

A Year of Wonders: Re-Turning Toward a More Common Good
Rabbi Wendi Geffen
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5781

In 1665, “social distancing” orders emptied campuses throughout England, as the bubonic plague raged, killing roughly one-quarter of London’s population, in a mere 18 months. A 24-year-old student from Trinity College of Cambridge was among those forced to leave campus and return indefinitely to his family’s farm in the English countryside to shelter in place. Reflecting on his experiences during that time, Sir Isaac Newton wrote extensively about his choices to question the operating assumptions that governed the physical world; to see himself less as a student in university and more as a student of the world. As a result, it was in that place and at that time that he would change the trajectory of our human understanding of the world and the universe with his discoveries in calculus, motion, optics and gravitation. This time at his home during the epidemic came to be known as his *Annus Mirabilis* - the Year of Wonders.¹

I wonder: how have you used your time over these last 6 months? One doesn’t dare compare mastering Zoom with discovering the inner workings of the cosmos (although sometimes it does feel like an equivalent feat). But nevertheless, we are not all that different from Newton in that we find ourselves amidst a time of chaos and challenge, faced with many of the same questions that we imagine he faced too. How have we used the time we’ve been given? How will we use it in the future? Who have we been? Who will we choose to be?

Consider, for a moment, the foundational physics of centripetal and centrifugal force.² Newton coined these terms to describe the tendencies of force to cause an object either to seek the center of a system or to flee from it. Centripetal literally means center-seeking, and describes the force that keeps an object moving in a curved path, directed inward toward the center; this is the force that keeps us from flying off the earth as it spins; it’s what holds everything together.

Centrifugal force, on the other hand, is the force that appears to push things away from the center; for example, when holding a rock attached to a string and swinging it around in a circle, centrifugal force is at play should one let go of the string; the rock will not continue to spin in the circular path, it will instead launch outward in a straight line. If the earth’s gravitational pull were to cease, at that moment, the moon would lose its orbit and simply travel away.

Both of these forces are operative in physical existence, but tonight, as the New Year begins, I’d like to suggest that they are foundational in our societal existence as well, and invite us to consider the profound insight they offer for how each of us might choose to move forward into 5781.

¹ See <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/woolsthorpe-manor/features/year-of-wonders> and <https://www.nvsoclib.org/blog/newton%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%9Cyear-wonders%E2%80%9D-during-great-plague>

² I’m ever grateful to Harry Epstein and Adam Ruben for their physics tutorials!

In their simplest forms, societies are made up of three primary elements: a market (or economy) that deals with the distribution of wealth; a state (or body politic) that navigates the distribution of power; and then a moral code, what we might call the common good. Now the market and the state can be governed either by outward or inward pulls, depending on the nature of the particular society, but, for any society to function in a healthy way, its moral system **must** be centripetal, because morality, in any society, is the force that limits and directs our pursuit of private gain - it is the voice that says No to the individual *me* for the sake of the collective *us*.³ Consider that before Adam Smith, the founding father of capitalism, wrote *The Wealth of Nations*, he wrote *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, in which he affirmed this very same idea: "... there are evidently some principles in [human] nature, which interest [a person] in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to [them], though [the person] derives nothing from it... Of this kind is pity or compassion... That we often derive sorrow from the sorrow of others, is a matter of fact too obvious to require any instances to prove it."⁴ Put more simply, there is something in our nature that impels us to transcend our selves and self interest and instead direct ourselves towards each other.

Judaism sources this notion back to the very beginning of humanity. Remember, when God created *HaAdam*, the first human? God determined rather quickly *Lo tov he'adam heyiot levado* - it is not good for a person to be alone. The solution? The creation of an *ezer knegdo* - a fitting partner - or put literally, a helper opposite of or different from him.⁵ Our foundational blueprint for humanity roots itself both in the centripetal idea of the importance of transcending aloneness or isolation - as well as in the importance of a shared, diverse, collaborative existence.

But today, we find ourselves far away from Eden's orbit, with our focus shifted away from the collective and towards an entirely different field instead- the field of self. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains it this way in his new masterwork called *Morality*: "The revolutionary shift from We to I means that everything that once consecrated the moral bonds binding us to one another - faith, creed, culture, custom and convention - no longer does so, [leaving us in]...an individualistic universe [that] may be free, but it is fraught with loneliness, isolation, vulnerability, and...a prevailing sense of the ultimate meaninglessness in life....That is the price of radical individualism... Everything has become immediate, transactional and presentational."⁶ And the result is that we find ourselves being pulled centrifugally away from each other faster than ever before.

This shift from centripetal connectivity to centrifugal dispersion is, in my view, the greatest threat to our relationships, our communities, our country and our world, no less to the well-being of our own individual souls.

³ Sacks, Rabbi Jonathan. *Morality*. p.1.

⁴ Smith, Adam. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Section I: Of the Sense of Propriety, Chapter I: Of Sympathy

⁵ *Genesis 2:18*

⁶ Sacks. p.83.

On this matter, I know that for so many of you, no matter what side you sit on, you believe that what happens on November 3rd will determine our collective trajectory. Although it *will* undoubtedly be an important day, I would like to suggest that we direct our *moral* energies instead toward November 4th. No matter how wonderful or terrible you believe either candidate to be, and no matter who is elected to reside in the White House, please hear me, that force cannot erase nor bridge the toxic divisions that continue to plague our society. Remember: a market, a body politic and a common good. We have agency in the market by our spending and saving; we have agency in the state by our support of candidates and voting; but our agency in a moral code is demonstrative solely through the choices we make of how to act in our own lives, particularly in the ways we behave towards each other. The market and the state do not know us; they do not feel; they have no moral sensibility in and of themselves. But too many of us have ceded our moral agency over to the market and to the state, investing all of our energies in the creation of a state that we believe should care, and in the process, we've abandoned our own responsibilities and accountabilities to each other. The state can never replace community and relationships with each other. But we've confused this. We've outsourced our value of mutual care to the state, and prioritized autonomy, the right to live as we choose, in our personal relationships instead. We've sanctioned the centrifugal shift.

Of note is that while America may give us rights, Judaism has no such equivalent concept. In a Jewish framework, what we have is responsibility: to ourselves, to each other, to the world and to God. This is, according to our tradition, what keeps the world rotating on its axis in its orbit, as it should.⁷

I am not suggesting that we should not have opinions, passionate ones, or that we should not advocate for and support efforts for those matters about which we care. It is our right to stand up for what we believe in. But it remains our responsibility to not permit our own narratives and viewpoints to erode the way we see and understand others who do not see things the same way, rupturing relationships and severing our ties.

We must remember: all violence begins in disconnect. Ultimately, with the disintegration of relationships where people are left on one side or another, each side perceiving the other as morally anathema, violence will increase, and what always follows, if we listen to history, is war. This is what is at stake and what in many ways is already happening.

Consider for a moment the function of identity politics, and how it can be used to unite or divide society. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr used identity politics centripetally - describing segregation and injustice as a destructive force, and appealing to universal principles and our common humanity as ways to heal prejudice and unite the nation. On how King used identity politics for the good, Sociologist Jonathan Haidt shared that MLK appealed to common religious principles, the creed of our Founding Fathers and a

⁷ See for example *Pirke Avot* 1:2

common language of love to drive out prejudice. King “framed our greatest moral failing as an opportunity for centripetal redemption,” reminding us that the group to which we all should most identify is our human family, while at the same time, not losing sight of the importance and beauty of our own uniqueness.⁸ This is identity politics used for the good. It aligns with our Jewish understanding of identity as well, one in which being a Jew is a part of what makes us who we are, but ultimately the quality of goodness is elevated above all else. As Rabbi David Wolpe so aptly puts it: “The line between good and evil does not run between countries, peoples or tribes. It runs through every human decision in every human heart... A human being is never a type or a group, but a unique image of God.”⁹

Today’s identity politics, however, are different. Instead of centripetally drawing us toward our common humanity, they centrifugally push us away from anyone not perceived as within or aligned with a given particular group. Today’s identity politics create an dangerous, impossible quagmire with the hard rules of “I demand that you understand me” and at the very same time “I forbid you to understand me,” not to mention that “There is no space for whomever you are if you are not part of me.” These provide just the right toxic recipe for a poison that brews nothing but a centrifugal disconnect.

Of note is that Judaism has always understood the value of maintaining the connection between the perceived “us” and “them.” 2000 years ago, our rabbis established a series of guidelines categorized as *Mipnei Darchei Shalom* - actions done for the sake of the ways of peace. In one such example, a Jewish person observing the laws of *Shmitah*, which forbade them from harvesting or processing crops in a particular year, was still allowed to lend another Jewish person an item to help them sift, mill or cook the grain that, according to Torah, they should not be doing in the first place.¹⁰ And what if the other person was a non-Jew and not bound by the Torah laws at all? The mishnah teaches that the Jew not only is forbidden to judge them or suggest that they consider changing their ways, but also is instructed to wish them well.¹¹ Please note, the non-Jew in the case was likely Roman - from the same nation responsible for destroying the Temple. Make no mistake - society messaged the very same “us/them” narrative all the way back then, but our rabbis didn’t fall for the centrifugal message. They doubled down on firming up the center.

What an incredible framework through which we can understand how to reweave the web of connection across lines of difference. We see here that while our religious life or belief system is, by rights, ours, that fact does not entitle us to stand in judgement of others who may not or do not operate in that same system. This is what it means to

⁸ As expressed through the lense of David Brooks, “The Retreat to Tribalism,” *The New York Times*, 1/3/18

⁹ Wolpe, Rabbi David. “Your Identity Group Doesn’t Define You.” *The New York Jewish Week*. July 21, 2020

¹⁰ *Mishnah Gittin* 5:9

¹¹ Later, in the 12th century, Maimonides took the idea one step further, instructing us to imagine ourselves in their shoes and how they must feel, as they were harvesting what undoubtedly they truly needed, and from that perspective, to “greet them with expressions such as: “Be of good courage!” or “Good luck!” (Mishneh Torah: Laws of the Sabbatical Year and Jubilee 8:8). The only restrictive guideline for the observant Jew was that they not breach the law of *Shmitah* themselves.

orient oneself for the sake of the ways of peace - which means for the sake of maintaining our connections in relationship with each other. And lest we assume that this sort of collaborative framework held true only for matters on which religious observance differed, the Gemarah, which comes a few hundred years later in a more urban context, ups the ante on how we might orient ourselves centripetally towards each other, when it states that we Jews are obligated to feed the hungry, Jews and non-Jews, to care for those who are ill, Jews and non-Jews too - all “for the sake of the ways of peace.”¹² The Jewish ideal is not a “you’re either with me or you’re against me” stance in the world, but rather, one grounded in genuine care for all other human beings.

I want to share with you one more key difference between centripetal and centrifugal force. Centripetal force is understood as a real force - meaning, that because its pull is towards the center, it is consistent across all perspectives and viewpoints. Centrifugal force, on the other hand, is referred to as an apparent or fictitious force, because it is experienced subjectively based on a particular frame of reference. It’s relative, not fixed or permanent. So it turns out the key to re-establishing centripetal pull lies within the re-establishment of a common center.

A common center. The thread that runs through us all. Our shared humanity. Not the dangerous, reductive thought that our entire identity is our political party, our gender, our race, our sexual identity, our economic standing, our zip code, what have you. When it comes to our human relationships, we need to remember that trying to convince another to change their viewpoint based on our own viewpoint just doesn’t work. All it will do is push us further apart; it is a centrifugal tactic. But we can strive to open each other’s hearts. We can build relationships intentionally with people who are not like us, who see the world differently, and then we can strive to create a culture of shared understanding, (not necessarily agreement) and at a minimum, respect for seeing how the other might see the world. Remember, long before learning from those with whom we disagreed was seen as betrayal, it was known as a noble virtue. It is in this space of both shared values and feeling valued that hearts open and things begin to change. The center can be re-established.

This night, we stand at a powerful flex point in time, where the axes of the Jewish New Year and the secular year meet. Sure we can call for the cancellation of 2020 - there is certainly enough cause for despair to merit such a force. But so too can we decide to shift our perspective, to envision what is yet to come not as already lost, but rather, a time filled with possibilities of healing and return waiting only for us to reveal them. And to make that choice, we can begin by reorienting ourselves around a center of hope, hope for all that can yet be possible. That however vast the perceived divide between us, it is not yet too late to extend our hands towards one another.

Here’s something pretty amazing about hope. Hope comes from an Indo-European root “keu” (pronounced koi) which is the same root from which the word curve comes, and it

¹² *Babylonian Talmud Gittin 61a*

A Year of Wonders: Re-Turning Toward a More Common Good
Rabbi Wendi Geffen
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5781

means a change in direction or going in a different way.¹³ And our Hebrew word for hope, Tikvah, comes from the root “kaveh” (kuf, vav, heh) meaning to gather together. It references the act of combining a multiplicity of strands and coiling them into a single, much stronger cable. Turns out hope is pretty centripetal in and of itself. In the epilogue of *Morality*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks asks: “What will be the shape of a post-Covid world?... Will we use this unparalleled moment to reevaluate our priorities, or will we strive to get back as quickly as possible to business as usual? Will we have changed, or merely endured? Will the pandemic turn out to have been a transformation in history or merely an interruption of it?”¹⁴

These are the questions. I pray that we will answer together in one resounding voice that returns us to each other, in what might yet be a most amazing Year of Wonders for us all.

Shanah Tovah.

¹³ As shared by Dr. Sherwin Nuland in his landmark Ted Talk “the Extraordinary Power of Ordinary People”

¹⁴ Sacks. p. 323