

Lessons from the Pandemic

RH 1 5782

Rabbi Ari Lucas

Almighty father, amid the trouble that hath come upon us, grant that our hearts might look trustfully unto Thee...Endow us with the wisdom and the caution to keep the dread sickness far from us. Bless and enlighten all physicians and nurses and all officers who safeguard public health. Heal those whom the plague hath smitten and those whom the plague will smite. Comfort those unto whom bereavement must come.

Hold in Thy protection all our brethren the House of Israel and all the inhabitants of our dear city. Speedily deliver our country from its many woes.

More precious unto us than our own will, make unto us Thy dear will, O Heavenly Father. And vouchsafe that the path we tread may finally lead to Thy blessed kingdom of light and love.

This prayer was written by Rabbi Abraham Cronbach - a prominent Reform rabbi in Indiana and Ohio - it was delivered in 1918 amidst the Spanish Flu pandemic. And even with its lofty language of "Thees and Thous," "Heavenly Fathers and blessed kingdoms," it still resonates in this moment as we pray for our own health, the well-being of healthcare workers and teachers. I share this with you because it is a reminder that we have been through moments like this in our history before and that it will end.

It may not happen like wars used to end with the signing of an armistice on a specific day at a specific hour, it may not end like the finale of a play where the curtain drops and the house lights come up and you know it's time to stand up and

applaud because it's over. It'll probably be more like the end of adolescence where it stretches into another phase of life and occasionally you revert back, but at some point you take a look at your life and you say, "huh, I'm no longer an adolescent, I guess I'm an adult now." At some point we may turn around and say, "huh, I guess the pandemic really is over." And we'll remember what this time was like and we'll try to describe it to our children and grandchildren. I know it doesn't feel like it, but this will end. There will be a day beyond this present reality. But the question for us is not whether or not it will end, but how will we be different because of it?

Any trauma, any challenge changes us, if we let it. I worry that we're so eager to be done with this, and trust me, I am too, that we might be missing an opportunity to gain some insight, some wisdom. That, after all, is the Jewish response to adversity - to hold on to it until we transform it into a lesson for our lives. It's why we eat the bitter herbs at the seder, not because we enjoy bitterness, but because we must keep the bitterness of slavery with us as a reminder of who we are, where we came from, and how we are meant to live today. When Jacob wrestled with the angel and the angel wounded him and finally as day was breaking, the angel sought to leave. You might think that Jacob would let him go, he had bested his adversary. But Jacob did not. He grabbed hold of the angel and said, "I will not let you go until you bless me." Because that is how Jews relate to suffering. Though we may be wounded in the darkness, we won't let the next day arrive, we won't let the adversity leave us, until we stare it in the face and squeeze out of it some kind of blessing that changes us and informs our lives.

So even though most of us are so done with this pandemic, it is not yet done with us. We might have hoped for a Rosh Hashanah that would turn a page and begin anew, the reality is different, and we must hold onto it until we learn something from it and it releases us from its grasp.

So that's what I want to speak about today - what lessons can we squeeze out of this difficult time? I'll share three of mine, but I'd encourage you as you sit with your families or speak with them this holiday to add your own.

Three for one.

Lesson 1 - Gratitude, Anyway.

Lesson 2 - We're All in the Same Boat

Lesson 3 - Hineini

I'll expound.

Lesson 1 - Gratitude Anyway

In an essay entitled "Gratitude, anyway" author Heidi Barr writes the following.

It can be tempting, in the face of loss, to look for silver linings or to say, "just focus on what you still have." But..."Gratitude is not the tylenol of life." Practicing gratitude doesn't change what's wrong...—gratitude means acknowledging what is still good even alongside the mess. You can experience grief, or anger, or overwhelm even while you are grateful for the good things that remain.

In summing up, she concludes, "gratitude and grief don't cancel each other out, they sit side by side."

We are here. Here we are - some of us in person, some over live stream. And there is much for which to be grateful - for another year, for the presence of friends and

families, for vaccines, for living in one of the most blessed nations on earth that has access to resources. And there is also much to grieve - that this year's Rosh Hashanah is not what we had thought it was going to be, the absence of family and friends who should have been with us, but cannot, for the thousands of tiny losses and stresses of living through a pandemic - for another school year in masks. The two sides of the coin don't cancel each other out. They sit side by side and we carry all those emotions in our hearts simultaneously.

This attitude of "gratitude anyway" is deeply embedded within our tradition.

תניא היה רבי מאיר אומר חייב אדם לברך מאה ברכות בכל יום

It was taught that Rabbi Meir used to say, "a person is obligated to recite 100 blessings every day

Later authorities enumerate how if you add up the number of blessings in the daily prayer services and add the blessings a person is supposed to recite before and after meals, you cross the 100 blessing finish line with ease. But I think those who try to count their blessings in this way are missing the point.

Rabbi Meir wants us to know that every day there are manifold blessings in our lives for which we can offer gratitude to the Source of all Blessing.

Really? Every day? Some days are downright rotten - terrible, horrible, no good, very bad days that make you want to move to Australia. How can the tradition expect us to say 100 blessings every day?

The reason is that to be a Jew is to begin from a position of gratitude - for the wonder of life, for the miracle of creation, for the beauty of relationships - not only when things are good, but perhaps even especially when things are bad.

As my teacher Rabbi Shai Held likes to point out, the first words out of a Jew's mouth every morning are supposed to be modeh ani - grateful am I before You, living enduring Sovereign, for returning my soul to me, great is Your faithfulness. And Rabbi Held likes to point out that the word Modeh/ah/ from Todah precedes the word Ani - I. It's not Ani Modeh. I am grateful, but rather Modeh Ani - Grateful am I. Gratitude precedes the self. It's an acknowledgement that it wasn't necessarily a foregone conclusion that I would exist at all and so the fact that I am, already puts me as a Jew in a posture of gratitude.

Our ECC director, Geula Zamist, shared an incredible story with me, it perfectly encapsulates this lesson of gratitude, anyway and I want to share it with you.

A man in his 80s contracted the Coronavirus and he became very ill. So ill that he had to be hospitalized and placed on a ventilator for several weeks. Thankfully, he recovered, and as he was being discharged from the hospital, he got the bill.

\$7,000 for the use of the ventilator.

And the man began to cry.

The clerk at the hospital assumed that the man was crying because the bill was so expensive that it would be a hardship to pay, and so she said, "if the cost is a problem, we can work with you."

To which the man responded, "no, no, the cost is not an issue for me. That's not why I'm crying. It's just that when I saw the bill, I realized how valuable the gift of breath

is. I realized that I've been breathing God's air for over 80 years for free and I never thought to pay God back."

How many of us are like that man - breathing God's air every day, for free and taking it for granted. Perhaps it takes a once-in-a-lifetime crisis for us to appreciate the preciousness of a breath of air. Perhaps the concentrated burst of air streaming through the cantor's shofar can inspire us to offer gratitude for every single breath.

Elohai - my God, the breath, the soul of life you, placed in me is pure.

Today I am alive and breathe freely - even if I have to wear a mask. And for that reason alone, grateful am I before You.

Gratitude, anyway.

Lesson #2 - We're all in the same boat

This pandemic presented an opportunity the likes of which we hadn't seen since 9/11 or perhaps even since World War II to come together. To work together towards a common goal. To flatten the curve, to support, honor, and compensate properly essential workers, to care for the most vulnerable among us, to make sacrifices for the common good. And I'm afraid, we missed the opportunity. Instead, we politicized everything. We prioritized our own rights and freedoms, our own conveniences, over our collective responsibility. We turned an uncaring eye to the inequalities that have been brought into clear focus by a pandemic that has affected us all - but some of us more than others.

There's that old tale of the two people out on a boat at sea and one of them begins drilling a hole in the bottom of the boat. And the other person says, "What are you doing! We'll take on water and we'll sink!"

To which the first person responds, "What do you care, I'm drilling on my side of the boat."

The lesson is clear - the actions of some of us affect all of us.

America has sold us a notion of radical individualism. Each of us can pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, no one can tell us what to do - it's a free country after all. We're the cowboy on the frontier, making a life for ourselves. Don't tread on me. Every one of us is an island and we can all succeed if only we work hard enough for it. But that story is in my humble opinion...for a lack of a better word... a bunch of foey.

We are all interconnected - our destinies are bound together - like the strings of the tzitzit.

Persistently, the Bible warns us of a society in which every person does הישר והטוב - that which is good and right in his own eyes, not considering that which is good and right for all.

What you get in a society where everyone goes it alone is a society in which everyone is lonely. Where people bowl alone, eat alone, pray alone, and yes, die, alone.

After the the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem - the greatest trauma of that day - the rabbis were searching for answers, how did we get here? What went wrong.

And in the Talmud in Masekhet Shabbat, the rabbis offer a number of responses.

Jerusaelm was destroyed because of sinat hinam - senseless hatred, argues one rabbi. Another says Jerusaelm was destroyed because of religious extremism, political corruption.

One notable opinion, not often cited, comes from Rabbi Hanina who says, “Jerusalem was destroyed because its inhabitants minded their own business.” Well, he didn’t say it exactly that way, but he says, they didn’t engage each other in the mitzvah of tokheha of holding each other accountable, of recognizing when and how the actions of one or some of us affect all of us. Now this mitzvah is hard, nearly impossible, to perform. When we hold each other accountable, it’s easy to delve into self-righteousness and rebuke out of anger - that’s a recipe for destroying relationships. But if we love each other, we must tell each other when your actions affect me. A society in which everyone ignores the dangerous behaviors of their neighbors is not a loving one and certainly won’t be a successful one.

It was only a few months into the pandemic when I met one of you at the cemetery. The health guidance was still evolving and they had only just begun recommending wearing masks. I didn’t have any masks yet, now we have a whale basket full in our foyer to grab as we’re running out the door, we call it our masket.

At the end of the funeral this member of our congregation who had just buried her mother, came up to me and said, “rabbi, you know, you should really wear a mask.” She said it gently, lovingly, it showed that she was concerned for me and my well-being. And I said, “yeah, I heard that’s what’s being recommended now, I just

haven't had a chance to get any yet." The next day, she dropped off a supply on my front door. I couldn't believe that in this person's moment of grief, she was helping me be a better friend/rabbi. She was affirming to me this value that we're all responsible for one another.

At the beginning of the pandemic - there were younger members of our congregation who said why don't we open up our building, this virus is only really dangerous for older people - let the young people go about our business. Now I don't believe that's true that the virus is only dangerous to older people, but even still, what that perspective misses is that the young people in society are connected to the older people - we share grocery stores and hospitals and yes, synagogue. Those older people are our grandparents and parents and they need us to make sacrifices to protect them.

And then when vaccines were only available to older people, there were some seniors who were ready to come back and ditch their masks. They said, "let the kids stay home! We older adults want to party!" To which we had to say, those kids are our grandkids and our children. And they're vulnerable. And they need us to make sacrifices to protect them.

The truth is, we all need to make sacrifices to protect each other. We all share the same resources. We are all interconnected. We're all in the same boat.

The myth of hyperindividualism gets in the way of our ability to join together for a common purpose, like say, defeating a global pandemic or changing the detrimental effects of global climate change. Can we see that now? How many more must suffer and die before we recognize how intertwined our destinies are.

Judaism has always been a force in opposition to that hyperindividualism.

Judaism is about the herd.

If this pandemic has taught us anything it's that the biggest, most important challenges cannot be faced alone, they cannot be conquered alone, they cannot be endured alone.

We are the people who say kol yisrael areivim zeh l'zeh - all of Israel are bound up with one another - responsible for one another - accountable to each other - connected - for better and for worse.

When Jews pray, ideally, we pray in community, we take responsibility for one another- we say Avinu Malkeinu - our God and God of our ancestors.

Do I believe in God?

Maybe/maybe not, but ultimately irrelevant - we do! And when you pray as a Jew, if only for a few moments, you suspend your individual doubts and pray as if we all believe!

Did I sin this year by denigrating teachers and parents? I don't think so, but we did and so I claim responsibility for us all.

There's no "I" in Jew.

Okay, there's one in Judaism, but you get the point.

So, yes - we're all in the same boat and that boat can take us to some amazing places and endure some really turbulent waters, but only if we're rowing in the same direction.

Lesson 3 and this is the shortest of the three lessons - Hineini

With the click of a button, I can access the most amazing resources that the world has to offer. I can hear lectures from brilliant professors, I can listen to concerts of the most amazing orchestras and rock bands, I can visit faraway places and get a virtual walking tour of the streets of Fez or Solonika. And yet...with the whole world at my finger-tips, there is nothing more gratifying, more rewarding, more enjoyable than simply sitting face-to-face with another human being, in person. Sharing a cup of coffee or a walk on the beach, feeling the touch of your hand or the comfort of your unpixelated visage across from mine.

The rock concert on youtube isn't the same as feeling those vibrations and the roar of the crowd reverberating inside my bones, keeping beat with my heart.

The shofar, no matter how beautiful it is over live stream and it is appropriate that many of us hear it over livestream today, it doesn't penetrate your kishkes in the same way as when you hear it in person.

There's a reason Jacob says to his brother Esau, "al keyn ki ra'iti otkha - kirot p'nei elokim - for seeing you is like seeing the face of God." Presence is the essence of divinity. And sometimes it takes the absence of presence to make us appreciate it even more.

When God calls to Abraham in the Torah portion we read on Rosh Hashanah, Abraham responds *hineini* - here I am. And forever more, we are the people of *hineini* - we show up for one another when we call - at shivas, at weddings and b'nei mitzvah, in times of sickness and for typical shabbat, we say, *hineini* - here we are. It's what the cantor will say in just a few moments as we prepare to pray to God on this holiest of days, - *hineini* - here I am. I showed up.

How might you think about answering with a "hineini" this year. How might you show up for your neighbors or family with your presence?

Often people ask me what they should say when they go to a shiva house? How can I comfort a family on their loss? What are the right words? And my response is always the same. It's likely not anything you say that they'll remember, but the simple fact that you were there. Your presence speaks volumes. In fact, traditionally when you visit a mourner, you don't say anything at all, unless that is the mourner opens the conversation. Your job is to be there for them - saying through your presence *hineini* - here I am for you.

I'll conclude with this. A couple years ago, I broke my pinky finger playing basketball - it wasn't a serious injury, but even after it healed, ever since, I can't quite straighten my pinky all the way. While I had my cast on I realized all sorts of activities that I never realized I used my pinky for - opening a door, cooking, washing dishes, getting dressed, turning the steering wheel. All of a sudden life's simple daily activities became more difficult and I vowed never to take my pinky for granted again.

And sure enough a few weeks after my cast came off and I regained full function of my hand, I quickly forgot about my pinky. It's just another finger - one in ten. I open doors, type, and even play guitar without paying it much mind or appreciating it.

But every once in a while I notice it's crooked and I remember how truly blessed I am to be able to use this little finger that does so much.

What if we could bring that same awareness to our post-pandemic life - may it come speedily and in our days. That even in the most challenging times, we have 100 blessings every day (Gratitude, anyway). That we are not, as much as we might sometimes like to think, alone in this world, but that we are fundamentally

interconnected. And that simply sitting with another human being - *panim-el-panim* - face to face is one of life's most glorious activities.

If we could remember that from time to time then maybe we can squeeze some good out of this very challenging time.

May this be a shanah tovah - a good year for all of us. Amen.