

Lessons from the Pandemic (and for after the Pandemic)

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In my early twenties, I once asked my rebbe, R. Yaakov Love, where I should attend services for the High Holidays.

“While it is still possible,” R. Love replied, “try to find a community with Shoah survivors.”

He went on and explained, “American Jews, thankfully, Baruch Hashem, don’t truly have a sense of real vulnerability. For the most part, they want something, they have it. They don’t have it, they order it. In America, everything can be fixed, or that’s what the culture constantly communicates. Everything can be glued back together, everything has a remedy and a cure. There must be a solution, and if there isn’t one, America will provide it.”

R. Love went on, “Shoah survivors remember a different world. When the Chazzen (the prayer leader) says *‘mi ichyeh, mi yamut’* (‘who will live, who will die’), Shoah survivors know, they don’t understand, they know, that this is for real. When the Chazzen says, *‘Adam yesodo me’afar ve’sofo be’afar’* – that every person is essentially dust and earth and that every person will ultimately return to dust and earth – they understand that too. You want to get a glimpse of individuals who understand that we are like clay, just clay, in the hands of our Maker? Go daven with Shoah survivors.”

Earlier this summer, I was contacted by a reporter working for a Jewish magazine. He wanted to know how our community will conduct services this year: how many folks will be able to attend, how long will each service last, what will be included and what will be left out. When the reporter heard that we would omit many liturgical poems and that we would limit communal singing, he wondered out loud: “How will this work?” Or in other words, will this work at all?

We come to Rosh Hashanah with these very questions: How will these services move us, touch us, transform us, and lift us in the absence of so many familiar elements, our sanctuary, our entire community being together, our prayers, melodies, and songs?

This question is compounded for individuals in our community who will not attend our outdoor services at all, either due to medical concerns, or out of an abundance of caution which Jewish law, which I deeply admire and respect, mandates.

In response to this question, I simply opened up a Machzor, while on the phone with this reporter and began reading some of the prayers out loud.

“Zuchreinu le’chayim melech chafetz ba’chayim” – “Remember us for life, King who desires life.”

“Kebakarat roeh edru...” – “Examine us as a shepherd overseeing his flock.”

“Berosh Hashanah yikatevun, u’veyom tzom kippur yechatemun” – “On Rosh Hashanah they are written, and on Yom Kippur they are sealed.”

“Veatah hu melech, el chai ve’kayam” – “And You are the King, the living, everlasting God.”

I know that we come to these High Holidays anxious and nervous, needing these holidays, perhaps more than ever in our lives, to move us, and touch us, to lift us, and transform us. I know that I need this so much as well.

Here is something else that I know. I know this about myself and I know this about you too.

We come to these High Holidays already transformed.

Simply put, we are no longer the same people who stood at CBI's sanctuary during last year's High Holidays services. After more than six months of living under the threat of a global pandemic, after more than six months of sensing the economic fragility of this powerful nation, after more than six months of racial unrest in America's streets, and, and, and, after the tragic loss of one of our community's most beloved sons...we are no longer the same. We have already been transformed.

This past year has been an extremely hard and difficult one. So many of us are stretched to the limit right now and rightfully so. We are struggling to keep pace, to breathe, to breathe in, to breathe out, to process, to determine our next steps.

This extremely trying year challenged us to change. It forced us to change. It keeps changing us.

And this insight brings me a measure of comfort in one way.

And this insight keeps me up at night in another way.

This insight brings me a measure of comfort because during the six months of sheltering in place, each of us has demonstrated in our own way, spirit and character perhaps not known to us ever before. We are resilient. We are strong. We are creative. We are faithful.

I am so deeply inspired by each of you as individuals.

I am inspired by several elders in our community, who in their nineties learned how to use Zoom. To me, their flexibility and resilience is a testament to our ability to adapt and change, at any point in life.

I am inspired by community members who live on their own, and who have found ways to stay connected, week in and week out, at a time when staying connected is made so difficult. You form the heart of the community we aspire to create as we face the social challenges of Covid19.

I am inspired by parents in our community, who strive to remain patient and thoughtful in their parenting, while they're working from home. To me, they are a constant reminder to each of us of our capacity to take on more than we thought we could. And they are also an important reminder for each of us to lovingly accept our own shortcomings and imperfections and start, when need be, afresh each day.

This list goes on and on.

There is something else too.

When this pandemic started, I didn't quite appreciate the sort of spiritual growth opportunities afforded by this tragic crisis.

In our midst, there are individuals who began learning Mishnah every day. Others, started Daf Yomi, the daily learning of the Talmud during shelter-in-place.

In our midst, there are individuals who began davening, praying every day, some even three times a day.

Perhaps even more surprising, at least two households in our community, began observing Shabbat in their home during this pandemic.

And this list too goes on and on and on.

However we encounter these High Holidays, we will each do so with the same resilience, creativity, and spiritual fortitude we've exhibited and cultivated over these past six months.

I believe that when we finally read the words of the Machzor this year, whether we are in the company of others or on our own, they will move us, and touch us, and lift us because we have already been transformed.

And this brings me to my fear and what keeps me up at night.

Please God, this year, a remedy and vaccine will be found for the coronavirus, and in time, we will return to a world that once was. When that happens, and please God *bimherah beyameinu* (hastily in our day), I can't help but wonder, how quickly will we return to our old ways?

Hopefully this year, we are going to be given the golden opportunity to decide individually, communally, nationally, and globally, what we want the world to look like post-Covid.

The Torah teaches us that after Noah survived the flood and emerged from the arc, he built a vineyard, and shortly after reaping the fruits of his labor, he got drunk.

And Noah, we are told, "was a righteous man in his generation."

We are not Noah. We are not righteous. And what will be with us?

How will we behave with solid ground once again under our feet?

How will we, once this virus is defeated, find balance between our trauma and a sudden newfound sense of technological and medical power, and human achievement?

When the economy returns to its strength, how might it change us too?

The Torah warns us: we will become drunk with power.

And there is more.

The very next episode in the book of Genesis is the story of the tower of Babel. The Midrash and our commentators teach that the towers of Babel were built as a faulty human attempt to hold the heavens from pouring down rain ever again. The generation of Babel, both traumatized and drunk with power, thought they would be able to control any future flood.

Friends, I am so scared of a post-Covid world – a traumatized world drunk with power, a Babel world obsessed with the externals of the next pandemic and or crisis, and neglectful of the internal lessons the previous pandemic imparted to us.

Rebbi Nachman tells this incredible story:

"A king once told his prime minister, who was also his good friend, "I see in the stars that whoever eats any grain that grows this year will go mad. What is your advice?"

The prime minister replied, "We must put aside enough grain so that we will not have to eat from this year's harvest."

The king objected, "But then we will be the only ones who will be sane. Everyone else will be mad. Therefore, they will think that we are the mad ones!"

After thinking for a while, the king decided, "It is impossible for us to put aside enough grain for everyone. Therefore, we too must eat this year's grain. But we will make a mark on our foreheads, so that at least we will know that we are mad. I will look at your forehead, and you will look at mine, and when we see this sign, we will know that we are both mad." (Rabbi Nachman's stories, Parable #21).

After this pandemic is over, what will we do to remember lessons learned with sweat and tears?

All that we can do right now is to make a promise to each other that we will do our best to remember and do our best to remind each other when we risk to forget.

Let's remember at least three things.

First, we need to remember that the world is one. A virus on one end of the world can reach every part of the world. Decisions made in one end of the world will ultimately affect the other end of the world.

The lines that separate countries, communities, and people can easily collapse, and consequently, the demands of empathy and the standards of mutual responsibility have increased significantly.

This insight bears important theological, political, and halakhic ramifications.

The global lessons which we have not yet really internalized should profoundly impact our thinking about global warming, poverty in our own neighborhood communities, racial tensions and injustice, and treatable diseases in the developing world.

Our narrow theology should change. Our national politics should change. Our global giving should change.

Second, we need to remember that we can live with less.

The economic challenge of this time forced many of us to spend less money, or to live within our means, or to realize that we can live well, with well below what we previously sought to own and possess.

We also drove less. We also flew less. We also vacationed less (or vacationed more modestly).

When the time comes and we are blessed to have more than we need and we are free again to do more than what is deemed necessary, we must internalize moral demands that limit what we think we own and possess, and also curtail the freedoms our wealth so easily afford us.

We learned to live with less and we will need to learn to live with giving much, much more.

Third, we need to remember how quickly we and the entire world can change.

This pandemic changed the entire world in the blink of an eye - *keheref ayin*. And there are two sides to this coin.

On the one hand, we now know that the world is deeply vulnerable to a fast and sudden change. On the other hand, we now also know that humans can adapt to change very quickly as well.

Sadly, unless Maschiach comes, a post-Covid19 world will still be riddled with a number of existential challenges that will continue to threaten life in this world as we know it. These demand drastic changes in human consumption and behavior.

Before Covid19, we have resisted those changes because we failed to understand that the world can change in the blink of an eye - *keheref ayin*.

Before Covid19, we also resisted those changes because we failed to understand that humans can change their ways in the blink of an eye - *keheref ayin*, as well.

This pandemic has changed all that for now. *For now*.

When the time comes and we are blessed to live in a world free of this virus, the urgent demands that call upon us to continuously change must stay firmly in place.

Post Covid19, we must not change back to life as it was, instead, we must adopt change as a way of life. Change as a form of continuous Teshuvah, is the only suitable response to this crisis.

Allow me to share one more story about my rebbe.

Every year, after the High Holidays, I call R. Love to ask him how his holiday was. He always gives me the same answer, which is why I always ask.

Every year, R. Love says: "How was Rosh Hashanah? How was Yom Kippur? I don't know, ask me next year."

We had an amazing Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur last year. The davening was moving, the singing was powerful, we walked away from shul feeling transformed.

And you know what, we had a truly terrible and tragic year.

You want to know how Rosh Hashanah was? You want to know how Yom Kipur was? Ask me next year.

Here is what I know about this year's services:

I firmly believe that our High Holidays services and prayers, out doors or at home on our own, will be very powerful again this year. But then again, maybe, just maybe, they won't be. Maybe I'm wrong and services just won't do what we need them to do.

But do you know what's more important, actually, the only thing that is important – we should be blessed with a good and healthy year. Period. Each of us. All of us. The entire world.

I keep hearing people say that 2020 is a terrible year.

Here's what I say: 5780 was a terrible year.

And friends, 5780 is about to come to a close. That's our year. That's God's year. So according to my calculation, we're only days away from reaching a better year, a new year, a good year.

May we make it so.

May Israel make it so.

May America make it so.

May all the world make it so.

Hashem, please, please make it so.