Every survey and article in the Jewish press is telling Rabbis to shorten their high holiday sermons this year. OK, so here’s mine in a nutshell: (head down and cry.)

I’m feeling a bit like both the Jewish pessimist and the Jewish optimist. The Jewish pessimist says “Oy, things are so bad, they can’t possibly get any worse!” And the Jewish optimist says, “Of course they can!”

Pandemics have literally changed the course of history way before COVID, as far back as the ten plagues in Egypt, and will continue to do so. Yellow fever, the blue death, the black death, it’s a wonder COVID didn’t get its own colour. As Elizabeth Kolburt wrote in the NY Times article Pandemics and the Shape of Human History: “…history is written not only by men but also by microbes.”

Suddenly, the modern world has become reacquainted with the oldest and most ancient reality of human history and because this experience is so foreign to us as modern people, as Western world people, we are psychologically and culturally unequipped. It behooves us to think through how this current pandemic will change modern history forever, in both negative and positive ways.

The negative is obvious. We have been through what disaster relief specialists call collective or mass trauma. While that’s a term applied to natural disasters or terrorist attacks, what makes Covid-19's trauma truly “massive" is its impact on the entire population – including those who never catch the virus. The constant disruption of real life and real time plus the constant repetition of pandemic news by the media triggers feelings of traumatic stress daily. The mourning rituals which normally comfort and ground us have been turned upside down. The ordinary world – friends, family, neighbours, places that symbolize normalcy have been recast as fraught with danger. The neighbour you might otherwise turn to for help becomes a possible source of infection. Travel, social networks, and communal gatherings like this one, so essential for our mental health, divide us into screen and in-person communities, and deciding whether or not to go indoors mentally taxes our normally decisive selves. The rituals of daily life become seen as opportunities for transmission, and the authorities enforcing quarantine or capacity limitations or even encouraging vaccinations become seen as agents of oppression.

Those of us who have been sick, or had friends or family ill or passed away *and* those of us who have stayed healthy and relatively physically unscathed by the disruption, in one way or another are experiencing PTSD—Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. We had the classic symptoms: nightmares, difficulty feeling positive emotions or joy, being constantly on guard for signs of danger, feeling excessively jumpy or grumpy, lack of concentration, fuzzy and forgetful thinking. These mass negative effects will be felt on human history.

But there will also be positive effects on human history, though much less obvious. This is not “silver lining” thinking. There’s no silver lining for the the unemployment, racism, anti-Semitism, anti-vaccination anti-science communal fracturing we’ve experienced; no silver lining to the individual illness and death. Instead of presenting “silver linings” I want to introduce you to the theory of Post-Traumatic Growth, or PTG, which is about what we as individuals can wrestle out and squeeze from a black cloud which has no silver lining.

Post Traumatic Growth, or PTG, is the other side of PTSD. Coined by researchers Lawrence Calhoun and Richard Tedeschi from the University of North Carolina, PTG posits that the frightening and confusing aftermath of trauma is also fertile ground for an unexpected positive outcome—that is, growth from the struggle with crisis. Psychologists and social workers and an increasing number of Rabbis are asking: in what positive ways has the global pandemic changed our mindsets? Calhoun and Tedeschi write: “the view that individuals can be changed, sometimes in

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radically good ways, by their struggle with trauma, is ancient and widespread.” Think of Jacob and his wrestle with the angel which left him with a limp and a new name. Think of Joseph and his struggle with his brothers and his trauma in the dry desert pit which led to his reconciliation with his father. And think of today’s Torah portion when Hagar and Ishmael get banished from their home. In the midst of their crisis, an angel meets the wandering Hagar and promises: despite the trauma of being thrown out, the boy will grow and have a full future; in fact, he will become the father of a great nation just like Isaac who survives his own trauma in tomorrow’s portion at the Akedah. The angel asks Hagar: mah lach, what do you have Hagar? I’m thinking the angel is not asking her "whats wrong Hagar?” because the angel must have known why Hagar was crying. The angel is asking “what do you have Hagar in your toolbox, what do you have from this trauma that you can learn?”

Today I want to suggest the ways we as individuals are experiencing post traumatic growth, and tomorrow at our 5782Palooza I'll look at PTG for our shul and for Judaism itself.

Two caveats: 1) I do not want in any way to negate, trivialize or devalue PTSD in any way. I know that many who experience severe life stress also experience negative psychological and physical troubles as a result. And 2) If you don’t think you experienced the kind of PTG I’m suggesting, if you didn’t learn Italian or become a sourdough bread expert, if you didn’t stop and smell the roses but only watched Netflicks all winter, don’t worry, I think you will find yourself in these PTG categories anyway.

Using qualitative data to identify broad categories of growth, Calhoun and Tedeschi name five areas in which trauma can produce a positive change, and all of them are relevant to us in this High Holiday soul-searching time. They are: realizing our personal strengths, reprioritizing our time, relating to others, appreciation of life, and spiritual development.

Comedian Seth Myers introduced the term “COVID Keepers” for these growth areas. These five are COVID keepers I hope we will hold onto. Think of these as “reverse Ashamnu”—the opposite of the Yom Kippur confessional when we list all the ways we’ve been weak. This is the list of all the ways we’ve been strengthened this year.

First, our strengths. When the midrash wonders why God chose Moses to lead the Jewish people, it asks: “what did God see in Moshe that Moshe didn’t see in himself?” What did we discover about ourselves that we didn’t know was there? We didn’t know we were so resilient. We didn’t know we were so flexible. We

didn’t know we were so patient. We didn’t know we were so appreciative. We didn’t know that we could take a deep breath and carry on. And now that we know these strengths in ourselves, we cannot unknow them.

Second, our time. A few years ago I gave a hard-hitting sermon criticizing us for the “cult of busy” we’d all joined. Well, many of us left that cult this year, and it no longer holds power over us. We’ve loosened the shackles of the competitive need to be busier-than-thou and we’ve learned to be unbusy, and thus more alive in the moment. We have learned finally to ask “what can I postpone?” What is really urgent, what is important, and what can wait? Now that we’ve had some quiet down time on our lives, we may never again over-programme ourselves to need it so badly.

Third, our relationships. We deepened them and widened them. We overcame what we thought were obstacles of time zones and distance. We who wouldn’t think of shlepping up to Thornhill made standing backyard dates and zoom Shabbat dinners with cousins and in-laws and people we used to travel with, from all over. We shed irrelevant and difficult relationships, and we re-established neglected ones. I-Thou, the meeting of two people without utilitarianism, without using each other or getting something from each other or needing something from each other, has become a way we really try to live.

Fourth, our Modim. We’ve shown tremendous appreciation for what we have, and for life itself, and we’ve said it outloud. We learned to say “thank you” to the clerks and cashiers we used to ignore. We paid attention to the shape of snowflakes and the colour of roses and the shifting shadows on the trees as we walked. And then, we paused to acknowledge it. We said shehecheyanu at seeing old friends or family finally in person. We wrote old fashioned thank you notes—even if by email—and I must tell you I’ve received more of them in the last 20 months than in 20 years of the Rabbinate, and boy am I grateful for that. And we learned to name our privilege while acknowledging our blessing.

And fifth, our souls. We found spiritual anchors—walking in nature, snowshoeing, meditation, yoga, music, a daily workout routine, a new pet. We discovered a Toronto we didn’t know we loved so much, and it helped ground us. We did with less, and we didn’t mind. We got creative. We nurtured our yetzer hatov, the inclination to do good, and volunteered to help people register for vaccines and baked cookies we left on neighbours porches and sought out places to support people of colour and immigrants. We came to shul more than we ever have, and found out those little zoom boxes let us into each other’s homes—and we stayed for an extra few minutes to say good Shabbos and to ask “how are you holding?”

I know it’s felt like we “lost a year.” We’ve had so many losses but we have not “lost” a year. We’ve grown in undeniably positive ways and thus we have gained something, some small measure of something we can carry into 5782. While we still may want to put down our heads and cry, here we are, humbled by a history-making microbe, and standing tall.

When the Israelites left Egypt, they actually took materials from their slavery, from their pain and their suffering, into the desert to rebuild with, to recast and reform those tangible difficult memories into a portable holy Mishkan. They had their own “keepers.” In fact, maybe much of the Torah itself is a catalogue of “keepers” our ancestors carried with them from their trauma in Egypt. If we reflect carefully we, like our ancestors, will have keepers we will bring from this narrow place, from this Mitzrayim we’ve been through, to recast and reform and rebuild, just like they did. Shana Tova.

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