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2023 High Holidays Sermon
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What was the biggest entertainment event of the year?
Even bigger than Barbie and Oppenheimer combined?

The final seasons of the first and second most watched TV series in America:
Season 4 of Succession: 3 million watching weekly, 10 episodes, viewership of 30 million.
And Season 5 of the most watched program on TV, by far, nothing even close—Yellowstone:
13 million watching weekly, 14 episodes, 7 completed and the 7 last nail biters to come starting
on November 13.
Once it's over, viewership for this season will be over 180 million.
Succession and Yellowstone combined, viewership of 210 million.

A confession—I haven't yet seen Barbie or Oppenheimer but I've watched all of Succession and
all of Yellowstone.
Raise your hand if you've seen either Succession or Yellowstone?
Now keep your hand raised if you've been like me and watched both?

Why are these programs so, so popular?
On the surface, they couldn't be more different.

Succession is New York City. Soaring skyscrapers and water. A family that controls the largest
media Empire in America. Fancy, fast cars, brownstones and mansions in the sky, haute couture
fashion, drugs and disco. Private airplanes and helicopters. Material excess.

Yellowstone is Wyoming. Majestic, snow capped mountains. Endless expanses of breathtaking
nature. A family that controls the largest ranch in Montana. Cattle. Horses. Cowboys and
cowboy boots. Pickup trucks. Country music, square dancing, and BBQ. "Americana."

If they are so different, why do so many people watch both of these shows?
Because they have so much in common.
Intrigue. Love. Romance. Power. Empire.
A powerful CEO who thinks everyone is out to get him, who thirsts for control, doesn't trust
anyone—and scares everyone.

But what Succession and Yellowstone most have in common and why, in my opinion, they are so
wildly popular is they are about the everlasting tensions of FAMILY—parents and children who
love each other but so often disappoint each other.

Parents who want to control their children and are willing to sacrifice their children for the sake of their own power and desires. Children who yearn for their parents love and validation, who desperately wanted to be favored over their siblings, yet disobey and turn on their parents.

Succession is an American satirical comedy-drama series that aired from 2018 to May 28 of this year. It centers on the Roy family, the owners of global media and entertainment conglomerate Waystar RoyCo, and their fight for control of the company amidst uncertainty about the health of the family's patriarch, Logan Roy, played by Brian Cox. His four children all begin to prepare for a future without their father and vie for prominence and control of the company.

Yellowstone is an American neo-Western drama television series that premiered in 2018 and will end in the next few months. Yellowstone follows the Dutton Family, who own the Yellowstone Ranch, which is the largest ranch in Montana. Kevin Costner plays the patriarch of the family, John Dutton—the sixth generation Dutton to own the ranch and lead his family through difficult times with developers, the national park, the bordering Broken Rock Indian Reservation, as well as internal family conflicts. Just like Logan Roy, John Dutton has four adult children—who each serve as an integral part of protecting the ranch.

About 2,000 years before Jesse Armstrong created Succession and Taylor Sheridan created Yellowstone, the rabbis had to pick Torah readings for Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, when they hoped for some of the biggest crowds of the year. They could have picked any of the 187 chapters in the 5 Books of Torah. They wanted something that we would remember, that would draw us in, open our minds and hearts and lead us to ask the deepest questions of ourselves. And the rabbis picked two stories, just like Succession and Yellowstone. Powerful patriarchs who are willing to sacrifice their children. Children who yearn for love and validation.

Our patriarch Abraham and matriarch Sarah, with seeming support from God, cast out into the wilderness Abraham's first son, Ishmael, and his mother Hagar, who was Sarah's maidservant and perhaps also wife of Abraham. Our patriarch Abraham listening to God's command to sacrifice his son Isaac and only being stopped at the very last minute by an angel of God. After these events in Genesis, there is never again a meeting or conversation between husband and wife or parent and child.

Why read these stories on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year? Why not something more uplifting and positive? If it's about family why not the miracle of the birth of the first Jewish child—Isaac or about the first Jewish marriage—Isaac and Rebecca? Or the reunification of Joseph and his brothers? Or another topic completely—it's the New Year, why not the story of Creation? Why read about family anguish and disappointment?

I would like to share three possible answers.

But before I do, just a recap of what this holiday is all about. We are in the season called the High Holidays, also called The Days of Awe, *Yamim Noraim*, or the Days of Repentance—beginning with Rosh Hashanah and ending with Yom Kippur. A time for introspection, a time to consider the mistakes of the previous year and to repent before Yom Kippur.

God has “books” that are written on Rosh Hashanah, writing down who will live and who will die, who will have a good life and who will have a bad life, for the next year. But these books are not sealed until Yom Kippur, so for 10 days they can still be revised. Our actions during the Days of Awe can alter God’s decree: *Teshuvah*, *Tefilah* and *Tzedakah*, Repentance, Prayer, and Good Deeds. This is why we greet people after Rosh Hashanah services with the expression—“May you be inscribed and sealed for a good year.”

So now the possible answers.

Answer #1. Family Anguish and Disappointment sells tickets. Just like Succession and Yellowstone. What makes for best selling entertainment also makes for getting people to show up to synagogue. Not happy families but families with strife. Why? Because it’s real. How many of you have had strife, anguish, or disappointment in your families? Everyone. The Rabbis picked these stories because they are popular, they are universal. We all can see ourselves in them.

When we see our most praised ancestors, Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac, our first Jewish couple, first Jewish parents and first Jewish child, having problems in their relationships, it makes us realize that if it happened to them, it could of course happen to us. But popular, universal, see ourselves in them is good enough for Hollywood. It isn’t good enough for Judaism. We also seek instruction and meaning from these popular stories. This is why we need answers 2 and 3.

Answer #2. It’s not just about us and our families. It’s about our relationship with God. According to famed Israeli teacher and writer, Yochi Brandes, Abraham caused a change in our relationship God. She writes: “Why did God choose as father of our nation a person whose faith in God had no end or boundaries, but who turned and betrayed his family! It was through these stories of Abraham willing to sacrifice his son for God, that Judaism earned superstar status with God. We remember the story of the *Akeidah*, the binding of Isaac every time we pray—morning, afternoon, and night, on weekdays, on Shabbat, and of course on holidays, [especially Rosh Hashanah]...Here is one example from a Sephardi prayerbook, “Our Lord of the World, just as Abraham overcame his compassion to do your will with a complete heart [and was willing to sacrifice his son for you!], so too should you overcome your anger over us and reveal your compassion to us....This examples makes real “the blank check” that we have received as inheritance [from Abraham]. Abraham our father agreed to sacrifice his son to God. God owes Abraham for this. [And because we are the inheritors of Abraham] God is obligated to us. God owes us too.” At this time of year, when the Gates of Life or Death are open, we want to remind God that God owes us!

But the problem with answer #2 is while we have a so called “blank check” with God, why can’t we use it on what might matter most to us—getting rid of strife, anguish, and disappointment in our families? It seems like the blank check is good for the survival of our religion and people, and our relationships with God, but it can’t be used for relationships with family. This is why we need answer #3.

Answer #3.

When we tell the riveting stories of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Isaac, and Ishmael on this holiday, so centered around considering mistakes and introspection, these stories take on a whole new layer and level of meaning. The question of being human is not whether or not we will have family problems. We will. The question is how we will face them, how we will handle them and how we will reconcile them. Our tradition gives us the answer to this question of how and it stares at us in one of the names of the holiday season, which we also call “The Days of Repentance.” As I mentioned before, we are taught that Repentance, Prayer, and Good Deeds can alter the book of life and God’s decree. When we do these things God forgives us. Not just once, but every year, in time for Yom Kippur.

So too with relationships *ben Adam l’havero*, between human beings: When we repent, when we ask forgiveness, when we do good with each other, we can help repair what is broken, we can alter the book of life.

Judaism give us what Succession and Yellowstone miss completely. Logan Roy and John Dutton sacrifice their children and preside over terribly broken families. They end with more division and strife than where they began.

Even when things look irreparably broken, Judaism gives us hope through the possibility of forgiveness. Forgiveness is so hard but it is possible. This past year Harold Kusher, *zichrono l’vrachah*, passed away. Rabbi Kushner wrote one of the best selling Jewish books of all time, “When Bad Things Happen to Good People,” the story of his enduring faith after the illness and death of his beloved son. He was asked in an interview how he could refer to God in his prayers three times a day as “great, awesome, and mighty” when God allowed so many bad things to happen in the world. Rabbi Kusher said, “Just as I have decided to forgive God for God’s shortcomings, I hope God will forgive me for mine.”

If Harold Kushner can forgive God for the illness and death of his son, maybe we can forgive our parents and children for what they have done to us?

When it comes to family, our tradition sees the stakes as supremely important. So much so that according to the Prophet Malachi, when Elijah appears, “He shall reconcile parents with children and children with their parents, so that when I (the Lord of Hosts) come, I do not strike the whole land with utter destruction” (3:24). In short, the onset of the messianic era begins, not with the arrival of the Messiah, but at home with family.

May you seize the opportunity of this High Holiday season,
To be with family even when it isn't easy.
To see them and yourselves as infinitely precious and infinitely human,
To repent, pray, and do good deeds.
To ask forgiveness, to forgive, and to be forgiven.
To fulfill Malachi's prophesy of reconciling parents with children and children with parents.

לשנה טובה תכתבו ותחתמו

To a good year.

May you be inscribed and sealed in the book of life.