

Living With Uncertainty

Sermon for Rosh Hashanah Morning 5781

Rabbi Laurence W. Groffman

Temple Sholom of West Essex

Think back to September 30, 2019. In case the date does not ring a bell, that was last Rosh Hashanah. If we opened up the newspaper or turned on the news that day, we would have learned that the great opera singer Jessye Norman died; and we might have heard that a 315 billion ton iceberg broke off from the Amery ice shelf in Antarctica. Perhaps we would have read an article about the results of the Austrian general election. One thing we would *not* have read about was COVID-19.

It is amazing how much our world changed just a few months after our last Rosh Hashanah. The emergence of this heretofore unknown virus reminds us that there is one thing we know for certain in this life—that *nothing* is certain.

Since last Rosh Hashanah, our world has been turned upside down by this devastating virus which has claimed so many lives, sickened enormous numbers of people, inflicted severe damage on the global economy, impacted education, religion, summer camp, child care, entertainment, politics, shopping, eating and so much else. A virus whose particles measure between 0.00000236 and 0.00000551 inches has wreaked enormous havoc across the world.

Among all the other challenges it presents, COVID-19 presents a spiritual challenge—the virus has compelled us all to live with uncertainty. We always live with varying degrees of uncertainty. We can never be sure how life will turn out. Will our kids make their way in the world? What about that concerning medical diagnosis? How will our careers develop?

COVID-19 has raised our uncertainty level significantly. We find ourselves asking questions like:

When will life get back to “normal?”

How do we even define “normal” now that we have experienced this crisis?

When will there be a vaccine and/or a treatment?

What will be the long-term mental health effects from so much isolation?

How will child development and education be impacted from extended quarantine?

How will the economy recover, and when?

Every Rosh Hashana we enter a New Year filled with anticipation, hope—and uncertainty. We can never know what a New Year will bring. We make the commitment to *teshuva*—“repentance,” or “return”—but we still must do the hard work of change, not knowing if we will, in fact, change. We hope to repair damaged relationships but are uncertain if we will succeed. We pray for a year of health and blessing, without knowing if we and our loved ones will remain healthy or regain their health. As we welcome the New Year, we acknowledge the uncertainty of life—and this Rosh Hashanah, more than ever before.

The point is driven home in no uncertain terms in the story from the Torah that we read each Rosh Hashanah --God’s call to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham’s entire life is practically a walking, talking living, breathing billboard for uncertainty.

Abraham is called by God to leave his home in Mesopotamia and to go to “a land that I will show you” -- destination unknown.

When Abraham does arrive in the Promised Land, which as we all know, turns out to be Canaan, a.k.a. Israel—there is a famine and he is compelled to leave said Promised Land and go to Egypt without knowing when or if he will return.

In Egypt, his life is endangered, leading him to pass off his wife Sarai as his sister, which, in turn endangers her, with no guarantee that she will survive.

Four times, God promises Abraham large numbers of descendants—yet he and Sarah cannot conceive a child.

Abraham is compelled to “sacrifice” his son Ishmael by banishing him and his mother Hagar from his household.

And finally, the *piece de resistance*-- God tells Abraham to sacrifice the one son, Isaac, whom Sarah and Abraham actually do have together and through whom the Jewish people will grow.

How do they handle this overwhelming uncertainty? By going forward.

By living their lives and making the best choices they can even without the slightest guarantee that anything will work out the way they hope it will and thought it would.

When God tells Abraham to leave his homeland, Abraham and Sarah go, even though they do not know where they are going. When there is a famine in Canaan, they go to Egypt. When they cannot have children, they stay together and try to find a solution.

They never give up and turn their back on each other or on God. And even at the moment of the most extreme uncertainty, that chilling divine command to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham agrees (yes, many people have serious reservations about Abraham's acquiescence to this command).

He responds to God by saying "Hineni," "Here I am, I am present and responsive to you." He moves ahead despite what must have been tremendous misgivings and doubts and it is consistent with his pattern of acting when he needs to act, despite the difficulty, the overwhelming doubts and the uncertainty of it all. And that is the message for all of us in Abraham's life story.

I believe the sages assigned us this reading for Rosh Hashanah because they want us to emulate Abraham's faith. At first glance, it seems that Abraham has blind faith in, and blind obedience to, God, no matter the magnitude of God's demands or how inscrutable God's ways are. The truth is the story of Abraham and Isaac is really a story about a different kind of faith—the faith to live life even in the face of great uncertainty. Abraham has faith—and doubt. He is certain God will keep the Divine promise of many descendants—and uncertain about it.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks defines faith, therefore, this way:

"I believe that Abraham taught us that faith is not certainty; it is the courage to live with uncertainty...He knew the promises would come true; he could live with the uncertainty of not knowing how or when."

Here's the thing: we all want certainty, don't we? Wouldn't we all like a guarantee that life will work out the way we hope it will, that our plans will come to fruition, our dreams for ourselves and those we love to come true? That this pandemic will end soon? But the only thing that is certain, is that life is uncertain.

The spiritual challenge lies in this question: how do we live with uncertainty?

We can get a hint from a rather unusual blessing in our tradition:

the blessing to recite when we use the bathroom. It blesses God who:

"...fashioned human beings with wisdom and created within people many openings and cavities...if but one of them were to be ruptured or but one of them were to be blocked it would be impossible to survive..."

This blessing acknowledges that we all live on that fine line between health and sickness, happiness and sadness, joy and pain, hope and fear. Life is uncertain. We are vulnerable. As any of us who has ever faced any kind of medical challenge can attest, the words "if but one of them were to be ruptured or but one of them were to be blocked..." ring all too true. Our lives can change drastically in an instant.

That blessing is not really a bathroom blessing—it's an uncertainty blessing. It is a daily reminder that *acknowledging* the uncertainty of life is the first step in living with uncertainty. If we pretend otherwise, we set ourselves up for disappointment every time life does not meet our expectations.

We acknowledge this uncertainty in the familiar and chilling words of *Untaneh Tokef*, one of the central prayers of Rosh Hashanah:

“On Rosh Hashanah it is written/and on Yom Kippur it is sealed:

How many shall pass/and how many will be born;

Who will live and who will die...

Who will be calm/and who will be harassed

Who will be at ease/and who will suffer...”

At first glance, this prayer is definitive—everything will be decided and decreed by the end of Yom Kippur. The thing is—even if that is true—which is questionable—we don't know what is going to happen. Maybe—maybe—God does—but we don't and that is what matters to us.

We do not know any of these things; we cannot know what will happen in this New Year, much as last Rosh Hashanah when we sang and read this very same prayer, we could not have imagined that this *Rosh Hashanah* we would be living through a global pandemic. Yet, *Untaneh Tokef* gives us the second step in how to live with uncertainty. Yes, the poem says, there is much we cannot control. And—there is much that we can and that is where we need to direct our energy.

At the conclusion of the prayer, we proclaim: “Repentance, prayer and righteousness avert the severity of the decree.” Repentance, prayer and righteousness are all very much within our control.

While we cannot control or know what the future holds, we can control our choices now. Those choices cannot completely determine if we will get sick, or experience sadness in our lives, or bring a cure for COVID-19, but they will determine the *kind* of lives we will lead, the kind of people we are and therefore how meaningful our lives are.

Teshuva/Repentance directs our attention inward as we strive to become the best people we can become by living by the values of Torah, repairing our relationships, being honest with ourselves about our flaws and working to improve on them.

Prayer turns us to God, to the Divine Presence in the universe, reminding us not only of the importance of communal worship, but of developing a strong spiritual life. Jewish spirituality means we acknowledge that we are not the center of the universe and that

there is something greater than us. It is seeing the world as a divine gift and therefore living with humility and awe; and seeing every living creature as created in God's image and caring for them accordingly.

Tzedakah/Righteousness turns us outward to the world to carry on the mission God gave Abraham--to do justice and righteousness. We Jews are called to right the wrongs of society, to help the most vulnerable among us and to create a world in which all people are truly treated equally.

I'd like to believe that when we atone for our mistakes, deepen our Jewish engagement and work to make the world better, we are better able to handle life's uncertainties. As life ebbs and flows, as we experiences life's ups and downs, we can create the certainty that comes with knowing that when all is said and done, we tried, with all our might, to be a positive force in the world; that we tried to bring blessing to those we love and to everyone we know; that we did our part to bring the Divine Presence into the world through living with integrity.

Rabbi Toba Spitzer puts it quite well.

"We can't change our fate; the truth is, we can't even anticipate our fate. We have no idea what's going to happen in this coming year. So what can we do? This is where we are not like sheep. We can reflect, we can make change in our lives, we can open our hearts to others. Through these practices of *tefillah*—prayer, contemplation, reflection; of *teshuvah*—changing the direction of our lives, returning to the pure essence that lies within each of us; and *tzedakah*—the practice of justice and of generosity—we can face our existential terrors. We are neither in control nor completely powerless. There is a way out of suffering, and it lies with us, our intentions and actions." (www.dorsheitzedek.org, accessed on July 8, 2020).

Let's look ahead 354 days to September 7, 2021, a.k.a., next Rosh Hashanah. Truth is, we really can't look ahead that far because we do not know what life bring us in these next 354 days. But here's what we do know—that *this* Rosh Hashanah is a gift, an opportunity to control what we can—the kind of people we are, our impact on others, our community and our world. We know we cannot live with complete certainty; the message of Rosh Hashanah is that we are blessed to be able to live fully and completely with uncertainty. And that is for sure.