

The night Max wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind and another, his mother called him WILD THING! And Max said, I'LL EAT YOU UP! So he was sent to bed, without eating anything.

These famous first words open up a story that is probably familiar to most of us from childhood—and possibly from parenthood. It is, of course, **Where the Wild Things Are**, a so-called children's book by the Jewish author and artist Maurice Sendak; a book that takes us on a fantastical trip to the place where the wild things are. But more than that, it takes us on an interconnected, mother-son journey of *teshuvah*, from sin and error, to repentance and return. There are theological lessons in this sweet book that are in deep conversation with our Torah and Haftarah readings today, and with the themes of the day itself.

Our Torah reading articulates three main principles regarding our moral obligations: first, that we all—from the elders to the children to the laborers to the strangers—stand together before God, committing to an eternal *brit*, an everlasting covenant. All of us are implicated, included, *invited* into this *brit*. Nobody is immune; the work is on all of us to take up. The Torah says,

וְלֹא אִתְּכֶם לְבַדְכֶם אֶנְכִּי כָרַת אֶת־הַבְּרִית הַזֹּאת וְאֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים הַזֹּאת.
כִּי אֶת־אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁנֹנוּ פֹה עִמָּנוּ עַמֵּד הַיּוֹם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ
וְאֶת־אֲשֶׁר אֵינָנוּ פֹה עִמָּנוּ הַיּוֹם.

Not only with you do I swear this covenant and this oath, but with those who stand here with us today before Adonai our God, and those who do not stand here with us today.

Future generations are responsible for taking on the work of Torah, for doing the *mitzvot* to the best of our understanding and ability.

Second, as Elsa chanted for us just a little while ago, the work is hard but not impossible. לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הוּא *It is not in the heavens, such that you might ask who will go up and get it for us?* No, it's much closer than that!

כִּי־קְרוֹב אֵלַי הַדְּבָר מְאֹד בְּפִי וּבִלְבָבִי לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ.

The thing is very close to you: in your mouth and in your heart, to do it

The teaching is in our words, and our actions, and our highest instincts. We know what we are called on to do; God lays it out for us in the instruction we call Torah

Thirdly, the Torah reading makes it clear that we will have choices throughout our lives. God is not making a blanket promise that all we need to do is show up. Rather God sets before us

אֶת־הַחַיִּים וְאֶת־הַטּוֹב וְאֶת־הַמָּוֶת וְאֶת־הָרָע
Life and goodness, and death and evil

The choice is ours to make, at each and every moment. The philosopher Victor Frankl, who survived three years in the concentration camps that killed many of his family members, taught about the opening between stimulus and response, sometimes no wider than a slit: our capacity to pause and reflect on how to handle what comes our way is where our moral character is built. No matter how degrading a situation we might be in, there is always the possibility of redemption: ours and that of the people around us. When we make life-affirming choices, things will go well for us, but if we turn to false gods, we won't last long.

Which brings us back to Max, in the storybook. That night he wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind and another, he was, as they say in the parenting books, not making good choices. Of course, of course, he was just a little kid and was probably doing the best he could. But for the purposes of thinking about *teshuvah*, let's imagine his exile with the wild things is a kind of straying after false gods, and perhaps even—when he becomes king of the wild things—making a false god of himself. To be honest, he enjoys that status for a while: frolicking with the wild things, wearing his “King of the Wild Things” crown with pride and pleasure. He is riding high, the five-year-old who has everything.

And yet, something is missing in his fantasy of a glorified existence. He is isolated and alone, disconnected from what truly matters. All the attention and status and power of being King of the Wild Things turns out to be an empty attainment.

The Haftarah speaks to this disillusionment, addressing a people who have gone astray and crowned themselves king; who have fallen away from God's holy ideals and gotten embroiled in the daily work of getting ahead. The prophet Isaiah rails at the hypocrisy of making a show of religious observance while oppressing workers and not striving for justice and equality. He calls us to examine not just our rituals but the ethical commitments that underpin them. “Is this the fast I desire? A day for starving bodies, heads bowed, sackcloth and ashes? Is this what God wants? No, this is the fast I desire: to unlock the snares of wickedness, let the oppressed go free, share your bread with the hungry.”

If we are fasting today to get God's attention, we are doing it wrong. Rather, God asks us to fast to get *our* attention. Our fast cannot be an empty gesture, but should lead to action and change. When we observe Yom Kippur with intention and back it with action, when we make choices that affirm our core values, God is near to us. God says, *Hineni*. Here I am.

Even the God of Unetaneh Tokef, the God Who decides who will live and who will die, has that soft side, for we know that repentance, prayer and charity diminish the harshness of the decree. And that God is slow to anger and ready to forgive.

ועד יום מותו תחכה לו, אם ישוב מיד תקבלי

And until their dying day, You wait for them.

If only they return, You accept them back unhesitatingly.

What does it all mean? What is God waiting for? The final aliyah that I just chanted moments ago lays out the task:

לאהבה את יהוה אלהיך לשמע בקלו ולדבקה בו

To love Adonai your God and to listen to God's voice and hold it close

When Max has his realization that he wants to be where someone loves him best of all, it's that primary connection that he longs after. This sweet image of a patient God leaving the light on is a beacon of faith and inspiration. Like Max's mother, the liturgy of the High Holidays depicts God seeing our faults and lashing out with impatience or even fury, yet there is great tenderness in this relationship too. The phrase Avinu Malkeinu which we recite over and over on Rosh Hashanah and at the end of Yom Kippur reminds us of that duality—Avinu Malkeinu, our parent, our ruler—the one who both judges us and loves us.

And Max, the king of all wild things was lonely and wanted to be where someone loved him best of all. Then all around from far away across the world he smelled good things to eat, so he gave up being king of where the wild things are.

Max stepped into his private boat and waved goodbye, and sailed back over a year and in and out of weeks and through a day and into the night of his very own room where he found his supper waiting for him.

And it was still hot.