

Every year in preparation for the Holy Days I write at least one sermon that goes into a large folder called “written but never delivered”... This year the sermon that made its way to that folder was called “Living on the Edge of the Apocalypse.” You can thank Laura for not being subject to that talk this morning...

We are not on the edge of the world’s destruction and yet it sure feels like that sometimes; that the world that we know, our way of life and the life of the planet will be radically altered for the worse, soon, in our day or the days of our children.

There are some identifiable issues at the core of our collective angst. The behavior and divisive rhetoric of our president, as well as the political weather pattern that swirls around him, the instability of the Middle East including of course, Israel, and Climate Change with its myriad of often dire implications – draughts, fires, rising sea levels, population displacement – climate refugees - mass extinctions, etc. Your list may be different from mine, but I think we can all agree that a lot is at stake; the urgency that Moses expresses in our Torah reading this morning, matches in some ways the urgency that we feel now.

After 40 years of wandering in the wilderness the Israelites stand poised to enter the Promised Land. Moses knows he won’t be crossing the Jordan with them, and so he gives a series of swan song orations, final sermons to prepare them for the invasion... The portion we just heard is one of the last of these talks and you can sense the urgency in his message. I imagine Moses standing on a bolder, his hair wild in the wind, the years of the wilderness leadership etched on his wizened face. The people spread out before him as far as the eye can see, the Jordan River and the Promise Land below and at his back. His eyes are fire and his voice booms, even at the age of 120!

“Shema Yisrael! Listen! I can’t go with you this time and there is so much at stake! Everything now hangs in the balance! And not just for you but for those who we lost along the way and those who come after you as well. Hear me! This is life and death we are talking about; what it means to really be alive, to truly be a free people—an am kadosh—a holy nation. I’ve put before you; life and death, blessing and curse; choose life so you and your offspring may live.” (Deuteronomy 30:15)

Thinking about the year ahead, the challenges we face as Jews, as Americans, as citizens of the world, Moses’ exhortation to choose life spark my imagination and

inspiration. Yes! That's what we want, a way forward into the New Year that is life affirming, positive and hopeful!

Moses begins his sermon: *Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem/You stand this day, all of you*. These four simple words hold the key to answering our question; how do we choose life in the New Year? The Hebrew verb nitzavim, translated as "you stand" is better understood as something like, standing at attention, standing ready, or perhaps being fully present. This I think is the first answer to the question, "how do we choose life in the New Year?" We stand ready, present, awake to what the New Year demands of us. Sounds simple enough if we were not so frenetic, distracted, always on the move. Moses wants us to be present now and we want to flee all the time.

Can we ever stop running? A friend who does not exercise once asked me as joggers past us by, "Where are they all running to?" and I wonder, "what are we running from?"

Usually we are fleeing from uncomfortable feelings, emotional pain of one kind or another. We keep busy, we stay distracted; we do most anything to avoid feeling that pain.

The Palestinian American poet Naomi Shihab Nye expresses this beautifully in her poem *The Rider*:

### The Rider

A boy told me  
if he roller-skated fast enough  
his loneliness couldn't catch up to him, the best reason I ever heard for trying to  
be a champion.

What I wonder tonight  
pedaling hard down King William Street  
is if it translates to bicycles.

A victory! To leave your loneliness  
panting behind you on some street corner  
while you float free into a cloud of sudden azaleas,  
pink petals that have never felt loneliness,  
no matter how slowly they fell.

To stand ready, at attention, to be present is not easy because it means feeling feelings like loneliness we'd rather avoid.

When I think of the year ahead, the emotion that comes to mind is fear... Part of choosing life in the New Year is learning to work with instead of run away from our fear. Let's start with the physiology of fear; what happens in our bodies when we are afraid.

When we are frightened, various parts of the brain signal the nervous system and the organs to prepare to take action. The pupils of the eyes dilate... blood pressure rise to supply the body and the brain with fuel, the liver begins to break down sugars for quick energy, ... the spleen pumps out white blood cells in case there is an injury, .... The bladder and the colon prepare to empty. The central portion of the adrenal medulla floods the bloodstream with adrenaline. Breathing quickens, the entire body is in a state of high alert.

Whew! It is hard to stand present and ready when we are afraid. It is also important to know – this may be the most important thing - that fear distorts our thinking. Like the angry voice, the frighten voice lies, distorting, exaggerating, even creating obstacles that aren't really there. Recognizing that we are afraid helps us be less reactive and more mindful.

Our tradition can also help us learn to manage our fear. Rabbi Isaac Abravanel, born in 1437, lived through the Spanish inquisition and knew a thing or two about fear.

His teaching about fear comes from his commentary to the story of Jacob & Esau in the book of Genesis. After Jacob stole Esau's birthright, he fled and did not return for many years. When he finally comes home – on the way - he hears that his brother is waiting for him with 400 men and he is afraid! His fear seems

obvious and justified to us but Jewish Tradition tends to glorify the Patriarchs, so Abravanel wonders why a great man like Jacob would be frightened?

Abravanel makes a distinction between feeling afraid, acting out of fear, and acting in spite of one's fear. Abravanel teaches that it is human to be afraid and to act out of fear. To run, to hide, to fight, that's human.

There is a great lesson here for us; when we are frightened we can act like a cornered animal reacting from an instinctive place of self-protection. Cornered animals can be vicious which is only helpful if you are actually fighting for your life.

Abravanel says this is human behavior, acting out in fear. However there is a higher ground we humans can attain, and that is when we act **in spite** of fear. The hero is not fearless. The fearless person in a real, dangerous situation is a fool. The hero is the person who acts in spite of her or his fear.

To choose life in the New Year we must face our fear, not flee from it. Understand its effect on us and act appropriately in spite of it. For me that means keep reading the paper in spite how upsetting the news can be, keep working towards positive change in spite of how overwhelming the issues are, and maintain an awareness of my own emotional state so that I don't inadvertently lash out at someone; behave in an unkind or in appropriate way.

Returning to the first line, *atem nitzavim hayom kulchem*/You stand (ready) this day, all of you, we find an interesting repetition. *Atem* means "y'all" but right after that Moses says "kulchem" "all of you". Why the repetition?... "Kulchem" "all of you" is there to teach the value and importance of a single human being, stressing the difference that everyone of us can make. We have little if any control over what happens in Washington, but that does not mean we can't affect change in our

own backyard, which could be like ripples in a pond moving from us out into the world. The Talmud echoes this sentiment with the beautiful aphorism, “To save a life, is to save a world.”

This is what I thought of when I heard Megan Kaun speak at the Bagel Club not too long ago. Megan is an engineer with degrees from Northwestern and Stanford but it was really being a mother of two small children that inspired her to act. “Once I realized that all these kids were playing in parks full of Roundup, I just felt like I had to do something.” Megan got to work, informing county officials about the dangers of Roundup while organizing other parents also concerned about the affect this toxic pesticide would have on their children. Since starting her campaign in 2018 Megan and her supporters have succeeded in a variety of measures that have almost eliminated the use of Roundup on publicly owned land throughout the county. One concerned Mom takes on Monsanto, a huge Agrichemical company and she wins!

The Swedish 16 year old Climate Activist, Greta Thunberg sprung to global prominence last year after she held her first climate strike sitting outside the Swedish parliament. A photo of Greta sitting solitary with her protest sign went viral inspiring climate strikes across the globe. Just before Rosh Hashannah this year, youth from 150 countries joined Greta in a Global Climate Strike, which saw millions taking to the streets around the world to demand action and an end to the era of fossil fuels.

"This is all wrong." She told the U.N., just before the strike. "I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you!

"... People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!

"For more than 30 years, the science has been crystal clear. How dare you continue to look away and come here saying that you're doing enough, when the politics and solutions needed are still nowhere in sight."

Her words punch us in the gut but more inspiring and hopeful to me is the way her actions have inspired so many others.

Choosing life in the New Year means, Like Megan Kaun and Greta Thurnberg, kulchem/All of us can make a difference. Kulchem/All of us can be agents for change and hope.

“Hope”, writes the poet Lisel Mueller

...hovers in dark corners  
before the lights are turned on,  
it shakes sleep from its eyes  
and drops from mushroom gills,  
it explodes in the starry heads  
of dandelions turned sages,  
it sticks to the wings of green angels  
that sail from the tops of maples.  
It sprouts in each occluded eye  
of the many-eyed potato,  
it lives in each earthworm segment  
surviving cruelty,  
it is the motion that runs the tail of a dog,  
it is the mouth that inflates the lungs  
of the child that has just been born.  
It is the singular gift  
we cannot destroy in ourselves,  
the argument that refutes death,  
the genius that invents the future,  
all we know of God.  
It is the serum which makes us swear  
not to betray one another;  
it is in this poem, trying to speak.

Hope is essential if we want to choose life in the New Year. For the poet Lisel Mueller hope is imbedded in all being, hovering over the dark, in dandelion seeds sent out to propagate by the wind, in a severed worm's ability to regenerate itself, in the wagging tail of a dog, in the first breath of a child. Hope is also something we have to cultivate, will into existence. Hope is an act of courage. When we

recognize the worth and power of kulchem, all of us to make a difference, we create hope for ourselves and those around us. It's also what Jews do.

We, “the ever dying people” may not be known for our optimism, but we are experts in hope.

We have one more word to explore in Moses' opening line *atem nitzavim hayom kulchem* and that is “*hayom*”, “this day”. “You stand ready this day, all of you! *Hayom*/this day; why is it there? Surely they know what day it is? *Hayom*/this day is there to remind us to be present now, this moment this breath, the life we are living right now and not to live in the past or project ourselves out into the future. As the Psalmist sings:

זֶה-הַיּוֹם עָשָׂה יְהוָה נִגִּילָה וְנִשְׂמְחָה בּוֹ:

“This is the day Yah has made, be glad and rejoice in it!” *Hayom*, this day and not another day. This day, not yesterday. This day, not tomorrow.

This is critical to choosing life in the New Year because *hayom*/this day might very well be a fine day, but if we are freaked out about what might happen in the future, we are likely to miss *hayom*/this day all together!.. (Early morning walks after reading the paper...)

Looking over my sermons all these years, more often than not there was some dark cloud looming over the horizon and yet, we are still here. We don't know what the future holds for us and in truth, we have little control over what will be. What we can affect, what we write in the *sefer chayim v'mavet*, the book of life and death is not so much what will happen to us, but how we will respond to what life brings us.

Will we stand ready, or will we flee, will we give it our best shot or will we give into despair, will we live as much life as we are given or will we squander it away in worry and distraction?

The choice is ours. May we chose well in the New Year.

