Erev Rosh Hashanah 5782 Congregation Beth Evergreen

September 6, 2021 Rabbi Jamie Arnold

**“Dispelling Pervasive Prejudices, *Part One*: TIME**

**Cultivating Trust, Embracing UNCERTAINTY ”**

A new year. We made it, back, to now. Together.

To reflect and to remember. *Yom Hazikaron*, to remember - a week, a month, a YEAR. To remember – a decade, century, two, ten.

The capacity to look back in time, to harvest what was, to measure how far we have come, this is a gift, mysterious, miraculous. This night, the onset of the year 5782, invites us to remember, to reflect on a completely uneventful year, so this won’t take long*. Ha.*

Perhaps it’s because of years like the one we’re bookending tonight, that the sages knew we might need two days to celebrate Rosh Hashanah! So much has happened in the last year. Where we see progress, we find purpose and meaning, derive confidence and pride. Where we see a lack of progress, we struggle with loss, the loss of expectations unmet. We feel humbled, perhaps lost, and afraid.

I wonder what mix of emotions you are feeling tonight.

If you had to describe the past year in a single word, what would be it?

A single word to describe the past year? **Uncertainty**.

**Uncertainty at home** – often stuck at home, working and schooling, attending services and classes from home. Limiting travel through space did nothing to limit the changes over time[[1]](#footnote-1) – births and deaths, graduations and retirements, postponed weddings and accelerated divorces.

**Uncertainty on the national stage** – contested elections, confrontations over racial inequities, wildfires, hurricanes, a 2020 Olympics in 2021 without cheering fans, bombs flying over Israel, escalation of white supremacy and antisemitism.

And just as we thought things were stabilizing on the COVID front – vaccinations rolling out, masks coming off – a *Delta* variant moves in to say, “Not so fast.” ***Delta***, the Greek symbol of change. From the Hebrew letter ***Dalet***, our word for a doorway.

All this uncertainty compels to confront some hard truths. And to redress some pervasive misguided perceptions – about ourselves and our time her on earth.

Hard truths. Let’s start with an easy one: Mortality. On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed – who shall live and who shall die. And every day since the outbreak became a pandemic, hospitalizations, ventilators, morbidity rates, death tolls, family members and friends fighting for (and too many losing) their lives – these have kept the truth of human mortality, my mortality, your mortality, front and center. Sooner or later, it will be our time.

On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. A Book of Life, and DEATH. This liturgical motif, I believe has endured as a motivator, waking us to the reality of impermanence, calling us to respond. Is it still working? As the pandemic wears on, it’s easy to become numb to the numbers. It’s tempting to turn away from, rather that confront the march of time. Why is that?

Perhaps that’s because we think of time as the enemy, the harbinger of mortality! And impermanence and death are ultimately at the root of our fear and suffering, right? Then again, maybe we’ve got that wrong.

As Italian physicist and author, Carlo Rovelli, reminds us, mortality and impermanence are themselves dependent upon a presumption of eternity and permanence. And he, like the Buddha and King Solomon, claims, permanence is a false and prejudicial presumption. He writes that **“[our usual perception of time allows] us to create the fleeting illusion of permanence that is the origin of all of our suffering.”** Mortality, impermanence, it seems, is not the problem. Rather, it is our fleeting illusion of permanence that is at the root of our suffering! And, the primary culprit fueling that illusion is our distorted perception of time.

So Rovelli writes a book called “The Order of Time” in which he sets out to, in his words, “**dispel ourselves of a pervasive prejudice…about time.”**

To **dispel pervasive prejudices.** Yes, let’s do that. Let us dispel ourselves of pervasive prejudices – so many to choose from. We’ll start with an easy one: **TIME**. *B’ezrat hashem*, in the morning, we’ll turn to **LOVE**. You’ve got the cliff notes of my chosen topics on the [yellow] paper you got when you came in – a grid outlining my initial responses to a powerful and provocative question:

**What are our most pervasive and problematic prejudices?**

Since we are here tonight, to honor an ancestral map of time, a year, a New Year, let’s begin with time itself. According to Rovelli, the three most pervasive and illusory prejudices we cling to about time are as follows:

1. Time is Constant
2. It is Universal
3. It is Directional.

and a fourth to chew on, one that I came up with myself…

1. Time is all about me.

Time it turns out, is none of these things.[[2]](#footnote-2) It’s not constant, not universal, not directional, and, I’ll be damned, it doesn’t revolve around me.

**The first pervasive prejudice about time: It is Constant.** Nope. Thanks to our cousin Albert, the one with the memorably wild hair, this one may not come as such a shock. Time, he helped prove, is relative. It is contingent – on gravity, on velocity, on location, on point of reference. COVID has brought this home as well. When forced to change our routine, we experience time very differently. Our experience of time is utterly contingent – on where we work, who we are with, on what we can and cannot do, on who is President or Prime Minister. The notion that Time is constant, reliable, immutable, like a well-built clock, *or a well-conceived democracy*, is false. It is a convenient prejudice, until it becomes an inconvenient source of suffering.

**The second pervasive prejudice about time: It is Universal.** The notion that somewhere in the universe there is a master clock, like cosmic version of the NIST atomic clock in Boulder, is so comforting. Sure, we’ve got time zones and the international dateline, and the sun sets later in Evergreen than it does in Denver, and here in the synagogue it’s the year 5782 and everywhere else its 2021, but surely …somewhere, somehow Time with a capital T exists and is universal, like truth with a capital T, right? Wrong again.

A clock in space ticks at a different pace than one on the surface of the earth. For those of you on Zoom breathing oxygen rich air at a lower altitude this service moves even more slowly than for those here at 7200 feet elevation. On the other hand, those of us living at a higher altitude age faster. It’s a tradeoff, I guess.

It does not take a degree in quantum science to extrapolate. But it does take courage to internalize this truth. Time is not constant or universal. Like all things, time is **contingent** and **relative** and **impermanent**. And we, with our ancestral cycles and holy days, atomic clocks, and google calendars, we are, well, we are making shit up.

**The third pervasive prejudice about time: It is Directional.**

Directional. Time moves forward, right? From the past to the future, through the present! In a nice, reliably straight line, right? Please? Nope.

Apparently, that notion does not hold up to scientific scrutiny either. To the directionality of time, the reliable foundation for our notions of cause and effect – say, ‘bye-bye.’ Our notions of the past and future, the steady march of time, even our belief in the existence of a present moment, a here and now, must be reevaluated. Time is not directional, moving from a ‘was’ to a future ‘will be’ in a nice clean line.

Any one of these revelations is disturbing enough. The combination of them, if taken to heart, is potentially devastating. We are running out of constants. The studies aren’t rigged any more than the election, and there’s a new truth in town. Yet another certainty unmasked as a ‘big lie.’ But before you stage an insurrection and storm the *bimah* in protest…It gets even worse! And then better, a little, I hope.

**The fourth pervasive prejudice about time: It’s all about Me.**

As the liturgy of the High Holiday prayerbook, the machzor, reminds us each and every year, we are not the center of the universe. Or even the solar system. And if we are not the center of space, neither are we the center of time. “It took us thousands of years, but in the end we managed to understand the revolving of the heavens: we understood that **it is WE who turn, not the universe. …**The map [of the universe] does not know where we are*.”[[3]](#footnote-3)*  To assert otherwise, to place ourselves at the center of space-time is hubris, a persistent prejudice among us, one that at least unites us across the political spectrum. Which brings me to the good news.

**The upside of uncertainty is possibility.** Time may not be constant, universal, directional, or about me. However, it is a useful tool in measuring change, and a constant reminder of ***the possibility of change.***  Even our pal Carlo admits that time “is a measure of change that hints at an eternal current.”

And this, to me, offers a cornerstone around which we can build a temple of faith, a community of faith. Especially if we define faith as the late Sir Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l – “not as certainty, but as the courage to live with uncertainty.”

Tonight, we come together to seek a new center, to renew our commitment to build a personal and communal life around something real and true. All year, each of us has been **cultivating this courage to live with uncertainty** – whether we did so intentionally or not.

*Col haolam kulo, gesher tzar meod…*Everything, even time itself, is a very narrow bridge. Life is riddled with impermanence and uncertainty everywhere and when we look. *V’ha’ikar.* But the essential thing, the core of the matter, is how we respond to that uncertainty. In the song we are about to sing, Rebbe Nachman calls on us to choose how we respond the fear we feel traversing such a narrow bridge. He calls on us not to make fear our guiding principle, our *clal*.[[4]](#footnote-4) And so tonight, we come together to celebrate the courage and the faith to live and love – to build bridges across the abyss of space-time.

In the face of all the uncertainty let this be the first step towards making the most of the possibilities that come with this uncertain moment in time. ***Lshanah tovah.***

1. In fact, as we limit our movement in space, we accelerate our movement through time. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. An acrostic pun not fit for public consumption -- Constant, Universal, Directional = CUD. Time does not ‘chew its CUD’ so it’s not kosher! [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rovelli, *The Order of Time, p. 147* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. With gratitude to Rabbi Michael Strassfeld, from whom I learned this *drash*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)