

My mother-in-law Elaine is a psychologist and the clinical director of a Jewish Family Service chapter in Florida. She's been running workshops throughout quarantine called "Coping With Our New Reality" and they're all focused on how to cultivate resilience during this harrowing time. At a recent session, someone sighed, raised their hand, and said, "Honestly, Dr. Elaine, I'm just waiting for this nightmare to be over."

Hearing this comment, Elaine stopped the class right there — she stopped sharing her screen and halted her presentation to address this person. And she said, "If you're living your life like it's a nightmare that you're waiting to end, we have a big problem."

She went on and said, "YES, life *is* impossibly hard right now, harder than it's ever been for most of us. But if your only plan is to wait for the nightmare to be over, you will be missing your precious life. Even though our reality has become so constricted, so frightening, so devoid of hope, we *are* still able to discover and create goodness in this time. And if we're able to name and conjure The Good right now, we will not only fuel ourselves through this crisis, but we will be making the most of our precious moments, and we will emerge from all this chaos and hardship stronger and wiser."

There's a part of me that knows what Elaine said is true, and I want to believe it so badly. But I also understand the sighs of the person Elaine was speaking to. These past seven months, I have also been sighing — and crying and sometimes even screaming. And there have been so many times when I have also wanted to crawl under the covers, curl myself into a fetal position, and wait until I can recognize the world again. Wait for the nightmare to be over. The multi-layered crises that we are facing have ripped so much of our reality from under us, leaving us shocked, confused, angry, scared, and so sad.

And as we've been approaching the high holy days, with every month that passed, I have wondered to myself: how am I, and how are *we*, supposed to do the spiritual work of teshuvah right now? Isn't life hard enough? Most of us are living some constrained version of what our lives used to be and facing some of the most frightening and painful losses in human history. Thousands are dying by the day; millions are sick and so many of them aren't able to get the care they need; our children are staring at screens all the time, and the kids who can't afford screens either can't continue their learning or have to risk getting sick to learn; fires are burning up California; black men and women have been suffocated and shot to death by police; many of us haven't touched or embraced loved ones in months. And on top of all of this, none of us are quite sure how healing will

come, there is a dearth of moral leadership we can trust to make things right again (not to mention that just today we lost one of the few moral judges of our time), and worst of all: we can't even gather in person as a community to hold each other and lift one another's spirits.

So, I've really asked myself this year, and I wonder whether you have too: Isn't it asking too much to even contemplate the work of teshuvah? To examine our souls? To scrutinize our behaviors? To ask ourselves how can we transform for the better? Aren't we just trying to survive?

And yet... don't we also know deep down, in our blood and bones, that our people have endured crises before? And don't we know from our vantage point today and with the unfolding of history that our people and others have not only survived, but also found a way to wrest beauty and blessing even out of the deepest darkness? Many of us know the heartbreaking and miraculous stories of Shoah survivors, or even of those who did not survive, who managed to compose music and write literature and bring children into the world. And there are so many other stories of life and beauty and resilience bursting forth miraculously from the darkest periods of history.

But there's a particular story I'd like to share with you tonight about a rabbi who also lived through a dark period, a rabbi who lived, as we are, during a deadly pandemic. Rabbi Nissim ben Reuven, known for short as the Ran, was a physician and talmud scholar who lived in Spain in the 1300's. He served as a judge, teacher, and physician for the Jewish community in Barcelona. Rabbi Nissim lived through the first wave of the bubonic plague that hit Europe in 1348.

For Jews in Europe, this was a period not only marked by brutal illness and death, but also by violent persecution, since many Europeans blamed Jews for causing the plague. In this way, Rabbi Nissim and his community were also living through crisis on top of crisis. Historians tell us that "some people coped with the terror and uncertainty of the Black Death by lashing out at their neighbors; others coped by turning inward and fretting about the condition of their own souls." There was a movement of upper class Christian men who took to public self-flagellation to demonstrate their willingness to repent and undergo punishment for their sins. Many of us may be familiar with this period of history more from parodies written about it than from history class. It's been a natural response to about a time so unthinkably frightening and grim.

It was in this bleak climate that Rabbi Nissim wrote a number of drashot, many sermons on the Torah portion, for his community. And in those drashot he urged his

frightened people to turn inward and to turn to Jewish tradition for guidance. In his drash on parshat Eikev, he addresses the Black Death directly and prescribes a response that completely altered the way I have been thinking about this season of repentance, in the time of coronavirus.

Rabbi Nissim says:

כשהעולם נוהג כמנהגו וטובותיו נמשכות

“... when life proceeds normally and the goods of the world continue,” he says, it is very easy to fall prey to false and temporal vanities and to be guided more by delusion than by truth. He says that when things are going fine, a person is more inclined to believe only what his senses tell him and to be guided by false narratives. He is more inclined to have a distorted sense of right and wrong and prefer to ignore truths, especially if they’re distressing or hard to swallow.

אבל

*But*, he says,

כאשר תקרינה תלאות ודברים שאינם על סדר מנהגו של עולם

“... when adversities occur and happenings which deviate from the normal pattern, ... when a person is shaken by witnessing frightful events and renewed afflictions” — then he becomes awakened to truths he couldn’t see before and can see reality more clearly.

In his drash he says this phenomenon corresponds directly to “our present state of affairs...” At the time of his writing, they had been living with the Black Death for 13 years. He writes, “... the evil [meaning, the Black Plague] descended in that year of 1348 upon most of the inhabitants of the earth, bringing upon them unusual and terrible afflictions...”

And this is the part of his drash that blows me away. In the midst of so much darkness, he does not advise his people merely to hunker down and try to survive. Instead, he says, with the state of things being as they are, how can we go on living in delusion and according to false narratives about what’s true and right? Haven’t we seen enough suffering to exhort us to stop falling prey to false, temporal vanities? And is it not, therefore, easier for us now, in the midst of so much loss and upheaval, to return to the Holy One Blessed Be God with a whole heart..?

He sums up his drash, saying, “In days of tranquility one does not discriminate things correctly... but when things are bitter and excruciating, a person cannot continue

as they did before. They can no longer be enticed by delusion. As a result, they have a clear perception of the truth, and they seeks out God, not just to escape affliction, but to return to God with their whole heart and soul.”

In complete opposition to my instincts, Rabbi Nissim says that it’s times like this, when the world is upside down, that it is actually easier to do teshuvah! When the world is not proceeding normally, but when we are faced with crisis, that is when we have the greatest capacity to do the kind of spiritual work we are called to do during the high holy days.

I have been thinking about this for several weeks now, and I’ve been speaking with many of you and reading the Rosh Hashana reflections you wrote. And I have been truly surprised to realize that Rabbi Nissim is right. While one might think that living through this time would weaken our ability to reflect about who we are and who we could be, it turns out that the complete overturning of our lives actually primes us for the kind of transformation we are called to during this season. Though we never would have asked for any of the crises we are facing right now, all of this upheaval has created an opening, a doorway to insight and to change.

And I’ve learned this most profoundly from you. Many of you wrote about what you’ve learned this year, how you’ve grown years in a matter of days, in our Rosh Hashana booklet. So many of you have a newfound sense of deep gratitude and a deeper appreciation for the fragility of life and the gift of each precious moment.

David writes that all the moments of loss and hardship, “while challenging, also cause me to reevaluate what I assumed was ‘normal,’ forcing me to feel lucky to have had, or to have again.” He says further, “Each moment that I reckon with fragility helps me grow, as if I am collecting another coin to put in my chest of awareness... But this moment is transformative. The unprecedented collective fragility has me leaning entirely into gratitude. My heart continuously breaks each time I hear suffering on the news, in the community, and in my work. But it has also deepened my sense of appreciation for each small moment of joy, like running into friends, proximity to nature, technology that keeps us connected, the kindness of community support groups, and much more. I’m embracing gratitude for so many things I took for granted, and I pray that, long after this virus has left us, my chest of awareness remains full.”

Sammy writes about how this time helped him to realize that his usual inclination to plan ahead with hour-by-hour schedules and detailed to-do lists comes from his fear of not

being in control of his life. He says, “this realization has forced me to breathe, capture my surroundings in the moment, and be present in a way I haven’t grasped before. It’s also forced me to understand how much I need loved ones around me to make me feel whole.”

To her own surprise, Rabbi Dr. Miriyam Glazer has been more active with justice work than she has ever been before. Since the pandemic struck, she has become pen pals with an incarcerated man. She’s supporting children’s literacy in a Navajo community by creating a Children’s Bookmobile. She realized how destructive the meat and dairy industries are and became a vegan. She writes, reminiscent of Rabbi Nissim’s words: “What false consciousness had ever let me be anything else?”

Dr. Annette Gottlieb writes how much she appreciates “that we are really one planet” in ways she never comprehended before. She says, “One exhale in Wuhan or Tel Aviv can have an effect on an inhale in New York or Beverlywood.”

And Melissa Balaban, our strong, energetic, and sensitive founder and CEO, writes poignantly about how she now understands with much greater clarity how she is not simply a bystander when it comes to racial division in this country. She describes the tension between her daily life and all the suffering just beyond her door. And she says, “The starkness of the contrast and my own complicity is a cold reality that I can no longer avoid. How have I wielded my privilege to contribute to the deeply ingrained inequities in our city and world? Does how I live my life, even in the most quotidian ways, exacerbate these inequities? ... If I am cutting in line, I am necessarily jumping over someone else.” “What have I learned,” she asks? “That I must be willing to interrogate my behaviors and assumptions and not let my identity as a progressive let me off the hook so easily. That the work is constant and endless... That I need to live in the discomfort of being wrong even about deeply held principles and long-held conceptions.”

If everything I just read is not teshuvah, then I don’t know what is.

All this horror and upheaval has not stopped up the spiritual wells inside each of us. It hasn’t prevented honest self-reflection or our ability to change. Quite the opposite. The overturning has created an opening, an access point to truth and righteousness and to what really matters. Through so much loss, we have renewed our appreciation for life and beauty and the natural world. We have become keenly aware of how connected we are to

each other, and how our actions actually make an impact, for better and for worse. And many of us have realized that we are stronger than we thought we were.

I've mentioned before that I spent my four high school years studying and monitoring marine species off the northern California coast with a high school club called Sustainable Seas. Early on Sunday mornings, we would drive to the same stretch of beach to gather data about the species and to analyze the impacts of human foot traffic and local fishing on the area. I got to know the marine vegetation and tidepool creatures really well. And I came to learn that this splash zone is one of the harshest areas of the ocean. Conditions alternate between being dry and exposed to being battered by cold, unforgiving waves. You might think that species would avoid living there altogether — better to stick to calmer seas.

But what stunned me again and again was that this intertidal zone is in fact one of the most thriving and diverse ecosystems. The algae and the invertebrates, the fish and sharks, have all adapted to withstand and thrive in rough waves and dry heat, and with the uncertainty of each. The mollusks grip the rock faces with tremendous strength; the sea stars can regrow their legs easily if they lose one to a predator; the sea anemones can close in an instant to catch their prey or to protect themselves; the nudibranchs have evolved fantastic colors and feathery crowns to attract mates. Instead of avoiding this area, the creatures here have become what they are — magnificent, thriving, and diverse — because they evolved to not just to survive, but to thrive in these conditions.

We too have been living in the “splash zone.” We have been battered with crisis atop crisis atop crisis. The hardship exists in our homes and extends far beyond us to the human networks we are a part of out to the animal and plant species with which we are also intimately connected. And while those intertidal zone creatures had the gift of time - thousands of years to develop as they have — our species, and our people, have proved to be highly adaptable and resilient too. And the reason is that we have not only survived crises, but we have learned and we have wrested blessing from those crises. We have not crawled under the covers to wait until the nightmare is over. Though we have been shaken and pummeled with wave after wave of loss and hardship, we have found our rocks to hold onto. We have adapted. We have been changing the ways we eat and think and plan and live.

In the story of creation, the first chapter of Breishit, the beginning of the world, the Torah says:

When God began to create the heavens and the earth,

וְהָאָרֶץ הִיְתָה תֵהוֹ וּבְהוּ וְחָשֶׁךְ עַל-פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל-פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם:

The earth was unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep, and a wind of God hovering over the waters.

How was the world created? It was generated out of *Tohu va'Vohu* — out of chaos, and out of darkness. It's from there that light and life and beauty were created.

We have been living through a period of chaos and darkness, through a kind of *tohu va'vohu*. But as God, and Rabbi Nissim of Spain, and as *you* have taught me, that disorder is where the opening for order is. That's where change comes. That's where truth and clarity and wisdom emerge. It turns out that chaos does not only have to be destructive; we can also find ways to make it generative. And we can even discover a more honest, more grateful, more clear-headed, more truth-driven, version of ourselves.

I really believe all this because I've also had a personal awakening during this time. I have told some of you that my response to the pandemic, like many of you, was what might be described as grief. I have moved through all of Kübler-Ross's stages: from shock and denial to anger and bargaining to deep sorrow and depression to moments of acceptance and back to shock and denial.

But what has been most difficult for me to let go of is all the expectations I used to have of myself as a mother, as a daughter, as a wife, as a rabbi. I have always cared so much about doing everything, and I mean everything, well and with attention and care. People had told me before that I could use to be more forgiving of myself, more patient with myself. People like my rabbis, my mother, my mother-in-law, my therapist. They would say: "You're always giving so much to others. Why don't give that kind of love to yourself?" I would hear them, but I wouldn't listen; I believed them, but I wouldn't actually change.

But in the weeks after Purim, when the world as we knew it shut down, and I was still trying to function as I was before this crisis. And when it became clear that I simply could not do it all 100% well, when it became clear that I would need to ask for help and that I was growing more depleted day after day, the message that those loving people had

been saying all those years finally congealed for me. Suddenly there was no other option. The only way I was going to get through this was finally to learn how to take care of myself, to forgive myself, to be patient and compassionate with myself, to laugh at myself.

Now I'm not going to pretend that I've got this all figured out. Far from it. I am only beginning to practice these new ways of being. And part of why I've been looking forward to these high holy days is because of the chance they offer for me to continue this self-reckoning, and to continue growing into these changes. And to seek help and inspiration from my community, our tradition, and from the Holy One. This year it turns out I couldn't avoid doing teshuvah if I tried. And I have gathered that this time is presenting us all with a unique chance to change for the better.

It's Erev Rosh Hashanah, the birthday of the world, the first day of the new year. The time is ripe with possibility, with hope for renewal and radical transformation. And the circumstances we find ourselves in 2020 have primed us to reckon with ourselves and our world, to discover our strength, and to grow into our most engaged, most awake, most grateful, most honest, most righteous selves.

*L'Shanah tovah* — let us make this a good year.