

One of my all-time favorite High Holy Day jokes comes from Jon Stewart. I've told this a handful of times, but it always comes to mind at this season. In his routine, Jon was explaining the difference between Catholics and Jews. He was saying, "Catholics, you go to confession every single week. Whereas, we Jews, we go once a year. So even in sin, you are paying retail." Even if we laughingly view Yom Kippur as the Jewish version of wholesale repentance, Yom Kippur, is, nonetheless, a day filled with angst, fasting, and teshuvah. It is designed to be intense and overwhelming. As one of my HUC professors Rabbi Rick Sarason wrote as an introduction to Mishkan HaNefesh, "We begin with our very real imperfections. 'Sin' is a challenging word, since it carries for some the Christian theological connotations of an imperfect state of being that is beyond our ability to change. It provokes guilt, suggesting that we are somehow 'bad people.' However, the Hebrew word for sin, *cheit*, literally means missing the mark, failing. It refers to our actions, not who we are."<sup>1</sup> Yet, we stand here tonight acknowledging that we are imperfect beings.

All that being said, I would like to challenge our notion of imperfection as being inherently 'bad' or 'flawed' and instead as being an important character design. Yes, we do make choices and through those, our actions can sometimes hurt others or ourselves; as well as our words whether spoken or written. This is the challenge then of Yom Kippur, to both acknowledge where we have gone astray, while also fully embracing the entirety of our humanity, flaws and all. More on this in a moment.

There are days were I do spend an inordinate amount of time in the car, but thankfully not as many as I used to. Back in the day, I had CDs, remember those, and AM/FM radio to keep me company. This was of course before satellite radio and podcasts. It was especially challenging

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<sup>1</sup> Mishkan HaNefesh: Machzor for the Days of Awe, Yom Kippur, CCAR Press, 2015, pg. xxi

when I was driving to and from Cincinnati to St. Louis, a six hour drive each way, to visit a then medical student I had fallen in love with. Through the rolling nothingness that was Indiana, all I had to keep me company was AM radio with its' late night dive into conspiracy theories, aliens, medical remedies, and farm reports.

Nowadays, I mostly listen to podcasts. Some of my favorites are the recast of NPR's Wait, Wait Don't Tell Me. The reruns of Car Talk. Tablet Magazine's Unorthodox. A relatively new one co-hosted by a friend and colleague of mine entitled Torah Smash. And Conan O'Brien needs a Friend. There are a multitude of others that I listen to from time to time, but those make up a big segment of the playlist.

Typically on Conan O'Brien needs a friend, the host gets to talk to celebrities, comedians, the occasional politician and the like for upwards of an hour. One of my favorites was a frank and honest conversation with his hero David Letterman. It was like listening to the history of late night television with all of the personal anecdotes and slights added in for flavor.

However, the one that I heard a little more recently that I found intriguing and sparked my thinking about tonight was an interview with acclaimed sitcom director James Burrows. James Burrows has been a sitcom director for over five decades and has directed such famous comedies as Taxi, Frasier, Friends, and Will & Grace. And then there is the one with the theme song by

Judy Hart:

Making your way in the world today

Takes everything you've got

Taking a break from all your worries

Sure would help a lot

Wouldn't you like to get away? ...

Sometimes you want to go

Where everybody knows your name

And they're always glad you came

You want to be where you can see

Our troubles are all the same

You want to be where everybody knows your name ... (admit it, you heard these words sung in your head).

Cheers was the creation of James Burrows and brothers Glenn Charles and Les Charles. Cheers ran from September 30, 1982, to May 20, 1993, with a total of 275 half-hour episodes across 11 seasons. And it was central to my childhood as Thursday on NBC was must see tv for my family with the Cosby Show, Family Ties, Cheers and Night Court.

What I did not realize until I picked up his autobiography Directed By James Burrows, is that not only is James the son of Broadway royalty, but that he is also a member of the tribe. James' grandparents were Russian Jews, his father became a Bar Mitzvah, but as James described it, "both (his) parents were agnostic atheists."<sup>2</sup>

As James wrote, "When I was twelve years old, I was asked if I wanted to have a bar mitzvah. I think if you give most Jewish boys at any point in our five-thousand-year history the choice of whether they want to put all the work into getting bat mitzvahed at that age, they'd probably decline. Which is what I did. But that's not where that story ends. My first wife was conservative, and at her urging I got on the "Shul-bus" and agreed to be bar mitzvahed when I was forty-seven years old. The Charles Brothers said that I was the only man they knew who was bar mitzvahed at forty-seven and lost his hair at thirteen."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Burrows, James with Eddy Friedfeld, *Directed by James Burrows*, Ballantine Books, 2022, Pg. 13

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 13

In their creation of Cheers, James and the Charles Brothers created a motley cast of characters, but more importantly, the characters felt real. The center of the show was Sam Harrison the former football player. If that doesn't sound familiar, it is because after casting Ted Danson, who didn't look like a football player, his character was changed to "Sam "Mayday" Malone, based on Bill Lee, nick-named "The Spaceman," who played for the Sox and then the Expos."<sup>4</sup> There was Diane, the sophisticated graduate student ,and the whole will-they-won't-they vibe between Shelley Long's character and Sam Malone. There was Carla, and there was also Norm.

Interestingly, Norm, played by George Wendt, was originally supposed to be a character named George, but James Burrows found it too confusing to have the actor and the character have the same name, a rule that he later waived for Woody Boyd played by Woody Harrelson. Norm was the embodiment of every bar regular they knew. "The (Charles) Brothers knew a man who was a regular at a bar they worked at in Las Vegas. He'd come in every day, sit in the same spot, and order 'just one beer.' Then he'd order 'just one more.' He'd still be there at closing time."<sup>5</sup>

My favorite of the casting decisions story involves Cliff Clavin. "John Ratzenberger came in to read for the part of Norm ... this was his first Hollywood audition. The audition didn't go well, but as he was leaving, he turned to (them) and asked, 'Do you have a blowhard?' They asked, 'What are you talking about?' ... he said, 'In New England, where I'm from, every bar has a horse's (you know what) know-it-all, someone who pretends to have the knowledge of all mankind between his ears and is not shy about sharing it.' So why is he a mailman? Well they wanted him to have a uniform and they thought of him as "someone who delivered magazines, he would know all the headlines but not much more."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pg. 155

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pg. 164

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pgs. 167-168

One of the big reasons why the show worked was not just because of the smart writing, but also because each of the characters was relatable. We could see ourselves in some of them. And if we couldn't see ourselves in them, we certainly knew someone like them. They were all fascinating, and they were all flawed. And, perhaps most importantly, they all grew as people, as human beings over the course of the show. Well, all, perhaps, except for Norm.

And this was a new concept. Prior to Cheers, most sitcoms were episodic, meaning they were self-contained. Everything was reset by the next episode. Cheers broke that mold and allowed for relationships and characters to develop, something which continues through to this day.

And if you think about it, maybe James Burrows was influenced down in his kishkes by our Jewish tradition, as this is such a very Jewish format. For Cheers reminds us of our Jewish obligations to learn, to grow, to fail, to rise, to fall again, to start over, to reimagine, to laugh, and to cry.

Our observance of Yom Kippur is steeped in this same tradition. From the melodies of Kol Nidre to the recitations of viddui and al cheit, the confessionals. The clergy and the Torah scrolls are dressed in white. It all feels like tradition. Because of this, it feels like home, or really, coming home, where everybody knows your name ... sorry couldn't help myself.

But the truth is Yom Kippur is also very contemporary. In today's world, we speak a lot about self-reflection and self-care. As is explained in Everyday health, "Let's clear up one common misconception from the get-go: Self-care is not synonymous with self-indulgence or being selfish. Self-care means taking care of yourself so that you can be healthy, you can be well, you can do your job, you can help and care for others, and you can do all the things you need to and want to accomplish in a day."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.everydayhealth.com/self-care/>

Yom Kippur in many ways is the prototype for this modern concept. It is about spending the day focusing on our imperfections, the parts of us that define who we are, and coming up with ways to improve them. It is also about living with life's imperfections. This is difficult to do for we live in a challenging society that emphasizes having the perfect life, the perfect family, the perfect job, the perfect house, the perfect car, and so on. But life is not that way. Happiness is not about perfection or even the pursuit of it, it is about contentment, as our tradition teaches in Pirkei Avot, "who is rich? one who is satisfied with their lot."<sup>8</sup> This is one of the goals then, to find contentment, and to make peace with ourselves, even when acknowledging our missteps. Living Jewishly means finding the balance between one's imperfections and one's convictions. And this is the heart of the drama that is playing out before on Yom Kippur. To rebalance ourselves even as life can weigh us down.

Sadly the dramas of life all too often outweigh the happier moments. Which is probably why we often wish life was more like a sitcom. But as we know, life is not like a sitcom. There isn't a bar where everyone knows our name. There isn't a coffee shop with a couch in the center reserved just for us. We rarely get to see our friends on a semi-regular basis, let alone daily.

One of the reasons we like watching sitcoms is because we can relate to the characters and their situations and dialogue make us chuckle, laugh and smile. It reminds us of how we can find entertainment and amusement in the foibles and decisions of others, while also seeing ourselves in them. This is why so many talented people like James Burrows have dedicated their lives to this artform.

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<sup>8</sup> Mishnah Pirkei Avot 4:1

But there is something to be said as we can learn more about ourselves from this medium. We can learn that our quirks, our imperfections, our crazy ideas, and our wacky friends, really are the best part of ourselves. They can remind us to embrace these same elements of our lives.

Kol Nidre and by extension, Yom Kippur, are not about pursuing the perfection of ourselves. It is all about course correction, and maybe even laughing at ourselves a little along the way.

So even though we may be paying ‘wholesale’ in sin; what we are really doing is taking the time to fully accept ourselves while at the same time acknowledging that there is more work to be done. As Rabbi Sarason wrote, “For we do well to remember that the ultimate purpose of this day, and of the entire High Holy Day season, is to help us shape lives that are more thoughtful and compassionate, more ethical, and more reverent.”<sup>9</sup> To accomplish this means being both critical of ourselves and kind to ourselves, which is no easy task. It means reflecting on where we have been, and where we hope to go, while at the same time accepting who we are.

The final episode of Cheers, “One for the Road,” debuted on May 20, 1993 to an estimated 42 million households. It was the second most viewed finale in television history behind the final episode of M.A.S.H.<sup>10</sup>

As James Burrows wrote, “When we shot the final scene of the last show, where they’re all sitting around smoking cigars, it was everything I could do to keep from crying. The last patron to leave the bar is, appropriately, of course, Norm. There’s one final customer, who comes along after the bar is closed, and Sam doesn’t let him in ...

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<sup>9</sup> Mishkan HaNefesh: Machzor for the Days of Awe, Yom Kippur, CCAR Press, 2015, pg. xxi pg. xxii

<sup>10</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One\\_for\\_the\\_Road\\_\(Cheers\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One_for_the_Road_(Cheers))

We ended the show as we opened it. Sam was married to his bar. Cheers was the real love of his life. He loved people, and owning Cheers allowed him to create this beautiful community of friends who were his family.”<sup>11</sup>

In this James Burrows story about the last day of Cheers is reminding us of that quote from Pirkei Avot, “Who is rich? one who is satisfied with their lot.”<sup>12</sup> May the hard work of self-reflection on this day help guide us down the path of reconciliation with others and ourselves. May it help lead us to lives of greater contentment. May it help us to embrace the entirety of our beings. And through the pathways of genuine teshuvah, may we be able to find peace. Peace in our lives, peace in our homes, peace in our relationships, and peace in our worlds, and most importantly, peace in our souls.

L'shana Tova

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<sup>11</sup> Burrows, James with Eddy Friedfeld, Directed by James Burrows, Ballantine Books, 2022, pg. 216

<sup>12</sup> Mishnah Pirkei Avot 4:1