

## Certainty and Uncertainty

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I thank them for their generous support of the shul. May they all be written and sealed in the Sefer Hachaim for a year of good health, happiness, *bracha* and *hatzlacha*!

We **like** predictability and certainty. We **crave** it. We **need** it. We **expect** our lives to follow predictable patterns. We do, of course, anticipate and expect some changes, but even these changes are expected to mostly follow regular patterns. We assume our lives will run on time, following structure and order. Children go to school and camp. Adults go to work. We have our minyanim, shiurim, vacations, sports, visits to neighbors and friends, and Yamim Tovim with family and friends...

A predictable routine is highlighted in the Torah from the beginning -- ויהי ערב ויהי בוקר --  
Night is followed by day...right on schedule.

Life sometimes moves too fast, but predictably so.

To borrow from the song “Sunrise, Sunset” from **Fiddler on the Roof**:

*Sunrise, sunset, sunrise, sunset,*

*Swiftly flow the days,*

*Seedlings turn overnight to sunflowers,*

*Blossoming even as we gaze...*

This pattern was promised by Hashem after the *mabul*, the flood:

בראשית פרשת נח פרק ה פסוק כא - כב  
(כא) ... וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-לְבֹוֹ לֹא-אֶסְפָּה לְקַלְלֵל עוֹד אֶת-הָאָדָמָה בְּעֵבֹר הָאָדָם כִּי יֵצֵר לֵב הָאָדָם רַע מִנְעֻרָיו וְלֹא-אֶסְפָּה עוֹד לְהַכּוֹת אֶת-כָּל-  
חַי בְּאֶשׁ עֲשִׂיתִי: (כב) עַד כָּל-יְמֵי הָאָרֶץ אֲרַע וְקִצִּיר וְקָר וְחֹם וְקִיץ וְחֹרֶף וַיּוֹם וְלַיְלָה לֹא יִשְׁבְּתוּ:

**Rav Hirsch** writes, in *Chorev*, that we depend on predictable patterns so that we can function. In halacha, we often make an assumption about reality called “chazaka.” For example, if something was a certain way yesterday, I have a right to assume it will continue today and tomorrow, until something changes.

So, this morning we sit here truly in a state of shock. The order of our lives has been disrupted. This year is **very** different from last year, in ways that we never could have imagined. A microscopic virus, Covid19, has brought major world economies to their knees. The most cutting-edge researchers and scientists are still struggling to get ahead of it. Worldwide, close to 1 million people have died. In our country, over 200,000 have died. Included among them were thousands of frum Jews. Schools, shuls, and businesses all shut down for months. And now, fortunately, we are operating, but there is so much fear.

We are all too aware that one positive case, in the web of our social lives, can spread quickly like wildfire...sending dozens, even hundreds, into quarantine...or worse.

There is so much fear. So much anxiety. So much uncertainty.

Close your eyes and picture yourself sitting here last year. (Of course, you were probably in a different seat, perhaps a different minyan.) What were you thinking about then? What were your expectations, hopes, and dreams for the coming year? What were your fears?

Now look around. Everything is so different. Whoever imagined that life would be turned on its head...so suddenly?

But we must remember--When was this verdict decided? We said it last year... We will say it again this year...

בראש השנה יכתובו וביום צום כפור יחתמו. כמה יעברו וכמה יבראו. מי יהיה ומי ימות...**ומי במגפה!** מי ישלו ומי יתסר  
On Rosh Hashana it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed: Who will live and who will die; who with a **plague**? who will enjoy tranquility and who will suffer?

What exactly were we thinking about last year when we said these words? Maybe we conjured up images of the people we knew who had died in the previous year...or images of the people in our lives who were sick or struggling...of the things in our lives we thought were uncertain and unstable. But did we ever imagine how this year, which was so ordinary at the start, would end so strangely?

Last Rosh Hashana, we tried to convince ourselves that nothing is guaranteed. But if anyone had stood here and told us that such a plague was even a remote possibility, we would not have believed them.

In life, we often say words and they are just that, words...but no longer. Covid19 has taught us the true meaning of בראש השנה יכתובו וביום צום כפור יחתמו...there is real uncertainty today.

The Gemara in **Megilla 14a** teaches that we can hear something from Neviim and we can read it in seforim, but until something actually happens to us, we don't react. That's just human nature...

תלמוד בבלי מסכת מגילה דף יד עמוד א: ויסר המלך את טבעתו אמר רבי אבא בר כהנא: גדולה הסרת טבעת יותר מארבעים ושימונה נביאים ושבע נביאות שנתבאו להן לישראל, שכולן לא החזירו למוטב, ואילו הסרת הטבעת החזירן למוטב.

But now we really have begun to understand that there are no guarantees.

**Chazal** record that Rabbi Yehoshua taught his students to do teshuva one day before they died.

Rabbi Akiva asked his teacher: Rabbi, how do we know when that will be?

Rabbi Yehoshua responded: Exactly. Treat every day like it may be your last.

מסכתות קטנות מסכת שמחות דרבי חייה פרק ב הלכה א הלכה א: היה רבי יהושע אומר שוב יום אחד לפני מיתתך, אמר לו רבי עקיבה, רבי, למדני וכי יש אדם יודע אימתי הוא מת שיעשה תשובה, אמר לו כל שכן, בכל יום יאמר אדם, אעשה תשובה היום שמא אמות למחר, אעשה היום תשובה שמא אמות למחר, ונמצאו כל ימיו באין בתשובה.

This message hits a little closer to home this year. There really are no guarantees. We cannot take our lives for granted. We cannot take our health for granted. We cannot take anything for granted—

In *Elul 5745* (1984), the *Mashgiach* of the *Ponevezh Yeshiva of B'nei B'rak*, **Rav Chaim Friedlander** was undergoing treatment at the Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York City, and could not deliver his customary pre-Rosh Hashana *shmuess* to his students in Israel. He decided to send them a letter instead. He began by citing a *Gemara* in ***Maseches Rosh Hashana*** (16b):

א"ר יצחק כל שנה שרשה בתחלתה מתעשרת בסופה שנאמר מראשית השנה -מרשית כתיב ועד אחרית-סופה שיש לה אחרית.  
*Rabbi Yitzchak said that any year that begins with poverty will ultimately be enriched, and end in prosperity. This is deduced from the fact that the Torah describes the beginning of the year as reishis ha'shanah (leaving out the "aleph" in reishis), which may be interpreted as a poor year. The Torah is*

hinting that such a year will have an ending different than that with which it began (prosperous and bountiful).

**Rashi** explains the insight as follows:

שרשה בתחילתה -- שישראל עושין עצמן רשין בר"ה, לדבר תחנונים ותפלה, כענין שנאמר "תחנונים ידבר רש" (משלי י"ה).  
He says that a “poor” beginning to the year refers to a Rosh Hashana in which people envision themselves as needing to beg and plead for even their basic needs.

Rav Chaim Friedlander writes that the *Gemara* is giving us invaluable advice for receiving a judgment for a good year. It is not sufficient for us to merely view ourselves “as if” we are poor for the day. **We must honestly believe and internalize that our entire lot for the upcoming year – health, happiness, wealth, and family – will be determined on this day. In other words, at the present moment, we must understand that nothing is guaranteed and that we must earn it all from scratch.**

This may be difficult for those of us who are fortunate enough to have a steady income, good friends, a comfortable house, and loving family, and no major medical problems. How can we stand before G-d and honestly view ourselves as poor people with nothing to our names? Rav Friedlander explains that, if we contemplate the fact that all we have is only because G-d has given it to us, we will naturally recognize that if G-d wishes to alter the situation, it will immediately change. He ends his letter on a personal note: *“I had the opportunity to feel the compassion of G-d who saved me from death and gave me new life [this year]. I am a living example of what it means to feel destitute on the Day of Judgment. A person can think that they are healthy and all is well, and be unaware that their health is really hanging in the balance. . . every second is a gift from G-d.”*

This year we have been given a rare opportunity to experience a Rosh Hashana the way it was meant to be experienced. We now understand that seriousness of the words *מי יהיה ומי ימות*. We now understand that *מי במגפה* are not empty words. **These decisions are being made today.**

The **Bnei Yisaschar** offers an insight on this familiar verse from Perek 121 of Tehillim:

אשא עיני אל ההרים מאין יבא עזרי, עזרי מעם ה'  
אגרא דפרקא אות רכו: וז"ש אשא עיני אל ההרים (ואתבונן על ידי ההרים כי) מאין יבא עזרי (כשאני אין ואפס אז יבא עזרי)  
He says that, when we acknowledge that we are coming מאין, referring to the little we actually control our lives, and realize that Hashem is ultimately in control, then *yavo ezri*, then Hashem helps us עזרי מעם ה'

**Dante**, in his *Divine Comedy*, wrote: *“In the middle of the journey of our life, I came to myself in a dark wood.”*

This year, we have truly come to ourselves in a dark wood. We have confronted our limitations and weaknesses. We now better understand that, in the great scheme of things, we are אין...not in control.

But as Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair explains in a famous statement in the Mishna in **Sota 9:15**, this realization should lead us to a place of comfort.

משנה מסכת סוטה פרק ט רבי פנחס בן יאיר אומר משחרב בית המקדש בושו חברים ובני חורין וחפו ראשם ונדלדלו אנשי מעשה וגברו בעלי זרוע ובעלי לשון ואין דורש ואין מבקש ואין שואל על מי לנו להשען על אבינו שבשמים  
After the *churban*, he said, we could no longer rely on the scholars and others we were used to relying on. Instead, we learned that **we can rely only on Hashem**. He observed that a silver lining of being left despondent is that at least then we realize that we can, and must, turn to Hashem.

Similarly, the **Brisker Rav**, based on a comment of the **Rambam** writes, that the fear on Rosh Hashana is so great that one who truly feels this fear will also naturally understand that he can rely only on Hashem. The greater the fear, the more one understands that he must turn to Hashem.

חידושי הגרי"ז החדשים סימן עה. . . שהימים האלו הם ימי פחד מורא והמורא הוא גדול עד כדי בריחה שמחמת גדול המורא צריך לברוח, ואין מקום לברוח כי אם למנוס אליו. . . ונמצא לפי"ז דכמדת הכרתו בצרתו כן מדת בטחונו ולא יותר, והן הן דברי הרמב"ם, שהימים האלו הם ימי פחד ומורא ופחדו כ"כ גדול עד שאין לו שום אפשרות ומרגיש שמוכרח לברוח ואחר שהגיע להכרת מצבו עד כדי כך יוכל לזכות למדת הבטחון שהוא מנוס אליו באופן נמצא שנמצא דהמנוס אליו שייך רק אחרי שהוא מרגיש שהוא צריך לברוח

During the current *mageifa*, we **feel** like everything is out of control. But we must remember that we are no more or less in control now than we ever were. We control our *hishtadlus*, our actions and attitude, our response to our circumstances, and Hashem does the rest. We must strengthen both our *bitachon*, our faith, and our *hishtadlus*, our actions.

Avraham Avinu faced a similar challenge of dramatically altered expectations at the *akeda*. He faced an enormous challenge, when he was commanded to sacrifice his beloved son, Yitzchak. And after showing his readiness to do the unthinkable, he was unceremoniously told to stop. אל תשלה ידך אל הנער. How confusing! What a feeling of loss of control! There's no certainty anymore...

What did Avraham Avinu do in this moment of confusion? וישא עיניו וירא והנה איל and he very clearly recognized וירא what he was supposed to do. A ram was waiting for him. He understood that his mission was different from what he had thought all along, but that was what Hashem wanted from him at that time.

And that ram had been created long before, in the first week of creation during *bein hashemashos*...

משנה מסכת אבות פרק ה משנה ו משנה ו

[\*] עשרה דברים נבראו בערב שבת בין השמשות ואלו הן . . . ואילו של אברהם אבינו

Evidently, this had been the plan **all along**. What is certain is not always what we predicted or anticipated!

רש"י בראשית פרשת וירא פרק כב פסוק יג

(יג) והנה איל - מוכן היה לכך מששת ימי בראשית:

**Rashi** says the ram was *muchan*, prepared in advance, even if Avraham did not notice it at the beginning.

**It was there the whole time.**

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ראש השנה דף טז עמוד א

זכרונות - כדי שיעלה זכרונכם לפני לטובה, ובמה - בשופר. אמר רבי אבהו: למה תוקעין בשופר של איל? - אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: תקעו לפני בשופר של איל, כדי שאזכור לכם עקידת יצחק בן אברהם, ומעלה אני עליכם כאילו עקדתם עצמכם לפני.

Avraham thought he was supposed to do one thing, but Hashem had different plans for him.

This is an overlooked lesson of the *akeda*--Avraham's willingness to change course. עקדתם עצמכם לפני.

The **Kli Yakar** points out that God called Avraham only once when commanding him to slaughter Yitzchak, but called him twice when commanding him to desist.

כלי יקר בראשית פרק כב פסוק יא: אברהם אברהם. . . דבר אחר, לפי שבשעה שעסק במצוה בעקידת בנו היה כל כך טרוד במצוה לגומרה כהלכתה עד שלא היה נותן לב לקול הקריאה, לפיכך הוצרך לקרותו שנית, וזהו טעם לכפל אברהם אברהם, מה שאין כן בראשונה שלא היה עדיין טרוד במצוה.

The lesson is clear: Many times, it is easier to follow our routines than to change course when necessary. Because we need the predictability.

But a *yerei Elokim*, a God-fearing person, cares only about the will of God—what Hashem wants from him. A *yerei Elokim* is willing to start all over again, if necessary; to change course. And that is why Avraham received a bracha כי ברך אברכה after he slaughtered the ram. It took real *yiras shamayim*—to redefine his mission, to change his expectations.

Finding the inner strength to change our path in life can be a most difficult and uncomfortable challenge. It was something we were forced to do during these past 6 months. The way we were used to living had

to change. The way we were used to relating to family and friends had to change. And our religious expression took on a different exterior, alone and over Zoom. But as Avraham Avinu showed us by slaughtering the ram, adapting to the situation was God's will all along, even if we did not know or expect it. There was a plan.

Why was the ram created during *bein hashemashos*?

What does *bein hashemashos* represent? **Rabbi Shmuel Goldin** suggests that Hashem intentionally created every day with periods of inherent uncertainty. During *bein hashemashos*, we are not sure which day it is. Is it still yesterday or is it already tomorrow?

In a world where we are driven to be certain, to solve all mysteries, to predict everything from the stock market to the weather, to forecast and control the future, to cure all illness, and more, how important it is for us to recognize that full certainty in our lives will always be elusive. Only God truly knows what tomorrow will bring. Part of each day must be left uncertain, to serve as a built-in reminder of our inability to achieve full certainty, no matter how advanced, knowledgeable, and sophisticated we might become.

How clearly this message of uncertainty, of *bein hashemashos*, has been delivered to us this year by the covid-19 pandemic. Carefully laid personal plans have been upended, businesses curtailed or closed, travel suspended, and weddings and other major events cancelled or modified dramatically. In spite of our technological prowess, we have been laid low by a microscopic virus. We suddenly found ourselves in a world that we scarcely could have imagined. Never, in our personal experience, has life felt so uncertain. The message of *bein hashemashos* is that life's uncertainty is not a necessary evil but a necessary good. We ultimately will be judged not by how we act when times are clear, but by how we respond when faced with life's *bein hashemashos*--what do we do during times of uncertainty.

ויהי ערב ויהי בוקר We are assured that periods of darkness will recede. We do not know when, but we know this *mageifa* is not permanent. We will re-emerge...with new lessons learned. This experience will hopefully change us—our *bitachon*, our ability to adapt, and our view on *avodas Hashem*—understanding that Hashem is calling the shots. We have greater clarity about what is important, what is meaningful. We have certainly learned a lot through this experience.

We have a new appreciation for the gift of life...מודה אני לפיך מלך חי וקים שהחזרת בי נשמת...we are thankful for every minute we are alive and our sacred obligation to use our time wisely...למען אלקים חיים...and to live with *bitachon*...not fear...and fulfill whatever mission God sends our way...to find the figurative rams that have been set aside for us...the certainty within the uncertainty.

The **Ramcha** writes in **Mesilas Yesharim** (Perek 8)

ספר מסילת ישרים פרק ח: ואמנם, מה שיוכל להגביר ההתעוררות הזוה הוא ההסתכלות ברוב הטובות, שהקדוש - ברוך - הוא עושה עם האדם בכל - עת ובכל - שעה, והנפלאות הגדולות שעושה עמו מעת הלידה עד היום האחרון, כי כל מה שירבה להסתכל ולהתבונן בדברים אלה, הנה ירבה להכיר לעצמו חובה רבה אל האל המטיב לו,

*However, that which may intensify this rousing is looking into the many benefits that the Holy One blessed be He does with a man at all moments and times and the great wonders G-d performs for him from the time of his birth until his final day. For the more one looks into and contemplates these things, the more he will recognize his enormous debt to G-d Who bestows good to him.*

**Ralph Waldo Emerson** said: “Write it on your heart that **every day is the best day in the year. He is rich who owns the day, and no one owns the day who allows it to be invaded with fret and anxiety.**”

Let us commit to live our lives with a true appreciation of what it means to be alive, what it means to be a Jew, utilizing every moment productively, and, in that *zechus*, may we all be written in the *Sefer Hachaim*...for a year of *bracha* and *hatzlacha*...good health, happiness, and *parnassah tova*...amen.