

## This Is Not Normal – Rosh Hashanah 5781

Rabbi Michael Safra

Several weeks into this pandemic, I began a meting by asking a friend how she was doing, and she answered: I'm trying to decide if I'm supposed to get used to this mess, or if I'm supposed to just keep hoping it will end soon.

That's the question I've been asking myself ever since. We been hear the words "new normal" a lot. We have to get used to this situation. We have to learn to do things like school or Shabbat or holidays or b'nai mitzvah differently. We have to accept the realities of Zoom and livestream and working from home and watching too much Netflix. We might even appreciate the silver linings – if you're still in your pajamas, or if you want a snack, or if you need to mute me or check in on a service in New York or Chicago or Los Angeles, you dan do it. The old joke about the guy who went to the rabbi before the World Series game that was to take place during Kol Nidre and asked what to do. ... "You mean you can *record* Kol Nidre?" Well, actually, YES WE CAN!

But *used* to it?!? No. Learning how to cope is not the same thing as getting used to it. Learning new technologies, demonstrating resilience, finding a safe way to play golf or tennis, or get takeout – that's not the same as getting used to it. This is not my "new normal." There's nothing normal about it.

Resilience is part and parcel of Jewish history, as Jews repeatedly found ways to survive and thrive in less than ideal circumstances. It was the year 70 and Romans were surrounding the walls of Jerusalem. Hope was lost. It was understood that within a few days, the inhabitants of the city would run out of food. The mighty Roman armies would sack the city; tragedy would ensue. Rabbi Yohanan

ben Zakkai devised a plan. He hid in a coffin and asked his students to carry him out of the city. They reached the Roman camp and Rabbi Yohanan emerged from the coffin to greet General Vespasian.

“שלמא עלך מלכא, שלמא עלך, Peace be upon you, O Emperor, peace be upon you!” To which Vespasian responded, “But I am not the emperor” (and you should understand that calling a general the emperor was a transgression punishable by death). But Rabbi Yohanan continued, “I know you have to be emperor because our prophets have foretold that our Holy Temple will fall into the hands of a king.”

Just then, says the Talmud, an imperial messenger arrived and announced to Vespasian, “Rise, for the emperor has died, and the noblemen of Rome have appointed you as their leader.” Vespasian was overjoyed. He told Rabbi Yohanan that he had to leave for Rome and would send a new general to maintain the siege. But in appreciation, he told the rabbi to ask for something he could give him. Rabbi Yohanan understood it would be too much to try to save the city; it would be too much to try to save the Temple. He just asked that the Roman armies be good enough to spare Yavneh and its academy; and the dynasty of Rabban Gamliel. Rabbi Yohanan set the table for Judaism to flourish without its most sacred space. He set the conditions for Torah to replace the sacrificial cult as the centerpiece of our spiritual lives. That’s resilience. Jewish life adjusted to the new reality; and almost 2000 years later, here we are.

The ideological descendants of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai interpreted Torah. They produced two talmuds – the Jerusalem Talmud, representing teachings from the Land of Israel, and the Babylonian Talmud. And the Babylonian Talmud, the Talmud of the exile, became dominant. That’s resilience.

Fast forward another 500 years. Sometime around 960, the Babylonian Jewish community was beginning to dwindle. The medieval historian Abraham ibn Daud tells a story of four great rabbis – Rabbi Shmaria, Rabbi Hushiel, Rabeinu Moshe ben Enoch, and a fourth whose name is lost, who boarded a ship in Bari Italy to sail the Mediterranean. The pirate Ibn Rumahis captured the ship and saw in these

rabbis an opportunity to earn a ransom. Rabbi Shmaryah was taken to Egypt, where he was ransomed by the Jews of Alexandria and went on to establish academies and other institutions as Chief Rabbi of Fostat. The ship sailed to Tunisia, where the Jews of Kairuwan ransomed Rabbi Hushiel and made him their chief rabbi.

And then it was off to Spain, where Rabeinu Moshe ben Enoch was ransomed by the community of Cordoba. Ibn Daud describes how Rabeinu Moshe came to lead that community and establish the schools where such luminaries as Moses ibn Ezra, Judah Halevi and Moses Maimonides were educated. The Spanish Jewish community entered a Golden Age – not just in terms of Torah scholarship, but also culture. Jews became great poets, wealthy financiers. The community thrived.

The 12<sup>th</sup>-century scholar Rabenu Tam reworked Isaiah's promise: *ki mitziyyon tetze torah*, Torah shall emerge from Zion and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. But no, says Rabenu Tam, in his estimation: *ki mi-Bari tetze Torah ud'var Adonai me-Otranto*, Torah shall emerge from Bari and the word of the Lord from Otranto. Our people, our God, our values will not just survive. We will thrive in any place, amidst any circumstances.

It reminds me of the man who went to his rabbi, down on his luck and in need of advice. The rabbi suggested that the man look for inspiration in the Bible. "It doesn't really matter where you begin, as there is so much wisdom in the Good Book. You can pretty much just throw open the book to any page and start reading."

A few months later, the man came back. He got out of his shiny Rolls Royce and handed the rabbi a check with more than a few zeroes. "Thank you so much," the rabbi said. "But I'm just curious about your swift change of fortune. What happened?"

"Well," the man explained, "I took your advice. I went home, took my Bible off the shelf, and opened it up. And it was right there in front of me."

“What? What did you see?”

“Chapter 11.”

Resilience.

Certainly in this country, where immigrants arrived from lands of persecution with nothing. Names like Macy and Rich and Rosenwald and Frankfurter and Morgenthau and Einstein and Wise and Schecher and Heschel. They established communities where there had been nothing. We experienced renaissance. It wasn't easy. We know antisemitism. Quotas in medical and law schools, restrictive neighborhood covenants, Protocols of the Elders of Zion, “The Jews will not replace us...”. But they cannot win. Even the Nazis. Much as they destroyed European Jewry, look at the State of Israel today; look at our community today; look even at resurging communities in Berlin or Moscow or St. Petersburg. From Yavneh to Babylonia, Bari to Cordoba, London to Lisbon to Breslau to New York, Jewish life is malleable and resilient. We endured “new normals” long before this pandemic.

But there is another thread to Jewish history as well – an opposing tendency that says that regardless of how successful I might be at any moment, regardless of how adjusted or attached we may be to a new world, we dare not forget our past, we dare not lose sight of what could be, we dare not abandon hope – התקווה – our faith in the world as it should be. We can never be content with the world as it is.

Another story, of the grandmother watching her grandchild play in the ocean, when a huge wave comes and washes him out to sea. She pleads: “Please God, you must save my grandson. I beg of you. Bring him back!”

Just then, another wave comes and washes the child onto the beach, good as new, not a scratch on him. And the grandmother looks up to heaven and says ... “He had a hat!”

Even when we are happy, even when we are grateful, we need to acknowledge the brokenness of our world. Some things are still missing. We know it from the Jewish wedding. We don’t just say “Mazel tov.” We break a glass. And not just so the groom gets one last chance to put his foot down. It is to remember the destruction of the Temple; and, by extension, the suffering that exists beyond the walls of the wedding hall in our unredeemed world. “If I forget you, O Jerusalem...” If I ignore the suffering, says the Psalmist, “may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I don’t elevate Jerusalem above my chiefest joy.” Even in our happiest moment, we pause to think about the things that aren’t right.

The medieval sages decreed that when building a house, a part of the building one cubit by one cubit, near the door, should be left unpainted or without plaster. We are supposed to leave an empty space at the banquet table – as a symbol that something is missing. It’s one of the reasons traditional synagogues don’t play music during services. Not to be mourning all the time; just to recognize that *this* isn’t all there is. It may be great, but not quite normal.

That is the Jewish conception of hope. Remember the past. The Holy Temple, the Garden of Eden, when things were Great. Remember. Hope. Return. Not just in a pandemic. During the best days of the Golden Age, when Europe was at its height, even in America. ... The freedom and liberty and socio-economic successes are wonderful. But it isn’t perfect. It comes at a price.

The rabbis of the Talmud talk about a particularly beautiful, therapeutically relaxing bath house called Deyomeset. It made people feel great, but the Rabbis warned against going there. You might become attached, they feared. You might love it so much that you forget all your responsibilities. You might feel so attached that you try their other traditions. That’s how the Lost Tribes were lost. First it

was the waters of Deyomeset, then wine and frivolity, and soon they abandoned the Torah. Hundreds of years later, the Talmud says that Elazar ben Arakh happened upon this bath house, and he became so attracted that he forgot his Torah. He forgot how to read. He opened his Bible to Exodus 12 and should have read “החדש הזה לכם ראש חדשים, This month will be for you the head of the months.” But his *Dalet* became *resh*, *khaf* became *bet*, *zayin* became *yod*, and he read “החרש היה לבם, Their hearts have become deaf.” He was so attracted to the outside culture that his heart became deaf to Torah. Many of us have probably made similar mistakes, and we know. If you let it go, if you move on to other things, if you don’t practice, you can lose it.

Think about it the next time you *kvell* about an accomplishment on the ballfield. Gymnastics is great. Soccer is great. Harvard is great. But don’t forget that there is more. Those accomplishments don’t replace the other responsibilities. The Jewish dream is more than just the American dream. It includes ongoing education, ritual skills, a strong connection to Israel, Shabbat, *kashrut*, a mandate to be holy and bring holiness to the world. The Jewish dream means always believing in and working towards something better.

Rabbi Schnitzer has hanging in his office a picture of Rabbi Stephen Wise. Born in Budapest in 1874, Wise immigrated to New York as a child and graduated from Columbia University. As a rabbi, he served communities in Portland and New York. And he became an advocate for progressive social causes. He promoted women’s suffrage, helped found the NAACP, the ACLU, the American Jewish Congress; he fought against child labor and advocated for workers’ rights. Not because it was the political thing to do, but because it was the *hopeful* thing to do. He felt a responsibility as a Jew to establish the messianic “kingdom of truth, justice, and peace among all men.”

Wise organized protests when Hitler came to power. On March 27, 1933, he pleaded before a packed crowd at Madison Square Garden: “What is happening in Germany today,” he thundered, “may

happen tomorrow in any other land on earth unless it is challenged and rebuked. ... We must speak out!" He wasn't just calling on Jews. The rabbi was calling on good people everywhere to look at their surroundings and proclaim that *this* is not okay. It is not enough to defeat Hitler. We have to defeat the stereotypes, the quotas, the sentiment that Jewish lives somehow matter less. Good people do not look out only for themselves. They cannot rest until all people enjoy the freedoms and opportunities we all deserve.

Thirty years later, On August 28, 1963, another American rabbi, Joachim Prinz, preached the same message before 250,000 people at the historic March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. "The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful, and the most tragic problem is silence," he said. "America must not become a nation of onlookers. America must not remain silent." Michael and Rita Schwerner heard that message. Andrew Goodman heard that message. They went down to Mississippi and met up with Freedom Riders like James Chaney. They couldn't just accept America as it was. They joined the struggle to mend an unfinished nation. Their efforts ended in a tragic murder. But their names live on. Their dream lives on. We know it is their ideals, not the comforts of silent reticence, that represent the best of Judaism and the best of America.

Maybe it was easier then. The white supremacists knew they were racist. George Wallace and Bull Conner were not quiet about the racist system they wanted to protect. Same with Wilhelm Marr, who coined the phrase "antisemitism" to describe his opposition to Jewish emancipation in Germany.

But today is different. There are a few extremists who admit their racism. But they are not what makes racism endure. So much is baked into the system. So much is supported unwittingly, by good people, whose only sin is to accept the normality of the world as it is. The sin of racism lies in being unwilling to examine ourselves and our environment.

This moment calls for engagement and dialogue, particularly with the black community. We share a history of cooperation and shared interests ... and there are also troubling elements and dangerous ideas we have to confront. The moment calls for introspection – not all Jews are white and we can do more to make our community more welcoming and diverse. The moment calls for education and examination and outreach. There really are good people on both sides, if by good people we mean people who love their children and pay their taxes and want to live in peace. We have to move beyond the polarizing labels of good and evil and winner and loser.

We did not cause the virus. We did not create the racism that plagued this new world from the beginning. We cannot ignore the needs of our own community as we seek to make a difference in the larger world. But we can be part of the solution. We have a role to play if we can bring ourselves to learn and to listen and to love.

When I was a child and I used to get a cold or a sore throat, I would sit through the pain and imagine to myself: If I can just get used to that raspy feeling, if I can just make this feel normal, then I will be better and I can go back to school. There's some truth to that attitude. Human beings, especially children, are incredibly resilient. It is amazing what we can get used to and what we can accomplish even amidst trying circumstances. But sometimes is not enough. When fighting strep throat, a little penicillin goes a long way. Vaccines matter too.

On Rosh Hashanah, in the midst of a pandemic, in the midst of social unrest, we need to pray. We need to unite. We need to adapt. We need to fight. And we need to imagine a world without a virus, where all people are free, where people speak out nonviolently and others listen, where the righteous yearnings of our hearts are fulfilled. May our dreams become our reality in the new year that lies ahead. Shabbat Shalom and Shanah tovah.