



***Shabbat Chol Ha'moed Sukkot***  
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**Something Left to Prove?**  
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Is it a good thing to go through life always feeling that you have something left to prove? Or do you ever reach a point where the healthier move is to say: you know what, I have nothing left to prove?

You are a tenured professor in your chosen field for 20 years. You have authored definitive works in your field. You cannot get fired except for moral turpitude. When you go to your classroom on Monday morning, what is the healthier mindset: I have something left to prove, or I have nothing left to prove.

You are a senior partner in a big law firm. You are a rainmaker, you're on the firm's executive committee, you are a noted expert in your field. What is the healthier mindset: I have something left to prove, or I have nothing left to prove?

You are a caregiver. You've been looking after your loved one for years. You are about to spend yet another morning with them, your umpteenth morning of caregiving. What is the healthier mindset: I have something to prove, or I have nothing left to prove?

One of your languages of love is cooking. You love cooking Shabbat dinner for your family, and it seems to be a crowd pleaser every time. You have cooked 1,000 successful Shabbat dinners. You are now preparing your 1,001<sup>st</sup> Shabbat dinner for your family. What is the healthier mindset: I have something left to prove, or I have nothing left to prove?

Do any of us, ever, come to a point where we have nothing left to prove?

I'll come back to that question in a minute, but first I need to dwell on a word we don't use often, but it is the word of the moment on the Jewish calendar. That word is *interim*.

The dictionary definition of interim is provisional, for the present moment, subject to change. Temporary, not here to stay.

An interim head of school is head of school for a short, finite period, for a year until the search committee can find a head who will take the school into its future. An interim rabbi is not the rabbi of the synagogue for a term of years, but just for this year, until the synagogue finds the next rabbi. An interim football coach will coach the team for the rest of the season, until the front office alights upon the next coach.

The word *interim* is used to describe this period of Chol Hamoed Sukkot, the intermediary days in which we now find ourselves. Tomorrow night Chol hamoed is over. Tuesday night the whole holiday season is over. Provisional, temporary. Interim means short-lived.

*Should we try to cultivate a consciousness of interim?* Should we be intentional about living with an awareness that nothing is promised. Nothing is guaranteed. Nothing is forever. All of this, whatever this is, whatever our life looks like on any given day, could well be provisional. Could well be temporary. Could well be gone. Are we well served by deeply internalizing that we have to go out and earn it again each and every day?

In chapter 3 of his code of Jewish Law known as the Mishne Torah, in *hilchot teshuvah*, the laws of repentance, Maimonides paints the most evocative word picture. He says when you wake up in the morning--this is every morning of your life--your scales are evenly tipped between good and evil, between justice and injustice. It's 50-50. At the end of the day it is going to be 51-49, and the question is will you tip the scales towards good, towards justice, or will you tip the scales towards the opposite? What hangs in the balance is not just your day, and not just your life, but indeed the universe. When you tip the scale towards justice, you bring

about deliverance not only to yourself but to the world. The opposite it also true. As we leave the holiday season, Maimonides reminds us that it is 50-50, order vs. chaos, and it all depends on you.

If what Maimonides writes is true, this means that no one ever arrives. If Maimonides were to come back to life and live in New England today, he would say something about Tom Brady. He would say: Tom Brady may have played for 20 years. He may have won six Super Bowls. He may be acknowledged as the greatest of all time. But none of that matters for tomorrow's game. When the game starts, it is 50-50, it will be 51-49 in one direction or another, depending on how he played that day.

The resonance of this 50-50 scale is that we all play every day like we have something left to prove. What if we did *not* live that way? What if we lived more casually, more cavalierly, more carelessly? What if we lived thinking we have nothing left to prove?

Which brings me to a powerful story by Somerset Maugham called *The Colonel's Lady*, which is about a marriage that had grown loveless. Let's just pause on that concept for a moment, *loveless marriage*. Most marriages begin in love. With love. Most partners love each other on the day of their marriage. That's why they get married. How then does a loveless marriage happen? Maugham's answer is that all it takes is for one partner to stop trying, one partner to get distracted, one partner to feel that they have nothing left to prove, which is just when the drift and decay begin to set in.

George Peregrine is a solid, stolid affluent British man, a distinguished war veteran, a busy man about town, an active man who loves fishing and shooting and hunting. At some point he stops seeing his wife. Not curious about her. Not interested in what she is thinking or doing. He stops investing in his marriage. He loses himself in his business, activities and an affair.

One morning they are having breakfast, seated far away from one another, on opposite ends of a long table, when the mail comes, which brings in multiple copies of a volume of poetry that his wife had penned under a pseudonym. You write poetry George asked? He had had no idea. How lovely. She gives him a volume, which he does not read.

Meanwhile, the book is a huge hit. The book sells like hotcakes, the narrator notes. No book of poetry had sold like it, had generated such interest, in more than a generation. People start coming up to the husband in different settings, noting his wife's newfound fame, and start looking at him awkwardly, as if he might be embarrassed. At last he reads the volume, and he is shocked to discover that his wife whom he had long ago concluded was bloodless and passionless had written a passionate love story:

It was the story of a passionate love affair between an older woman, married, and a young man. Written in the first person, it began with the tremulous surprise of the woman, past her youth, when it dawned upon her that the young man was in love with her...And she was terrified when...she discovered that she was passionately in love with him...[dot, dot, dot, this is shul on a Shabbat morning, so I will omit the details here but this couple gets together]

There was a period of ecstatic happiness.  
The world, the dull, humdrum world of every day, blazed with glory. Love songs flowed from her pen.

The end of the love story is that this young man passes away, and this older woman was left with a memory of an ecstatic, passionate love that once was but is no more.

George feels humiliated. A best-seller in Britain is about his wife's torrid affair.

George is shocked. He thought his wife was mousy. He did not believe his mousy wife had it in her.

George is confused. What did this young paramour see in his wife, how could he be so attracted to her, when George himself had long ago lost interest?

George is burning with curiosity. Who is it? With whom did she cheat on me?

He approaches his wife and says: tell me, who is it?

She says it was you.

What do you mean me? In your story the man dies.

Exactly. Not you today. Not the you who does not see me now and has not seen me in years. But the you that I fell in love with when we met. The you who fell in love with me. The man who fell in love with me is no more. That man died. That love died. Can we get it back?

The title of her book of poetry is so evocative. The title is *When Pyramids Decay*. Pyramids are supposed to last forever, bricks and mortar that would house Pharaohs for all eternity. But even pyramids are not impervious to decay. Marriages are supposed to last forever. But marriages are not impervious to decay. When George stopped trying to prove that he was a worthy partner to Evie, their marriage began its decay and drift into lovelessness.

On this Shabbat of Chol Hamoed Sukkot, it is not just a few last festival days that are provisional. Temporary. Everything that we have, and everything that we are, is a pyramid that can decay. Our health. Our wealth. Our relationships. Our accomplishments. Our reputation. When we think we've made it, we're on our way to decay.

But the good news is that if we get this, if we get that we have never arrived, and never will, if we get that if the 40 year marriage wants to make it to 41, both partners have work to do, if the tenured professor wants to thrive they have work to do, if the loving caregiver wants to give love they have work to do, if the best chef wants this dinner to rock it there is no resting on laurels, if we live like we always have something to prove, we can prove it. You wake up in the morning, it is 50-50. You go to sleep at night, it is 51-49 in one direction or another. The scales are evenly balanced, and the very meaning of our life hangs in the balance on what we do today. Which means we have something left to prove. Shabbat shalom.