

Seeking Healing and Renewal in a Time of Distress

Two weeks ago, tennis star Novak Djokovic defaulted in a match during the fourth round of the US Open Tennis Tournament. Ranked number one in the world and seeded the number one player in the tournament, the moment of default was a stunning defeat for one of the three most dominant players in the sport.

Djokovic's demise in a tournament in which he was striving for his 18th Grand Slam title was shocking and painful to watch. A tennis player I'm not, but I love watching the annual US Open Tennis tournament as much I can, which is why the tragic ending to Djokovic's reign at the tournament stung. Even more, the circumstances immediately struck me as a symbol for our lives in this current moment in time.

What happened? Djokovic, acting-out in frustration and anger during the match, became callously careless. Having lost a game on his serve, he took a ball from his pocket, bounced it, and then slammed it back angrily toward the wall. Except it wasn't just a wall — the line judge standing there was hit in the neck by the ball and collapsed, struggling for breath. A clear violation of the rules, Djokovic was forced to default the game. He departed angrily and only found the resolve to apologize later. The damage was done—it hurt his ranking and his income and brought a fine upon himself on top of that.

Word has it that Djokovic has been angry lately. He was chided for his lack of humility. Hearing this, I recalled that he also recently recovered from a case of COVID19. Medical authorities talk about lingering effects of the disease, where some people suffer from mental and emotional challenges after “recovering” from the illness. My first reaction upon hearing of the news of his default was, “OH, so sad that it might have

been partly from COVID.” I can’t know that, of course, but that is one consequence of this pandemic.

Then I thought of the tremendous emotional stress of this pandemic, leaving many people edgy, even angry and depressed. We are not normal right now — none of us are. An old friend described this so aptly when we checked-in recently. “How are you?” I asked. Deep breath, and he said, “Well, I think we are all experiencing a slow degradation of mental health.” Wise words from a wise friend.

I feel badly for Novak Djokovic. This feels like the stress that truly has become our shared burden. When I talk with friends and family and ask how they are doing I hear an almost universal reaction -- a missed beat of silence, a deep breath then exhaled with, “well, OK.” Or, “As good as can be expected given the state of the world!” Or, “I’m trying to stay positive.”

A pandemic of stress has gripped most if not all of us, even if we haven’t realized it. I recall the first conversation last spring surfacing the reality that we needed to plan virtual high holidays. I wanted to go hide somewhere. “How can we do that?” I wondered. Another deep breath, and then the realization that we would figure it out together.

There is a deep sadness this Rosh Hashanah in our inability to be together in person, in our beloved sanctuary. We want to be close, to see each other in person, to share smiles and hugs, to check in with old friends, to feel the warmth of being physically present, to be reminded of prior years in our lives on the High Holy Days, feeling the joy of community, pride in being Jewish, and sustained by our beautiful spiritual traditions.

I don’t mean this as a downer -- but rather, to acknowledge our sense of loss. These holy days offer us an opportunity to elevate our spirits and direct our hearts

heavenward. There is a lot to celebrate and much joy to be shared on these holy days. Just like Novak Djokovic needed to do, we can redirect ourselves. He later released a statement "This whole situation has left me really sad and empty. "I checked on the lines person," he said, "and the tournament told me that thank God she is feeling ok. I'm extremely sorry to have caused her such stress. So unintended. So wrong."

It sounded like a Rosh Hashanah kind of apology -- like our heartfelt expressions of remorse at this time of year following unintentional slights. Our rabbis taught that we cannot ask God for forgiveness until we have asked each other. With all the stress of pandemic isolation and worries, racial justice protests, painful political polarization and climate change concerns, it might be hard for us to even realize when we have unintentionally offended or hurt others. It can be harder still to apologize; a kind of survival-mode protection is pulsing through our subconscious. That is when we become self-protective, like Djokovic when he angrily left Arthur Ashe Stadium without apologizing.

Permit me to offer my apologies now. For any unintended offenses, which I have caused for any of you, I am truly sorry. Please forgive me.

Djokovic said further, "... I need to go back within and work on my disappointment and turn this all into a lesson for my growth and evolution as a player and human being. I apologize to the US Open tournament and everyone associated for my behavior. I'm very grateful to my team and family for being my rock of support, and my fans for always being there with me. Thank you and I'm so sorry."

He went on to thank his fans for their positive messages, and added, "Please also remember the linesperson that was hit by the ball last night needs our community's support too. She's done nothing wrong at all. I ask you to stay especially supportive and caring to her during this time. From these moments, we grow stronger and we rise above. Sharing love with everyone..."

Novak Djokovic's story is our story. These are very difficult times, and we need to find our footing emotionally, interpersonally, spiritually. Amidst suffering, loss, and despair we are seeking a way to strengthen our faith -- if not to find it again -- or find it in the first place. My colleague Rabbi Hayim Herring offered an inspiring message to answer this need that he entitled, "Act, Engage, Trust, Hope." These rabbinic teachings frame four practices that he has adopted.

First, he taught, "**Act:** Speak Little and Do Much." (Pirkei Avot 1:15) Rabbi Herring commented, "Very few statues have been dedicated to critics; it's the creators, those who act and lead the way to change, who are honored." Let's invest our energies in being among the creators. And where we can't take a constructive, active role in solving a problem, let's be careful to refrain from reflexively criticizing the people or ideas who irritate or offend our sense of rightness.

Second in Rabbi Herring's message is "**Engage:** Don't Separate Yourself from the Community" (Pirkei Avot 2:4) How can we "inoculate ourselves against political apathy?," as Rabbi Herring warns. Here is what will guide us creating the reality we seek: Get involved--constructively, in positive ways that can make a difference, rather than wringing hands on the sidelines. This engagement can take many different forms. I was talking with a family member who is parenting two very young children while working full time. She confessed to feeling guilty about not participating in protests against police brutality and racial injustice. "But I am afraid of Covid," she added. I asked, "Have you seen some of the books and resources for talking with kids about race?" I asked. "Sure, we talk about it all the time," she replied. "Well, then you are showing up -- in the way you are teaching your children about what's right. That's activism enough for your family right now."

We each, in our different life-circumstances, have to find the best way to be present to the challenges facing our world and to seek out the ways we can contribute to the

healing of these problems. If this New Year is a turning -- a returning to all that matters to us as members of families, communities and humanity -- and we each chart a course within our capacities, imagine what change we can create in the world!

Third, in Rabbi Herring's message is, "**Trust:** Judge all people favorably" (Pirkei Avot 1:6) In our hyper-partisan divide, when, for example, some of us read the news voraciously and some of us avoid it; when the news sources we read are divided by political agenda, when some of us watch MSNBC and others follow the commentaries on Fox News, it has become nearly impossible for us to talk beyond those divides and feel like we are having the same conversation. How can we remember that, like the rabbis of the Talmud modeled, disagreement is holy, and hearing varied views leads to discernment?

Rabbi Herring advised, "We should challenge statements that diminish the innate Divine worth of another person. But learning how to have a respectful disagreement on a significant issue is a skill that we need to reacquire. Divergent viewpoints help clarify our thinking." Perhaps we can learn from each other rather than rushing to judge each other as stupid or crazy or bad. Maybe, in listening rather than reacting, we can find compassion and even some measures of commonality. How can we work at the trust required to judge others favorably?

A Rebbi's Proverb by *Danny Siegel*

If you always assume
the one sitting next to you
is the Messiah
waiting for some simple human kindness
you will soon come to weigh your words
and watch your hands.
And if the Messiah so chooses not to be revealed in your time
it will not matter.

The fourth value to recover at this New Year is "**Hope:** Did you hope intensely for salvation?" we learn in the Babylonian Talmud, as taught by Abraham Joshua Heschel (BT Shabbat 31a--Heschel's translation,) **Hoping** for a better world is essential to its

arrival. Rabbi Heschel wrote, “To wait is to stay in readiness, to live a life of expectation.” (*Israel: An Echo of Eternity*, p.96.) This is what it means to be a Jew -- to open our hearts to the possibility of change, with patience for how difficult it can be to get there and how long it takes for change to finally arrive. In the meantime, we pray, we learn, we celebrate, and we act toward a new reality. Then, eventually, with this hope, it will happen.

Let’s take a deep breath together. We will *Act, Engage, Trust* and *Hope*. Our hearts filled with wisdom and love, we can heal the “slow degradation of mental health” of this time. May our hearts be pure and holy, as when we were formed.

The Beginning Of The Journey Adapted From Mayyim Hayyim

May I begin this year fresh and open to the possibility of transformation.

Though the future is uncertain, I release this past year with all its difficulties and joys.

I open my heart to receive the blessings of the New Year.

May I return to my true self and be strengthened as I continue my journey of *tikkun halev* — repairing the heart, *tikkun hanefesh* — repairing the soul and *tikkun olam* —repairing the world.

We are here for each other.

May this New Year be a time of healing, spiritually, emotionally and physically. The promise of the New Year is here.

Leshanah Tovah tikateivu.