

# Yom Kippur Sermon - 5781

## Rabbi Ari Kaiman

**Thesis:** If not now when: / Gam zeh Ya'avor

There was once a wise King who had a vivid dream. In it there was a magical ring. The ring made all pain less painful, and all joy more joyful. The King awoke completely convinced of the ring's existence. He summoned his most loyal servant and charged him with a mission to find this ring. All throughout the Kingdom the servant searched, going to every metalworker and jeweler, tracking down any lead. But everywhere the servant looked nobody knew of this magic ring. He left the kingdom and began searching other kingdoms, asking for the ring that made all pain less painful, and all joy more joyful. Finally, after years of searching, he was about to give up, and the servant tried a small, unassuming store, the kind that sells all sorts of chachkies and knickknacks. The servant, with almost no hope left within him asked if the owner knew of a magic ring, a ring that would lessen pain and increase joy, and the owner without hesitation replied - you finally came! I have been waiting for you! The shopkeeper went into a drawer, and pulled out a simple metal ring. This is a ring that will lessen pain and increase joy for anyone who wears it. The servant offered to pay any price, but the shopkeeper replied, anyone who has the wisdom to seek this ring deserves it free of charge.

The servant rushed back to his King and presented the magical ring. This ring was not gold or silver, it had no gems. Just three Hebrew words were it's only adornment. *Gam Zeh Ya'avor*: This too shall pass.

The King began to wear the ring, and at first, nothing happened. Then a day came when the King was particularly sad, he looked at the ring and remembered, *gam zeh ya'avor*, this too shall pass, and he felt a little less sad. On the day of his daughter's wedding, he looked at the ring and remembered, *gam zeh ya'avor*, and remembered to savor every moment of that special day.

The ring became his most treasured possession, and its wisdom stayed with him all the days of his life.

We all need the wisdom of *Gam Zeh Ya'avor* today. There's a lawn sign on Highland that said "Please make it stop." Almost every conversation I have, every sermon I give ends reminisces about how much we miss seeing one another face to face, how hard it is right now, how much we hope to be together again soon. We all need to remember that "This too will pass." We all need to keep close at hand the knowledge that all of this is temporary.

The reason why *Gam Zeh Ya'avor* works to lessen our pain is not only because these hard moments we are in will not be forever, but also because the present moment is ultimately all we have. When we spend our time living in the past or waiting for the future, we miss the fullness of the life we are living right now.

*Im ain ani li mi li* - If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

*U'ksheani L'atzmi, mah ani* - If I am only for myself, what am I?

*V'im lo achsav, aimatai?* **And if not now, when?**

"If not now, when" can be a call for the urgency of the moment, the urgency of self care, and the urgency of caring for others, but it is also a call to be present in this very moment, no matter how difficult.

Today is the final day of the Yamim Noraim - the Days of Awe. But there are a lot of other names for these holy days - names that call us to the present moment. Rosh Hashanah - the head of the year is also known as "Hayom Harat Olam" **Today** is the day the World was conceived. It's known as "Yom HaDin" the day of judgement. Every Musaf Amidah ends with the poem "HaYom" On this day.

Today is not only known as Yom Kippur - the Day of Atonement - it is also “Shabbat Shabbaton” As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel might say, the ultimate sanctuary of time.

How many of us are taken out of the present moment every day as we obsess over news stories that are overanalyzing the past or trying to predict the future? How can we have a true Shabbat when our minds cycle through every horror that just happened and try to imagine every possible way out of this.

We cannot live in the past, all that happened in 5780 it's over now. All the good, and all the hardship, they are written in our book of life. The point of a season of repentance is the opportunity to read our story, learn and grow from it. *Cheshbon HaNefesh* taking account of our soul is not to change our past actions, or to dwell on them, the point of *cheshbon hanefesh* is to commit to making better decisions in the present moment, and every future present moment.

We cannot live in the future either. None of us could have predicted the present that we are in right now. We cannot imagine every possible future. *Mi Yichyeh U'Mi Yamut* - Who will live and who will die? We cannot know. But what we believe is *Teshuva, Tefillah, and Tzedakah Ma'avirin et Roah Ha-Gezeirah* - repentance, prayer, and righteous giving will avert the severity of whatever is going to happen.

How does *Teshuva* avert the severity of whatever is going to happen? *Teshuva* is as simple and as challenging as taking your feet and turning them to walk in a different direction. *Teshuva* doesn't happen in the past, and *teshuva* doesn't happen in the future. When we commit to be the best version of ourselves today, regardless of whatever may happen, we will experience meaningful living that comes with self-improvement. *Im Lo Achshav Aimatai* - we make the right choice today, now.

How does *Tefillah* avert the severity of whatever is going to happen? Prayer is a form of mindfulness meditation - a reading mantra that allows us to

connect with divinity. The benefits of meditation are scientifically proven. Meditation reduces stress and anxiety. It's also fulfilling *Pirkei Avot - Im ain ani li mi* - if I am not for myself, who will be for me. If we commit to being present in the moment through *tefillah*, then whatever may happen at least we will have the meaningful living that comes with mindfulness. *Im Lo Achshav Aimatai* - We center ourselves, today, now.

How does *Tzedakah* avert the severity of whatever is going to happen? Giving of ourselves for the sake of others is fulfilling *U'ksheani L'atzmi Mah Ani* - If I am for myself, what am I? A world where I care for another is also a world with the potential for someone to care for me. When we stay at home to remove one possible vector for the virus to spread we are performing an act of *tzedakah*. When we reach out to someone who is different than we are and we simply listen - we are performing an act of *tzedakah*. When we commit to a cause to apply our God given abilities and gifts to, we are performing acts of *tzedakah*. When we perform acts of *tzedakah* we gain meaning and purpose in life, we leave a legacy. *Im Lo Achshav Aimatai?* We step up to action and justice today, now.

How are we at Shearith helping you living in the present moment? Our building may be closed, but we have furthered our mission and vision every day of this pandemic, we are living in the moment every single day - despite the challenges and difficulties we are facing. *Im lo achshav aimatai* - if not now, when?

We are investing in the connections that are the foundation of our community. In the coming weeks and months, we are going to be working to better understand and document who you are in this community. What animates your engagement? What kind of opportunities motivate your involvement? How can we be a better community for you? We're shifting from the model of programming to the model of relational Judaism. We are educating our children and one another in Jewish values, Hebrew language and the continuing story of our people.

We are creating live spaces to continue our communal prayer practice. As Past President and evening minyanaire Ed Jacobson says, these zoom services are remarkably “Kosher.” In a few minutes, we’re going to reenter our time for prayer, a time to present in this very moment, and connect to God in the music and ancient words of our tradition. We will elevate our spirits and feel God’s presence through prayer experiences.

We are creating opportunities to make this world a better place through our Ahavat Chinam opportunities. We are going to learn and grow through the work of our equity committee. We are embracing our covenantal responsibility to comfort all who are suffering and celebrate each other’s joys.

May we all have the strength to be present in this moment, no matter how challenging, or how good because this moment will pass. May we have the strength to become the best version of ourselves, the self that God sees within us. May we finish this holiday season with strength, and carry that strength every day with us through 5781, whatever the year brings.

G’mar Hatimah Tovah!