

## All We Do Not Know

Rosh Hashanah 5781

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In the old rabbinical school classroom where we learnt Jewish philosophy, there was a small poster on the wall by artist Ben Shahn. It was of a wide eyed, bearded man in a turban, holding, in one hand, an open book. His other hand was raised, as if he, too, were in our classroom, patiently awaiting a pause in Dr. Kogan's lecture, so he could ask a question. The raised hand is open loosely—not the kind that says, "I have something important to say that the world needs to hear," but the kind that is genuinely curious and eager to *receive* new insight. The page to which the book is turned gives the man away; it reads, "TEACH THY TONGUE TO SAY 'I DO NOT KNOW' AND THOU SHALT PROGRESS" – this, a quote from the great Maimonides, one of the most learned, prolific Jewish philosophers of the Middle Ages: Moses ben Maimon, also known as the Rambam. His wide eyes, raised hand, and this page, held facing us like a placard, were a reminder to us students that even someone as marvellously knowledgeable about Jewish laws and texts, the sciences, medicine, and the universe, only achieved all he did because he was willing to say "I do not know." Every time we raised our hand in Philosophy class, the Rambam was raising his hand too—we weren't alone in our curiosity or confusion; there was hope for us, and we, too, could progress. As a student, this was inspiring.

As a rabbi one decade later, it's still inspiring, only now for different reasons. I used to think the Rambam's words and posture in the picture simply espoused the Jewish value of *education*—the quest for knowledge that was so important to Maimonides. But now I see that even more so, his words reflect a *stance* in the world—a degree of *humility* in the face of the things we do not know. That only by recognising how very much we do not know, will we progress. It is adopting this stance in the world that will help us *get through* the world. In the artist's rendering of Maimonides' words, the only letter not capitalised is the "I". The self is tiny in the face of how much there is to know in the world, and once we acknowledge this, we shall progress. That gives me hope.

Because this year, we all have had to come to terms with how very little we know. We didn't know which way the winds would blow the bushfire flames, when the rains would ever come, or whether we'd see the sun again in summer (remember summer?) Then we didn't know when our power would come back on after an epic storm. And now, nobody knows how long we'll all be stuck at home, dodging the deadly Coronavirus. We humans, each of us a tiny, lower case "I" in an unknowable universe, are at the mercy of forces we don't know how to control, and for many of us, having our lives shaped by them—by the throes of history—is a very new thing to wrap our heads around. Many of us didn't live through a war, a plague, or the Great Depression, and even those who did say they've never known anything quite like COVID. This year, rabbis and all other teachers, along with parents, government officials, doctors, and

even scientists... all our tongues have learnt to say “I do not know,” because this year has transformed the world *as we knew it*. *I do not know* why some people die of Covid and others are asymptomatic—it’s arbitrary compared to what I knew before about viruses. *I do not know* who touched the fruit before me in the grocery store, and now that’s a matter of life and death. *I do not know* when there’ll be a cure or vaccine, so I don’t know how long communal life will be disrupted, or when we’ll be able to hug our friends again. Or how the economy will fare, and how that will impact your job or mine, or our children’s opportunities, or their mental health. Who shall live and who shall die? Who by suffocation and who by droplet? We have no idea! Since March, we’ve been living the *Unetaneh tokef*. This is new territory, for all of us. None of us knew it was coming, and none of us know when it will go away. We are newly aware of how little we know. So surely, we shall progress... right?

Call me a rabbi, but I put my faith in Maimonides. I feel hopeful that this season of not knowing will indeed help us progress, as individuals, as a society, and as Jews. The question is, *how*? How did saying “I do not know” help *Maimonides* progress? Not just in amassing his great wealth of knowledge. Clearly, curiosity propelled his *learning* progress. But how did the diminutive “I” help him progress through life? How did his sense of smallness in the face of all he *didn’t* know about the universe help him get *through* the world and what history threw at him out of the blue?

The answer, I believe, lies not in the Rambam’s intellectual compositions, but in a personal one—a letter he wrote to a confidant, a judge named Yefet. In his letter, from the year 1185, the Rambam describes his reaction to a devastating personal tragedy—the death of his beloved brother David in a shipwreck. Maimonides describes the loss as:

The worst disaster that struck me... worse than anything I had ever experienced from the time I was born... For about a year from the day the evil tidings reached me I remained prostrate in bed with a severe inflammation, fever and mental confusion, and well near perished. From then until this day, that is about eight years, I have been in a state of disconsolate mourning. How can I be consoled? For he... grew up upon my knees; he was my brother, my pupil... “The sun has set on all joy.” [Isa. 24:11.] For he has gone on to eternal life, leaving me dismayed in a foreign land...

Maimonides was on all new territory. Logic didn’t hold; his younger brother, a learned and worthy soul, had predeceased him. For all that Maimonides knew, he didn’t see this tragedy coming, and he didn’t know if its effects would ever go away. Like us in the face of the pandemic, he was but a diminutive “I” in the face of the vast unknown and the throes of history. So how did *he* move forward when *his* world became unrecognisable? When he found his life suddenly paralysed and misshapen by forces beyond his understanding? How did he get through this “foreign land”? His letter goes on to explain, “Were it not for the Torah, which is my delight, and for scientific matters, which let me forget my sorrow, ‘I would have perished in my affliction [Ps. 119:92].” The study of Torah and of science kept the Rambam going, helping him to temporarily

forget his affliction so he could take the next step. Studying Torah and science didn't alleviate his inflammation or fever, but they addressed his *spiritual* affliction of unknowingness and insignificance and helped him progress, to life and even "delight." Maybe there is a way forward for us in this, too.

It's easy to see why the sciences would be a salve to the affliction of not knowing. Math equations can be solved, the order of constellations predicted, every action countered by an equal and opposite reaction. When we feel at the mercy of things we can't comprehend, conquering a smaller-scale problem can ward off feelings of overwhelm that may paralyse us. One of the most popular pastimes during Covid lockdown was working on jigsaw puzzles—not just because you could do them at home—you could also play Twister at home, after all. But there's a spiritual comfort that comes from solving puzzles, and making a coherent picture out of the initial chaos of 1,000 pieces. Solving life's smaller mysteries gives our soul the balm it needs to keep going and get through each day.

But *Torah* can also keep us going through times like these, because it gives us a blueprint for coping with the unsolvable. Torah is often the *opposite* of logical. The sea parts, a donkey talks, Abraham and Sarah bear children in their 90s. So unlike the sciences, Torah doesn't suggest the work of the *mind* as a solution to the problem of not knowing. Instead, it offers teachings for the soul that help us take the next step forward in a wilderness of uncertainty. It teaches that when we find ourselves in a foreign land, revelation will come if we stand together. It teaches that as we wander the wilderness of not-knowing what will be, we still have a responsibility to look after the stranger, the orphan, and the widow, and make sure the most vulnerable have enough to eat. It teaches that joy and purpose and God can be near to us, even outside our Promised Land. And with the utmost seriousness, it teaches us, in the very first commandments, that we are not God and shouldn't make ourselves out to be. The "I" is not to be written as a capital letter, the way we'd write the G in God. Torah teaches us the humility of the human condition. How does this help us progress? Because in the same breath that God commanded us to remember our humility, God gave us a to do list: more commandments—613 in total! We have things to *do* in this world, says the Torah, and our humble human condition doesn't get us off the hook. To the contrary, we may not be all knowing like God, but through God's commandments we do know that there *are* things we *can* do and must do, even when we feel small and insignificant in the palm of history.

I believe this is the wisdom Maimonides found in Torah that helped him through the world—that helped him go on, when logic failed him and the intellect proved insufficient to ease his pain. This same wisdom echoes down the centuries in our machzor, each time we encounter that agonising litany of things we do not know: *How many shall pass on, who shall see ripe old age and who shall not, who by plague and who by strangling, who shall be secure and who shall be driven, who shall be tranquil and who troubled?* We don't know! and yet, we are not powerless. *U'teshuvah u'tefilah u'tzedakah*—"Repentance, Prayer, and Tzedakah—temper the severity of the decree." We may be storm tossed by history, but we can still temper the harshness of our

affliction—of our not knowing—by right *doing*. We can give to those in need, and donate food to Mazon. We can comfort one another, make eye contact, and share a smile, even from a distance. We can call to check in on a friend or neighbour.

Maimonides practiced medicine and treated the sick. Rabbi David Stern writes that “For all that... is beyond our control, there is infinitely more that is within our reach to change.” How tragic it would be if this treacherous year taught us *only* that we are powerless—if learning to say “I do not know” left us feeling paralysed and impotent to make any difference in this world. Teach thy tongue to say ‘I do not know,’ and thou shalt *progress*, not succumb to dismay; there’s too much work to do, and it is precisely *because* we don’t know what’s around the next corner that we must get busy doing it.

Rabbi Stern asks, “Can human action have meaning... in a world of uncontrollable events and devastating diseases?” Our liturgy responds, year after year, that even though “Our origin is dust, and so is our end”—even though we are but like “a shadow moving on, a cloud passing by, mere dust on the wind,” *nevertheless*, it affirms, “every human hand leaves its mark, an imprint like no other.” We may be an insignificant “I” in the grand scheme, but what we do matters, now more than ever. There’s a saying: “We should never allow that which we can’t control to control that which we can.” The teaching of Maimonides says that the same is true for that which we know and don’t know. We may not know how to cure, but we do know how to heal, and we shall progress.

*L’shana tova.*