

Pandemic Lessons 5783

Some of us may be old enough to remember the horror film, “Invasion of the Body Snatchers,” a 1978 production, or the original 1956 version, just as scary. ’78 was my era, and I admit that it haunted my sleep at the time until I could get it out of my mind.

The movie, featuring the all-star cast including Donald Sutherland, Jeff Goldblum, and Leonard Nimoy, in one terrifying scene after the other, shows the invasion of a race of gelatinous creatures who have abandoned their dying planet to populate earth. The creatures arrive on Earth and take the form of small pods with pink flowers. Each pod then takes on the form of a person it replaces as the real human dissolves when they fall asleep. The humans who have discovered the terror unfolding before them are ultimately powerless to avoid their own downfall, even after no measure of cold temperatures or caffeine can hold off sleep indefinitely.

Raise your hand if you remember this movie... My older brother Hal, of blessed memory, whose yahrzeit is today, Rosh Hashanah, would laugh hysterically at my screaming in terror at this film. He loved that stuff. These days I wonder how terror-movie-loving folks like my brother would feel now, as we mark a third New Year gripped still by a pandemic. We have NOT been through the terror of body-snatching Pod People, Thank Gd!, but we *have* lived through sometimes terrifying, exhausting, confusing, disorienting times that have impacted who we are as individuals and as a human community. Who could have imagined that more than one million of our fellow citizens, including dear and beloved members of our community and our families, would have perished!! Now we are together on the New Year as the shofar is a “wake-up” call for us, a spiritual awakening to fend off the fear and disintegration of our exhausted, isolated, even frightened selves.

The shofar signals the opportunity for transformation and a “rebirth” – to be renewed and whole again. As we yearn for and, Gd willing, move toward renewal, let us take stock on what we have learned, how we have changed and what we yearn for in the coming year.

What are we taking with us, and what are we leaving behind from this past pandemic year? What are the blessings we would like to give to each other at this liminal moment of into a New Year? What has the pandemic taken away, what has the pandemic left behind, what has the pandemic changed that we miss and mourn; and what have we learned? What will we be harvesting with appreciation from the pandemic circumstances going forward?

A lot of this has **not** been our choice. But at this moment, we have the opportunity to *choose life* – to choose what we treasure, what we prioritize and what will be the quality and content of our lives can be in the coming year. Where do we have choices to make, and how will we prioritize for the coming year? Which values will guide us as we chart this course?

As we consider what we have learned and how that shapes our perspectives about life, about each other and about the world, let us hold the precious lessons of this past year and more, as blessings to guide our steps going forward into this New Year.

A Talmudic teaching {from *Rabbi Ishmael*}: *Blessing is not to be found **except** in that which the eye does not control.*

We have had so little control over the course of our lives and our world during this pandemic time. The text goes on to teach:

*The Rabbis taught that one who enters the silo to count his grain says: **May it be your will, O Lord, our God, to send blessing to the work of our***

hands. Blessed is the one who sends blessing into this heap-- because blessing is not to be found in anything that has been weighed, measured or counted but only in that which is “siloed”—hidden—from the eye. (Babylonian Talmud Ta’anit 8b)

What are the blessings that we have yet to notice, or have been hidden from our eyes during this very challenging time? Now, at this New Year holy day, we are bidden to uncover the blessings; to notice the qualitative, immaterial aspect of blessing.

This is a time to peel back the veil – to notice the bracha, the blessing that has been there even when we didn’t notice it. Now, at this New Year, we have the opportunity for perspective, to embrace the moment for what it is. This is the spiritual imperative of these Holy Days.

Yes, we have experienced grief and disorientation from the pandemic’s loss and change. Now, how can we emerge with *celebration* and find our footing? We could come to this New Year to share our stresses, to tell each other how we are just worn out. Indeed, in the quiet of our holiday dinners and murmurs on the way into or out of synagogue, many of us will unload our sorrows, and fears with each other, out of need and because caring community is an important source of support. But our fundamental question here today is this: *How shall we make meaning?* We have choices about the way we react to the circumstances that life throws at us. It is not always easy, but on these holy days we are reminded that God helps us make meaning out of events in our lives.

The Torah reading for Rosh Hashanah day two, the most provocative and arguably most impactful of the stories we read each year is the *Akedah*, the “Binding of Isaac.” There, Abraham believes he is called to sacrifice his son Isaac, but the angel stops him. Abraham looks up and what does he see? He sees the Ram caught in the thicket, awaiting him. When we are looking for meaning, just like the ram that was right before Abraham’s eyes, it is there for us to see. God is here to guide our eyes and our hands, as Abraham found.

A dear colleague, Rabbi Michael Feshbach, in the name of another colleague, Rabbi Jack Luxenberg, commented to me that “Nobody can yank your chain if you’re not holding onto the other end.”

During this pandemic time so much has changed which will take time to assess and understand. Now, with the clarity born out of time, and the nourishment of friendship and caring, we can gain perspective. What was hidden that we can now identify? Fortunately, we have this holy New Year; a gift of time and reflection to notice and return to who we are meant to be. As our liturgy voices in the repeated refrains of *Hashiveinu*:

Return Again *by Reb Shlomo Carlebach*

Return again, Return again
Return to the home of your soul
Return to who you are
Return to what you are
Return to where you are born and reborn again.

In considering how our lives have been impacted by these pandemic years, our personal relationships top the list. In many ways, we lost contact or reduced contact with each other. We are not meant to be alone. We need human contact, caring, sharing and love. It is time for us to recover that.

The anxieties and tensions around masking or not masking have impacted, or perhaps reflected how we relate to each other. Many of us have, even unintentionally, come to size each other up as either a threat, a friend, an adversary, or a partner. To mask or not to mask? The mistrust, distancing, awkwardness, and everything in between has torn us apart.

It is time to notice that we are meant to be a community, a whole, much more than the sum of its parts. Our Biblical text lays bare many stories of conflict, where ego and personal concerns topped the collective value of community. These are cautionary tales

with a message: it is our task to come together, no matter how different our viewpoints. On this holy day of the New Year, **we** can commit to being part of this healing, for ourselves, for our community and for the larger world. In a time when pandemic fears and isolation have led to too many people taking sides while not hearing each other, **we** can elevate the discourse with *shalom*/wholeness and peace as our central values while we assume good intent from each other. The path for a renewal of spirit is between and among us.

Let us celebrate acts of caring and kindness. It is a gift when individuals ask others if they would like them to be masked while gathering in small groups. This is a positive and caring way to navigate differing views and practices regarding risks, rules and personal autonomy. We might reflect on this question: Is it about **me** or about **we**?

As a community, we reacted to the emergence of the pandemic with resilience and tenacity. Technology has enabled us to remain engaged with our Jewish community in unprecedented ways, even enabling connection in a way that was not possible just a few years ago. While in-person gatherings remain a challenge for some people out of concern for illness, we continue to care for each other by enabling virtual opportunities for Jewish experience and prayer for all. Now, when the technology periodically fails us, we are more likely to chuckle, out of a realization of just how far we have come in such a short time, by finding ways to remain a community and to serve everyone.

We know now that this is not going away, for us and for synagogues all over the country, even around the world. Our community has been nimble, pivoting to maintaining our weeknight minyan virtually, especially for those who are saying kaddish. The impact has been profound. Many more people attend than in the waning days of in-person minyan before the pandemic. Our families can Zoom-in from anywhere to say kaddish for loved ones, or healing prayers when needed. We have met many wonderful friends and family members who live far away and can only join us on

Zoom. Even when we lack a minyan, which still often happens, it takes only a few phone calls or texts to get other OZ members to log on and join us, something we could never do for in-person services. In the mix, there have even been rare occasions when was there just one person who logged on for minyan and no one was saying kaddish. We have had joyous, meaningful, deep conversations in those moments. I wouldn't trade that for the elusive goal of in-person minyan.

Still, the ease of logging on for a Zoom or streamed service, especially on Shabbat, has shifted the energy in the sanctuary. We have lost some of the benefits of conversation before and after services, the exchanged glances and smiles and hugs that are shared in the room. Still, we have learned that *we should judge our success based on the quality of the experiences we offer, and not the numbers of people in the room.* As we celebrate our resiliency, our task now is to continue to adapt and rebuild to hold the nurturing feeling of mutual support.

Technology has also brought a vast array of Jewish experiences, near and far, onto our screens. Anyone can choose the Shabbat experience they prefer with a little shopping around, including the musical services at New York's Romemu and B'nai Jeshurun, for example. I have sometimes logged onto services of Beit Tefila Yisraeli in Tel Aviv, where I can see my friends there and enjoy the wonderful music, as the sun is waning in Tel Aviv. And now we can take stock of what we have enjoyed and learned through these experiences and *also* revel in the special quality of Shabbat with our own community. Engagement and joy -- this is what we aspire to, while we cultivate our community's talents and resources.

We know that the ease of Zoom services has brought about relational change. A blessing is that through Zoom we can spend time with friends and family who live far away. Now, as we rebuild our connections with each other, we will seek to find ways to

connect here at home. The value of community is re-emerging centrally in our lives. We are blessed to be a **people** with a long history of a collective way to be. *“In the last two years we’ve seen that the power of this time of year transcends the challenges of this particular moment and thousands of years of Jewish history have provided us with countless resources to draw upon.”*¹

Now is a time for healing the individualism impacting our public discourse, and painful, divisive politics. Public officials like Dr. Fauci and Dr. Wolensky have been called heroes or villains as medicine and science has become a battle for the soul of our country. Let us raise up our voices in solidarity, even when we don’t understand and may not be sure we agree. The Akedah, the story of the binding of Isaac that we read on Rosh Hashanah is a lesson in **humility**. There can be no more important lesson for our world at this sacred time of new beginnings.

From these many months, we can see the acute mental health crisis from pandemic isolation, especially in schools. And, while many people found ways to pivot to working from home, it is not clear that going back is so easy. With an increased sense of personal empowerment emanating out of more solitary work and leisure choices, we need to recover the sense of a shared collective. *We need each other, even if it means foregoing the perceived luxury of individual choices.*

There is a beautiful teaching from the influential early 20th century spiritual leader, Rav Kook. In a work entitled, *Orot Teshuvah*, Rav Kook taught that **teshuvah**, meaning, *turning*, translated as “repentance,” is about **embracing the possibilities of the future by returning to yourself**. In an extraordinary teaching, Rav Kook imagined the process of teshuvah as though we are putting up a ladder to climb **up**. Digging is

¹ “Third time’s the charm – High Holy Days in the time of COVID-19, again” Rabbi Danny Burkeman August 29, 2022 *eJewishPhilanthropy*

not the right direction! *Teshuvah* is an opportunity for transformation – **toward** who we are to become in the New Year. It is not about the past, it is about the future!

But, what about the past, those sins we came to atone for? For that we turn to the great teacher, Rambam, who taught in ***Hilchot Teshuvah***, *Laws of Repentance*, that these are the ways we atone: *Kapparah/atonement*, *Selichah/forgiveness* and *Mechilah/pardon*. These are the themes of our prayers in the *machzor*, the high holy day prayerbook.

This is our moment for **teshuvah**, for turning, for **returning** to a new becoming.

What have we learned for the better or gained? We have learned lessons in the preciousness of family. We have learned about what matters to us most as individuals and as communities. We appreciate the warmth and friendship of community. We have been reminded of the value of caring and support that we enjoy together; this is the gift we give to each other, and to ourselves. There is nothing like sharing a meal together (which, we have learned, is not quite the same sharing a meal with zoom.)

Here at Ohavi Zedek, we are returning with a passion for what we are creating together as a community in this era of Imagine 2025. In this process, we have come to accept and appreciate change while holding close what is most precious that must remain.

On this New Year, the gift of reflection is here for us. Who are you? Who are **we**? And how shall we thrive in the coming year — renewed and purposeful, with joyous community, loving relationships, and appreciation for what we mean to each other. Yes, there are enduring challenges in our physical health, our mental and emotional health and our children's education. But as we emerge, there is much to celebrate in this moment, at this time of turning, returning and renewal. In the spirit of celebration,

I am reminded of the beautiful words of the song, “What a Wonderful World,” adapted and sung by my friends at Beit Tefila Yisraeli in Tel Aviv:

What a Wonderful World – Eizeh Ach’lah Olam²

K’she’ani ro’eh ba’chalon

Etz she’morik l’cha v’gam li

Ani shar l’atzmi, eizeh ach’lah olam.

Ha’shama’yim k’choolim, anan hu lavan

V’haboker bahir u’valaylah ishan

Va’ach’lom l’atzmi, eizeh ach’lah olam.

The colors of the rainbow, so pretty in the sky,
Are also on the faces of people going by.
I see friends shaking hands, saying “how do you do”;
They’re really saying “I love you”.

I hear babies crying, I watch them grow;
They’ll learn much more than I’ll ever know.

And I think to myself “what a wonderful world...”

I see trees of green, red roses too,
I see them bloom for me and you.
And I think to myself “what a wonderful world...”

I see skies of blue, and clouds of white,
The bright blessed day, the dark sacred night.
And I think to myself “what a wonderful world...”

Yes, I think to myself “what a wonderful world.”

One more thing, my friends. We need to have fun again! As an artist presented in a recent NYTimes Opinion graphic, “**How to Have Fun Again**,” here is a simple story to help us remember to be our inner child. Its uplifting message, as we renew the life we yearn for, reminds us to shift gears, to return to ourselves in healing ways. It read,

I’ve been in a Funk. But Let’s be Real, Who Hasn’t been? These days I’m more inclined to stay on the couch than rally for an adventure. A few weeks back I hoisted enough inner Oomph to visit a friend for a drawing trip. We’d been drawing at the top of a grassy hill when I was overcome with an inexplicable urge. I lay face down on the ground, tucked my arms tightly into my chest and began rolling down the hill like a log. I went around and around until I had no idea how far I’d rolled. Then I stopped. My mouth was full of grass. I couldn’t stop

² Hebrew transliteration From Beit Tefilla Yisraeli “A Tel Aviv Prayer”

laughing. The world was spinning. I almost puked. **The happiness lasted days.**³

Here's to happiness! And joy and renewal! Let us return, to ourselves and to each other.
Leshanah Tovah Tikateivu!

³ “How to Have Fun Again” By Wendy MacNaughton, NY Times, September 2, 2022