

After all these things

Today, (pause) our Torah reading begins with the words, achrei ha d'varim haeleh, "after all of these things." It seems appropriate after the year we've all had.

After. All. These. Things. Pandemic, economic strife, fear, political turmoil, racial injustice, hurricanes, fires and to then last night we learned of the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, a light to so many of us--described by Chief Justice Roberts as a "jurist historic stature, a tireless and resolute champion of justice."

We look back to 5780 and consider our trials, our disappointments, our challenges, our losses. All these things. And yet, we also reflect upon our joys, our celebrations and our successes.

Achrei ha-d'varim ha-eleh. (slow)

After all these things. We are resilient. We are strong. As we come together on this Rosh Hashanah morning, we put this year behind us and look forward to what comes next. It is an exclamation of faith in the future—after all these things.

It was after Abraham faced his trials—and trials they were: sodom and Gomorrah, fleeing famine, parenthood (some of us may know that trial) and even leaving everything he ever knew for a new land. It was after these many trials that Abraham embarked on his biggest adventure yet. After all these things Abraham sets forth on a new journey.

Achrei ha-d'varim ha-eleh.

It is a turn of phrase that is in many ways the biblical equivalent of “once upon a time.” It is a dramatic introduction that marks the beginning of whatever story we are ready to tell. In choosing these words, we are reminded that *how* we tell our story/ matters. Telling the tale gives us the strength and resources to scale the next mountain peak. As the playwright of Hamilton, Lin Manuel Miranda reminds us, we cannot control who lives who dies --but who tells our story? That narrative is up to us.

Each Rosh Hashanah we chant this torah portion The story of the Akedah, the binding of Isaac--A story of faith in the future. A tale of putting one foot in front of the other. Having the steadfast belief that the ram will appear in the thicket. Yet it is hardly a happy ending. The binding of Isaac is an unnecessary reminder that after all these things there will be more things. The resolution comes from sharing the story each year with new meaning. Holocaust survivor and psychologist Victor Frankl writes, our “human freedom is not freedom from conditions, but freedom to take a stand toward the conditions.” The promise is not that we will be free from trials. The promise is that we can find the courage to continue walking up our own mountain as Abraham did.

The rabbis of the Midrash¹ see it a little differently. They teach, don't read "achar" as "after," in 'after all these things.' Read that word instead as "hirhur" or "reflect on all these things." Reflection is a human gift. Through our ruminations we find perspective. Years from now. . . what will we share about this time? What was it like in 2020? We can speak of the anxiety, the sadness, the disappointment and the loneliness. We can also share memories of the connections. We can share the wells of strength we discovered and the love we shared on zoom, over phone lines and in person, masked and distanced. 2020 may be a tale of uncertainty and fear. Only we can write in the parts about possibility and hope. We can author the chapter that turns lemons into lemonade and sour times into sourdough.

Achrei ha **d'varim** ha-eleh.

The word "d'varim" (things) also means "words"² in Hebrew. After all of these words.

We are reminded that we have agency over our words. We have the language to make our story one of kindness and compassion. It is ours to record with the actions of our lives. Today, this Rosh Hashanah, we tell a new story for 5781. A tale of showing up for each other. And for ourselves. We get to decide the sources of our narrative. Will it be a tale of bitter polarization and hate? Or can we remove ourselves from a feedback loop that predicts doom? Can we shift it to one that *allows* us to find perspective above the petty.

¹ Midrash Tanhuma Buber Vayera 42

² Sanhedrin 89b and Rashi on Genesis 22:1

One rabbi teaches, “Our days are scrolls: write upon them what you want to be remembered.”³

What a gift. As we contemplate the pages of our lives at the gateway to this new year, let’s ask what we want written on our scrolls. We can write stories of grudges held and resentments sustained. We can cling to instances when we knew we were right. We can also write a story about healing and hope, forgiveness requested and forgiveness granted.

We can’t always change disorder, or the things we fear, but we can change how we respond. We find solutions through our drive for something better. The very idea of teshuvah, repentance, suggests an open future. What’s past is done. What comes next is the product of our imaginations and our vision. After all these things—

Ehud Manor, Israeli songwriter extraordinaire, wrote the song *B’shanah Haba’a*, meaning “next year.” It was two years after his brother perished in the 1967 war. It is a song about Manor’s longing to be with his brother again. He wrote it as a way for him to cope with his loss. Yet the song does not reveal this sadness to the casual observer. “You will see how good it will be next year” the lyrics read. They tell a story of hope in a brighter future—so much so that the composer wrote upbeat music to the words. They do not deny the deep pain of his loss, but instead leave open the

³ Rabbi Bahya Ibn Pakuda

possibility of better things to come. Hope in a future when the pain will pass. It is a familiar sentiment, one we express each year at the Passover seder-Next year in Jerusalem.

There is an “after” for all of these things. There is a “next year.”

After all of these things we can not only survive but thrive in 5781.

We can choose the stories we tell of this time, and how we tell them. We can write in love and hope at the center.

B’shana haba’a, Next year. . . in person.