

The Aces Up Our Sleeves

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"Are you lucky?" That was one of the interview questions that my rabbinical school classmates and I were asked. We were in Cincinnati for a few days to meet with congregational leaders from a couple dozen synagogues in the hopes that one of them would hire each of us for our first jobs out of school. During breaks between interviews, we would compare notes about congregations and the interview experience. None of us knew what to do with the question, "are you lucky?"

Clearly the right answer was, "Yes, I am lucky." After all, who wants to hire someone who says that they're not lucky? But none of us felt lucky getting asked that question in an interview. And what does "lucky" even mean? That we have privilege and blessings in our lives? Or that more good comes our way than it does to the average person? Did saying we were lucky suggest that we were superstitious or that we believed that our fates were predetermined?

I don't actually remember how I answered the question. I think I was too flustered by the million thoughts running through my head when I heard it. So it's not surprising that I didn't get a second interview. I guess that was good luck, though, because not going there meant that I got to come here.

But this isn't an interview and there's no way for me to know your answer, although you could put it in the chat if you'd like. So -- are you lucky?

I think a lot of us would say that we are lucky, that we have gifts and privileges and blessings that make our lives tend toward the good. I know that some of us would say that we're not lucky, that hardship and heartache and tragedy always seem to find us. There are also those of us who think we're supposed to feel lucky but don't, and those of us who most people think are pretty unlucky when we actually feel the opposite. And then there are those of us who think that luck is just how we make sense of the random, chance experiences that we encounter throughout our lives.

The psychologist Maria Konnikova decided to research luck, especially the line between luck and skill. Where does one go to research luck? Apparently, to the poker table. Konnikova got a coach, learned some math, and used her own experience as a psychologist. In a little over a

year, she learned to play poker so well that she won a pro poker tournament. But how much was good luck and how much was her ability to read people or calculate the odds?

It turns out that luck was helpful but not enough. In her book *The Biggest Bluff*, she says that she did worse when she relied on chance to give her good cards. When she counted on luck, she played defensively and worried that the cards she got weren't good enough. Even when she had good cards, she would bet less and fold more. She says, that she "saw luck as something that happened to her." She "was seeing [her]self as this helpless pawn being tossed by the winds of fate." In other words, when she played like the game was beyond her control, she generally lost.

Her coach helped her reframe luck: He said, "You have to get that internal locus [of control] and say, 'OK, sure these things are happening, but what am I doing?' Don't focus on the luck. ... Focus on what you're doing, and what you *can* do to reclaim agency." What could Konnikova do? And she could rely on her skill at reading people, she could bluff, she could use the mathematicians' focus on odds to push them, and she could fold early to wait for something better. Thinking like this, Konnikova won significantly more, even with a mediocre hand of cards. And when she lost, she knew that she had done the best she could with the tools she had. It wasn't about good or bad luck; it was about how she responded to what chance provided. Reclaiming agency was the ace up her sleeve.

Jewish tradition, including the *Un'taneh Tokef* prayer that we'll offer tomorrow morning, has a slightly different perspective on chance, but ultimately comes to the same conclusion---it's how we respond to our experiences that determines the outcome. We say,

ותשובה ותפילה וצדקה מעבירין את רוע הגזירה

Ut'shuvah ut'filah utz'dakah maavirin et roa hag'zeirah.

Through repentance, prayer, and righteous giving, we can transcend the harshness of the decree.

Bad things may happen to us over the coming year. We don't necessarily know why. But when we accept what we're handed and just go along with it, much of the blessings that we could experience will be lost. Even times of joy may taste somewhat bitter. If, instead, we focus on what

we can do and if we lead with the best of what we have to offer, the suffering won't be so painful and the joy will be that much sweeter.

As luck would have it, Cantor Rosalie Will, who taught for us about a month ago, posted this adaptation of the Un'taneh Tokef by Rabbi Joseph Meszler this morning. This adaptation emphasizes the importance of our own response to the events of the coming year. Meszler writes:

"On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed:
That this year people will live and die,
some more gently than others
and nothing lives forever.
But amidst overwhelming forces
of nature and humankind,
we still write our own Book of Life,
and our actions are the words in it,
and the stages of our lives are the chapters,
and nothing goes unrecorded, ever.
Every deed counts.
Everything you do matters.
And we never know what act or word
will leave an impression or tip the scale.
So if not now, then when?
For the things that we can change, there is *teshuvah*, realignment,
For the things we cannot change, there is *tefilah*, prayer,
For the help we can give, there is *tzedakah*, justice.
Together, let us write a beautiful Book of Life
for the Holy One to read."

T'shuvah, *t'filah*, *tz'dakah* - realignment, prayer, and justice. These are the aces up our sleeves, the ways we reclaim agency and make the best of what life throws our way.

So let's talk 5780 and 2020 - the Jewish year that has just ended and the secular year that is three-quarters through. While the first half of 5780 had a pretty normal mix of good and bad, the second half has felt like worse things happening on top of bad things happening on top of horrors. It's gotten to the point where we can't even keep up with everything that's going on. In March we hoped that the pandemic would end and we'd be back to normal. Now, every time something bad happens, Facebook is filled with comments about how "that's so 2020," as though this happens to be a particularly unlucky year. I've even started to see comments from

Jewish friends that maybe it's 5780 that was unlucky and that, now that it's 5781, things will get better.

Yes, there are a handful of chance occurrences that are worse because they arrived around the same time, but the truth is, most of the bad luck we're seeing this year is not the chance occurrences themselves, but how we as individuals, as communities, and even as a nation have responded to these situations.

The novel coronavirus that has been plaguing our world for nine months was a bit of bad luck. But the response of national leaders has made it a tragedy. We needed unity, government support of preventative measures, and a commitment to preserve life. Instead, we've had a President who downplays the risk, ignores recommendations for minimizing spread, reduces testing capacity, and then says, "it is what it is." We've had partisan battles about mitigation efforts and whether the primary goal is to preserve life or to preserve the economy, as though they're mutually exclusive instead of inextricably intertwined.

These bad responses to bad situations have made everything exponentially worse. Maria Konnikova calls these responses "luck dampeners." We not only make the current situation worse, we actually make it harder for good things to happen in the future. Avoidance, ignorance, stinginess, and complaining push away the opportunities that would make things better. That's part of why this year feels so terrible---we've closed off the possibilities with our negative reactions.

It's time for national *t'shuvah*, for our leaders to return to what's right for sustaining the country and its people. It's also time for personal *t'shuvah*, for each of us to consider how we have contributed to making this terrible situation worse and what we are going to do to try to make it better. Where has our anger pushed others away when we need, more than ever, to feel close? When have we complained ourselves into isolation? When have we railed against the unfairness of it all without offering better options? What wrongs can we repair to make us more open to the good that can come our way?

That being said, I want to acknowledge the luck amplifiers in our community, the ways we have responded with "what can I do to make things better?" Our Temple Sinai family has stepped up

to offer support beyond what I would have ever expected. We had dozens of volunteers make calls to check on each and every congregant this spring and summer. We've had congregants offer technical and other support to those who needed help accessing our services and programs. We've had congregants make deliveries of groceries and, recently, our *machzorim*, our High Holy Day prayerbooks, to keep the more vulnerable among us safe from exposure. And we've had very generous donations to help support those who have been struggling financially because of the pandemic. Each person who has stepped up has made it easier for others to join in. The generosity, the *tz'dakah*, in our community has made this terrible situation more tolerable for many. I know I'm grateful to be part of this community. I hope you are too.

So I'm not hoping for a luckier new year in 5781 or 2021. Instead I'm hoping that each of us will take the time to think about what we need to *do*, to *change*, to *improve* our responses when bad things happen. I'm hoping that we will pray together to lift each other's spirits and enhance our sense of unity. I'm hoping that we each give what we can to support and sustain our community to help us see the blessings and gifts that can accompany our struggles. May our commitment to *t'shuvah*, *t'filah*, and *tz'dakah* in the coming year be the aces up our sleeves so that we can open ourselves and our community to the possibilities to come. May this be God's will.