

One of the unexpected gifts of moving is that you have to touch just about everything you own as you pack and then unpack. Part of the reason the process takes me so long is that each item holds memories and meaning. I was reminded of this when I came across the book “All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten” Even if you haven’t read the book, you know all you need to from the title and it has spawned a thousand memes in the 30 years since it was published.

I was inspired to think of this book as I was contemplating the possibility of another book that could be written now. The title of this one would be, “All I need to know, I learned during COVID.”

What have we learned?

Certain things seem less important than we used to believe or not necessary at all. Most of us have had fewer haircuts or nail appointments than we normally would. Walks outside have replaced time spent in the gym. I have mixed feelings about missing the Olympics this year. We are finding ways to work without offices and I’m sure few of us miss commuting.

I know, as a rabbi, I miss connecting with people. Yes, it can be done on zoom and on the phone but these are still poor substitutes for being physically together with someone. This has been hard at times when I want to give a supportive hug or when I want to slap an excited high five. Just the awkwardness of greeting and leaving someone’s presence is punctuated by the lack of a hug or a handshake.

We’ve learned that some things we rarely gave much thought to are suddenly must have items. How many of us searched early on in vain for toilet paper, flour or yeast? Then as we entered the summer there was a shortage of bikes and swimming pools.

Now, as children are starting back to school, you would be hard-pressed to find a desk for a child’s room that they can sit at and do homework.

We can even look to the future. As the weather turns cold, but people still want to be outside, where the transmission is less likely, there will probably be a rush on items like outdoor heaters and fire pits.

But, most importantly, we have learned that we, as individuals and as a community, are resilient. We have adapted and we have learned new ways of connecting with others. For some that means enduring financial hardship, loss of jobs and income. Some have also struggled with the isolation, especially those living alone or, God forbid, in an abusive relationship and are isolating with their abuser. They have needed to find additional strength to persevere and be resilient.

Most of us have learned a heightened sense of gratitude. We, overall, are grateful for our health.. Those who have recovered from COVID-19 are grateful for the healthcare

they received. The families of those who didn't recover are grateful for the care they received as they approached the end of their lives.

What else have we learned during this unusual time?

Go easy on yourself. You're doing great. This is just really hard.

This may be the hardest lesson of COVID-19 to internalize. After all, we have Facebook and Instagram to show us how many of our friends are learning a new language, mastering French cooking or designing incredible learning projects for their kids while they hold down a full-time job. It can be easy to feel like we aren't *doing* enough. Like we aren't enough. The judgement is coming at us from all sides.

This is really important and quite timely. Another name for Rosh Hashanah is Yom HaDin, the Day of Judgment. It is a time, the tradition tells us, where our deeds are placed on a scale, merits, and good deeds on one side, misdeeds and transgressions on the other. If I now have you worried about being judged from above as well as from within and without, then the rabbis of the Talmud are here to set your mind at ease.

In the Talmud, the rabbis look at a verse from Isaiah which reads: **"I will bring them to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in the house of My prayer"**

The rabbis wonder at the phrase "the house of My prayer" If God was talking about a synagogue, it would say "the house of *their* prayer" meaning us, the people. The image of a house of God's prayer elicits the question, "What does God say when God prays?" An answer is given by **Rav Zutra bar Tovia who said that Rav said:**

**God says: May it be My will that My mercy will overcome My anger towards Israel for their transgressions, and may My mercy prevail over My other attributes through which Israel is punished, and may I conduct myself toward My children, Israel, with the attribute of mercy, and may I enter before them beyond the letter of the law.**

This story should soothe our troubled souls. God recognizes that we are guilty of transgressions, that we have missed the mark, that we have failed. Yet, God wishes mercy for us. God recognizes our imperfections and loves us anyway.

Today is Yom HaDin, it is our Judgment Day. A day when we come before the Divine and state our case, asking that God's mercy prevails over the Divine attribute of justice. And the secret is, God wants that too.

At the same time we stand before God, we are judging ourselves. We can learn from God's prayer to focus not just on judgment but also on compassion and mercy. We must ultimately emulate God by seeing the flaws but showing ourselves compassion anyway.

We are our own worst critics but we need to remember this most important lesson of COVID-19: Go easy on yourself. You're doing great. This is just really hard.

But, just because we judge our own actions with mercy like God does, does not mean we agree to see ourselves as powerless in the face of the scales weighing our good deeds against our bad. A regular image that the rabbis use for this judgment is a scale. In fact, the zodiac sign for Libra, which begins September 23rd is the scales. Now, most people would consider a Rosh Hashanah starting after the 23rd to be "late" but it certainly happens.

The scales are seen as the device God uses to weigh out our merits against our transgressions.

Once we judge ourselves and reflect on how God judges us as well, we can use the imagery of the scales in a different way. We can ask, not how do our merits weigh against our transgressions but how do we tip the scales of the world? Do the actions we take move the world in a positive direction or negative.

One of the things about the pandemic is that it is not the only thing that weighs on our minds. There are so many other ways we see the world out of alignment, out of balance.

Do we tip the scales of our world and our country towards justice? How should we respond when injustices are carried out by our country? Do we act to support those in need? What is our role in protecting the planet from global warming? Do we support people of color in our communities? Do we advocate for the rights of LGBTQ members of the community?

Rambam in his legal code, the Mishne Torah, in the section of Laws of Realignment (3:4) states:

If someone commits one transgression, they will overbalance themselves and the whole world to the side of guilt, and be a cause of its destruction; but if someone performs one meritorious act, behold, they will overbalance themselves and the whole world to the side of virtue, and bring about their own and their salvation and save the world."

In the vast universe, it could be reasonable to see ourselves as insignificant. But Rambam is arguing the opposite. He wants us to know that in the face of disorder and chaos, each action we take can tip the balance of the scales of the world. We can't allow for those who would benefit from disorder to thrive while we sit quietly.

We could come to this point in the year and feel dejected. We could think that we haven't done enough to improve ourselves or to improve the world. This is where we have to remember to judge ourselves with mercy. We should also take the opportunity to learn from our mistakes and to use the point we are at now as a new beginning.

The Hasidic master Rebbe Nahman of Breslov used to tell his followers that they should treat their regrets like gifts. He said, “The agony of regret is not like other kinds of agony, for it increases your days and adds to your life.”

Do we have some regrets? In the words of Frank Sinatra, “Regrets, I have a few.” The regrets we have, may be “too few to mention” or they may be many, either way, these are opportunities and as Rebbe Nachman says, gifts. They set the trajectory of our life. They give you purpose so that in the future you can take them off your list of regrets. We write the next chapter of our book of life. We write the next chapter of the world’s book of life. If we have a regret, it can be a tool to do better and to make our life and the life of the world, better.

There is a tradition, as we approach the new year, to look for phrases in the Bible whose letters add up in value to the numerical value of the year. We are entering 5781 and one of the phrases that matches that value is:

עֲזֵי יְזַמְרֵת יְהוָה

Yah the LORD is my strength and might,

This is certainly a year when we need all the strength and might we can get. It occurs to me that Robert Fulghram didn’t write “All I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten” in second grade or even twelfth grade. It wasn’t until much later, as an adult, that he could see how important the lessons of kindergarten were in his life. So too for us, we will best be able to learn the lessons of COVID-19 when it is in the rearview mirror. Hopefully, that will be soon and then we can all reflect on the impact it has on our scales.

May this be a year, that in spite of the challenges we face, and the reasonable inclination to retreat inward, that we find the strength to push forward, to learn from these difficult times, to not allow complacency. May we work to find common ground with others and to tip the balance of the judgment of the world to bring about peace and justice. May 5781 be a year of healing. Healing of individuals, healing of our country, and healing of the planet.

Amen