

Kol Nidre Sermon 5781

Is It Too Early to Make Meaning?

Rabbi Maura Linzer, Temple Beth El of Northern Westchester

Suddenly it's quiet. How'd that happen? No email to answer. No text message waiting for a response. No sibling fights to break up. Oh, how should I spend these precious quarantine minutes? Fold the laundry pile on my dresser that looks like the Tower of Pisa? Unload the dishwasher? Sneak a few minutes of 90 Day Fiancé? I settle on calling a friend.

By some miracle, she answers. "Wow, you're alive!" she begins. "Despite all odds," I respond. "How are you?" There is silence on the other end, intermittently filled with children screaming in the background. She answers, "Well you know."

There is so much to unpack in that silence: months filled with anxiety, pain, and loss. But I wonder if that's the whole story, the only story. What else might be buried in there? Is it too early to make meaning of the pandemic and what we've been through, if we are still living it? Are we ready to go there?

We are in month six. Usually when we're faced with stressful times, we can draw on past experience for guidance. But we've had no road map for these last six months. We're in uncharted territory.

Certain memories stand out, signposts that our reality had changed: Do you remember when many of us got up in the middle of the night to try and get a food delivery slot from Fresh Direct? Or when we searched grocery stores for one coveted six-pack of toilet paper? And when we tried to convince ourselves that the warm weather would kill the virus and our children would return to school in April or by May at the latest?

We have all made decisions and instantly second guessed them. At night, we made plans based on CDC guidelines only to wake up to brand new

recommendations. One day we didn't need a mask, the next day we were urged to consider it and then almost overnight, masks were mandatory. And as we moved forward, we didn't look back. Who had time or the energy to stop and think about the journey we were on, when we were just trying to make it through each day?

But now is the time to look back. Yom Kippur is a Jewish experience unlike any other. Tonight and tomorrow, we are encouraged to enter into a state of reflection, to consider our lives over the past year, all while acknowledging the uncertainty of our future. On this Yom Kippur, we have more to reflect on than perhaps any other year, and we're going to begin the process tonight, even though it might be difficult. Because this is exactly what we need.

We cannot gather in our beautiful sanctuary tonight, but we can enter into this sacred time of reflection together. So let us take a few moments to consider the range of experiences among our Beth El community.

Some of us who are at an increased health risk have not ventured beyond our mailboxes in six months. Others have been unable to visit our loved ones in nursing homes and care centers. Many of us have grown accustomed to working at home side by side with our spouses, without childcare, flipping pancakes while we homeschool our children and walk the new dog--all at the same time. Many are struggling financially as companies have downsized and restructured to stay afloat. Some of us have welcomed our grown children back into our homes or had other relatives come to live with us. Some of us have suffered the painful loss of loved ones during this pandemic and had to bury them without even having a chance to say goodbye. And the list goes on.

Yes, it's been bad, terrible even. But has it all been bad? After all, some of us now spend less time commuting to and from work and more time with our families. We

have had dinner with our children every night regularly for the first time in their lives. Zoom has allowed us to connect with our loved ones near and far; and be present for moments that we might have otherwise missed. Our circumstances have born creative rituals such as car parades and drive-in graduations. We now spend more time in nature and have developed a new appreciation for our environment. We refused to let the pandemic disrupt our commitment to Tikkun Olam, and collected thousands of pounds of food for those in need. Our members have made hundreds of phone calls to keep us all connected. And our attendance at virtual Shabbat services has increased dramatically, as we seek to connect with one another.

We also were able to launch Better Together, a program of the Legacy Heritage Foundation that paired Beth El teens with seniors for weekly virtual activities during the summer. These partnerships impacted both our teens and seniors in unexpected ways. One of our teen participants, Jordy Singer shared that little things like talking to someone new after months of isolation can make a huge difference in how she felt in her day-to-day life. Long-time congregant, Carol Saltzman, reflected that her participation in the program was a very special light in an otherwise dark period. She appreciated how energizing and fun it was to chat with her new friends, and she hopes that their relationship continues long after the program ends. These are the rare glimmers of hope that have sustained us. According to Jewish tradition, it is not enough to offer our prayers tonight. We are also required to include Kavanot, our reflections and self-assessment on the year gone by.

To guide us through this process, I ask you to think about what you've overcome during the last six months and what have you learned about yourself? What did you do that you never imagined you could?

Tonight, once the service ends and you log off, I encourage you to share your thoughts. If you are alone, you might put your feelings into words, either by sharing them with a friend or perhaps writing a letter to yourself.

I can tell you; I've spent a lot of time reflecting on my own journey over the past six months. And to be honest it's been a painful and emotional road. I remember each and every challenge that I've faced. Last spring, my husband and I pulled our children out of school, because of my severe asthma. Then only days later our au pair decided that she needed to return home to Spain to help her family. Suddenly, we found ourselves homeschooling two children, one with severe learning differences, while I simultaneously tried to serve the needs of the community and while my husband worked alongside us at our kitchen table. We remember cancelling our long-awaited trip to Europe and our plans to send our children to camp. All of these decisions seemed excruciating until the phone rang late one night, and we learned that my father-in-law in Israel had passed away and we wouldn't be able to go to the funeral or even enter their home for shiva due to the tight quarantine orders in Israel. Suddenly, all of those previous decisions seemed trivial.

But while there have been so many difficult moments, some I didn't know how we'd make it through, we did. And tonight, I reflect on our many blessings as well. My family and I have spent so many wonderful moments together, hiking, biking, and just being a family--moments I certainly would have otherwise missed. I've made bedtime every single night for 6 months for the first time in my life, and I've reconnected with my husband--even if there were moments we wanted to kill each other along the way. I know that none of you can possibly relate. I've also strengthened my ties to my friends, who have been there to support me and hold me up, when I didn't think I could do it myself. And I've realized just how strong I am. After these last six months, I truly believe I can overcome anything.

Tonight, I want us to celebrate our inner strength and resilience. We are here. We are a bit broken, yes, but we have persisted, adapted, and grown in ways that we never imagined.

Tonight, I challenge us to share our strength. Find those individuals who need to be lifted up. They can be a neighbor, a relative who lives alone, or a friend, who is isolated due to increased health risk. Reach out to them and connect. Let's strive for more than a text message or a quick hello. Consider what you can do to let them know you care. When you ask, "is there something you need?" many will probably say no, they don't need anything. So, come ready with ideas: Can I bring over a meal? Schedule a weekly socially distanced conversation? Help with grocery shopping? If you are told, no, you are not exempt! It might mean you need to get more creative!

Performing acts of loving-kindness remind us that we are alive. They help us remain balanced and grateful when our world feels like it's spinning out of control. On this Yom Kippur, may we rediscover the light inside of each of us and may we rekindle the spirit of those we love.

Let us acknowledge how truly grateful we are to be alive to enter into a new year together with Shehecheyanu. I invite you to say it with me:

*Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, shehechyanu v'kiy'manu,
v'higiyanu laz'man hazeh.*

Blessed are you, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, who has sustained us in ways we never imagined possible, and helped us to reach this moment in time. Shana Tova.