

I have heard from many people who have said that they were **not** looking forward to these High Holidays. Rosh Hashana illumines the grandeur of the human soul as part of all creation, but much of the grandeur comes from the experience of being with throngs of people. So it's a great loss not to be together, and for many, that loss brings grief.

It's impossible to ignore how, in the midst of this time of pandemic, some of us have suffered devastating personal losses, and all without the comfort of others' proximity during a funeral and shiva, and now, and this Rosh Hashana does not provide the comfort of experiencing the life-affirming collective of the Jewish community.

This has also been a time when many of us have been confronting the pain of the world, looking closely at racial inequality and violence, the assault on democratic and civic norms, the neglect of reason, science and the basics of public health, the climate crisis playing out dramatically on the west coast. I know that so many of us have found ways to adapt, and ways to be part of the change we want to see. But I am realizing this year how much I and so many other people depend on the basic human yearning to be with other people - feeling each other's presence, sensing each other's yearnings, and how our personal stories feed those yearnings. I believe we depend on that close proximity to each other to remind ourselves of who we are and what we wish to be - and we don't have that experience this year.

So this Rosh Hashana, **I have to ask myself a hard but honest question BEFORE I can truly embrace this season - can these holidays, which I have always experienced and celebrated as a time of renewed connection and purpose - truly speak to us in this moment - this moment being one of isolation, dread, disillusionment and cynicism?**

Rosh Hashanah is the Holiday to "Choose Life." I would more than anything want to Choose Life, and feel obligated to do that.

But this year, I am compelled to consider counter-arguments - from within our own tradition - that make it hard for us to make an easy retreat to hope, comfort and reassurance. **Perhaps by taking in some Jewish voices that convey hard truths, we can return with greater insight and commitment to each other.**

Lately, I have been studying Kohelet, the Book of Ecclesiastes, in our weekly Tuesday study group. Kohelet, Ecclesiastes, looks at the world as it is, with no illusions. His challenge for us, against the belief that we can change our world, is **whether our work and actions have any inherent meaning or purpose at all.**

In the opening of his book, he famously observes, "**Futility of futilities, all is futile. One generation comes and another goes, but the earth stands firm forever. And there is nothing new under the sun.**" Neither meaningful work, or the pursuit of wisdom, or certainly

financial security insulate us from death, which erases our accomplishments and renders us all forgotten.

In a typical passage, Kohelet observes:

**“The wise person has eyes in their head, and the fool walks in darkness. But I have realized that one fate awaits them all. I said to myself, what will happen to the fool will happen to me, so why have I tried to gain more wisdom? So I said to myself this too is futile.”**

But it is worse than that. In a passage repeated on this holidays and also in the daily liturgy, he says:

**“There is only one fate for human beings and animals like: the death of one is as the death of the other, as they are of one breath; and the human being has no advantage over the animal, for all is wind.”**

In another passage, Kohelet takes on a topic close to our heart - **the cause of the oppressed**. But here too he doesn't offer much hope. “Where there is justice,” he says, “There is also evil.” He tells us that he has seen the “tears of the oppressed,” but also the fact the hand of the oppressor will always be stronger than those who are vulnerable. Anticipating our objections, he tells us, “Do not be surprised” because there is always someone on the take, each one above stealing more than the one below.

**But here's the thing** - there ARE things that Kohelet observes that are not ONLY futile. In this same passage about injustice he admits, “Two are better than one, because if one falls, the other can provide support and The 3-fold cord will not be easily unraveled.”

Kohelet makes no grand promises. But after lifting the veil on humanity, he admits that **relationships mean SOMETHING**. We at least provide some relief to each other, like a shelter in a storm. And by banding together, perhaps we can collectively create some kind of buffer against the forces of greed and destruction.

This isn't a statement about tikkun olam, redemption, or healing. It's not a grand affirmation about our individual moral agency. **But the conviction that human society matters is something we can build on.**

This summer, I came upon another counter-argument to the grand promises of Rosh Hashana, one that suggests that **we are not as noble as we think we are.**

It is a story that is original to the Zohar, the 13th Century foundation of Kabbalah, and draws on the central themes and myths of Rosh Hashanah. The story also refers to the stories we read

in the Torah today and tomorrow, and instead of re-interpreting these stories so that Abraham and Sarah are spiritual heroes, this story highlights their moral failures.

In the story, as God was judging humanity on Rosh Hashana, the prosecuting attorney, Satan, spoke up against God's inclination to treat us with compassion. Satan said to God, "Your people are callous and cruel, even your most beloved among them, and I will show you."

The Torah in today's reading speaks of the celebration on the day that Isaac, the miracle baby born to Abraham and Sarah when they were elderly, was weaned. It was a day of expansive and generous celebration for Abraham and Sarah. The Zohar relates how all of the great luminaries - the Torah scholars but also the kings and princes - were invited to the celebration, which was overflowing with food and wine.

The prosecuting attorney, however, observed from afar that while all the great scholars, sages, and people of power were at the celebration, there wasn't a single poor or destitute person there. Not even the poor who were Abraham's servants were there. So he disguised himself in rags and knocked on Abraham's door. And despite the great joy and generosity of the occasion, Abraham and Sarah paid no attention to him.

At which point the prosecuting attorney, Satan, ascended to heaven and said to God, "See?! Not even your most devoted followers, Abraham and Sarah, who you call "My beloveds," care about the poor! How much more so everybody else!"

Satan's argument would lead to the conclusion that God would have to punish all of humanity severely.

God couldn't deny Satan's evidence. But neither does God buy Satan's claim that the rest of us are guilty by association. God punishes Abraham and Sarah, devising trials and sufferings for them - the strife with Hagar and Ishmael, the Akedah, Sarah's death - so that they may grow in insight and do teshuva.

As for the rest of us, the jury is still out: will we hear the cries of the oppressed, or remain callous, self-satisfied and cruel? Are we capable of change?

In all the traditional commentaries I've read about Abraham and Sarah, this is the only story I have seen in which there is no attempt to make it look like they're really enacting God's plan. Instead, their missteps and the stories that follow represent nothing but their total failure.

But perhaps very real disillusionment with Sarah and Abraham is also a beginning.

God punishes Abraham and Sarah, but **not** the rest of humanity. That means while the jury is still out, we have a chance. Their trials give us the opportunity to learn from their story so as to strive for what they couldn't - to listen closely to the voices of those who are abused, outcast, and silenced. Again, there is no grand assurance here that we can rid the world of pain and

injustice. At any moment, even the most righteous among us can be callous and cruel. **But, armed with this self-knowledge, we don't have to be.**

**Putting these two arguments together might go something like this: together, not alone, we can learn and hold each other accountable to not harm those who suffer. Maybe that modest possibility is a bulwark against total despair.**

Rabbi Alan Lew, in his book, "This is Completely Real and You Are Totally Unprepared," observes with wonder how each year, the Jewish calendar takes us from despair to realistic hope.

In the Book of Lamentations to commemorate Tisha B'Av, the darkest moment of despair in the Jewish year, we read the most bitter descriptions of the destruction of Jerusalem. These laments are also statements of protests against God as if to say, "Look God, at what you have done to us? Do human beings deserve to suffer this much?" Perhaps we feel some of this protest ourselves.

But at exactly the halfway point, the author says, "**let us search out and investigate our ways, and let us find our way to return.**" And that pivot changes everything.

The Book of Lamentations ends on a hopeful yearning: "Help us to return to you, God, and we shall return, renew our days as of old." Six days later is the 15th of Av, on which suitors would seek partners in a ritual where everyone would wear borrowed clothing, erasing the difference between rich and poor. The hopeful momentum builds over next 7 weeks as we read Haftarat of consolation on Shabbat, prophetic visions of a world restored in which justice and love reign. And finally, on Rosh Hashanah, all of this momentum helps us develop the conviction that we **MUST** see ourselves as capable of transformation - of ourselves and, ultimately, our world.

And then we do it again the next year. Because despite the grandeur of Rosh Hashanah, **there are no grand promises. No statement that renewal is inevitable. But if we look at our lives without illusion we can realize that the most meaningful path is the path of teshuvah, of turning toward companionship and compassion, love and ultimately justice. None of this is a guarantee, but it is much more than wishful thinking.**

And perhaps this year, in our longing for real human connection, perhaps we can look inward to at least notice how some human connection may not be too far off.

Our distance from each other is itself an affirmation of how we view life as sacred. Our personal grief and loss may reflect how much we mean to each other. And our longing to connect may itself be the reminder of how the bonds of love are always possible, and proof that they we will be renewed again.

