

Five thousand, seven hundred eighty-one years ago today, something extraordinary happened. It was so extraordinary that we celebrate it every year. And yet it is so ordinary that we now do it 25,000 times a day, with barely a notice.

As the Torah tells us, “God formed Adam from the dust of the earth. God blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and Adam became a living being ¹.” While the Torah itself does not give a time when this occurred, rabbinic tradition ² imagines this took place today, on the first day of the seventh month.

Furthermore, that tradition not only gives an exact date for the creation of humanity, but even an exact time. The whole process unfolded in steps, as did creation overall. “In the first hour, the idea to create humanity arose in God’s thought; in the second, [God] consulted with the angels; in the third, God gathered the dirt; in the fourth, God kneaded it; in the fifth, God weaved it; in the sixth, God made it a form; in the seventh, God blew breath into it.”

And so, in the seventh hour of the seventh month, an act of Divine CPR gave the human species life. Inanimate matter became alive. The first person began to breathe. In and out. In and out.

In this view, Rosh Hashanah is the birthday not of all creation, but specifically of humanity. It recalls the day that matter and spirit came together in a Divine kiss that created humankind, embodied like all other animals, yet infused with a holy breath. It is this Divine breath, granted to people alone, that gives us uniquely the ability to reason, to speak, and to make moral judgements. For this reason do we say that people are created in the image and likeness of God.

Breathing is essential. It is the first thing we do when we are born and the last thing we do before we die. It accompanies us through every moment of life, ever-present but usually unnoticed. A moment of joy. In and out. In and out. A moment of sadness. In and out. In and out. A moment of boredom. In and out. In and out. A moment of excitement. In and out. In and out.

Scientifically, breathing is simply one mixture of gases entering our bodies and another one exiting. A recent book called *Breath: The New Science of a Lost Art* documents the extraordinary importance of breathing. Unsurprisingly, it turns out that re-training our bodies to breathe differently, using techniques passed down by different traditional cultures, might have a profound impact on our physical and mental health and well-being.

But spiritually, breathing is much more. It is a little bit of Divine energy entering our bodies, giving us life every moment. Each breath re-enacts that moment when the first person was given life through breath. This constant exchange we each have with the universe makes us not only physically alive, but spiritually alive as well. This never-ending interchange connects us to each other, to the world around us, and to our Divine source, every single moment of our lives.

No wonder so many spiritual traditions from around the world invite us to focus on our breath, as a way to connect with the Divine. In and out. In and out. The times I’ve dabbled in Jewish meditation, including a memorable silent Yom Kippur retreat a few years back, I found it grounding to focus on my breath, as the air, and, I’d like to imagine, Divine energy, flowed in and out of my nostrils.

¹ Genesis 2:7

² Vayikra Rabbah 29:1

This morning, on this anniversary of the human breath, I want to discuss two ways that events of this past year have demonstrated to us the importance of breath.

The first is obvious. The world trembled this year with the tremendous health, economic, and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This microscopic virus so far has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, made many others terribly ill, and disrupted daily life as we knew it around the world. Alas, we now understand that this disease spreads primarily through the breath and attacks the lungs ruthlessly.

In a way, this disease has shown us the power of breath. The very thing that connects all creation with itself and with its Creator also can carry something that can kill us or make us very ill. We have seen powerful confirmation of what our tradition has taught all along: how powerful, and therefore how precarious, breathing can be.

And so, social distancing became the order of the day. We did whatever we could not to breathe in the same air as others. First large gatherings and then any gatherings were canceled. All but the most life-sustaining institutions like hospitals and grocery stores shut down. Schools and many workplaces abruptly shifted to remote work for a few days, then a few weeks, then a few months, and perhaps indefinitely.

I think back now to those dizzying weeks in March as I and the other leaders of this synagogue raced to keep up with rapidly changing circumstances. This virus, which began as a distant concern in far-away cities, got closer and closer.

I personally will never forget the night of March 4. I came home from a synagogue event feeling lethargic and achy. I figured I was just tired from the road trip through Texas we had taken the week before, and some exercise I had done earlier that week. I took some Tylenol, fell asleep immediately, and woke up having sweated out a fever, but feeling much better. I then got dressed and went to work, and even visited my brother later that week.

The thought did cross my mind at the time: could I have had the coronavirus? Don't be paranoid, I told myself. It was probably just a normal winter bug. At the time, there was just that one known cluster of cases in New Rochelle, and no reason to think that the virus had already been silently spreading in our region for weeks.

A few months later, I took an antibody blood test and sure enough, it came back positive. That virus that seemed so distant had made it from the other side of the world to my own body in just a few weeks. And all through the terrifying power of breath.

I was lucky to be so mildly impacted by COVID-19. Others in our own community and beyond were not so fortunate. Some were significantly ill, but able to recover at home. Worse still were those who fought for every breath in overwhelmed and hastily-expanded hospitals. And of course, those in our community and beyond who lost friends and loved ones to this merciless disease, without being able to say goodbye or mourn properly.

The pandemic has cruelly and starkly reminded us of the biological and spiritual interconnectedness of all life. As different as people can be, we all breathe in the same air. We are all subject to the same germs. We are all, as the mahzor puts it, like "a fragile vessel...like the dust that floats, like a dream that flies away."

But there is a second way that the events of this year revealed the importance of breath. Last spring, many of us watched with concern as a Minneapolis police officer put his knee on the neck of George Floyd for nearly eight minutes, snuffing the life out of him as Floyd cried out, "I can't breathe." The video spread rapidly, touching off nationwide protests that were mostly peaceful, but at times devolved into violence and looting.

More importantly, these events intensified important and on-going conversations about policing and race relations. The image of a white police officer with his knee on a black man's neck clearly resonated beyond this specific incident. It became a symbol for all of the ways, past and present, that many people of color in this country feel that they are not able to breathe freely.

As with the pandemic, these national and global events played out locally. Port Chester saw an extraordinarily peaceful demonstration, done with the full cooperation of the local police, which attracted nearly 2,000 people. I was honored to be invited to speak at it and to affirm that everyone there was a beautiful image of the Divine. I also attended a gathering at Crawford Park organized by some impressively savvy Blind Brook students, including several teens affiliated with KTI.

I have also participated in a few meetings that the Port Chester police have held with a diverse group of local clergy. These meetings have helped me appreciate the range of situations that we, the public, ask our police to handle, everything from the most violent of crimes to the most mundane of traffic laws. These meetings also helped me understand the challenges the police face, and how community trust and cooperation are essential to their work.

One thing has become clear to me, in my encounters with local police and activists, and in the reading I've done since the death of George Floyd. It has become clear to me that we, the public, are asking too much of our police. Because they are often one of the few tools at a municipality's disposal, we ask the police to deal with problems like homelessness, addiction, mental illness, and poverty that might be better handled by other kinds of professionals. Or, rather, we as a society lack the resources or the will to confront these problems, and then expect the police to clean up the resulting mess.

Let me be clear. I am not suggesting we abolish or defund the police. While I pray for the day when the lion will lie down with the lamb and policing will no longer be necessary, I do not expect that to happen anytime soon. What I am suggesting, however, is that we expand our conception of public safety beyond the crime-and-punishment paradigm of policing. How can we as a society help people access the care and resources they need so they can live thriving, productive, and peaceful lives? How can we change the conditions that lead people to decide that violence and law-breaking are the best solutions to their problems?

Consider, for instance, the experience of the small town of Alexandria, Kentucky. A few years ago, the police chief hired a social worker to respond in tandem with officers to calls for help, especially around problems like domestic violence, mental health, and substance abuse. The results were immediate: at a lower cost than a new police officer, the social worker was able to connect people to the services they needed, resulting in a 15% decrease in people going to jail and a significant drop in repeat 911 calls. The

police social workers, said the chief, “started solving problems for people in our community and for our agency that we’ve never been able to solve before.”³

Or, consider the experience of Eugene, Oregon, where about 20% of 911 calls are handled by specialists in mental health counseling and crisis de-escalation. These professionals respond to the nonviolent social and health problems I mentioned earlier. In 2019, this program answered thousands of calls, but had to request police backup less than 1% of the time. And, it saved the police departments and emergency rooms millions of dollars a year by assisting people who would have otherwise ended up hospitalized or arrested.

Or, consider the successful community-based “violence interruption” programs, where trained mediators and outreach workers from within a community work to prevent ordinary neighborhood conflicts from becoming violent.⁴

These and other examples give us a glimpse of a world that might emerge from a broad-based approach to public safety that includes, but goes well beyond, traditional policing. I hope in this new year that more communities will implement these and similar strategies to achieve public safety for everyone, and I pledge to continue to be part of the solution locally.

As I mentioned earlier, Jewish tradition imagines that the first human began to breathe on the seventh hour of the seventh month. But the human experience did not end there. That tradition continues: on the eighth hour, God brought Adam into the Garden of Eden; in the ninth, he was commanded against eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge; in the tenth, he transgressed by eating the fruit; in the eleventh, he was judged, and in the twelfth, he was pardoned. In other words, on that first Rosh Hashanah 5,781 years ago, Adam, the first person, sinned, was punished, and then pardoned.

And so it would be on this day forever after, not only for the Jewish people, but for all of humanity. On Rosh Hashanah we stand to account for our failures and shortcomings, just as our tradition imagines that Adam did. We must face up to what we have done wrong, with the faith that God, who is merciful, will pardon us and grant us another year of life. Whether we believe that to be literally true, or understand it as a powerful metaphor, Rosh Hashanah and this entire season of repentance invite us, individually and collectively, into a process of self-accounting and resolving to do better, no matter what lies ahead in this new year.

And so, after this unusually challenging year, we stand before God as Adam did all those years ago. And we use the holy time we have set aside today to ask ourselves the hard questions.

When others around me suffered, did I merely thank my lucky stars that I avoided their fate, or did I do everything I could to help alleviate that suffering? Will I read about problems in far-away places and imagine that they won’t impact me, or will I sense the interconnectedness of all life and act accordingly? When I see the people who are supposed to keep us healthy and safe fail spectacularly, will I shrug my shoulders and excuse the status quo, or will I demand systemic change at every level?

³ <https://www.wave3.com/2020/07/28/kentucky-town-hires-social-workers-instead-more-officers-results-are-surprising/>

⁴ <https://www.vox.com/2020/6/24/21296881/unbundle-defund-the-police-george-floyd-rayshard-brooks-violence-european-policing>

Will I respect the many people whose labor we now realize is essential, and insist that they be paid and treated accordingly? Will I listen when people say they literally or figuratively can't breathe? Will I internalize the fact that we all breathe in the same air?

And, most importantly, will I value the preciousness of life itself, that fragile energy that turns inanimate matter into an image of the Divine?

The breath of life is an extraordinary thing, so easy to take for granted, yet so fundamental. In this new year, may we recommit ourselves to the supreme value of every human breath. And, as the Psalms conclude, may every breath we take praise the Holy One. In and out. In and out.