

Getting to Zero: Tackling the Backlog

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I used to play a lot of video games. If you ask my wife, I still do. But, see, there's a difference between *playing* games and playing *games*. When I was younger and had all the time in the world, I could bounce from one game to another. I could spend hours running around trying to save Princess Zelda and the citizens of Hyrule harnessing the power of the Master Sword to travel through time and using the ocarina to solve puzzles. I could then swap over to play through Kingdom Hearts, an unnecessarily convoluted story of light versus dark which mashes up elements of magic, Arthurian tales, steampunk aesthetics, Japanese mythology, and, of course, the wonderful world of Disney—I'm not joking, you play through the entire game fighting minions who have been unleashed from the Realms of Darkness and you ultimately succeed because you have Donald and Goofy as your trusty companions. The power of friendship always wins.

Now, I just don't have that same kind of time to play games. When I do play games, though, I end up choosing the same few titles I can be done with in about 20 minutes. Quick online multiplayer games that I don't really feel any connection to, playing with absolute strangers over the internet who disconnect from the game the second it loads in and then your team is down one or two players for the remainder of the match and you sit there wondering "why am I doing this to myself? Is this even fun? What is the meaning of life?"

I used to have time and energy to play and then replay games that took 80+ hours to beat—and that's not including the side missions, secret bosses, unlocking every possible ending, collecting every ultimate weapon for all of my characters. In the business, we call that 100%ing a game.

Now, there's a new game that we all play, where we just try to get to zero.

[email inbox number]. [number] is the number of the emails I currently have in my email inbox.

Getting to zero unread emails might just be the most Sisyphean task of our time. We take that number down, we respond to every message, we feel that sense of accomplishment seeing that beautiful goose egg and so we walk away from our desk only to have our phones *ding* bringing in that pesky hovering red number back to the email icon—great, another temple newsletter.

Even without the external messages coming in, I personally add to my own anxieties about the unread email count. For years, my only method of creating to-do lists was emailing myself reminders—"reach out to so-and-so about xyandz"..."add info to b'nai mitzvah page on website"..."follow-up about"..."cancel subscription to..."... and I would leave these emails as "unread" until I finally completed the task.

This summer, I finally got around to one of those unread email to-do list items that has been sitting there in my inbox since 2013.

Ten years ago, when I was the young naïve Youth Director here at TIOH, I thought to myself, "you know what would make an amazing High Holiday read? *Leaves of Grass*, by Walt Whitman." I loved what I read of it in high school and thought that it would be a powerful way to connect with the Divine via nature during a deeply reflective season. So I checked it out from the library, put it by my bedside table, wrote emails to myself to remember to read it, and, never got around to reading it. Probably because I was playing video games... But when the High Holidays came and went, I sadly returned it to the library. And it's been on my mind ever since.

Now, you might be thinking to yourself: "Calvin, why didn't you just go back to the library, check it out again, and read it?" Well, if we're being honest, I didn't have the time—I've been busy: I went to rabbinical school, lived in Israel for a year, got married, graduated from rabbinical school during the lockdown, started life as a virtual rabbi, transitioned into an in-person rabbi with a bottom half, had a child, that child just started school here last week...

But, as we entered *this* summer, I knew that I wanted to talk about tackling the backlog for my High Holiday sermon and so I made it a point to go out of my way to borrow *Leaves of Grass* from the library and finally read it. And I had the perfect opportunity: I was going back east for a week-long retreat in the woods at a camp on a lake—exactly how Walt wanted me to experience his poetry.

Well, here I am standing before you, and I can proudly say two things: 1. I have finally read *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman—I deleted that email reminder to myself and have crossed it off my to-do list; 2. Something shifted inside of me when I read those final words of "Leaves of Grass" and closed the book—so much so that I was almost charged a late fee for not wanting to return the book to the library. *I finally read it.* Sure, the words were profound, and I'll actually be peppering in a lot of what I gleaned from Walt's poetry throughout these Holidays, but what was truly awe-inspiring was the experience of finishing something that I intentionally set aside to accomplish.

I felt myself getting closer to zero—that elusive state of productivity, pride, and progress. Now, I know that there’s still so much for me to tackle in terms of my own backlog—movies I want to watch, books I want to read, games I want to play, places I want to visit. I know the emails are going to keep coming in. And the unread notifications, the notes we leave for ourselves, the to-do lists—these are all accountings of tasks that require our attention and perhaps even our action to complete. Realistically, we recognize that we can’t accomplish everything—and we don’t want to!—because then what would there be left to do with our time. What we do want is to figure out how to get each task to a manageable state so we feel better prepared for what’s to come that will also require our attention.

Earlier this summer, Rabbi Mari invited our community to finish the sentence: “Before I die...” Some of those responses, in the form of artwork and hand-written answers on chalkboards, will be on display throughout our building over the next ten days. This prompt, though, is the underlying theme of the Days of Awe. Our tradition even teaches that Yom Kippur is a rehearsal for our own deaths—this is why we have certain practices of fasting, guidelines as to the clothes we can and cannot wear, and activities from which we should refrain. For the next 10 days we gather as community, we offer traditional prayers and reflections that evoke grand imagery of our God judging us for our backlog of shortcomings from this past year. It seems easy to say that we understand the metaphors of a fresh new start, blank slate, yada yada yada. But, what if, we took a few steps back to take in what this season offers us? What if we stood in awe—even in a little fear—of these *Yamim Noraim*, the Days of Awe?

Rabbi Eliezer taught his students “‘the day before you die, you should work to restore that which is broken.’ The students asked, ‘but how does one know the day of one’s death?’ The Rabbi responded, ‘Exactly. You could die tomorrow, which is why you should act now to repair the brokenness—this will allow you to live in such a way that you will be in a consistent and constant cycle of the restorative work of *tshuvah*.’”¹

What might it feel like to acknowledge everything from this past year that brought us further away from zero? How would it sound to truly apologize to those whom we have hurt? In a week’s time, when we chant *Kol Nidrei*, we admit that we are going to make more mistakes—that our to-do lists are going to grow longer. What if we gave ourselves permission to take the words of our *machzor* seriously? What if we gave ourselves permission to believe that our prayers matter? What if, this year, we accepted the invitation to hit the button for a spiritual reset—to use this season as a chance to get to

¹ [Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 153a](#)

zero—to tackle the backlog of less-than-ideal interactions and the ways in which those experiences fractured our souls?

Just this week, I got even closer to zero—I began reading another book from my backlog called *Daytripper*. It's a graphic novel that follows the writer of obituaries for a local Brazilian newspaper. Each segment of its ten short parts highlights a different time in the protagonist's life, and every episode ends with a different version of him dying—sealed with a one-to-two line obituary that he would've written for himself. I haven't finished it yet, but two important themes have already jumped out at me: 1. the emotional and spiritual nuance of one's life is greatly reduced when told in just a few words; 2. time is ever-present, relentless. *Daytripper* asks us: How often do we ponder the past, wish for the future, but exist foremost in the experience?

Rabbi Hillel taught:

Do not separate yourself from the community.

Do not be sure of yourself until the day you die.

Do not judge your peer until you have stood in their place.

Do not say anything that cannot be immediately understood in the hope that it will eventually be understood.

And do not say, I will study when I have the time, for you may never have the time.²

So much of what we don't control will continue to come in, requiring our energy and attention—pulling us further away from zero. For what little we can control—with the time that we have left, let's choose to fill our souls with goodness, lean into our passions, engage in activities that bring us joy, surround ourselves with people we love and who love us.

What better place than here? What better time than now?³

May this be a year we get to zero, so that we can 100% life.

² [Pirkei Avot 2:4](#)

³ [Guerrilla Radio](#), lyrics by Zack de la Rocha, music by Rage Against the Machine