Shanah Tovah

Simone Biles, the greatest gymnast of all time, pulled herself out of competition at the Tokyo Olympics this summer. Her decision was lauded by mental health advocates. And criticized by those who felt that she was letting down her teammates, her coaches, and our country.

Days after her announcement, it was revealed that Simone Biles’ aunt unexpectedly died back home, while Biles was in Tokyo, and Biles was also experiencing a phenomenon called “The Twisties.” The “twisties” is a term used to describe when a gymnast loses the sense for where they are in mid-air, rendering them unable to make the appropriate twists and turns necessary to land on their feet.

As the world watched this story unfold, it occurred to me that Simone Biles’ decision generated so much attention and commentary for reasons far more personal than the Olympics, or gymnastics.

All of us, to some degree or another, are experiencing “the twisties” this year. This pandemic has tossed our plans, our schedules, our routines, up into the air. Not to mention the twisters that came through our area just last week. We are still trying to figure out how to land on our feet.

Just as Simone Biles lost track of twists and turns, we have lost track of time. We’ve joked around the office here at Beth Or that during months of quarantine, every day was “Blurrsday” because each day seems to blur together with the next.

Simone Biles’ Olympic experience was a concentrated and magnified version of what life is like for so many of us right now. In the 16 days of the Tokyo Summer Games, Simone Biles experienced the loss of a loved one. She experienced the weight of mental health challenges, and in the midst of doing the thing she has done all her life – gymnastics - she literally couldn’t tell up from down.

And so, on the world’s biggest stage, Simone Biles had a choice to make. Press on? Or give herself the rest that she, and all of us, so desperately need right now.

Most of us have come to that fork in the road over these past two years when we had to ask, “Is this a moment when I need to push through the difficulty? Or is this a moment when I need to protect myself and stop what I had planned to do?”

Can the working mom push through one more meeting while her kids are screaming on the other side of the door? Or is it better to miss the meeting?
Can the son of elderly parents complete the tasks of the day knowing that his parents are sick? Or is this the day he finally takes time off?

Can a person living alone go ahead with their regular routines? Or is today the day they pick up the phone to call a friend or a relative and ask for help?

Once we finally jump the hurdle and make the decision one way or the other, our minds become flooded with follow-up questions. Am I being brave for making this choice? Or am I being silly? Am I doing the right thing? Or have I made a terrible mistake?

It was merely 18 months ago that my wife, Rina, and I were vigorously wiping down each and every box and bag we brought into our house from the supermarket. At one point we were looking into the details of cleansing fruit beyond the usual rinse of water in the sink. And there came a point, when the evidence emerged that the virus was primarily transmitted through the air, that we had to ask ourselves, are we bravely continuing to do this annoying ritual? Or are we making a mistake by continuing to wipe down the groceries?

For the first few weeks of our Beth Or softball season this spring, I walked up to the plate with my mask on my face and my glasses all fogged up. I was barely able to see the ball. Without commenting on whether I was doing the right or wrong thing, I can promise you this - I felt silly.

We are a country divided. On masks, on vaccines, on travel, on trust. Simply knowing that whatever decision you make, there is a gigantic number of people in our country who would vigorously disagree with you, can make us all feel uneasy. The fact that new information is coming at us all the time is also a great source of fatigue. It leaves us often wondering, what is the correct way forward?

Jewish tradition has helped bring order to chaos for thousands of years. That is, in fact, the theme of our creation story in the book of Genesis - the event we celebrate on this very holiday. God is described as the Creator, but also as the Great Organizer - making sense of the “tohu vavohu” - that which was unformed and void. And so tonight I hope to bring you three ways to try and stay grounded in these challenging times. To bring order to the chaos.

The first thing we can do is turn to our sacred texts. The writings that have kept our people grounded for thousands of years. But this year, it’s what the text doesn’t say, that can help us understand these times.

Simone Biles' brave choice to open up about her mental health helped me realize that our tradition is remarkably silent when it comes to the mental weight of the decisions our Biblical heroes had to make.

On Rosh Hashanah we will read the binding of Isaac, when God told Abraham to bring his son, Isaac, to a mountain and offer him up as a sacrifice to God. We never get insight into the inner workings
of Abraham’s mind. In fact, for all the arguing that Abraham did over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, we don’t see any argument from Abraham over the commandment to kill his son. Perhaps the Torah is reminding us to empathize. That before we assume Abraham is blindly following God’s command, it is our job to imagine the anguish of Abraham’s decision. It is our job to see Abraham, and Simone Biles, and every human being, not as a robot, but as a person with deep pains and challenges that we cannot see.

On Yom Kippur we will read the Book of Jonah. We will read the story about a reluctant prophet who heard God’s command, and ran the other way. But we never get to know what went on in Jonah’s mind. Did Jonah deliberate? Did he weigh the pros and cons? We’ll never know because by the third verse of the book, Jonah already hopped on a boat to try and escape the pressures he faced. Here, in the Hebrew Bible, I see an invitation once again. This time, not to see the challenges of others, but to look at ourselves with compassion. To make room for the reality that, as human beings, sometimes we won’t be able to push through. Sometimes we need to hop on the boat, and escape for a bit, before coming back to carry out our responsibilities.

In the past I tended to think of Abraham as a brave man who was willing to follow God even to the most extreme situations. I tended to see Jonah as a coward who tried to avoid God’s charge. This year, I’m not so sure. I’m not sure I have enough information on either one of them – on what’s going on in their minds – to judge one way or the other. This year, when I hear their stories read aloud, I’m hoping to try to understand them just a bit better. My goal is to relate to these ancient people and stories in a way I haven’t before. We can use our text to remind us to empathize, to recognize what others are going through, and to give ourselves compassion. This is an essential way to stay grounded.

The second thing we can do is revisit one of our most famous and well-known words in Jewish tradition. We say it in synagogue. We say it at our dinner tables. We say it at the bar. We say it with full hearts and sometimes even with a tinge of sadness. L’chayim. To life.

We say this special word so often that I think the meaning might get lost on us a bit. Like so many things in Jewish tradition, this one word, “L’chayim,” is multi-layered. And it is quintessentially Jewish.

To toast, the English language uses the word “cheers.” In Spanish it’s “salud” - to health. It’s not that these words are in any way contrary to Jewish tradition. We wish for joy and health too. And we gladly use these words in toasts.

But the Jewish people, and our friends and family, we say “L’chayim.” And it is unique. Because life is all-encompassing. When we toast to life, we toast to happiness but packed into that word is the
acknowledgement that life has sadness too. We toast to health, knowing full-well that life includes sickness. We don’t exclusively toast to the good. We toast to life. We toast “L’chayim.” We toast to it all.

It is one thing to enjoy the good life. It is another thing to toast to life and all it throws at us. Life brings incredible beauty. And life brings unimaginable pain. Sometimes the pain leads to art and music and poetry and prayer that has the power to bring us to tears. It’s all jumbled together.

No matter how much God separated at creation - the waters below from the star-filled heavens above, the dry land from the waters, the day from the night.

Like the Havdallah candle reminds us, there are still some things which remain intertwined. The good and the bad, the bitter and the sweet, are not always so clearly divided.

For almost two years now, our hearts have been beating out of our chests with anxiety. Our healthcare workers, our first responders, our funeral directors, our food service workers, our educators, our leaders, our scientists, and all essential workers have been face to face with risk and suffering. They have had to make decisions at work, not to mention personal and family decisions precipitated by impossible situations that grind on them every day. And as I stand here before an almost completely empty space, I am reminded that this pandemic is not over. The elevated stress levels, and faster paces of our jobs are still palpable.

To keep shoudering our burdens is going to take a toll. To keep supporting each other is going to be a challenge. But we are going to do it anyway. Because we must. Sometimes it will be brave to keep moving forward. And sometimes we’ll need to rest. But we keep moving forward. Because, what choice do we have? This is life.

So let’s make sure that in 5782, we make the time to raise a glass. There are so many ways to do it. We can make kiddush on Friday nights. We can make Havdallah a part of our Saturday nights. Doing this guarantees that, at least one time a week, we’ll actually know what day it is. And at each ritual, week after week, we can remind ourselves of this essential Jewish lesson – that we toast to it all. We toast to life. We toast “L’chayim.”

Finally, the last way we can stay grounded, is to read your Beth Or email. And I promise no one on the professional staff at Beth Or is bribing me to say that. You should read our emails in general to stay plugged into all the wonderful things we are doing. But tonight I want to call your attention specifically to how we sign the emails. Those of you who read all the way until the end, know that we often sign our letters “L’Salom.” To the modern Hebrew speaker this looks a bit odd, as it would in English too. Because “L’Salom” means “to peace.” It might be easier on the eyes to sign, “B’shalom” meaning “in peace.” But this isn't just a modern issue. The debate on which word to use goes all the way back to the Talmud at the end of tractate Brachot.
“Rabbi Avin HaLevi said: One who takes leave from a dead person should not say to him: [“Lech L’Shalom”] Go to peace, but rather, one should say: [“Lech B’shalom”] Go in peace, as it is stated [in Genesis chapter 15 when God says to Abraham] “But you shall go to your ancestors [B’Shalom] in peace. [You shall be buried at a ripe old age.]”

We learn from this teaching that we say [B’Shalom] “Go in peace” to those who have died. And so, to the living, we say [L’Shalom] “Go to peace.”

This Talmudic discourse, gives me great comfort. It reminds me that while, yes, the pandemic has impacted us so much ... that this is life. That life brings an unending set of questions and challenges that will push us to the brink.

So long as we are here on this earth, the discomfort of difficult decisions will not disappear. We all will likely feel brave at times and foolish at others, and most of the time if we’re really paying attention, we’ll likely feel a mix of the two emotions at once. The ultimate act of bravery is not to make sure we never make the wrong decision. The ultimate act of bravery is to confront the fact that we will never be completely at peace so long as we are alive, and to recognize that fact about our fellow human beings as well. All of these practices – reading our ancient texts, celebrating Shabbat and Havadallah, toasting L’chayim, and bidding farewell with the word “L’shalom” can inspire more compassion in us. Compassion for Biblical figures like Abraham and Jonah, public figures like Simone Biles, and regular folks like you and me.

In our liturgy we pray, “Zochreinu L’chayim.” “Remember us for life.” May we be remembered for life and all that comes with it. May we be written in the book of life and all that is written in its pages.

Shanah Tovah may it be a good year
Shanah M’tukah may it be a sweet year
But most of all, may it be a year full of life.

L’Chayim.