

Here's how I want to die: at a very old age, in my own home, surrounded by generations of my loved ones.

When I imagine this scenario, I like to think that I've been blessed to know my great-grandchildren; to celebrate a minimum of 50 (but preferably 60+) years of marriage; and to know that my children have found happiness, love, and satisfaction. If I really get to orchestrate my leaving, I'd like my family to sing to me as my soul departs this world.

<<Pause>>

I say this as if I have any choice in the matter.

If there is anything that we've learned from this pandemic, it is that we can take virtually nothing in this world for granted. If we ever thought we had even a modicum of control over our lives, we now know the truth: so much is out of our hands. It's one thing to know, in the abstract, that the world can be turned upside-down in an instant; it is quite another thing to experience it first-hand.

Letting go of the idea that we get to plan what tomorrow will look like has been a reality of this coronavirus. The only thing we can control is how we respond to the unpredictable.

Collectively, we have experienced vast losses this year; individuals in our community have lost spouses, parents, and siblings, with no opportunity to grieve

publicly and properly. Others have lost jobs, eliminating both their income and health insurance at a time when they are needed more than ever. Virtually all of us have missed out on life milestones, or had our joy about them significantly diminished.

Of course, there is no comparison between the loss of a life and the loss of an enjoyable opportunity. But the truth is that none of us will come out of this pandemic unscathed. All losses bring grief, and so we are **all** grieving in some way. Missed school days, playdates, college semesters and proms and summers at camp; lost Shabbat dinners; skipped birthday parties and summertime BBQs. True, some of our family pictures will look the same as they did before and others will be smaller, but make no mistake: we've all lost something to this germ. It's just a question of scale.

The overarching theme of the *Yamim Nora'im*, this year and every year, is that we don't control the narrative - only God does. Our job is to give up control and to put our faith in the Holy One. Since March, we've been living in a months-long High Holy Day season, learning and re-learning that we do not own our own destiny, and ceding control of our lives to God.

I was 7 months pregnant when the world turned upside-down; from the very first days of lockdown, I knew that I would need to enter a medical facility in the middle of a global pandemic. For months, each of us prayed that no one in our

families would need to visit a hospital, to enter, what felt like at the time, an epicenter of death. But in the back of my mind, I knew that even if we stayed healthy and avoided the virus, the day would come when I would need to walk into a hospital - and hopefully, would be able to walk out, covid-free, with a healthy baby.

Planning can only take us so far; for all the social distancing, sanitizing, staying at home, and mask-wearing that we've all done these past six months, at the end of the day, we have each chosen one of two options: live with unremitting and overwhelming anxiety, or give into, perhaps even welcome, the unknown. I see this latter choice as welcoming God into my life. Making space for the unknowable means acknowledging that once I have taken the steps I can to minimize risk, the rest is in God's hands. Believing that takes away some of the anxiety, allowing me to fret less about the things that are outside of my control.

Avot D'Rabbi Natan, a Jewish text from approximately 700-900 C.E., tells of Rabbi Yohanan Ben Zakai's actions when the Second Temple was about to be destroyed. Death and despair were literally all around, so the rabbi had two of his disciples smuggle him out of the city in a coffin. They brought him to Vespasian, a Roman general and future emperor, from whom he managed to extract three favors: the health of Rabbi Tzaddok; the survival of Rabban Gamliel's family; and a gift of the city of Yavneh. This final promise would change the face of Judaism forever, as it

would soon become the place from which the rabbis would rebuild our religion in an entirely new way.

The destruction of the Second Temple was a turning point for Judaism. It is fair to say that without Yohanan Ben Zakai, we would not be here today. Judaism would not have survived the loss of our holy space - and if, by some miracle it did, it would not be a Judaism that we would recognize. Yohanan Ben Zakai took a moment of deep despair and was able to find light - even some small amount - where it seemed there was only darkness.

A similar pivotal moment of hope in our shared history took place 72 years ago. Rising from the ashes of the Holocaust, our People created the State of Israel and once again reimagined what Judaism could look like. Abraham would not have recognized the Judaism of Moses; Moshe would not have identified with that of Yohanan Ben Zakai; and R"Yohanan would not understand our modern brand of Judaism. This is by design; we have created a religion that can evolve with the changing of the world around it, while keeping our core values intact.

Without minimizing what we are going through right now, we can grant ourselves permission to have some perspective. While the personal losses are devastating, we are not experiencing the same level of destruction as the loss of the Temple or the Holocaust. Just the same, we can take inspiration from the Zionists and from Rabbi Yohanan Ben Zakkai, and find ways to recreate the sense of community, Torah, and prayer that have been missing for the past seven months.

Sometimes we'll find that we will be creating something entirely new, and we must accept that this is alright. I would much rather see your smiling faces in shul than speak to you on Zoom! Other times, we will need to readjust our priorities and find meaning in things that have been there all along; this lets us know that there is a future to anticipate.

In desperate times, it can be hard to look forward to any kind of future. We read about one such case this morning, in the story of Hagar and Ishmael. On their darkest day, they were cast out from the only family that they had ever known and left to wander the desert, alone and without sufficient sustenance. Hagar feared that death was near. Determined not to watch her son suffer and perish, she left him under a bush. As she walked away, she cried out to God - and was answered. God's response was to open Hagar's eyes to the well of water in front of her; to cause her to see what was there all along, but to which she had been blind. Stripped of all defenses, Hagar had no choice but to make room for God in her moment of pain. And in that moment she was able to fully see what she had been missing.

There is so much to which our eyes have been opened this year - things many of us pretended not to know, things we wished were not true. But there have also been blessings that we only came to fully appreciate in this time of crisis.

Sometimes people talk about the "silver linings of Covid." With due respect, there are no silver linings to a pandemic that has cost nearly a million lives worldwide,

wreaked havoc on the economy, and threatened our homes, livelihoods, and way of life. But there ARE moments worthy of gratitude, and we ought to lift those up. (Some) families are reconnecting and growing closer; (some) kids are discovering that they learn better at home than at school; (some) people are enjoying having time to devote to their hobbies.

This practice of recognizing the good, known in Hebrew as Hakarat HaTov, is healthy for all of us. In this time, we might be focusing on the negative, intensely comparing our situation to others' and missing what we've lost. Instead, noticing the good in our lives is a powerful reminder of all that we still have. When we remove all the layers that are swept away by a pandemic, we may find that what remains is that which matters most. By making room for God to open our eyes, we are given the opportunity to see the very things that we need, but often ignore.

Rabbi Jordan Braunig writes that we enter this High Holy Day season with twin desires:

“The first is to obliterate the memory of this year, to take 2020/5780 and wipe it from our collective consciousness. Who could blame us for wanting to erase all of the frustration, the disappointment, the loneliness, the immense loss? Our second desire, conversely, is to really dig in; to sift through the wreckage and to examine all that has been revealed in this

time. That which has come to light varies from the intensely personal to the sweepingly societal.”

Every year, we are asked to delve deep into our souls and sift through the wreckage of the past year. Like cleaning out an attic, we divide the contents of our year into “keep” and “throw” piles. This time, the process feels more fraught than usual, because for most of us, one of the piles is significantly larger than the other.

I tend to prefer when Rosh Hashanah can act as a bookend for the year. If I’ve had a particularly rough year, the holidays offer some closure and a fresh start. The same is true for the secular New Year. Celebrating these holidays is a ritual for us - we close one year and open another, putting behind us all that happened, and looking forward to all of the possibilities of the next year. So it is notable that, in most cases, this won’t happen for us in 5781. Many of our challenges from this past year are going to follow us right into the next year - and Rosh Hashanah will feel neither like a closing of one time period, nor an opening of another. But perhaps we can frame the rollover into the next year in another way, so that we enter the new year with the belief that things *will get better*.

There is a church in Walpole that, for months now, has had a huge sign out front reading, “Hope is not cancelled.” This sign would look just as appropriate outside a shul; it is no coincidence that Israel’s national anthem - the song that

encapsulates our homeland - is titled "HaTikvah," "The Hope." We, on the whole, are optimistic - we could never have made it through so many horrific experiences without believing that *we would make it through*. We are a People who know how to look at dark times and have faith that they will get better. We are a People who know how to hope.

This is my wish for you, for all of us: remember that we Jews never give up our hope. Even as we struggle with the difficulties of this new world, may we have the wisdom to experience our blessings. With whatever anxiety we feel, may we also know gratitude. I pray that this holiday brings a measure of sweetness to our lives, in an otherwise challenging time. And I hope that we'll get to see each other again in person, b'shana ha'ba'ah, next year at Temple Israel. If not sooner.

Shana Tova u'metukah.