

## **Better than “Normal” – Erev Rosh Hashanah 5781/2020**

by Rabbi Katie Mizrahi

Goodbye 5780, year that WAS.

Can't say I'm too sorry to see you go --

Year of the Pandemic

Year of George Floyd, and so many others,

Year of Impeachment and acquittal,

Year of Wildfires so intense their smoke blotted out the sun.

And just hours ago, this also became the year of losing Justice Ruth Bader  
Guinsberg.

Of course there have been moments of joy and love and immense gratitude. There  
have even been gifts sheltering in place. But overall, let's be honest – on the  
global scale, it's been a parade of catastrophes since last Rosh Hashanah.

I find myself rushing to redeem it all, looking for lessons, searching for hope. And  
I promise I will go there, but first, I think it's important to just acknowledge what  
we're living through.

Loss loss loss loss

Celebrations postponed,

Mourning without hugs.

Zoom school, zoom camp, zoom meetings, zoom services,

(and that's when we're lucky and the internet is working!)

Fear, grief, anxiety

Loneliness, isolation

Disruption

Uncertainty

So much trauma

And chronic toxic stress.

All of those fight or flight hormones building up with no where to release.

The haunting Unetoneh Tokef prayer of the High Holy Days has never felt so real to me. We live it day by day:

Who shall live and who shall die?

Who by fire and who by water?

Who by an earthquake and who by a plague?

Most years, that moment is a theatrical ritual confrontation with mortality.

This year, tuning in to services on a screen, unsure if it's safe to go outside and just breathe, we don't need a ritual drama to "get us in the mood".

I've been wondering -- what would Maimonides or Hillel and Shammai or any of the other great rabbis make of this time we are living through? In my imagination, I hear our conversation.

"You say a great plague afflicts all of humanity? Fires and great storms - worse by the year? And the sun, dark at noonday in the most powerful empire of the world?"

"Yes."

"God is definitely trying to tell you something." Rashi would say.

"You say that the richest land in the world lets one in five children go hungry every day? That it separates and imprisons women and children at its borders who are fleeing violence? You say that officers charged with keeping the peace have killed citizens with many witnesses time and again, and still there is no justice?"

“Well, Yes.”

“Repent. Do Teshuvah.” The Baal Shem Tov would say.

“Pray with all your might. Give Tzedakah.” Rambam would say.

And as much as I love these rabbinic ancestors of mine, as much as I cherish their wisdom, a skeptical voice arises within me.

“You really think that will change anything? Isn’t that what we’ve always done?”

I’d ask. “It hasn’t worked out so well, has it? Never kept those pogroms from happening. And you might have heard – the last hundred years have not been kind to us.”

At this I imagine Rabbi Akiva would sigh and smile gently with infinite compassion and the serious eyes of one who has known great suffering.

“Depends on what you think it means for it to ‘work out,’ my great great great great great great ... grand-daughter. Go look a little closer at that piyyut, that prayer you were just talking about...”

And you know, Rabbi Akiva was right.

It turns out Unetoneh Tokef doesn't just leave us with a message of mortality and dread. We don't just look into the abyss to scare ourselves into better behavior.

No. The prayer goes on.

Who shall live, who shall die, ... who will be humbled and who will be exalted...

SING U'teshuvah, utefilah, utzedakah maavirin et roah hag'zerah.

Lots to translate there.

But teshuvah – returning/repentance,

Tefilah - prayer,

and tzedakah - righteous giving,

so these three things, repentance, prayer and charity

ma'avirin et roah hagezerah.

That last phrase is a bit harder to translate properly. The literal translation is something like, cause the evil of the decree to pass.

In other words, these three things do not cancel the decree. We cannot defeat mortality. As hard as we pray, as much as we repent and give, there are things, many things, beyond human control.

But somehow, our ancestors advise us, there are three things we can do to lessen the suffering of our inevitable vulnerability.

Teshuvah Tefilah Tzedakah.

For now, I want to focus on just one. Teshuvah. Repentance. More Literally, Return.

Return could imply that we are going back. Back to something from before. Like a kind of innocence lost. A return to the Garden of Eden. Before the sin.

Not unlike the backward glance of making America great AGAIN, as if we need to go back to a time when we were once greater. Once better. Hmmmmm.....

Maybe it's about a Return To Reality?

I confess, I've been getting very confused lately about TV and reality, and reality TV, And reality tv becoming reality, and Reality becoming TV

And what is real anyway?

Maybe teshuvah is just a return to normal?

Then again, I've also become quite confused about what "normal" means.

These days,

Sometimes the sun rises,

Sometimes the sun doesn't rise...

Sometimes there's a Democracy,

Sometimes the government uses violence to clear peaceful protestors for a photo op by a criminal posing as the leader of the free world.

I can't wait to get back to a normal

that's more normal

than the normal

before normal stopped being normal.

Oh, I do long for some things in that Pre-Pandemic Normal

Singing with you all in person is near the top of my list.

Letting my sons go on play dates and practice jiu-jitsu.

Sitting in a restaurant. Going to a concert or a ball game.

Hugging friends.

Celebrating simchas with big groups of extended family

Wow. Normal sounds so amazing.

But while just getting back to “normal,” would indeed be a vast improvement. My main point is this -- let’s aim higher.

Raise your hand if you miss a good “normal” rush hour stuck in traffic.

There are things about the “old normal” better left behind.

Activist and author Rebecca Solnit wrote recently in the Guardian:

“... one of the things most dangerous ... is the lapse into believing that everything was fine before disaster struck, and that all we need to do is return to things as they were. Ordinary life before the pandemic was already a catastrophe of desperation and exclusion for too many human beings, an environmental and climate catastrophe, an obscenity of inequality.”

The longer we pause the “normal” routines of pre-pandemic reality, the more we can look upon them with clear eyes and see where our choices lie.

In this time, we see the painful cost of our broken healthcare system, our lack of worker protections and adequate child care, our radical and misguided selfish individualism.

We see that for people of color in this country, America has never yet lived up to its own ideals of freedom and justice for all.

And on the West Coast, trapped in our homes and unable to breathe, readying our bags for evacuation, we experience the cost of counting on slow incremental change to address our climate catastrophe.

Maybe the normal we thought was so normal wasn't ever really so normal after all.

We must aim higher.

We must have the courage to imagine a better world than 2019 or even 2015, or even, as great as it was ... a world better than the 1980s.

The teshuvah that 2020 calls for is a teshuvah that seeks, not just a return to normal, but a return to moral. And by that I don't mean a puritanical oppressive "morality" as it's defined by some supposedly religious circles.

I mean a return to principles of respect, honesty, humility and human dignity. A morality that recognizes the value of every human being, regardless of race, religion, gender, sexuality, ability, or nationality. A morality that recognizes the claim of future generations to a healthy planet.

Imagine what would it mean for that kind of moral compass to guide our policies and laws and economic and political structures.

That is the kind of teshuvah that takes some of the evil out of whatever unwelcome experiences life may throw at us. Not a return to some nostalgic never-was "normal." A return to the path of righteousness. Akiva and the others were right. Teshuvah is a wise, adaptive, and resilient response to adversity.

Natural disasters and other horrible tragedies will happen. Teshuvah cannot magically cure the virus or stop the storms. But it can help us to turn these tragedies into catalysts for overdue change in the human sphere.

But I still wonder -- How do we know what we surrender to, and what we can change?

I was recently talking to an Or Shalom member about how this time of racial justice awakening has helped her to realize that more change is possible than she had previously thought.

We learn to live with so much. We adapt. A statue seems so permanent. The name of a town, or a team. We tell ourselves that the deep transformation we long for is too much to hope for. Too big to imagine. We adjust our goals and work for incremental change.

And maybe that's a realistic strategy in normal times.

But now is not a normal time.

The same volatility and uncertainty that make this moment so excruciating open a powerful window for transformation. As George Packer wrote recently in the Atlantic, this could be America's "plastic hour," a "crucial moment" when deep transformation is suddenly possible.

It's so hard to stay hopeful as we are battered by crisis upon crisis upon crisis. It's tempting to want to rush back to the way things were as quick as we can. BUT. There is reason to hope for better than what came before.

This painful disruption gives us a chance, maybe a once in a lifetime, once in a century chance, to make big change for the good.

Right now, we are still in the cocoon, dissolving the caterpillar that once was. Letting go of so much that defined us, even to ourselves, before the pandemic.

How will we emerge?

Will we let ourselves change enough to become the butterfly? Or will we crawl back out again in a few months, little more than the earth-bound caterpillars we were before?

It's up to us.

And I pray that while we are in this mess, we are given what strength and patience and love and courage we need to make it through and help one another to make it through in health and safety. And may we also be given the spiritual imagination and determination we need to greet our moment with vision, and change ourselves and our world profoundly for the better. When this pandemic ends and we venture out of the chrysalis, may we find that our suffering and our heartfelt soul searching have been enough to forge us new wings with which to fly.

Shanah Tovah U'Metukah!