

# Wild Things

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“On 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.”

So begins Maurice Sendak’s classic picture book, [\*Where the Wild Things Are\*](#) -- one of my and my kids’ favorites. If you go to the library, you will find it shelved among the children’s books. But like any great children’s book, it captures the imagination not only of kids, but also of the adults who read it to them.

Joseph Campbell, the famous scholar of mythology, once [described](#) *Where the Wild Things Are* as one of humanity’s greatest works of literature. The story fits the archetypal hero’s journey -- that literary motif where a character sets out on an adventure, overcomes some obstacle along the way, and returns home transformed.

Max, the hero of our story, does exactly that. He steps into his own private boat and sails in and out of weeks to become king of all wild things. And when he returns home, he has learned an important lesson -- about facing his wild side, about befriending his anger, about mastering those parts of himself that seem most dark and terrible.

On Yom Kippur, we, like Max, must also set out on a hero’s journey. We step into the private boat of our conscience, and sail in and out of the weeks of the past year. We examine our deeds. We consider our flaws. And like Max, we commit ourselves to mastering our own wild things.

And while there is much we can learn from Max about our task on Yom Kippur, it is only half of the picture. Because there is another message about this holy day hidden within the pages of *Where the Wild Things Are* -- a deeper message, that captures an important truth about Yom Kippur. And that deeper, hidden message comes to the surface when we read *Where the Wild Things Are* alongside a different, but parallel story -- a story from our Jewish tradition.

Our sages say<sup>1</sup> that on Yom Kippur, we are reenacting the story of the golden calf. It is, after all, a story of wrongdoing and repentance, a story of transgression and atonement. Like *Where the Wild Things Are*, the story of the golden calf is all about making mischief of one kind and another -- and then about making amends.

This evening, let us put these two stories into conversation with one another. Let us read *Where the Wild Things Are* alongside the story of the golden calf, in order to discover the deeper,

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<sup>1</sup> Rashi on Exodus 33:11 -- based on Midrash Tanchuma, Ki Tisa 31.

hidden meaning of Yom Kippur -- what this holiday asks of the child inside of us, and what it asks of the adults we have become.

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Let us begin with the straight-forward meaning of Yom Kippur.

Our sages say that the Israelites who built the golden calf were like children testing their parents' boundaries. To refresh our memory:<sup>2</sup> the Israelites are encamped at the base of Mount Sinai, where they've just received the Ten Commandments. And although one of those commandments clearly states that they are not to worship statues, they go ahead and do exactly that, when Moses is not looking. They build a statue of a golden calf, around which they gather in frenzied revelry. They eat and drink and sing and dance around the statue, like Max and his wild things swinging from the vines and howling at the moon -- a wild rumpus at the base of Mount Sinai.

And although the Israelites have clearly broken the rules, our sages view them with sympathy. Some sages say that they acted like children, for whom it is only natural to explore what is off limits.<sup>3</sup> Others say that the blame lies with Moses, who should not have left them unsupervised.<sup>4</sup>

But despite these varied explanations, there is one thing on which all of our sages agree: the Israelites were acting on the basis of their Yetzer HaRa.<sup>5</sup> In the Jewish imagination, the Yetzer HaRa is a character trait that is inherent in all humans. It is our primal, aggressive inclination. It is the chaotic force within each of us that, when left unchecked, can lead us towards destructive behaviors. Other fields of study also recognize this attribute of the human psyche. Freud called it the id. Evolutionary psychologists call it our reptile brain. Maurice Sendak called it our wild things.

Call it what you will, each of us has a Yetzer HaRa. In our evolutionary history, the Yetzer HaRa was a sustaining force. Our aggressive inclination allowed us to fend off predators, to maintain our territory, to procreate. But as human society became ever more complex, our safety and prosperity began to depend more on our shared social structures and less on our individual aggressive inclination.

Having lost its immediate usefulness, our Yetzer HaRa finds other, destructive outlets through which to express itself. It causes us to lust after things we cannot have, to commit acts of violence, to exploit others in pursuit of our own success. We are not proud of these character traits -- but nevertheless, they are real. Every now and then, when we are not being careful, they slip out in our behavior, or flash in the back of our mind. They roar their terrible roars and gnash their terrible teeth and roll their terrible eyes and show their terrible claws.

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<sup>2</sup> Exodus 32

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, *Vayikra Rabbah* 10:13.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, *Bamidbar Rabbah* 15:21.

<sup>5</sup> See Rashi on Exodus 32:6.

But despite the unavoriness of our aggressive inclination, Jewish tradition recognizes that it is not all bad. If we can harness its chaotic energy, give it some meaningful direction, our aggressive inclination can be made productive. Our sages say that without the Yetzer HaRa, no person would ever build a house, engage in commerce, or have children.<sup>6</sup> Like Max, we must learn to befriend our Yetzer HaRa, so that we have power over it, and it not have power over us.

This may be the straight-forward meaning of Yom Kippur. But we have yet to uncover the deeper, hidden meaning of this holy day. If we are not paying careful attention, then we are likely not to notice that, besides Max, *Where the Wild Things Are* has a second protagonist, who goes on a hero's journey of her own: Max's mom -- whose voice we hear only once, and whose face we never see. And it is from this hidden character that we can learn the deeper, hidden meaning of Yom Kippur.

This, then, is where her hero's journey begins:

"On the night Max wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind and another," he pushed every single one of his mother's buttons, until she was at her wit's end. She tried to stay calm, to reason with Max. But the more she tried, the more he pushed -- and the more the situation escalated. Her patience waned, her irritation grew -- until finally, in a fit of frustration, she burst out at him and shouted: "WILD THING!" And she sent him to bed without eating anything.

We have all been there, whether it was with a child or with an adult. We get pushed just beyond our limit. Though we were plainly clear about our expectations, our child breaks one of our rules. Though we are always there to support them, our friend is never there to support us. Though we do everything we can to get their attention, our spouse is too self-absorbed to see that we have needs of our own.

And it gets to us. It touches off something deep inside of us -- not just about this particular offense, but about all the times that we have been pushed to the limit, all the times we have felt taken advantage of. And rather than responding in a thoughtful and constructive way, we lose it. We yell at the kids. We punch a wall. We take out our frustration on all of the wrong people.

This is exactly how Moses reacts when he sees the Israelites worshipping the golden calf. He has sacrificed a comfortable life in the palaces of Egypt in order to lead this people from slavery to freedom -- and how do they thank him? The minute he turns his back, they flout one of the ten simple rules.

He feels betrayed. He feels abused. And so he storms down from the top of Mount Sinai. In a fit of rage, he grabs the ten commandments and hurls them to the ground. The tablets shatter into a thousand pieces. He confiscates the golden calf, burns it to a crisp, and grinds the ashes into dust.

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<sup>6</sup> Bereshit Rabbah 9:7

In the immediate moment, there is a certain release that comes from lashing out against those who have hurt us. But as we unclench our fists, we begin to see that our outburst did little to help our cause. All we have done is created a cycle of pain, in which hurt is repaid by more hurt.

For Max's mom, this might be where her story begins. But thankfully for us, it is not where it ends. While Max is upstairs in his room becoming king of his wild things, his mom remains downstairs, setting out on a hero's journey of her own. Somehow, and without explanation, her anger recedes, her irritation fades. And although she had sent Max to bed without supper, she is now at the stove, warming a bowl of soup for him.

How are we to understand this transformation in Max's mom -- her move from anger to forgiveness, from explosion to compassion? Maurice Sendak does not say. But if we are to uncover the deeper, hidden meaning of Yom Kippur, we must try to understand this unexplained act of grace.

To help us, let us return to Moses, after the golden calf.

After Moses's outburst,<sup>7</sup> he returns to the top of Mount Sinai to cool down and to confer with God. He is at his wit's end. The Israelites have pushed him to the limit -- and he pleads with God for guidance about what he should do next.

And here, God says something peculiar to Moses -- something that later Jewish sages would eventually revisit. When Moses is at his wit's end, God says to him: "I am a compassionate God, slow to anger and quick to forgive." But God then quickly adds: "*V'nakeih lo y'nakeh, pokeid avon avot al banim v'al b'nei vanim.*"<sup>8</sup> But I do not always wipe the slate clean -- taking the sins of the parents and extending punishment to their children and grandchildren."

The writers of the Hebrew Bible present an image of God with which we might be able to identify. We overreact; sometimes God overreacts too. Like us, sometimes God punishes too harshly, making children pay for the misdeeds of their parents. Like us, even God contributes to the endless cycle of pain -- in which hurt is so often repaid by more hurt.

There may be some small degree of comfort in knowing that sometimes even God overreacts. But in this story, the writers of the Hebrew Bible do not get the last word.

Many centuries after the Bible was written, our ancient Rabbis would revisit<sup>9</sup> this story and present us with a different image of God. In their retelling of the story, the Rabbis omit the second half of God's statement to Moses -- where God admits to sometimes punishing too harshly. And in so doing, the ancient Rabbis present us with a different vision of God than the one that is found in the Torah -- a vision of God that is undeniably bold; a vision that requires

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<sup>7</sup> Exodus 33-34.

<sup>8</sup> Exodus 34:7

<sup>9</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 17b

theological audacity; a vision so powerful that it makes its way into our High Holiday prayer book, in words that we repeat more often than any others on Yom Kippur, words that we chanted only moments ago. When Moses is at his wit's end, the ancient Rabbis have God say:

*Adonai, Adonai, eil rachum v'chanun, erech apayim v'rav chesed ve'emet, notzeir chesed la'alafim, nosei avon va-fesha v'chata'ah v'nakeih.*<sup>10</sup>

“Your Eternal God is compassionate and gracious, endlessly patient, most loving and truthful; showing mercy to the thousandth generation; forgiving evil, defiance, and wrongdoing; wiping the slate clean.”

By keeping only the first half of God's statement, the ancient Rabbis present not an image of God with which we might identify, but rather, an image of God towards which we can aspire<sup>11</sup> -- not a flawed, vengeful, and punishing God, like the all too flawed humans that we know ourselves to be, but rather, a God Whose compassion knows no bounds, Who is endlessly patient and unceasingly forgiving. They present us with a God of grace.

We Jews may feel uncomfortable with the word grace, on account of how central it is to Christian theology. But make no mistakes about it: we Jews, too, have inherited a theology of grace.

Simply put, grace is the idea that sometimes we are granted things regardless of whether we have done anything to deserve them. And on Yom Kippur, the freely given thing that we are granted is forgiveness.

This is a daring idea. It means that no matter what misdeeds we may have committed, no matter how defiant we may have been, God is always ready to forgive. Though we make mischief of one kind and another, though we worship a golden calf, God is always prepared to give us a second chance. Even before we admit to our faults, even before we correct our behavior, God is waiting for us, ready to wipe the slate clean. As our Yom Kippur prayer book puts it: the gates of repentance are always open.

We may bristle at this idea. If God is always ready to forgive, then why bother with doing the right thing in the first place? Does not the world depend on a measure of accountability?

Of course it does. Grace does not mean that we are cleared of accountability -- that we can act however we want without consequence. Rather, grace is the mechanism that makes atonement

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<sup>10</sup> Exodus 34:6-7

<sup>11</sup> In this insight, I am indebted to my teacher and mentor, Rabbi Danny Zemel. See his essay “In Whose Image? Yom Kippur’s Annual Choice” in *Prayers of Awe: Encountering God -- God Merciful and Gracious*, edited by Rabbi Larry Hoffman.

possible. The promise of forgiveness is what allows us to own up to our mistakes and make amends.<sup>12</sup>

This is the deeper meaning of Yom Kippur -- the message that is hidden within the pages of *Where the Wild Things Are*. It is not only by mastering his wild things that Max is able to make the journey homeward. Equally important to his return is a moment we never see; the moment when his mom extends the promise of forgiveness; the moment when she is at the stove, heating a bowl of soup for him; the moment when, all around from away across the world, Max smells good things to eat, and wants to be where someone loves him best of all. When he knows that open arms await him, Max can begin the journey home.

Tonight, as Yom Kippur begins, each of us will set out on a hero's journey -- in hopes that we might master our own wild things. And before Yom Kippur ends, we will make the journey home, with the promise of God's forgiveness extended before us. We will wave goodbye to our wild things, step back into our private boat, sail in and out of weeks, and return home from where our wild things are -- into the night of our very own room, where we will find that our supper is waiting for us.

And it will still be hot.

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<sup>12</sup> In this insight, I am indebted to my teacher, Rabbi Maggie Wenig. See her essay "How the Bible Became the Prayer Book: Not Threats of Punishment but Rabbinic Promises of Forgiveness" in *Prayers of Awe: Encountering God -- God Merciful and Gracious*, edited by Rabbi Larry Hoffman.