

Yom Kippur, 1848. A cholera pandemic is sweeping through Eastern Europe. Millions have died. Rabbi Israel Salanter, head of the Musar yeshivas in Lithuania, stands at his pulpit on Yom Kippur morning with a piece of challah and a glass of wine in each hand. It is a crisis, and community health officials have recommended that eating is a way to stave off the illness. Rabbi Salanter recites kiddush and motzi in a full voice, and with tears in his eyes, proceeds to eat and drink in front of his entire congregation on Yom Kippur morning.

Rosh Hashana, 2020. A COVID pandemic has swept the world and way too many have died. I stand at my pulpit in my dining room, ring lights and cameras. It is a crisis, and community health officials have recommended cutting out many of the most beautiful readings and songs to keep the service short enough to stave off screen fatigue. I am in front of my computer on a day I normally do not drive, use electricity or the phone. I invite my congregation to join me on zoom, and with tears in my eyes, I press record.

You do what you gotta do. You do what is hard and what is right and what will help. And as I see it, 7 months to even 7 years is a blip on the Jewish history scene, and we have done this adaptation routine before.

Remember, when the temple was destroyed in 70 CE Judaism should have gone out of business. But our ability to do what you gotta do saved us. That doesn't mean it doesn't hurt. That doesn't mean it isn't hard.

A 13th century piyut or poem for Rosh Hashana, of unknown authorship but called Shir Hayichud, ends with these powerful words: "mizbe-ach evneh b'shibaron libi: I will build an altar from the broken pieces of my heart."

You take the pieces of your dashed dreams and you build an altar with them.

Rosh Hashana 2020. If you don't have a cottage or friends with cottages it's been a long hot summer and maybe you haven't drunk Quarantinis

laughing with friends in the backyard. Maybe you were furloughed or lost your job and CERB is ending. Maybe your grandkids live in the States and it's been 9 months since you've seen them and they don't want to go on zoom anymore for visits. Maybe your kids are anxious about being back in school and they've been leaning heavily on you while you are trying to work from home. Maybe a loved one had to go to hospital and you couldn't be there beside them. Maybe you live alone and are feeling extra lonely.

Now of course it depends on your temperament. Maybe you are an introvert so you enjoyed the quiet alone time and the release from pressures to socialize. Maybe you aren't a planner, you like to live in the moment without a thought as to where your next winter vacation will be. Maybe you hate shopping and you're so glad to have everything delivered.

And there are what we've come to know and love as the "silver linings": the quiet of less planes overhead, cleaner air and water, engagement with our neighbours, increased support for local businesses, reaching out to and reconnecting with friends who don't live close by. Pivoting in a way that made it possible for the shul to thrive even with its doors closed. The incredible generosity of City Shul members and high holiday plus participants who gave so we could do this.

"mizbe-ach evneh b'shibaron libi": We have spent all summer building altars from the broken pieces of our hearts.

Most of us say when asked how we are doing "I'm fine..." After all I have food, a house, *and* toilet paper. But don't you just want to say sometimes "I'm struggling today, but I don't know why;" or "I'm just not sure how I feel." May Pang wrote in Medium at the end of April: "I'm going to coin a new word .. The next time someone asks me how I'm feeling, I'm going to say, "I'm feeling Covish."

It is perfectly ok to feel Covish and even more perfectly ok to say you do. Because it's likely we are all going to feel Covish for a while to come. And it's important for us to acknowledge that. Author and child psychiatrist Dr.

Daniel Siegel has a therapeutic formula he uses with children that has nothing to do with COVID but I think can help us all. He calls it “name it to tame it” —say out loud what negative emotion you’re experiencing in order to get some distance from it. Labeling a difficult emotional experience allows you to take the reins back, if only briefly. There is truth in our pain, and there is growth in our pain— but only if our pain first acknowledged. By using our human gift of language, he says, with someone who cares about us, we might actually be able to make some order out of the chaos. And we Jews don’t go to a mountain top alone to name it, we do it in community and we do it on the holiest day of the year.

So we name it to tame it: shock, grief, disappointment, loneliness, fear, uncertainty. “Ambiguous loss” that’s unclear and lacks a resolution. The inability to solve this problem.

We name it to tame it today, here on Rosh Hashana on zoom: while virtual Judaism has allowed us to visit big name synagogues across the world and learn with each other across Canada and celebrate simchas together and mark passings together with participants from all over the world, it comes with a spiritual price-tag: we miss the full-bodied Judaism that is generated by face-to-face engagement.

I name it to tame it: Disorientation, and religious changes needing to be made immediately. Loss of members because they don’t use or like zoom. Loss of our shins—those fabulous 18 year old Israeli ambassadors who enrich our school and our shul in so many ways, who aren’t coming this year. Bar and Bat Mitzvah families not having their relatives in person, and the kids not standing in front of us all reading from our Torah scroll. Kids who love our Hebrew school but simply cannot sit in front of any more screen. Staff exhaustion and burnout.

Our Torah portion today has us weep with Hagar as she sits far away from her son in order to not see his suffering. She turns to God and says “let me not see the boys death.” The text says she sat a bowshot away—and thats much more than 6 feet. The Hasidic master Haemek Dvar comments that

she did it for *him*—she moved away so her crying wouldn't worsen his condition— but Rashi says she did it for *her*—the more Ishmael grew close to death the farther away from him his mother moved. Unlike Abraham who in tomorrow's reading will *walk with* Isaac in his anxiety, Hagar “checks out” when the going gets tough. We haven't had that privilege, to sit it out far away, to check out from our anxious children and lonely parents and struggling friends.

Our Machzor seems to understand this. After literally naming all our fears about the ways we can die in Unetaneh Tokef— who by stoning, who by wild animals, who by thirst, who by *plague*, our prayer ends with a formula, three action tools to take it from a thing you know in your head to a thing you do in the world: teshuva (repentance), tefila (prayer) and tzedakah (charity). I am going to retranslate those three for this COVID year as:

Teshuva: from *lashuv*, to return: returning again to the teachings, the Corona Torah we learned during the worst part of the pandemic;

Tefila: the cultivation of hope and faith;

And **Tzedakah:** practicing charity on ourselves as well as others, by exercising enormous amounts of compassion this year.

These three will help us temper the severeness of the decree in this year of dashed expectations. These three are the ways we move forward from taming it to living with it.

First, Teshuva: let us return to the beautiful, deep Corona teachings of the early spring:

- The realization that we are fragile by ourselves and that our strength lies in being part of a community.
- That there are some in our society more fragile than others and we must actively rectify that
- That we have to learn to not be afraid of solitude and alone time.
- That we must value those closest to us.
- That going back to basics is healing.

- That we must pay attention to our own mental health and to the mental health of everyone around us, and.
- That slowing down is beneficial

Second, Tefila: Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, “to be a Jew is to be an agent of hope in a world serially threatened by despair...” Hope is not about getting what we want, things working out for the best, or escaping disaster just in the nick of time. Vaclav Havel, wrote: “Hope is a state of mind, not of the world...It’s an orientation of the spirit...”

We must orient our spirits because we do not *find* hope— we *create* it. According to Viktor Frankl, Holocaust author of *Man’s Search for Meaning*, “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing... – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances.”

The Hebrew word for faith is “emunah,” and it means steadfastness. Faith does not require specific beliefs. Faith is the choice to remain steadfast in the face of uncertainty. Everyone on this screen today has shown faith in being here.

And **third, tzedakah**, compassion— for ourselves first and foremost, accepting that life is different right now and we are allowed to expect less of ourselves. (And *that* is very hard for a type A overachiever like me to say!) Compassion for others in surplus measures. Compassion for our shul by being patient and calm with the technological glitches that are bound to happen, by reaching out to the staff and checking in on us and by supporting our gargantuan programming efforts and online services by showing up. Compassion for our city: by continuing to do what we are supposed to do no matter how long or how inconvenient. Remember the old joke about how to get 50 Canadians out of a swimming pool? You simply say, “Please get out of the swimming pool.” Well, the province said to us, “Please get out of the swimming pool” and we did so without being asked twice. We must continue to do that.

So we've named it. It's up to each of us to tame it. What new ways have emerged in this crazy time for you to nurture and grow? What once served you well that you are ready to let go of? What pieces of your life have you discovered are really "core" for you? And what will you do in the 10 days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur to engage in teshuva, tefila and tzedaka? We move forward into the unknown with the only commitments we can really make this year: to reliving the hard lessons learned, to cultivating an attitude of faith and hope, and to an abundance of compassion. May this community be a source of strength for us in those commitments.

Shana Tova.