

Shanah tovah. A good new year. A year of joy and sweetness and hope. But how can we mark a new year with joy and hope when we're in such an existential state? When we're overwhelmed by chaos and fear?

I would be lying if I said that I hadn't felt completely overwhelmed by the last few months. With all of the stressful news around police violence, vigilante extremism, natural disasters, the elections, and the existential anxiety of living in the time of COVID, we are all being constantly bombarded by triggers and traumas on what feels like a constant basis. Our reliance on social media for connection can drag us deeper in, as we obsessively read every Facebook post or news story, searching for some kind of good news that will release us from this anxiety.

Unfortunately, what we typically find instead is something that enrages us, or fills us with despair. There's a term for this: *doomscrolling*.¹

At the same time, we're expected to adapt to a completely upended way of life for ourselves and our families – one

¹ <https://www.wired.com/story/stop-doomscrolling/>

where if we're not all working and learning virtually – at the same time, in the same space – we're navigating the world of masks and hand sanitizer and social distancing.

On top of all of that anxiety, I'm your spiritual leader! It's my responsibility to shepherd you through all of this! How can I make sure that all of you are OK when I've lost my primary points of access to you – and you to me?

And, on a meta level, I just have to say that I believe that these High Holy Days have to be the most overthought, over-researched, over-planned, over-analyzed since the rabbis developed the standards for observing the Days of Awe two thousand years ago. Managing the technical aspects of these services is probably five or six fulltime jobs – four of which are being done by our amazing new executive director, Amy Rosenthal, on top of the other two fulltime jobs worth of work that she's been doing for us since all of this started in March. We've put in countless hours to make everything work. And there are constant hiccups. There's only so much that we can control.

But that doesn't mean we aren't trying to stay in control. We're all vacillating between trying to keep everything in order and letting our anxieties lead us to act impulsively.

I'm sure I'm not alone in having done some impulsive stress shopping recently. Many of us grew up in households where there was already a constant, underlying fear of scarcity. And while *you* may not have purchased a 25 pound bag of flour from Costco, in spite of not doing very much baking or having the time to bake, I'm sure that there are at least five things that you've purchased in the last six months not because you wanted it or needed it, but because you thought you might need it in the future and not be able to get it. We're trying to plan and make the right choices for the future when we don't have any idea what that future will look like. And the disconnect there can lead us to act impulsively.

Impulses and desires were of great importance to the Jewish sages. They read in the Book of Genesis that "*yetzer lev ha-adam ra*" – the devising of a man's heart is

wickedness² – and understood a need to guard oneself against that *yetzer* – that energy inside us that drives us towards bad things. They read further in Kohelet, the book of Ecclesiastes, that “there is not a righteous man on Earth who does good and does not sin.”

We’re human. We’re going to make mistakes sometimes. Usually when things feel out of our control. The rabbis gave it a name: *yetzer hara* – the impulse towards wickedness. But they didn’t stop there. They postulated that we could not be driven solely by a wicked impulse, or we would always be sinning. There must be something else in us to provide some sense of balance. They called that *yetzer hatov* – the impulse towards good.

In the rabbinic understanding, the yetzer hara is not an impulse towards pure evil, but towards an excessive use of resources. Bereshit Rabbah³ tells us that the yetzer hatov and the yetzer hara were both created in the beginning, pointing to Genesis 1:31: After the work of the sixth day – creating humans and giving them dominion over the earth

² Genesis 8:21

³ Bereshit Rabbah 9:7

– the verse does not say “vayar Elohim ki tov” – and God saw that it was good, but “vayar Elohim et ko lasher asah, v’hinei tov m’od” – and God saw all that God had made, and *hinei* – behold, it was *very* good.

This might seem like a compliment – humans are the best! But the midrash says otherwise. Hineh tov - behold it was good – this refers to the yetzer hatov – but hineh tov *m’od* – this is very good – refers to the yetzer hara – the desire for more – the initiative to strive and innovate. The yetzer hara is what sets humans apart from the angels. It’s what gives us free will. It’s what allows us to have a choice at all.

If we didn’t have an impulse to do things differently, this world would be a very boring place.

Beyond that, though – the yetzer hara is how we grow! In the Talmud, there’s a story about a group of rabbis capturing the yetzer hara. They want to kill it, but they are warned that without the yetzer hara, the world will be destroyed, because there will be no desire to procreate. So they imprison it for three days. During that time, not a single egg can be found in the land of Israel. So the rabbis

let the yetzer hara go, but not without first blinding it so that it can't be too dangerous.⁴

Perhaps that's why, in Pirkei Avot 4:1, one of my favorite teachings, Ben Zoma teaches, "Eizehu gibor? HaKovesh et Yitzro." Who is mighty? The one who conquers their impulse.

After all, in spite of everything positive I've just said about yetzer hara, it's still extremely dangerous if not controlled.

The Vilna Ga'on, one of the most influential scholars of the 18th century, said that "The *yetzer ha'ra* does not try to seduce you to do something that is outright sinful because in that case, you'd never take the bait. Rather, the *yetzer ha'ra* tries to get you to take only one small step down a wrong road, which it can do by convincing you that this first step is actually a good and righteous thing.

...Once the yetzer ha'ra has succeeded in that small measure, it will continue enticing the person farther and farther down the path of transgression."⁵

⁴ Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 69b

⁵ Paraphrased in Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar, by Alan Morinis:
<https://www.aish.com/sp/pg/48917082.html>

We've seen the temptation that quick fixes, easy answers, and conspiracy theories can have on vulnerable people.

One of the most important indicators that someone is vulnerable to making a destructive choice is dysregulation. One whose life is chaotic or in upheaval is at greater risk of falling prey to a bad idea.

I can hear you saying, "OK, Rabbi Jake – we know – things are terrible and chaotic. You gonna give us any advice? Some inspiration? Or just bum us out?"

Dr. Sandra Bloom, a psychiatrist, and her team at an acute care psychiatric unit, developed a trauma-informed approach to working with adult patients. One of the most important pieces of their Sanctuary Model is the safety plan:

"... In the Sanctuary Model when we use the word "safety" we are referring to four all- encompassing domains of safety: physical, psychological, social and moral. Safety Planning requires attending to all four domains simultaneously and coming up with a plan for avoiding danger.

It is clear, however, that safety issues are not simply applicable to people in treatment. For our brains to think rationally and act appropriately we must feel safe with each other and safe within our organizations. Creative and innovative planning and implementation is not possible without some degree of calm and safety. And the kind of thinking that is required to address complex problems does not occur under crisis conditions.

A Safety Plan is a list of simple activities that a person can choose when feeling overwhelmed so that the person can avoid engaging in the unsafe, out-of-control or toxic behavior he or she is accustomed to resorting to under stress and instead, use an activity that is safe, effective and self-soothing. The items in a Safety Plan should be simple things that people can do anytime, anywhere without embarrassment. In the Sanctuary Model, everyone has a Safety Plan so that having one and using it become a social norm, not simply an instruction pointed at a client. It is a form of Universal Precautions like washing one's hands. Staff members often carry their safety plans on the back of

their ID badges – always there, always conveniently accessed.

Safety Plans are designed to help people achieve increasing levels of skill in regulating their own emotional states. The creation of Safety Plans is a relational tool, adjusted over time to meet both increasing skill levels and increasing demands for those skills. It is both an individual and a group tool in the Sanctuary Model, providing a simple cognitive-behavioral skill for the individual and setting group expectations for the entire community. When people see each other using their safety plans, it strongly reinforces the notions that high levels of emotional distress can and should be managed, but that we all must learn to do that – it doesn't just come naturally.”⁶

For example, my safety plan includes drinking a glass of cool water, eating a piece of fruit, closing my eyes, taking deep breaths through the nose, and changing position to

6

<http://sanctuaryweb.com/TheSanctuaryModel/THESANCTUARYMODELFOURPILLARS/Pillar4SharedPractice/TheSanctuaryToolkit/SafetyPlans.aspx#:~:text=In%20the%20Sanctuary%20Model%20when,a%20plan%20for%20avoiding%20danger.>

stand up straight or lie down, depending on which is more socially acceptable given my surroundings.

Having behaviors like these – ones we can turn to to keep us regulated – can help us think more clearly and act more thoughtfully. Feeling this sense of safety can help us manage our yetzer hara - keeping us from stepping too far into impulsiveness and accepting simplistic answers to complex problems, and allow us to utilize the creative spark of the yetzer hara – taking uncertainty as an opportunity to try something new.

As we begin this season of reflection, repentance, and renewal, I wish for all of you the emotional, spiritual, and moral space to reflect and engage in new ways. Shanah tovah!