

“Are We Being Judged on The Day of Judgment?”

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One of my favorite memes of the past several months is a picture of Michael J. Fox and Christopher Lloyd, also known as Marty McFly and Dr. Emmett “Doc” Brown, standing on either side of their retrofitted, time-traveling, Back-to-the-Future DeLorean, mouthing the words “Anywhere but 2020!” If you could have your own flux capacitor, and 1.21 gigawatts of power and time-travel yourself, would you ever choose to go back to the year 2020, or for that matter 5780? I am so done with this year... its misery, its disappointments, its almost daily dose of bad news and worse news. Let’s get on with a new year already! Let’s leave this one not just in the past, but in the dustbin of history, never to revisit it again.

This year has been devastating. In a civilization as advanced as ours, a tiny, microscopic virus can still bring the world to its knees. With all of our scientific prowess we are still scrambling to figure out how to vaccinate against an invisible predator. Never could I have imagined that I would be conducting High Holiday services like this... in an empty sanctuary, looking into a camera... because it is too dangerous for us to all be here under the same roof together. Never could I have imagined not greeting you personally, not being able to shake your hand or embrace, or wish you a *L’shana Tova* face-to-face...or to pass out Hershey Kisses to your children during services! It’s incomprehensible what’s going on right now.

I want to ask you a question... not that I’ll be able to hear your answer, but just play along! Have you just once, even in jest, attributed what’s going on in the world to something of “biblical proportions?” Have you ever, in conversation, referred to the Coronavirus as a “plague?” Did you at least chuckle when you heard about those swarming giant hornets that arrived on our shores a few months ago, and think, ‘Wow that sounds like something right out of the Book of Exodus!’ Or, for that matter, the unmistakable increase in destructive hurricanes battering our coastlines, or fires devouring millions of acres of forests out west, turning the skies burnt orange, more like the atmosphere of Mars than Earth?

As our society feels like it is coming apart at the seams, I can’t help but wonder, is *Someone* trying to tell us something? Where *is* God in all of this chaos? On this day that we don’t only call Rosh Hashanah, but also *Yom Ha’Din*, the Day of Judgment, I can’t help but wonder if the suffering that has befallen the world is meant to grab us by the shoulders and shake us into some profound realization.

I know this is an uncomfortable question to ponder. We are moderns, after all. We are rational, educated people. We “follow the science.” But friends, we also say in our *Mahzor* on this very day “*Hayom ya’amid ba’mishpat kol yotzrei olamim,*” Today, all of creation is called to judgement! My beloved teacher Rabbi Eliezer Diamond says that Rosh Hashanah is the most non-Jewish holiday of the Jewish year because God not only judges Jews today, God judges everyone, God judges the entire world! On nearly every page of the *Mahzor* that claim is made. In nearly every book of the Bible, God is the Judge of nations and peoples. In what is arguably the climax of today’s services, *Unetaneh Tokef*, we say that God is *dayan u’mochiach, v’yodei va’eid*... Judge and Prosecutor, Expert and Witness... The whole setting of Rosh Hashanah is a courtroom!

Now I know some of you are thinking... c'mon Rabbi, c'mon Adam, those are just metaphors; it's all poetry...it's not meant to be taken literally. Jews don't really *believe* all that stuff. Well, not so fast... I'm not sure that I want to believe in a God who doesn't judge me. I know that may sound strange, but I'm not sure I can take seriously the idea of a God who either doesn't have any expectations of me or isn't really paying attention!

There is a beautiful Chasidic teaching that during the month of Elul, God leaves the palace on high, and enters into the world in order to be especially close to us; to see what we see; to experience what we experience. How do you think this world makes God feel right about now?

I noticed this reading on page 61 of the Maḥzor called "Justice." It says, "the biblical standard of justice is always defined by the treatment of the poor, the weak, the powerless, the infirm, the unprotected. God's care is especially directed toward the most vulnerable, and societies are judged by how they are treated. The lack of justice is the undoing of God's creation."

I can't imagine God's despair at the undoing of His creation in 5780:

God said, I created all people, *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the divine image. But so many people fear for their lives every time they step onto the street solely because of the color of their skin.

God said, *Lo ta'amod al dam rei'echa*, do not stand idly as the blood of your neighbor is spilled. But our innocent neighbors' blood is routinely spilled and runs through the streets of our cities.

God said, I am giving you this world, *l'ovdah ul'shomrah*, to cultivate and protect it. However, our world is choking from toxins pouring into our air and into our water, causing both irreparable damage and devastating weather.

God said, *V'ger lo tilchatz*, do not oppress strangers. But strangers are all too often treated as criminals, separated from their families, kept in cages, refused resettlement.

God said, *Lo tonu ish et amito*, do not afflict another person with words; do not abuse another person verbally. But we have accepted as normal a public discourse that is cruel, mean spirited, spiteful, and divisive.

God said, *Lifnei seiva takum*, show deference and respect for the elderly. But we have seen nursing homes and elder care facilities become ground zero for the Coronavirus.

God said, *U'vacharta ba'chayim*, Choose Life! There is nothing more precious than human life. And yet in the pursuit of opening businesses and restarting the economy, we have decided that it's acceptable to let some people die. So that we can watch sports, we accept that professional athletes get tested every single day, while people who work in nursing homes and hospitals and prisons are tested once a month if they're lucky.

If all that we say about judgement on this day of judgement is true, then we've got some serious work to do as a society if there is to be any hope for carbon-based life forms on this planet for much longer. The Talmud says in tractate *Berachot*, "*Im ro'eh adam she'yisurin ba'in alav*," if a person sees that they are beset by troubles, that they are suffering, "*yifashpesh be'ma'asav*," that person should examine their ways. So too with a society, a nation, a planet. Beset by troubles, we all need to re-examine our ways. We have gone wildly astray and, I believe, we are feeling the effects of judgment.

But the good news is this, dear friends. We believe in a God of forgiveness. We believe in a God whose attribute of mercy and compassion is at least as great as God's desire for strict justice. *Ha'kaztar b'za'am uma'arich af*, we say in the musaf prayers, "God withholds wrath in favor of patience." But let us not try God's patience for too long. Let us not beg for forgiveness today but then go back to abiding, excusing, or even enabling society's sins tomorrow. As Abraham Joshua Heschel once said: "We may not all be guilty, but we are all responsible."

In the 1930's, David Ben Gurion had a trusted advisor named Yitzhak Tabenkin. Once Ben Gurion asked Tabenkin his advice on a decision of critical importance to the Yishuv, to the Jews living in the land of Israel. Tabenkin said that he had to take counsel before offering his opinion on the matter. The next day Ben Gurion asked Tabenkin with whom had he taken counsel. Tabenkin said, "I took counsel with my grandparents who have already passed away and with my grandchildren who have not yet been born."

As this new year begins, let us take counsel from our grandparents and our grandchildren; from past and future generations about this world that has been placed in our care. Though they may not be here physically, we have great responsibility toward them. Each one of us must decide what we must do at this critical moment. I take hope from the Rambam, who said: "If a person does one mitzvah, one righteous deed, that can have the effect of tipping themselves and the world *le'chaf zechut*, to the side of merit." Find your one mitzvah. More than one would be better, but even just one is amazing. Speak out for those who are oppressed; do more acts of *chesed*, of lovingkindness, in the community; learn about and appreciate the diversity of our neighbors; be more curious and less dogmatic. Just be kind, for God's sake. Be kinder in how you speak, what you post, how you engage with others. And together through our holy deeds and dedication, let us tilt this world back towards justice, and healing, and peace... for our grandparents, for our grandchildren, and for us.