

Until around a week ago, I didn't know how this sermon would begin or end. I had a sense of the questions I wanted to ask, the sources I might explore. But what was its point? Would it have a point? What resolutions might it offer - what wisdom could it bring to bear?

Now, if you know me, you will know that this uncertainty felt excruciating. I am a planner. An organizer. Someone who moves through the world under the rubric of "there is no problem a shared google doc can't solve." My meals for the week are planned and recorded on Fridays, are shopped for and cross-checked against the grocery list app on Sundays, and are executed at their appointed hours, with leftovers for lunch preemptively apportioned and accounted for (I'm really a joy to be married to). I recently put prep times on my schedule for b'nai mitzvah charges and parsha classes extending through the whole of 5782, causing Melissa from our office to grasp the wide reach of my neuroses, and causing me to realize that my calendar privacy settings are not what I thought they were.

These - this desire to plan, this attempt to control - these are tendencies that, yes, are manifest in me to an extreme. But they likely are, also, at least somewhat resonant for you. And they are tendencies that have made this period - these weeks, these months, these 18 months - really, really difficult. Because part of what COVID brought was much *more* uncertainty than we had previously been accustomed to - a quantitative difference. Things, this year (and really, especially, these last few months), have just seemed *more* up in the air, *more* unreliable, *more* unpredictable, than before.

And- as these episodic moments, these sporadic pits in the stomach of “I don’t know what’s next,” came to the forefront - at the same time, underneath, something much deeper was unraveling. At perhaps its most unsettling, what COVID brought about was a peeling away of the layer - a removal of the facade, a shattering of the illusion - that we ever had certainty to begin with. Sure, questions of our mortality, control, sense of faith in a future feel, now, more explicit, more revealed. But in truth, we have never known our fates. We have never mastered our destinies, foreseen all outcomes. I know no less now about my fortunes or ours than I did two years ago. The difference is that now I know that I don’t know.

And that is a scary place to be. It can make us feel small. Powerless. Feel stuck. It is an uncertainty that can overwhelm the most fervent attempts at distraction or diversion; that can, has and will pierce the bubbles of imagined control we so carefully construct; that can drown out those inner voices we cultivate or cultishly take at face value that say “I can figure it out, can plan my way out, can know it all.” If there is anything that we now know, it is that we just cannot know it all.

What a weary spiritual state in which to enter a new year.

Weary - and, not unfamiliar to our tradition. Because while we may have been unaccustomed to, or uncomfortable with, this newfound knowledge-of-lack-of-knowledge, uncertainty has been baked into Jewish legal discourse since its inception.

The concept there is called “safek” - doubt. And this doubt - this moment of: there are facts I do not know, situations outside of my control, rules from my past that just don't apply in this present - this doubt can creep up anywhere. If you don't know whether you said the blessing over your food or not, do you re-say it? If you might have seen a bug in your lettuce (making it forbidden according to the laws of kashrut), but you might not have, do you eat it? If you can't remember if you bought this meat from the kosher butcher or the non-kosher butcher, do you cook it? And that's just breakfast.

The doubts get bigger too, and less technical. Our ancestors doubted the covenant. They doubted one another - frequently, painfully and often to their detriment. They doubted God - God's presence, God's goodness, God's ability or willingness to intervene on our behalf. The Torah even tells of moments in which God doubted us, proving that no being, Divine or otherwise, is protected, fully, from not always believing, fully.

And so it is to our tradition we turn - to the fellow travelers along life's uncertain road, who have traversed not with more knowledge, per se, but with stories and wisdom that can accompany and guide us as we chart our paths.

The first piece of guidance is one that sounds so obvious, but feels so hard and also so profound. It is: do something. Do something. When you're in that moment of panic, that moment of am-I-about-to-eat-a-bug-or-am-I-not, don't remain forever frozen. Do something.

Rabbi Norman Lamm wrote a piece called “Faith and Doubt” that has not left my heart since I read it. There were several days in which my fallback plan for this slot was just to read that to you - which is to say, I commend the piece in its entirety. Rabbi Lamm became the President of Yeshiva University in 1976, the same year that my great-grandfather, a rabbi who also served in the YU administration, passed away. Given his Orthodox bonafides, it is that much more surprising, refreshing and breathtaking to encounter such honest reflections on existential uncertainty.

But like our tradition, Rabbi Lamm does not remain only in the theological. He also helps us with our potentially buggy lettuce. Rabbi Lamm writes: “you can refuse to come to a conclusion, or insist that it is impossible to come to a conclusion, in the theoretical sphere, such as on the question of the existence or nonexistence of God. But in practice, *you must act as if there was a God or as if there was no God. There is no middle ground.*”

Amazing, right? Because what Rabbi Lamm says is that even in the face of imperfect knowledge - even in the face of what *will inevitably be* lingering, or even prominent, intellectual doubt - we still have the capacity, and probably even the *obligation*, to do something. In the realm of philosophy, we can muse and ponder all we want. But in the realm of halacha - the realm of actually living life - we either gotta eat the salad or not. Cook the meat or toss it. Open up the synagogue or keep it closed. Go on vacation or skip it. Can I foresee all consequences? No. Will I be rid of my gnawing doubt? Doubtful. But still we do. We act. We plod on.

After the most recent (and truly devastating) climate report came out, scientist Dr. Katharine Hayhoe gave an interview with her local paper. In it, she admitted - “the scientific models can’t predict with precision” how and when specific consequences will unfold. They don’t know it all. And this lack of knowledge can be immobilizing. In fact, while 56% of U.S. adults say that climate change is the most important issue facing society today, four in 10 have not made any changes in their behavior, and seven in 10 said they wished there were more they could do, but they don’t know where to start.

Dr. Hayhoe says - you won’t know where to start. You won’t know its exact effects. You won’t! We can’t! But we still have to do something. We can’t remain fossilized in the indecision, so unmoored by the uncertainty. Dr. Hayhoe has reduced her travel, modified how she shops for food - we don’t all have to do exactly that. But we do have to, and we can, and wow we still must, do something. Even when the exact path is unknown. Even when the precise ramifications are uncertain. In fact, probably, especially then. Do something.

The second piece of guidance picks up on what is so radical, and so crucial, about the first - the realization that we cannot have perfect knowledge. We can’t Wikipedia or Twitter refresh our way out of uncertainty. And so, our tradition says, rather than focus only on what you *don’t* know, re-orient about what you *can* know, and what you *do* know.

There are two parts to this. One is cognitive. It says: in this moment, there's a lot I don't know. What will happen next? Will this surge pass? Will I and my loved ones make it through? That, I don't know. But there is also a lot that I *do* know.

Here's some: I know that many of us are scared. I know that we are resilient. I know we have lived through times that we never could have imagined. I know that much lies ahead, but I also know that much has already passed. I know we care for each other. I know that tonight the sun will set and tomorrow it will rise. I know that today, we sanctify holy time. I know that tomorrow, we turn over a new leaf. I know whom and what I am responsible toward, I know whom and what I love.

There's a lot we don't know, a lot we can't. And also - *a lot we do know*, that will bolster, ground, support, nurture and comfort us through the uncertainties that are bound to come.

The other part of this reorientation, though, lives outside of our minds - outside our mental gymnastics. Rabbi Lamm characterizes this piece as a move from "belief that" to "belief in." He writes - "[belief-in] is the area not of proposition, but of relationship." This is a move from trying to believe in an idea to realizing you believe in a person. "Relational belief-in rather than propositional belief-that," he claims, "is the essential core of Jewish faith. *Cognitive doubts in the latter (in belief-that) can be overcome by reverting to a state of relation[ship].*"

Examples:

Do I *believe that* these vaccines will forever squash all variants? I don't know. But I *believe in* scientists, and doctors, and their devotion to life-saving pursuits.

Do I *believe that* democracy will hold, that truth and justice will prevail? I don't know. But I *believe in* the activists, journalists, well-intentioned lawmakers, community organizers and change makers working to make that proposition real.

Do I *believe that* God is sitting up there counting our deeds? I don't know. Probably not. But I *believe in* us, in you, in our ability to do teshuva. To ask and grant forgiveness. To grow into our best selves.

Belief that - propositional, a concept, an idea. Belief in - relational, a person, a connection. "Belief that" is elusive. "Belief in" is tangible. It is me and you here and now. Knowledge might not be perfect but faith can be - I can have an emunah shleimah, a full *belief in*, me and you and them and us; the future can be hazy but your hand holding mine as we walk toward it can feel crystal clear.

Now - I have a third piece of guidance. But I first want to pause for a moment to reflect. Because so far, what I have offered feels, to me, both important and insufficient. These are techniques - tools - not just for *navigating* an uncertain moment, but for *mitigating* it. Lessening its effects. Taking the uncertainty, acknowledging it, but then putting it in its own little box tucked away, and filling the rest of the space with something different.

But what if we opened the box? What if rather than *manage* the uncertainty, we explored it? Delved in? Succumbed to its inevitability, yes, but to its generative and transformational power, also.

This is guidance three. And it comes from looking not in, not out, but / up. To the skies.

Could we see the (actual) skies right now, we would notice a period of day called “bein hashmashot.” Twilight.

Now, we probably know that “the Jewish day begins at night.” But what constitutes “night” is murky. Is it when the sun sets? Yes, for some things. When three stars appear? Also yes, for others. So what, then, is twilight - the period between?

Rather than settle this matter - say, definitively, it’s the sun one, or the stars one - the rabbis leave the question open, calling this time, this “bein hashmashot,” this twilight, “safek yom v’safek laila.” Safek - doubtful (remember?). Uncertain. Possibly day, possibly night. Maybe still yesterday, potentially already tomorrow.

Rabbi Shmuel Gordin writes about bein hashmashot, and points out something stunning. “From a halachic perspective, bein hashmashot is nothing short of astounding. Jewish law is always precise when it comes to timebound issues, pinpointed to the minute. The last time to recite [the morning] Shma is 9:22; chametz must be destroyed by 11:21.



Given the usual exactitude concerning matters of time, why are the rabbis content leaving the definition of bein hashmashot uncertain?” Rabbi Gordin answers his own question - “Perhaps bein hashmashot is not the product of *indecision* but of *deliberate decision*. Bein hashmashot exists because Jewish tradition consciously wants to build a period of uncertainty into each of our days.”

It is as if to say - we can't run away from doubt. We can't resolve every ambiguity. And lest we start to think we can, each day, we are hit again with the reminder: you will not know it all. The setting sun and rising stars tap us on the shoulder and whisper - “you can't. You don't need to. And you maybe even shouldn't.”

My childhood rabbi, John Rosove, recently wrote about *his* childhood rabbi, Leonard Beerman, who would teach: “doubt may be the most civilizing force we have available to us, for it is doubt that protects us from the arrogance of utter rightness, from the barbarism of [unquestioning] loyalties, which threaten the human possibility.”

We need doubt, not just humming along in the background - we need it loudly, prominently, reminding our pride- and certainty-inclined souls that we don't, in fact, ever know it all.

And when we absorb this recognition that uncertainty is a part of the cycle of our days, the contours of our lives - what can happen then?

From the mishnah: עשרה דברים נבראו, בערב שבת, בין השמשות.

Ten things were created on erev Shabbat - in those last hours of our world's first week - in this time of bein hashmashot, of twilight. This period bracketed on both sides by safek yom safek laila, by doubt.

ואלו הן: and these are them. The hole in the earth that swallowed Korach. The opening to Miriam's wilderness well. The mouth of Balaam's talking donkey. The rainbow that emerged after the flood. The manna that God provided the Israelites in the desert to eat. Moses' rod. The special worm that enabled the Temple to be constructed without proper metal tools. And the letters, writings, and tablets of the Ten Commandments.

What is it that this eclectic group shares? *These ten things defy the laws of nature.* The earth should not swallow its people. A desert should not overflow with water. Sticks should not become snakes, and buildings built by worms should not be structurally sound. But they did. They were. At least maybe. As if to say: when we open ourselves to the reality that we neither know nor understand it all - when we breathe in bein hashmashot - the previously unthinkable can reveal itself as possible.

And we don't have to believe in the supernatural for this to feel real. These miracles are everywhere, all the time - in any and every place where we pull back long and far enough to realize that *safek yom safek laila*, that moments of uncertainty, of spontaneity, of unpredictability do exist, always have, always will. And that in these moments, something else can emerge. An openness. A humility. A sense of wonder at the universe's mysterious ways. The simple truth "I don't know what is to come" opens the door of possibilities so much wider than an attempt at an assertion ever could. It's like the car trip where you veered off course and stumbled into your vacation's most surprising highlights - the antique store, the ice cream shop, the friendly local (to name a few from our recent clergy retreat in which Rabbi Alexander took us not just on the wrong road but somehow landed us in the wrong state).

Or it's like my sermon. Writing high holy day sermons is the toughest professional thing I do all year - partly because it is such an uncertain road. I described it recently as a process in which *I* do not drive *it*, but rather the *process* guides *me*. If I come in trying to impose an idea, it's going to fall flat. It will feel stale. I just have to give in. Delete the prep times from my schedule (or, realistically, fill them with something else). Read and study what I can, sure (do something); focus on what I *do know*; *believe in* my abilities and training. But also succumb. Wait (often with bated, or panicked, breath) for the muse. Accept that the journey is not mine alone to control - that its path, its schedule, its outcome will be uncertain. And then see what emerges. This is terrifying. And for me, very hard. But it is also the only way I can stand here with you and really bare an honest soul.

Arriving at a final draft might not be a full-on miracle in the likes of Miriam's well. But it really does fill me with humility, with gratitude, with a sense of wonder. And that's just for one 22 minute drash. Imagine the possibilities of the rest.

We don't know what is to come. And thank God for that. That doesn't mean we don't act - do something. That doesn't mean we go it alone - believe in. But it does mean that not knowing can allow for the unexpected, the unanticipated, indeed even the miraculous to emerge. And that can be beautiful, and life-giving, and important. Van Gogh said - "I don't know anything with certainty but seeing the stars makes me dream."

Tonight, as the stars come out - as we enter into that bein hashmashot, that twilight of uncertain doubts - let us act, yes. Let us hold one another, surely. But most of all, let us step, bravely, with open minds and curious hearts, into the sacred space that uncertainty creates. Let us surrender. Let us dream. And then let us count, bless, and give gratitude for the miracles, large and small, that will - with a clarity, a certainty, even, felt in the depths of our souls - that will emerge from the haze.

SHANA TOVA