

Resisting Bartleby: On Duty, Change, and Vision for the Future

Rabbi A. Brian Stoller

Yom Kippur Morning 5784 / September 25, 2023

In the winter of 1853, Herman Melville, the famed author of *Moby Dick*, published a short story he called “Bartleby, the Scrivener.”¹

It’s about an elderly Wall Street lawyer who hires a quirky legal clerk named Bartleby to help out in his office.

At first, Bartleby impresses his boss with his exceptional productivity and strong work ethic. But one day, something changes.

For some unknown reason, Bartleby abruptly starts refusing to do *any* work at all. All he’ll say is that he would prefer not to.

The situation quickly devolves into absurdity as Bartleby continues to show up for work every day; but, now, any time he’s asked to do even the most basic task, he just responds with the same old refrain: “I would prefer not to.”

The whole thing is maddening, both for the lawyer *and* the reader.

In the end, Bartleby—who, we come to learn, has actually been living in the office 24 hours a day but doing zero work—just kind of withers away and dies.

Melville ends this strange story with a cry of exasperation: “Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!”

I think it’s very apropos for Yom Kippur.

Because while we probably all agree that Bartleby’s attitude is not a good one for the workplace, I feel like, too often, we take that same attitude when it comes to the way we’re living our lives.

My Aunt Carolyn—who is a fount of wisdom, especially around the High Holidays—said to me once: “When we’re sitting there on Yom Kippur and reading that list of all the sins we’ve committed, you just *know* there are people thinking to themselves: ‘Yeah...I have *no* intention of not doing that one again.’”

- Stop judging and resenting other people? “I would prefer not to.”
- Stop participating in gossip? “I would prefer not to.”
- Spend less of my money on personal indulgences so I can give more in *tzedakah*? Be more sensitive to how my actions impact other people and the world beyond my own little corner of it? “Meh. I’d prefer not to.”

So, not surprisingly, we leave the sanctuary when services are over, and we’re right back to doing what we’ve always done.

Why go *through* all this if we know we're not even going to *try* to change course?

Do we think it doesn't really matter that much?

Do we just lack the motivation to do something different?

Or do we feel like this is just who we are and there's no point in making the effort to change *now*?

Do we want to go through the same cycle again and again for the rest of our life?

If so, that seems pretty obstinate and cynical and self-defeating.

Kind of like Bartleby.

In truth, Bartleby's attitude might make sense if you see the world in a certain way.

The Jewish philosopher Will Herberg explains that in the ancient pagan cultures of Greece and Rome, people believed that time moved round and round in a never-ending circle, without *any* direction or purpose.

"The pagan world was literally without hope," he says. "[T]here was nothing to look forward to, nothing to strive for beyond one's own day, nothing that time could bring but a turn of the wheel of fortune, a recurrence of the cycle."

Spiritually, at least, it was an existence of "profound melancholy."²

Bartleby must have seen the world this way, too. And why do *anything* if, as far as you're concerned, there's no meaningful future—if life is just about running on an endless treadmill?

But Judaism introduced a completely *new* concept of time into the world: one in which time is *linear*, not circular. In this view, Herberg explains, "[Time] *gets* somewhere, it accomplishes something, it has meaning to God and man alike."³

"[T]he past and the present [are] oriented toward the *future*" and human life is the "vehicle of the divine purpose."⁴

The passage we're going to read from the Torah this morning expresses this idea beautifully:

"You stand here today, all of you, before Adonai your God...to enter into this Covenant. ... I make this Covenant not with you alone...but *both* with those who are standing with us this day...*and* those who are *not* with us here this day."⁵

The midrash says that all Jewish souls that ever *had* been and ever *would* be—those that were *incarnate* at the time and those that were *not*; from Abraham at the beginning to Elijah at the end—made that Covenant with God.

Meaning: *We* were there, too, and we are key players in the Grand Story, no less than Moses or Miriam or our great-great-grandparents or our great-great-grandchildren.

It is a Covenant that at once *transcends* time and yet must be lived out *in the context* of time.

Since each of us is a critical link in the chain, everything we do during our short time here *matters* in moving history toward its ultimate fulfillment.

There is no room for Bartleby-like apathy or inaction.

To remain static and refuse to strive toward the ideal because, well, we would *prefer not to*, is to deny the significance of our individual lives in that Grand Story and to negate the purpose for which God put us here in the first place.

Our responsibility in the Covenant is to partner with God to drive the Grand Story forward by writing our next chapter in the Book of Life.⁶

The goal is not to start from *scratch*, because where we are at this moment is not the *beginning*. A profound and meaningful story has already been unfolding—not only throughout our lives but also well before we were here.

So, our goal is to start from where we are *now* and build on it and move the story *forward* in a way that is coherent with, and faithful *to*, what came before.

In our individual lives, that means taking stock of our good qualities and our not-so-good ones, acknowledging where there's room for improvement, and being honest with ourselves about what it's going to take for us to get there.

In some cases, the changes we need to make will just take some *focus* and a little effort.

In other cases, where we know certain qualities or behaviors are deeply ingrained in our habits or our psyche, we're going to have to work harder to make meaningful change, and our movement toward the ideal might come much more incrementally.

And that's OK. Remember: The goal is not *perfection*; it's *growth*. So, the key is to do what we need to do to put our character development on the right trajectory.

To help us do that, I want to suggest an exercise for each of us to try on our own in the coming days. It's a Yom Kippur-ized version of something I learned from a book called *Vivid Vision*, by the prominent leadership coach Cameron Herold.

Here's what you do: Imagine that a time machine magically transports you to Yom Kippur 5785, exactly one year from today.

When you step out of the time machine, you meet the future, one-year-from-now version of yourself—and it turns out, you're living the best life you know you're capable of.

You have no idea what you did to *become* that next version of yourself, but all you know is that you really like what you see.

It's not some far-fetched *fantasy* person, though; remember, it's *impossible* to reach the ideal in one *lifetime*, let alone in one *year*. What you see is a version of yourself that makes *sense*: It's *you*, only better.

Now, describe what you see. And do it in writing. Remember, you're crafting your next chapter in the Book of Life.

One or two sentences won't suffice. Try to describe it in vivid detail:

Where are you living? Who are you with? How are you spending your time?

What's changed about you? What qualities in yourself are you proud of? What have you overcome to reach this point?

What are your relationships like? How are you impacting the people around you? What are *they* saying about you?

This is your Vivid Vision for the next chapter of your life, so keep refining it until it feels right.

Then, when it does, start figuring out the *specific* things you need to do to make it a reality by this time next year. Write those out, too—and, as Chris Cuomo likes to say, “get after it.”

One more thing: This isn't something we can or should do only for our own personal lives. We're going to do it for Temple Beth-El, too.

Everyone here knows that the world around us has changed dramatically, and it's impacting our congregation in significant ways.

This is an historic congregation with a proud legacy. Today, *we* are the trustees of that legacy; and as the newest links in the chain, it is our *duty* to carry that legacy forward.

And the only way to do that is by taking up the responsibility of writing a new chapter for our congregation: one that is coherent with—and faithful *to*—the *past*, while also putting us on the right trajectory for the future.

That’s why I’m excited to tell you that, under the leadership of our president Gary Slobin, we have assembled an outstanding team of thoughtful, dedicated congregants—among them past presidents, current board members, and people with a wide range of professional experience—who will lead us in the critical and sacred work of creating a Vivid Vision for the next chapter of Temple Beth-El.

This process, which will involve the deep and consistent commitment of our visioning team, will begin next month. I want to thank them for agreeing to take this on for the benefit of all of us.

Both in our personal lives *and* in our congregational one, the work of change and growth will be hard. There’s no doubt about that.

But time is marching forward, and we have to move forward *with* it.

True, things may pan out differently from how we imagine them right now. But with a Vivid Vision of where we want to go, coupled with a serious and honest effort to achieve it, I’m confident that we’ll put ourselves *and* Temple Beth-El on the right trajectory.

Truth is, we don’t have the *luxury* of saying, “I prefer not to.” Because not only is that irresponsible and defeatist, but as we learned from *Bartleby*: to remain static in a world that is charging ahead is to wither away and die.

So today, let’s vow to resist our *Bartleby*-like nihilistic impulses to withdraw from reality and do nothing.

Let’s take up our Covenantal duty to God, to our community, and to ourselves with vigor and optimism, and keep our Great Story going toward its majestic fulfillment.

¹ I read Melville’s story after first learning about it on the podcast *America This Week* with Matt Taibbi and Walter Kirn

² Will Herberg, *Judaism and Modern Man*, 195

³ *Ibid.*, 196

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ *Deuteronomy* 29:10-14

⁶ In discussing this idea of writing our next chapter in the Book of Life, I am drawing on Ronald Dworkin's metaphor of the "chain novel" in legal theory, as outlined in his book *Law's Empire* and other writings.