

Hayom Harat Olam
Today is Pregnant with Eternity

I must admit that I am full of disbelief right now. I cannot believe I am actually standing here on Rosh Hashanah before our community. For some of us, this is the first time in nearly two years that we have entered this sacred space. I also cannot believe the amount of mental and physical gymnastics required to arrive at this moment. I am truly grateful to all of our leadership who helped make these High Holidays possible. I cannot believe that another year has passed, and we still cannot all gather together safely. Many of us fully intended or hoped to be here today. Some of us already knew weeks ago that it was not in the cards. Others woke up this morning and felt our hearts urging us to stay home. I cannot believe that modern medicine discovered and created a vaccine at warp speed. I also cannot believe that nearly 100 million Americans continue to eschew the responsibility and obligation to save their life and the lives of loved ones. I cannot believe I am still running around with this *schmatta* – this mask – on my face. And I also cannot believe so many Americans feel the nuisance of a *schmatta* isn't worth their health and wellbeing, let alone those around them. I cannot believe we have arrived at this moment. And I also cannot believe we are still in this moment. The words of our mahzor repeat *v'khol ma-aminim* – we believe – and yet I remain full of disbelief.

I think I speak for all of us when I say that this has been a most confusing, stressful, and exhausting 18 months. For over a year we have been trying to figure out how to maintain our safety; how to maintain civil life; how to literally protect our aging parents and grandparents. Everyone is now a self-appointed epidemiologist, statistician, and public policy expert. Wear a mask, don't need a mask, wear a mask again; six feet apart, hugging again, back to elbow bumps; Shabbos dinner outside, Shabbos dinner on zoom, don't know where to have Shabbos dinner. Our

lives have been marked by change and change has been the marker of our lives. Questions beget answers and answers beget more questions – all converging on this sacred moment.

Today is Rosh Hashanah, according to the Jewish calendar the day the world was created, a day given over to possibility and new beginnings. We look at the concentric circles of our existence, as individuals, as Jews, and as members of a wider humanity. The High Holiday mahzor announces: *Hayom harat olam*, today the world was born, translated differently, “today is pregnant with eternity.” Today is a day when we dare look beyond the horizon of our vision. And today, perhaps more than any other Rosh Hashanah, we ask the difficult questions that will give birth to the future, a new horizon full of possibilities.

Last Rosh Hashanah I spoke about the need for us to make a moral pivot, to literally *teshuva* – turn around. I shared with you six pivots needed as individuals and as a society. I had asked you to engage with these ideas individually, as a family, and collectively. I had hoped that we would arrive at this moment, proud of the moral pivots we made to shape the future of our community, our people, and our nation. Today, one year later, at the dawn of a new beginning, I want to briefly summarize the moral pivots I suggested a year ago and what needs to be added one year later.

When this nightmare began, we were focused on closing down our entire society - schools, businesses, entertainment, everything. We were limiting almost all of our interactions with other people. We did so because the first moral pivot was the primacy of life. Life is a central category of our tradition. At every turn of the page on Rosh Hashanah we invoke God to remember us for life - *zokhreinu l'hayyim* - and inscribe us in the Book of Life - *kotveinu b'seifer ha-hayyim*. Life takes precedence over all commandments in the Torah. Don't talk to me about missed vacations, restaurants, or your right to privacy. We are only concerned about life.

The second pivot grew out of segments of our society flaunting their responsibilities and draining community resources. The moment when life is endangered is not the time to calculate moral responsibility, that's tomorrow's project. At the time, we had to respond to all immediate threats and dangers to life equally. Pundits and ethicists would ask, "who gets the ventilators? The 60-year-old? The 85-year-old? Someone who wore a mask? Someone who didn't?" In moments of crisis we don't play Monday morning quarterback – all life is equal. I don't care what your age is, I don't care what your race is, I don't care what your economic status is. All human beings are created in the image of God.

Moral Pivot #3. I mentioned last year how proud and grateful I was that Agudas continued to employ and pay its staff during the worst moments of this crisis. While the sanctity of life takes precedence, in Jewish tradition the sanctity of a job also takes precedence. The policies surrounding employment were vital for our physical and emotional survival. What a difference it makes when a society cares deeply that all individuals have a source of sustenance *and* a source of dignity.

Moral Pivot #4. A moral society is judged precisely by the way we treat the most vulnerable. Throughout the High Holidays, we declare that *tzedakah* has the power to transform the harshness of our destiny. The place of *tzedakah* in our community is such that we define the morality of a community on the basis of how those who are least fortunate are seen and taken care of.

The fifth pivot recognized the importance of local community. Global and national infections mattered, Federal, State, and local policies were important, but our primary concern was on numbers in Northern Virginia and on what we as individuals needed to do. Who do I allow into my home? Who do I keep out? How do we make sure our community is safe? The dignity of the

particular sometimes got lost in universalist discourse but there was no way we could protect ourselves unless we concentrated our focus locally.

Moral Pivot #6. We often think of ourselves as endowed with unalienable rights. That's the American way. Judaism teaches us that we don't have unalienable rights, we have unalienable responsibilities. Part of the experience of Covid was realizing that we could harm someone. We could be like a bull in a china shop just by walking outside. What does it mean to walk into the public sphere, with a mask, and realize that our first moral responsibility is not to harm others? How did this change some of our priorities in the way we look at the world? In order to create an environment that was safe for everyone we needed to reassess our priorities and commit to being part of the solution.

Here we are one year later. Our responsibility now is to reconnect to these moral pivots precisely as our lives are beginning to stabilize. We could easily forget many of these priorities now that they might not entail life and death for most people. But they do make up the difference between a mediocre or good society and a great society. How do we maintain what we have learned and commit to it even when it's not as pressing? How do we think about the equality of life? How does, for example, the sanctity of life influence the way we look at various members of our community who believe that their lives don't matter? As we enter this new year we must ask: what are the moral pivots that we want to keep, that we *need* to keep? Now that we are at the next stage, some 18 months later, we are beginning to envision a life after crisis. We are not shell-shocked anymore, but we've lived through trauma, a trauma that has changed who we are. As we enter these *aseret yemei teshuvah* - these Ten Days of Moral Pivoting – there are a few ideas I want to add and adjust to what I said last year.

#1. A year ago, my primary focus was on the sanctity of life. Now I am equally focused on the frailty of life. So much of American culture is built on myths of stability. If you ask someone, “how are you,” protocol requires that they respond, “fine, thank you.” If you actually give an answer, that’s impolite. If someone is mourning the loss of a loved one, we ask, “how are they doing?” “Well.” What is doing well in a time of mourning mean? We’ve all walked through the valley of the shadow of death – we, our families, people we love, our entire society. I’m not so sure I want to rush back to the myth of stability so quickly. It is too easy to say that Covid will just become another normal feature of life, people will die just like people die from cancer and hunger and any number of problems in our world. Perhaps the “gift” of Covid, and I use that term lightly, is the need to rethink how much suffering we will tolerate. It’s just Afghans facing brutal retaliation. It’s just more starving children in the Democratic Republic of Congo. It’s just another death at the hands of gun violence in the United States. Covid has been a wakeup call for a humanity that was morally asleep.

If we have learned anything this year, it is the precariousness of life. Whether “by fire...by water...or by plague,” in old age or in youth, frailty and death will always be a part of our humanity. For all of our efforts at mastery over our lives, the complex and unpredictable forces of existence are greater than any of us can fathom, let alone hold sway over. While this realization can lead to despair and apathy, it can also free us to focus our attention on those areas of life over which we do have control and to which we can respond meaningfully. Our lives may be precarious, but we must not tolerate the conditions that make it such.

The High Holidays are a great gift. Our ancestors have bequeathed to us a compelling ritual framework in which to do the hard work of self-and communal assessment, knowing that this task should be done regularly but is often ignored or taken up only in fits and starts. The process of

soul-searching during Rosh Hashanah involves both a retrospective and prospective dimension. We look back over the past year; examine our thoughts, feelings, and actions; and evaluate as honestly as possible our successes and failures. We also look forward, attempting to learn from the past, seeking to integrate new insights as we prepare to wake up from our slumber and begin a new year.

#2. A year ago, I was laser focused on the many lives in danger. When someone needed a ventilator, you got a ventilator. We didn't ask if you wore a mask or not. When life is in danger you don't try to assess responsibility or allocate resources on the basis of responsibility because that's not the time. Well, *now* is the time. Now is the time for us to ask ourselves: who acted irresponsibly? Who is an anti-vaxxer and snubs their nose at their social obligations? How did we allow a certain anti-science conversation to promulgate to such unhealthy and dangerous levels? What caused certain communities to have self-destructive policies? Where within our society was there social dysfunction? Now is the time to ask these questions and do the difficult societal soul searching to answer them with determined honesty. Now is the time for activism, not of hatred or judgmentalism, but of trying to lay foundations for a different type of social responsibility. If we want a country that takes social solidarity seriously, we will actually have to build one.

#3. For over a year we understood that our safety was inextricably tied to our local community, but there is one community that had a unique role in helping us survive. This local community wasn't our nation, our state, or our city...it was our family – whether our family by birth or our family of choice. As we were isolated from so many others, we were saved by that small circle of individuals that remained present in our lives. For so many of us, family is what enabled us to get through this year. Speaking personally, the few family members that always remained in our “pod” is what made Shabbos dinner feel so special and maintained the social

interactions we all needed. Even seeing the beautiful faces of close family and friends on zoom during milestone moments gave me the spiritual booster no shot could deliver. While family for many was literally a lifeline, we also saw how family could have profound dysfunction. Issues of abuse, issues of gender roles, issues of neglect, many of which were always present beneath the surface, were uncovered and discovered. Covid placed a spotlight on family, both on the powerful role that it could play, and on our responsibility to elevate the dignity of all family members.

#4 One year ago, I was focused primarily on local protection. In this new year I am concerned about local vaccination. What are our obligations to this community? To each other? Should we continue requiring proof of vaccination for all eligible individuals? After all, our unalienable responsibility is to protect ourselves, and if someone entering into our space poses a danger to us, we don't have a moral responsibility to allow them to enter. Looking beyond our local community, do we have a responsibility to anyone else? Think about this for a moment, and I will admit I struggle with this greatly. We are currently awaiting the green light to safely inoculate children under 12. As a father of two children, I am eagerly waiting for that moment to arrive. We are also learning that we might need booster shots to maintain high levels of immunity. When needed, I'm sure the military will require it of me. But as a global citizen, it bothers me. What is the death rate of children under 12? Of people without a third shot? Meanwhile 85% of the world is unvaccinated, many of whom are over 60. Does anyone else besides me matter? The dignity of the individual is a foundation of the ethical, but the exclusiveness of the individual is the foundation of the immoral. At what point do we think about other people? When does someone else claim our resources? I know that every child that is vaccinated reduces the chances of additional variants and I know that as a father I would do anything to keep my kids healthy, but it still keeps me up at night. While Covid elevates the dignity of individuals, it challenges us to ask

who are the different people that we might have forgotten, and what are the limits of our individual concerns.

#5. Political leadership is critical. When we look at the qualities of our leaders, what are we looking for? Do we simply vote with our pocketbook? Just look at the world and which societies fared better and which worse. The role of leadership in determining the well-being of a society has to force every one of us to take very seriously our civic responsibilities.

#6. Finally, change has always been *the* permanent feature of the human condition. So much has changed over this last year. As we begin a new year, some of us will be inclined to snap back to the way things were. How do we think about change even when it's very scary? What changes do we want to embrace and what changes do we want to push back against? On a trivial level we will talk about zoom meetings and in-person meetings and how much zoom we should keep using. But there are much more serious questions about the nature of our relationships. What does community mean? What does it mean to be together? There are so many new horizons and experiences that we've had that it's not going to be possible for us to deal with each one of them. We almost have to have a new theory about change and develop a greater instinct on how to evaluate the many changes in our lives. The nature of crises is that they lay bare the flaws that already exist. Our responsibility is use this moment to heal and rebalance the core features of our society. How can we use this last year for a ten percent change? Not a revolution, a ten percent evolution enabled by a greater sense of clarity and urgency. As I said on Rosh Hashanah last year, our responsibility is not only to physically survive Covid, our responsibility is to use this moment to think about our values and where we need to pivot as individuals and as a society.

It is true that there is so much that I cannot believe. But there is one thing I do believe, in fact *v'khol ma-aminim* we all believe, that the whole journey of a life worth living is the constant

struggle, not to move from evil to good, that's easy, but to move from good to great. That is our aspiration for holiness. As we embark upon this new year, our collective and individual responsibility is to hold on to that aspiration. *Hayom harat olam*, "today the world was born, today is pregnant with eternity. In this moment, right now, all of eternity - our whole future - is waiting to be born. It's up to us what kind of future we "birth" for the year to come. We can shape a year of stasis, or we can shape a year of change.

I learned this best years ago from my homiletics class – the art of preaching – at JTS. On a Monday, our teacher would model a sermon on the weekly Torah reading and then on Wednesday a student would do the same. The rabbi was notorious for tearing into his students' sermons, instilling so much fear that when my turn came, I delivered word-for-word the remarks that my teacher had shared just two days before. When I finished, the rabbi proceeded to tear my sermon apart. "But rabbi," I pleaded, "I'm only saying what you said the other day!" "Ah, but Steven," came the reply, "I have evolved since then."

Our world, our community, we ourselves need to evolve. While there is much that we do not know and cannot control, this is the time to take stock and to recommit ourselves to becoming the people we ought to be. In facing our vulnerability this year, in coming to terms with our limitations, we have the opportunity to enter into a process of discovery and discernment that can lead to healing and renewal. God has opened the Book of Life, but the real work is ours. We need to begin writing the next chapter of our lives. May we all fill the blank pages sitting before us, turning them together, writing the next bold volume of our shared humanity.