

Rosh Hashanah Sermon Day I

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Greetings. As I mentioned earlier, because of public health considerations our services are significantly abbreviated this year. Among other consequences, that means that the time I have to address you in my High Holiday sermons is quite a bit shorter than in previous years. So, I'm going to jump right in.

I'm basing my remarks this morning on a text from Maimonides' Mishneh Torah, his legal code. It is a text which, I believe has particular resonance for the moment we are living in right now. The question the Rambam is dealing with in this passage is, what should the community do when faced with a time of *tzarot*, troubles -- like famine, locusts, or plague? He says that if such a calamity happens, the community should proclaim a special fast day, and on that day:

בְּכָל יוֹם תַּעֲנִית שְׁגוֹזְרִין עַל הַצָּבוּר מִפְּנֵי הַצָּרוֹת. בֵּית דִּין וְהַזְּקֵנִים יוֹשְׁבֵי בְּבֵית הַכְּנֶסֶת וּבֹדְקִים עַל מַעֲשֵׂי אֲנָשֵׁי הָעִיר. On every fast day that we decree on the community on account of troubles, the court and the elders sit in the synagogue and examine the actions of the people of the city.¹

Now Maimonides wrote these words in the 12th century. He himself knew both personal and communal calamities in his own lifetime. But the importance of his words spans all the generations since then, up until our own day. The plague of corona virus that has struck our world has led to so much suffering, so much isolation, so much disruption, so much anxiety, so much loss of life. And we are approaching a million deaths in our world. One million.

Can Maimonides' prescription for responding to calamity in his time, help us as we reflect on our own?

As we've just heard, Maimonides instructs that when disaster strikes, the elders should sit and **בֹּדְקִים עַל מַעֲשֵׂי אֲנָשֵׁי הָעִיר** – examine the actions of the people.

Now this idea of examining the actions of the people can be taken in one of two ways. First explanation: God is sending the calamity as a punishment for our transgressions -- so we'd better examine our deeds, in order to know what to repent for. That way we can earn God's forgiveness and a lifting of the calamity.

But there is another possible interpretation of the Rambam passage, which I find more spiritually fruitful: when there is some sort of disruption, catastrophe, or

¹ Hilchot Ta'anit 1:1, 4, 17.

trouble that afflicts you – *that's* the time to examine your life, both as an individual and as a society. *That's* the opportunity to overcome the inertia that sets in when everything is “normal”. We know that everything is not in fact normal right now. Everything is *not* okay. Let's take this opportunity לבדוק על מעשינו to examine our deeds as individuals, as a community, as a society -- to open that hard stuff up. Maybe if we do so, together we can figure out some ways to make it better.

Societally, there are so many issues: Global warming and all its ramifications including wildfires and hurricanes, massive inequality in income and opportunity, racism, violence, the plight of millions of refugees and migrants, corruption, assaults on democratic norms and values – all these societal problems and more were known prior to the corona virus. But the reality of each has become exposed even more clearly by this plague. Can we use this opportunity לבדוק על מעשינו – to examine our actions and become better as a society?

But it's not just about society as a whole. As Jews, we are faced with the constant challenge of safeguarding our people's future in the face of enormous assimilatory pressures from the wider culture. This problem was of course also known before corona, but our inability to gather communally has forced us to ask these fundamental questions about Jewish identity in the contemporary world without being able to rely on some of the usual answers.

And as individuals, too, we must ask ourselves: How have the last months changed who I am? How have I grown as a human being? As a Jew? How has this extraordinary period of time opened my heart? Have I become kinder, more generous, more accountable to others? Have I become more aware?

Some of us may be able to answer these questions readily; for most of us, we've got some work to do, some honest introspection, in order to answer them. Good, substantial, hard High Holy Day work to do. In the Torah reading for this morning from Gen.21, we read that Hagar, who had been chased out of her home and sent into the desert by Abraham, was in the depths of despair for herself and her son Ishmael when, ויפקח אלהים את עינייה ותרא באר מים -- God “opened her eyes and she saw a well of water.”² Many of our sages infer that the well was there all along; Hagar, in crisis, just couldn't see it. In the midst of our despair over the pandemic, what relief and what comfort and what opportunities to grow are out there, just waiting for us to, with God's help, open our eyes and see them?

² Gen.21:19

These days are known in Hebrew of course not as High Holy Days, but rather as *hayamim ha-noraim*. We are accustomed to translating that phrase as Days of Awe. That sounds a little nicer than the other possible translation of *noraim*, which is terrible, or terrifying. As we enter 5781, the idea that these are terrifying days is not so hard for us to connect to, because we don't actually know where this thing that we are experiencing is going in the new year -- and that uncertainty is truly terrifying.

But in the midst of our anxiety, there is also so much to be grateful for. Let's give thanks for our amazing front-line and health care workers and public health officials and researchers and educators who are keeping things going and working on answers -- often at risk to themselves, and in so doing saving lives. Let's give thanks to each other for each doing our part as citizens to keep ourselves and others safe. And let's give thanks for this amazing opportunity we have לבודק על מעשינו to examine where we are, in a very thoughtful way, knowing that nothing we took for granted from before necessarily will or has to stay the same. That can be disconcerting for sure, especially for a traditionalist like me. But that awareness also represents our best chance to make our Jewish community, our society, and our world cleaner, stronger and healthier for all. As we cultivate the quality of gratitude, let's be sure not to emulate the guy who wakes up late for a job interview, speeds his car to the address but can't find a parking spot. Desperate, he prays "God, if you provide me with a parking spot, I promise I'll go to shul every Shabbat." Just then someone pulls out of a spot and he says to God, "Oh, never mind, I found one." Let's instead remember the source of our blessings, and the way that God can help us find, if not parking spots, then at least ourselves.

How can we do this? A comprehensive answer to that question most definitely will take me beyond my 10-minute limit. But I will close with some observations that I've taken from a source of wisdom that is outside my usual textual database. Like many of you, I've looked for ways to stay physically fit during the lockdown. One way I've done this is by working out at home to some of the many workout videos that are available on the internet. On these videos, certain motivational phrases come up again and again, and I think each one has High Holiday resonance as well:

First, engage your core -- find that place of greatest fundamental truth in your soul and become more aware of it and let it give you strength. Become aware of what your Jewish core is and lean into it -- whether it be prayer, or culture, or acts

of hesed, or social action, or Shabbat, or Israel. Become aware of your spiritual and ethical core as a human being and engage it, help it become even stronger.

Second, stretch. Ask yourself what 1% extra effort looks like for you, and ask what that extra effort would yield for yourself and for the world. What does 10% extra effort look like? Go beyond your Jewish core and challenge yourself to try new expressions of Judaism, new mitzvot; stretch Jewish muscles you didn't even know you had. Find new ways to contribute to society, keeping your obligations as a member of our endlessly fascinating and quirky Jewish family in balance with your obligations to humanity as a whole, in all its stunning variety, every one of whom is created in the image of God.

Third, remember that it's supposed to be hard; that's what you're here for. In fact, if it's hard -- that means it's working. None of the change we need as individuals, as Jews, as a society is easy, but that's our task and we can't run away from it.

Fourth and finally, make this workout your own. Of course, we're part of a tradition that goes back centuries, a tradition that has called us to gather on this day to celebrate the beginning of a new year, and we're part of the Jewish people whose future we have a stake in and a responsibility for, and we're part of the human race -- which is really hurting this year. Within those collective identities, we each as individuals need to land on what we can work on in the coming year to make ourselves better people, better family members, better Jews, better members of society. You've shown up, either here or at home, which is the first step. A lot of folks don't even do that. Now that we're here, let's each get to work, the work of individual and societal teshuvah.

Rambam said calamity is a time to examine our actions. I don't know what posterity will say were the major lessons of this extraordinary time, this crisis which has brought so much suffering and loss, so much wrenching change, so much anxiety. But in keeping with Rambam's teaching, on this Rosh Hashanah I say -- let's courageously examine our deeds. Let's not let a good calamity go to waste.