

This New Year's celebration seems totally counterintuitive.
 We are all joining together by staying apart;
 Looking forward with hope to tomorrow even as we so worry about today;
 Affirming the world's creation as the death toll rises around us.
 Some would call it counterintuitive; others would say its *meshug!*
 Yet today is *HaYom Harat Olam*, roughly translated, "*The Birthday of the World.*"
 The annual appearance at Services that feels more or less compulsory.
 And much as tradition frames it as "The Season of Repentance," for many,
 It is "The Season of Reconnection"—with family, generations gathering yet again,
 even family long gone, parents/grandparents who sit alongside us giving voice to
 the same prayers we now utter; reconnection—with a community of seekers,
 Book of Life open, all of us linked in common hope,
 Yet it's a reconnection that gives way to Re-Consideration of life's core questions
 as we step back from the tumult long enough to wonder:
 WHAT greater purpose does life hold? WHY, again, are we here?

Perhaps, this year, its even more than Re-Connection...
 The rabbinic name for today: *Yom Harat Olam* doesn't actually mean
 "Birthday of the World" but rather, "*The Day the World was Conceived.*"
 Implying that through our gathering in prayer, our spiritual yearning,
 Our hopeful, broken hearts...this day—we must reconceive the world!
 It is a commitment most of us didn't realize we carried;
 A task we may not feel quite ready to undertake...
 For it compels us to step back and see where the world stands,
 painful as it appears, and with that perspective
 to reconceive what our world must be.

Metaphorically speaking, its about us all going back to school!
 For much as we want our kids to return safely,
 This High Holy Day moment is meant to be our life-classroom:
 A refresher in what's foundational, helping us create a society,
 that is again healthy and whole.

Reconceiving our World means going back to basics;
 Applying the life lessons that reframe our vision, recalibrate our values and
 enable us to renew a waiting world.

Essentially it means understanding the 3R's: Relationship—Race—Responsibility...

It starts with R #1—**RELATIONSHIP**

Entrenched in combatting this vicious virus, as we must,
 We'd be shortsighted not to appreciate all its taught us

about the human connection we share.

With the insularity staying safe requires—covering our faces,
Masking our sadness, our smiles, we feel the loss of emotional contact,
Recognizing we are very much *“punim to punim”* people.

Chuck Lamphier, Exec Director of Ecumenical Affairs at Notre Dame
Set forth a number of profound pandemic takeaways. Consider two.

Every Person Makes Waves...

This means more than the pebble in the pond, ripple response.

In a pandemic world where the daily running tally of cases and lives lost,
is the graphic accompanying every news story,
we dare not miss the news **behind** the story...

Every person's action or inaction, decisions or indecision,
care or disregard impacts the well-being of an entire world.

Call it “The Butterfly Effect” if you like, though I think

Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav got to the heart of the matter when he taught:

“Kol HaOlam Kulo, Geshet Tsar m’od—The whole world is but a narrow bridge”
“V’ha-Ikar—and the key is, Lo L’FaChed—not to be afraid.”

We each make our way in this world thinking we are walking alone,

Pursuing professional goals/personal plans, paving our own path.

But moments like these open our eyes, helping us realize

We are all trying to make it across that same narrow bridge,

And the only thing that keeps us from falling, from our fears overtaking us

Is knowing we do not walk alone.

As the flipside of Lamphier's life lesson makes clear:

Self-sufficiency is a Dangerous Myth...

Our continued existence is contingent on people who, before all this,

Sometimes went unnoticed, certainly unacknowledged,

Now—they are “essential”—grocery clerks & delivery drivers;

Mass transit workers and sanitation crews; EMS & healthcare providers,

And OMG, schoolteachers! How enormously essential are they

to our sanity, our safety and overall well-being.

For whether you are the leader of the free world, or a small-town suburban rabbi...

Thinking you can make it through life alone,

that you, on your own, can solve life's persistent problems, is not merely inaccurate,
not just ignorant, it is downright dangerous.

The Rev Dr. MLK Jr preached it to us 60 years ago: [The American Dream, Lincoln Univ, 1961]

*“This is simply to say, all life is interrelated. We are caught in an inescapable
network of mutuality; tied in a single garment of destiny...As long as there is
poverty in this world, no man can be truly rich...As long as diseases run rampant,
no man can be totally healthy...Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.”*

Our interdependence links us beyond what we can see; beyond what we customarily consider.

Our teacher Rabbi Larry Kushner called it "Invisible Lines of Connection." But today we can't miss the lines that link us...Every death diminishes us [all], no matter where in the world it happens. And when we peel away the separations on the surface, we quickly comprehend, no matter the language we speak or the customs we keep, as members of this marvelously diverse global family, bound by the hope that makes us human, we share a common heart.

R #2—RACE

Facing riots in Birmingham—the response to bombs planted by the Klan, Ripping a hole in the Gaston Motel, where the Rev Dr King and his ground team were staying, and another tearing apart the home of Dr. King's brother, The Rev A.D. King who, along with his wife and 5 kids, barely escaped, With 30 blocks of Birmingham ablaze, police vehicles destroyed, The frustration of African Americans long oppressed finally boiling over; Trying to preserve the truce agreement signed just the day before, counseled by King himself, even as the racist Alabama Governor George Wallace began to relent—recognizing the urgency of the moment, calling the 3 TV networks to reserve airtime himself, [early June, 1963,]

JFK gave a groundbreaking address which rings hauntingly true today:

"The fires of frustration and discord are burning in every city, in demonstrations, protests... We face a moral crisis as a country, as a people...It cannot be quieted by token moves or talk...It cannot be met by repressive police action.

It is time to act, in congress, in your state and local legislative bodies, and,

Above all, in our daily lives...Those who do nothing are inviting shame...

Those who act boldly are recognizing right as well as reality...

The time has come for this nation to fulfill its promise."

How many years does it take to make good on a promise?

How many Black lives will it take for us to know that they matter immeasurably?

8 minutes, 46 seconds is far too long to "stand idly by..."

Nicholas Kristoff framed the struggle we face

through a four-letter word usually unheard these days: HOPE...[NYT, 7.19.20]

"To the extent that America's 50 years of failure had their roots in racism, it is striking that new possibilities arise in part from mass revulsion at the video of seeing George Floyd's life snuffed out. The current Black Lives Matter movement, roughly 20 million strong...is supported by 60 million Americans...

In the 1930's, the unequivocal nature of Hoover's failure made the New Deal possible. Will national anguish again become the midwife to progress?"

It all depends on our response...

The week of JFK's call for Civil Rights Legislation, the President invited a select group of clergy leaders around the country to the White House, among them, the prophetic spirit of his day Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel,

who sent a telegram before arriving, the conclusion of which read:

*"I propose you Mr. President declare state of moral emergency...
The hour calls for high moral grandeur and spiritual audacity."*

How once more we desperately need a leader who heeds,
and who cares enough to lead.

As foremost thinker, teacher on racism Prof Ibram X. Kendi framed it,
ultimately, change is in our hands. *"For all of its life-shaping power, race is a
mirage...but one that we do well to see never forgetting that it's the powerful light
of racist power that makes the mirage appear.."* [[How to Be an Anti-Racist](#), Kendi, pg 37]

How, then, do we begin to see beyond it?

By altering the power dynamic and so, doing away with pervasive racist policies.

Which means being empowered, ourselves, to rise up as anti-racists:

Confessing racist ideas we support or maintain...

Combatting racism by leveling societal inequities...

Confronting racialized behaviors that we witness,

In essence, changing our view of the world [& our place within it.]

Kendi, articulate academic who founded the Center for Anti-Racism

at American Univ. before recreating it, I'm proud to say, at my alma mater, B.U.,

Was just finishing his much-heralded book [How to Be an Anti-Racist](#) at the start of 2018

When he was diagnosed at 37 with stage IV colon cancer.

Perceiving his personal fight in the mirror of our nation's he reflected:

"What if we treat racism the way we treat cancer?

*Saturate the body politic with the chemotherapy of anti-racist policies
that shrink the lesions of racial inequity, ensure there are clear margins,
and treat any recurrence before it can grow..."*

Kendi then knowingly adds: *"But before we treat, we must believe all is not lost.*

Racist policies are not indestructible; racial inequities are not inevitable...

Racism is not even 600 years old. It's a cancer we've caught early." [Kendi, pgs 237-238]

John Lewis' death from pancreatic cancer at 80 attests to the power of a single life to

effect change...American hero who was celebrated by a spectrum of national leaders,

No tribute was more gracious and powerful than President Barack Obama's.

*"The life of John Lewis was, in so many ways, exceptional. It vindicated the faith in our
founding...that most American of ideas, that any of us, ordinary people without rank or
wealth...can somehow point out the imperfections of this nation, come together to
challenge the status quo, and decide it is in our power to remake this country that we
love, until it more closely aligns with its highest ideals.*

*America was built by people like that...And someday when we do finish the long
journey toward freedom, when we do someday form a more perfect union...*

John Lewis will be a founding father of that fuller, fairer, better America."

[The March Is Not Over, Funeral of John Lewis, B. Obama, July 30, 2020]

R #3—RESPONSIBILITY

WHY do I love **Jeopardy**?

Being Jewish to the core, in part, because every answer must be given in the form of a question, and we Jews live in the questions...Likewise, as a lover of learning, because I celebrate the exchange of knowledge for wisdom's sake.

But truth be told, it's the host. Alex Trebek, with a quick wit, gracious yet probing presence, since 1984, has been a beacon of gameshow integrity; nothing less than the arbiter of right and wrong. As last month, he explained:

"There's a certain comfort that comes from knowing a fact. There is reality, and there's nothing wrong with accepting that reality, even when it's hard. It's when you try to distort that reality, to maneuver it into accommodating your particular point of view, your personal bigotry...That's where you run into problems."

So many manipulate reality these days to try and convince us it is otherwise.

But "Reconceiving our World" compels us to perceive a planet in pain;

A reality far from what it must be—with viruses still raging, in order to see where our responsibility truly lies...

We were gathered at AME Zion Church in Mt. Vernon, a year ago last Spring,

At a Sunday afternoon AJC sponsored multi-faith program on fighting racism.

There were choirs and clergy speakers, and though I don't recall what anyone said, [myself included] one powerful, dynamic woman's words,

a Black Baptist from the Church in Bedford stuck with me: "I don't need you to patronize. I don't need you to sympathize. I'm just looking for allies."

I shook my head in unwavering agreement; may have even shouted "Amen!"

Drawn to her call, there was only one problem.

I wasn't sure what it meant for me to be her *ally*...

The Allied Forces during WWII formed an Alliance which,

By coordinating efforts, combatted the advance of fascist forces Germany, Italy & Japan...

But knowing Russia found its way into the Alliance in 1941,

Ally for me had questionable undertones...The roots had to mean more than mutual interest.

It was African American philosopher, Harvard Prof, & intellectual troublemaker Cornell West who clarified the call...

"Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was not an ALLY to MLK Jr. They were two brothers: One from the Jewish tradition and one from a Black Church tradition. They came together as human beings in the name of integrity, honesty and decency. Heschel understood that in Jewish tradition, to be decent is to be in solidarity with people who are suffering. Not just Black people. Could be indigenous; could be the Goyim. Whoever it is, if they are hurting, it's his human responsibility."

[*"Future Perfect"* Interview with Sigal Samuel, 7.29.20]

Seeing the uncertain state of our daily lives—perilous, precarious,
unsteady footing on very shaky ground...

the prospect of world renewal seems overwhelming...

With so many struggling, suffering,

It's hard to know who to help, or even how.

Most times it seems like enough just to hold ourselves up.

But early 20th century Jewish existentialist Franz Rosenzweig

Revealed the secret—the miracle—of the responsibility

That beckons our most humane/holy response...

*"Each of us can only seize by the scruff whoever happens to be closest to us
in the mire...And the miraculous thing is that although each of us stands in the
mire our self, we can each pull out our neighbor, or at least, keep her from
drowning. None of us has solid ground under our feet. Each of us is only held up
by that neighborly hand...the result being that we are each sustained by the next
one, most of the time, **mutually holding one another up.***

*All this mutual upholding—a physical impossibility—becomes possible only
Because the great Hand from above supports all these holding human hands
by their wrists. It is this, and not some nonexistent "solid ground under foot"
that enables all human hands to hold & to help. [So understand,]
There is no such thing as standing—**there is only being held up.**"*

In a world filled with questions, many beyond us, we must realize:

When it comes to renewing our lives—reconceiving this world,

WE are the answer to God's question.

We defeat dis-ease with interdependent human decency.

We repair inequity with right-minded policy & real/reciprocal relationship.

You don't have to be whole yourself to soothe another's broken heart.

You don't actually need to grab a hand to support/uplift a wounded soul.

This hour calls for moral courage, uncompromising kindness,
brotherly/sisterly solidarity...[and] reawakened responsibility.

Holding one another up and so daily keeping our world from falling apart,
With life-affirming audacity and unfailing hope

May the Holy One help us, this New Year,

to make our world more humane, more holy & whole...AMEN