away.

Merlin Mann, the genius behind the blog *43 Folders*, was recently interviewed for a profile in *New York Magazine*, focusing largely on the topic of attention and inattention. Mann says there: “Where you allow your attention to go ultimately says more about you as a human being than anything you put in your mission statement. It is,” he says, “an indisputable receipt for your existence.”

Powerful words. But is attention enough? In a *New York Times* op-ed published on Rosh Hashanah (Sept. 30, 2011), David Brooks questions the value of empathy, a kind of emotional attention. He quotes Jesse Prinz, a philosopher at the City University of New York, summarizing the numerous studies investigating the link between empathy and moral action: “Empathy is not a major player when it comes to moral motivation. Its contribution is negligible in children, modest in adults, and nonexistent when costs are significant.”

---

As any radiologist will tell you,  
paying attention to the margins  
does not always provide good news,  
but it does provide more usable information.

---

Brooks adds: “Other scholars have called empathy a ‘fragile flower,’ easily crushed by self-concern...Empathy often leads people astray. It influences people to care more about cute victims than ugly victims...It leads us to react to shocking incidents, like a hurricane, but not longstanding conditions, like global hunger or preventable diseases. Nobody is against empathy. Nonetheless, it’s insufficient...People who actually perform pro-social action don’t only feel for those who are suffering, they feel compelled to act by a sense of duty. Their lives are structured by sacred codes” — which he explains can be religious, military, social, or philosophical. “The code,” he says, “isn’t just a set of rules. It’s a source of identity.”

Our fast on Yom Kippur may produce moments of temporary identification with those who are genuinely and chronically hungry, but if it were chiefly a pedagogic strategy to foster empathy so as to lead to action combating hunger, I’d guess the Yom Kippur fast would be a failure. Its purpose is not really to make us feel empathy with the hungry, but to serve as a discipline

that focuses us on the fact that we are individuals with obligations, members of a community with a sacred code.

In the Yom Kippur morning Haftarah, Isaiah harshly reminds us that that code only begins with fasting and other acts of self-denial on Yom Kippur: *Is not this the fast I have chosen: To loosen the chains of evil, to undo the bonds of oppression, to free the oppressed, to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, to bring the homeless poor into your home?* [ISAIAH 58:6-7] Attention that is not linked to action is, indeed, a fragile flower.

What would Isaiah have thought of *U-Netaneh Tokef*? The powerful liturgical poem hauntingly recounts the myriad ways a person's life can be ended — “who by fire and who by water...” But then in response to this contemplation of our own mortality, we are reassured: *teshuvah*, *u-tefilah*, *u-tzedakah*/repentance and return, prayer and introspection, charity and righteousness *maavirin et ro'a ha-g'zeirah*/literally, “cause-to-pass the harshness of the decree.” The individual pray-er, having walked liturgically through the valley of the shadow of death, here finds some solace — the decree of mortality can be softened, its severity tempered by *teshuvah*, *tefilah*, and *tzedakah*, improving the quality, if not the length, of her individual life.

But is this enough? Though *teshuvah*, *tefilah*, and *tzedakah* will inevitably connect us to and affect other individuals and the wider human community, the flow of *U-Netaneh Tokef* would seem to encourage us to see them rather solipsistically as *nechamta*, the comforting coda to a stark encounter with our own mortality (a theme that bleeds through the entire Yom Kippur liturgy), rather than as acts of repair and justice that can transform our world.

A short story called “Charity” in Hugh Nissenson's collection, *The Elephant and My Jewish Problem*, might help us with our *U-Netaneh Tokef* problem. At the core of the story is a phrase from Proverbs that is likely also one of the sources for *U-Netaneh Tokef*. The phrase, from Proverbs 11:4, reads: *Tzedakah tatzil mi-mavet / Charity (or righteousness) saves from death.*

The narrator of the story recalls the winter of 1912 when he was 12 years old — the winter his mother would eventually die of pneumonia. His family is very poor, living in a one-room apartment without hot water, but there is always Shabbat dinner, and an invited guest at that meal, someone in even greater need. When the weather is cold, the father regularly insists that

the guest stay overnight, responding to his son's complaints regarding these smelly men who snore with the words of Proverbs, "Charity saves from death."

The week his mother becomes ill, the boy has a bit of a mystical experience, and comes to believe profoundly that God will reward his father's charity. That night, the snoring of their guest, a man named Rivkin, is particularly loud, and neither father nor son can sleep. They have the following conversation.

"I feel much better now" [the boy says to his father].

"Do you? Why?"

"Because Mama will get well."

"How can you be so sure?"

"You said so yourself."

"Did I? When?"

"You said that charity saves from death."

"What's that got to do with Mama?"

"Everything."

He suddenly raised his voice. "Is that what you think a mitzvah is? A bribe offered the Almighty?"

"But you said so. You said that charity saves from death." Rivkin groaned in his sleep.

"No, not Mama," my father said in a hoarse voice. "Him."

And there the story ends — and, I think, helps to resolve our U-Netaneh Tokef problem. Acts of repentance, prayer, and charity do, without question, soften the harshness of the *g'zeirah*, making our lives better and holier even if they can't save us from our ultimate end. But read in the light of Nissenson's final line in "Charity," the end of U-Netaneh Tokef widens our vision beyond our own quality of life and our own mortality. It calls to us as members of the human community to recognize that we live amidst seven billion others whose individual lives will also be shaped this year by illness, depression, and loneliness; natural disasters and tragic accidents; poverty, and slavery. Our own attentive actions can make an enormous difference in the severity of the *g'zeirah* of human vulnerability and mortality. They can help us save one another. Or perhaps the "Him" that is saved by our sacred acts is no less than the Divine Self, whose very presence in the universe is strengthened and sustained by interpersonal caring and responsibility.

In the Shofar service on Rosh Hashanah, and during Tashlich, we recite this verse from Hallel: *Min ha-meitzar karati Yah, anani ba-merchav*

*Yah/From the place-of-narrowness I called to God, God answered me with Divine expansiveness* [PSALMS 118:5]. These words give voice to one of the few things I feel confident asserting as enduring personal theology: God embodies (as it were), or represents, the notion that there is always more, beyond what we perceive at a given moment in a given place in a given state of mind. We come to God in a place of narrowness and bounded perception, and God offers us, in response, the possibility of widening our perspective — including truly seeing the other people around us, perceiving their needs through the lens of ethics and obligation, and understanding our place in the human community, and in all of creation. *Min ha-meitzar karati Yah, anani ba-merchav Yah* — this is the song that the shofar sings to us one last time in a single glorious note of *tekiah gedolah* at the end of Neilah.

In the waning moments of Yom Kippur, Avraham, Hagar, and Isaiah stand with us, inviting us to lift our gaze, to open our eyes, to widen our view...and to resolve to take action, in accordance with our personal codes and our religious obligations, that will soften the *ro'a ha-g'zeirah*, the bitter inevitability of human vulnerability and mortality.

Without courage, as poet and writer Maya Angelou noted in a 2011 interview on National Public Radio, we cannot practice any of the other virtues. So this is my wish for each and all of us in the coming year: that we may be blessed to find the courage to see what we have not yet seen, hear what we have not yet heard, do what we have not yet done, and be what we have not yet been. *G'mar hatimah tovah*.

#### NOTES:

For information on the gorilla experiment, and to see the video, go to: [www.theinvisiblegorilla.com](http://www.theinvisiblegorilla.com) and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJG698U2Mvo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJG698U2Mvo).

My thanks to Rabbi Gil Steinlauf for the idea of using the gorilla experiment to frame the story of Hagar, and to Rabbi Rob Scheinberg for the electronic conversation (when we were both working on High Holiday *drashot*) in which he brought it to my attention.

Quotation from “Charity” from: Hugh Nissenson, *The Elephant and My Jewish Problem: Short Stories and Journals, 1957-1987*, HarperCollins, 1988, pp. 75-81. My thanks to Rabbi Gail Labovitz for recently reminding me of this story, which I had apparently brought to her attention 17 years ago! *Cast your bread upon the waters, and you will find it after many days* (ECCLES. 11:1).

**RABBI SUSAN P. FENDRICK** is an editor, writer, and spiritual director. She lives with her family in Newton, MA, and davens with the Newton Centre Minyan, where this *drash* was originally delivered in 2011.