

Shabbat Korah 5780
June 26, 2020
R' Keilah Lebell

Creativity Loves Constraints

Rabbi Tsadok told me an incredible story this week, that many of you may have heard before. It's about the legendary jazz pianist Keith Jarrett, who played a concert one night that would alter the course musical history. It was an evening in 1975, and Jarrett was to give a recital at the grand opera house in Cologne. Jarrett, who has perfect pitch and very specific preferences about pianos, had requested a particular grand piano for the concert. But the opera house staff made a mistake and had set up a small, dilapidated piano that was completely out of tune. On top of this, Jarrett suffered from terrible back pain, and also happened to be utterly exhausted after driving 6 hours from Zurich. Under these conditions, Jarrett nearly canceled the concert.

But after his promoter adamantly encouraged him to perform anyway, Jarrett ended up playing. And that night, on an out-of-tune piano with broken pedals and through searing back pain and fatigue, Jarrett brilliantly improvised two of the most astounding pieces of music. Because of the broken instrument, Jarrett had to play the piano in a way he had never played before. One of the many articles written about this astounding performance says, "In the end, the less-than-perfect piano, which Jarrett initially thought was his worst nightmare, turned out to be a blessing and a boon rather than a curse."

<https://www.udiscovermusic.com/stories/koln-concert-keith-jarrett/>

I love this story, and many others do to, because it expresses a fascinating truth: that creativity flourishes out of constriction and even pain.

You and I, our community, our city and country, and the whole world have been living through a time of great constriction and pain. We were already grappling with multiple crises when our world was struck by a pandemic that has required all of us to limit and even halt most of the ways we used to live. Our movement and our travel are restricted. We need to wear masks covering our nose and mouth. We need to wait in lines before entering only essential businesses – if we're even able to go. Many of us haven't been able to hug or even feel the

warmth of our loved ones. Our options for eating, working, playing, gathering, protesting, celebrating, and mourning have been reduced to what is safe. We have been forced to play on a dilapidated, out-of-tune piano.

And on top of this, we have had to play through the pain and fatigue that comes from still having to reckon with the broken and racist health, criminal justice, housing, employment, and welfare systems that are failing to care for the poor, unemployed, and afflicted people all across this country. It's just too much to sustain. And I know that so many of us would rather just give up – in one way or another.

But I have also seen in this time of great constriction a tremendous flourishing of creativity. Toward the beginning of quarantine, one of IKAR's beloved board members began painting colorful cardboard signs with greetings, like "You are a treasure" and "I'm so glad that you are my neighbor" and "Nice Mask." She takes walks and places the signs around her neighborhood for whoever walks by to see. This is one of many delightful gestures of creativity that I've seen burst through the pain and challenge of this time. I have seen musicians playing on street corners, balconies and subways for passersby. I have seen spontaneous, socially-distanced line dances in the street. I have seen magnificent art made from home-harvested materials: rainbow hearts bent from recycled steel and majestic murals. I have seen a string quartet perform to a concert hall packed not with people, but with house plants. I have seen a Parisian café place giant teddy bears at alternating tables to keep guests at a safe distance. I have watched people tending their gardens and helping new plants grow. I have seen singers from around the world creating the most exquisite music together, thousands of miles apart. And I will also mention that I have taken my sidewalk chalk skills to a whole new level. Creativity flourishes out of constriction and even pain.

I learn this truth not only from Keith Jarrett performing a masterpiece on a broken piano, and from the creativity that is sprouting forth during national upheaval and a pandemic. I also learn this truth from the practice of Shabbat.

Shabbat is specifically designed to halt creative action. The commandments that shape the seventh day are mostly restrictions: one may not light a flame, cook, sew, write or erase. And on Shabbat one is essentially supposed to shelter in place. Besides gathering with

community for services, our rabbis teach that we are not to travel on Shabbat. Because of these restrictions, Shabbat can feel constricting to many of us. My daughter resents that Shabbat doesn't let her paint. My son often says, "I can't wait for Shabbat to leave so we can DO STUFF!" Even I start looking at the clock on Shabbat afternoon, eagerly waiting to write or just do something productive.

But one of my favorite commentators, the Sforno, comes to assure us. He says: "אין זו אביל היא מתנה מצוה בלבד" -- the laws of Shabbat are not merely prohibitions, but they're actually a gift. Further, he describes, מנוחה, the halting rest of Shabbat "constructive rest." (Sforno on Exodus 16:29) Shabbat is not only a gift because the stopping itself lets us rest and makes our productivity that much more meaningful. But the restrictions of Shabbat are also a gift because they spark tremendous creativity. Without computer games or paintbrushes, my children engage in the most inventive, imaginative play. Without many of the usual tools of art and play, our couch becomes a ship, and the carpet an ocean; a cardboard box becomes a magical place. And without access to a pen or keypad, my own thinking expands. The limits of Shabbat compel us to imagine possibilities we've never considered before.

It's June now, and we're now at a stage when the world is itching to reopen, to start production again, to get back to work. But today I want to lift up one of the gifts of limits and restrictions, especially as we are seeing that as we make moves to get back to work, cases of the virus are surging. Instead of angrily ordering us all to stay home and wear our masks, I ask us instead to notice and appreciate the gifts and the possibilities contained within the constriction and pain of this time. There is so much beauty bursting forth, so many ideas being born. And I hope that this can give us comfort and assurance to keep moving through this together, to keep playing our hearts out, even if the piano we're playing is broken.

Shabbat Shalom.