



YK Sermon 2021

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Now What? Resilience During & After COVID

Mekor HaChayim, Holy Energy in the Universe that unites us all.

We've been speaking our hearts since *Rosh HaShannah*.

We've been doing the hard work of *teshuvah* – of introspection, turning inward, reflecting, apologizing, and changing.

This is a precious time.

We're blessed our tradition encourages us to lift the veils we've spun around ourselves and embrace radical transformation.

We also know that You, Creator of the Universe, have a lot on your plate.

So, let's begin at the beginning...

When you birthed the world, there was a great rupture. Some call it the Big Bang, our Mystics call it a spark of light in the darkness of *tohu va'vohu* – of chaos.

Right now, the world feels chaotic.

On *Erev Rosh HaShannah* I shared with You some of what we're struggling with:

- The **health of our planet** – the hurricanes, tornadoes, droughts, fires - the effects of climate change.
- The **divisions we see in our country**– between red & blue, vax and anti-vax, rural & urban, those who think the election was stolen & those who don't, anti-abortion & pro-choice.

- **Our teens and their mental health** - their social anxiety and depression, their overuse of cannabis and alcohol, and their tendency to take out their phones rather than look into each other's eyes.

- And **deep inequality** – discrimination against women, girls, and differently-abled people, LGBTQ and BiPOC people, the rise of hate crimes against Jews & Muslims, how Palestinians are treated in the West Bank, the millions of refugees around our world, the unequal access to quality education and unavailable housing for all.

- And just last week, we marked the **20th anniversary of the horror of 9/11**– how it tragically changed our world – while at the same time we're wrapping our heads around the deeply flawed process of **American withdrawal from Afghanistan** - and the Taliban's reseizing of power.

- And this summer we were supposed to enjoy re-opening, but instead we're in this **weird in-between place** when we yearn to rebuild, yet we're hesitant to reunite. We wanted to hug, but we're still doing elbow bumps.

We're **unsettled** and **anxious**. We don't know what's next.

These may feel like **narrow concerns** in the scope of the universe's trajectory, God, we imagine you have a **much greater perspective** than we do.

You don't have to remind us that your seal is EMET –“truth”¹, meaning only YOU know the beginning, middle and end of each of our stories, the story of our planet, the story of the Universe. **Perspective is your trademark.**

We can only **glimpse** Your vista.

But maybe today, on Yom Kippur, You can help us look back, in order to envision an ever-changing future....

¹ The Hebrew word *Emet*/Truth is composed of the first(א), middle(מ) and last (ת) letter of the Hebrew alphabet – as if to remind us that only God has total perspective.

We remember that this time last year² the entire Jewish people stayed home.

- On Simchat Torah. We embraced “Social Distancing” instead of the Torah.
- We heroically moved entire schools, synagogues, offices, counseling, funerals, and arts performances online.
- We suffered while our loved ones were alone in the ICU, while an angel of a nurse held up a cell phone while covered in layers of PPE.
- We lost our jobs, the freedom to sit down for coffee with a friend, the embrace of a grandchild.

These past 20 months we’ve lived through the equivalent of three historic crises: the global pandemic of 1918, job losses on a scale not seen since the Great Depression and political unrest and turmoil akin to that of 1968 – all at the same time!

At first, we kept wondering: **when will it go back to normal**? Now we’ve stopped asking that question. Just like after Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit in the garden, after Cain killed his brother Able, after YOU God flooded the earth during the days of Noah – we learned early on that **“normal” needs to be redefined**.

Crisis changes us.

It rocks our world.

“Normal” is fluid – always evolving, morphing into something new.

Thanks for the lesson, *Adonai*, we Jews have learned it well... or at least we’ve tried.

We’ve developed a particular **genius** for turning **catastrophe** into **opportunity**.

² I want to thank Rabbi Ed Feinstein of Valley Beth Shalom for inspiring me to write this sermon and for his teachings, many of which I referenced in this sermon.

It's not what happened **on** Tisha B'Av³ – it's what we did **next**.

Yes, at first, we lay down and weep by the waters of Babylon⁴, but ultimately we stand up and **redefine** ourselves, **resurrect** our people, **redraft** our mission, **reinterpret** our values, **reshape** our institutions, and **rework** our relationship with YOU.

Our greatest books and movements were **birthed out of chaos!**

- Our Hebrew Bible was codified while we were in Babylonian exile.
- The Talmud came about after the destruction of the Temple.
- Our mystical book, the Zohar, arose during the time of Christian oppression in the Iberian Peninsula in Spain.
- Chassidism was a response to the crises of the destructive impacts of the Jewish false messianic movement and the Cossack massacres in Eastern Europe.
- And Zionism was the inspired vision of persecuted Jews who dreamed of creating a utopian country free of Anti-Semitism and any inequality.

Like a piece of soft clay - hit us with disaster and we reshape our narrative into something new, more creative, more vital.

It's true **all humans** adapt to change – not just Jews.

The Japanese created the art called ***Kintsugi*** in which they mend broken pottery with gold lacquer - treating breakage and repair as beautiful rather than something to disguise.

God, I **learned** a few things about **adaptability amidst chaos** during these past 20 months when I regularly visited my mom at her assisted living home through a 1st

³ The holy day which marks the destruction of the 1st and 2nd Temples in Jerusalem

⁴ Psalm 137:1

floor window holding our iPhones because we couldn't be in the same space, or when I experienced the value of taking a daily morning walk in nature, and when I watched people all around the world banging on pots and pans nightly to celebrate our health care workers who risked their lives to save others.

Yes, all humans adapt to change - it's just that we have a **remarkable record** over thousands of years.

Some call us **stubborn** – we call ourselves **resilient**.

Of all people: Haman (boooo!), in the book of Esther knew this. He complained that we were a “scattered and dispersed” people who didn't obey the rules of the kingdom.⁵ We caused him a headache because we were edgy, innovative, we refused to follow the status quo.

As we try and navigate a world with COVID, Creator of the Universe, we're calling on that edgy attitude. We're asking what we need to sort through and throw out?

We **want** to **reopen** our lives and hearts, but we're **ambivalent**. What will it take to courageously leave behind what's no longer important, as we reinvent our future?

Normal is fluid. Normal is fluid.

Post-COVID Judaism will change. Our synagogues will change. Our relationships **are** changing. How we date, learn, mourn, and connect is changing. We're here because we've always had the chutzpah to change.

And how do we change?

We do this by **leaning into radical imagination** while asking: “what now?”

⁵ Esther 3:8

Remember, God, when we were sent into exile? Our first Temple in flames⁶, our lives in shambles, displaced as refugees. Jeremiah the prophet looked us in the eyes, when all we could do was put one foot in front of the other, and he begged us: “**Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and have children, and marry off your children... multiply there, don’t decrease.**”⁷ He told us that You would make a **NEW covenant with us.**⁸ We had NO IDEA what that meant.

I imagine some of us bristled. Said Jeremiah was just full of bluster.

But we got the message. We knew we had to think out-of-the-box and take risks. We wondered: **what now?**

Then remember, hundreds of years later, when Rabbi Akiva⁹ defied the Roman government and taught Torah? He was thrown in jail and publicly executed. Yet, **You knew** the day Rabbi Akiva died, Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi was born; and on the day Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi was dying, Rav Yehuda was born.¹⁰ You had that perspective. You know that **from death, life one day emerges.** Eventually after years of mourning, we were able to whisper, just whisper, what now?

But there’s one story I really felt in my *kishkas* this year.

It was when Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai¹¹ and his son **hid in a cave for 12 years** because the Romans put a death sentence on anyone’s head if they taught Torah.¹² I’m guessing many of us have felt like Rabbi Shimon and his son these past 20 months – hiding in our caves. Scared to emerge. Terrified of risking our lives.

⁶ 586 BCE

⁷ Jeremiah 29:5-6

⁸ Jeremiah 31:32-33

⁹ Rabbi Akiva lived from 50-135 CE

¹⁰ Talmud Kiddushin 72b

¹¹ Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai lived after the destruction of the 2nd Temple, which was in 70 CE

¹² Talmud Shabbat 33b

After the Caesar died, father and son emerged from their cave with inflated egos – they felt **so certain** about their **great** Torah wisdom.

We hope that won't be us, Creator of All Things. These past 20 months of consuming media that justifies our already divided nation **is not working in our favor**. We don't want to become **echo chambers** of our narrow points of view. We need to hear **beyond the walls** of our caves.

When Rabbi Shimon and his son resurfaced, they watched people going about their daily errands, and **judged them harshly** for **wasting their time** with menial matters - instead of what the **two of them valued**, Torah. Anyone they looked at with their **critical** eyes, burned to ash. You, God, were furious – You chastised them saying “You’ve come out of the cave just to destroy My world?! **Get back in there!**”

Two thousand years later, we're listening to your warning anew. We hear that we can't reemerge from COVID with a **toxic harshness** or **self-righteous attitudes**, otherwise we'll **burn each other up**. And with humility, we ask: **what now?**

I guess, Adonai, you've been teaching us all along.

We're not in exile like the days of Jeremiah, however many of us feel lost, disconnected from community, burned out, and experiencing ambiguous loss.¹³ Just like our ancestors who looked at Jeremiah like he was crazy – build houses in exile?! Marry?! Have kids?! What seems ludicrous to **us now**, that we need to consider doing? What **new sense of purpose**¹⁴ do we **individually and collectively** need to discover? And do we have the courage to reimagine our lives? Yes, we're committed to asking: **what now?**

Like Rabbi Akiva's generation, who witnessed his violent death with unimaginable horror and helplessness, we've also looked on as so **many souls have passed**

¹³ The term “ambiguous loss” was coined by Dr Pauline Boss. <https://www.ambiguousloss.com/about/fag/>

¹⁴ Viktor E. Frankl's book *Man's Search For Meaning* is an excellent example of finding purpose after tragedy.

unexpectedly and suddenly. Do we have the imagination to **learn from** and **lean on** Jewish tradition while creating novel rituals to mourn and celebrate across the country, and by ourselves? To **re-envision what prayer might look like post-COVID** on Zoom, livestream, at the beach, or in our back yards? Do we have the humility to accept that **impossibly, painfully, sometimes tragically** death will eventually lead to new life? Yes, we're committed to asking: **what now?**

And we haven't been hiding in a cave for 12 years, yet these past 20 months have blurred time. Do we have the open mindset to move past our **narrow judgmental tendencies** and engage in **radical acceptance** of fellow Jews and people across the political spectrum with whom we disagree? And if so, what would **radical acceptance without compromising our integrity** look like? Yes, we're committed to asking: **what now?**

We are going to have the courage to speak up.

We are not going to let this crisis go to waste.¹⁵

We are going to keep asking: what now?

And then sit with **open curiosity**,

the **silence of uncertainty**,

and the **myriad of questions** to follow.

Yes, Adonai, we're tired. It's been a long difficult year. We're scared and cautious.

But we're **not giving up**.

¹⁵ Stanford economist Paul Romer famously said, "a crisis is a terrible thing to waste."

I started with the Big Bang of Creation, and I'll end with Proverbs.¹⁶ You taught us,

כִּי שֵׁבַע יִפֹּל צַדִּיק וְקָם

“Seven times the righteous person **falls and gets up**”

Yes, we've fallen this year.

We've fallen on our faces and cried, screamed, and sat in silence.

I've cried, screamed, and sat in silence.

But we keep getting up.

Stay with us, *Avinu Malkaynu*, Hear our prayer

Have compassion upon us and on our children

Inscribe us for blessing in the Book Of Life

Let the new year be a good year for us, our families, and the world.

It's your turn, *Mekor HaChaim*, source of life:

Now what? I'm listening. We're listening....

OK – we know, You're smiling¹⁷ and looking back at **us**.

It's in **our** hands.

We know....

And we also know we're **not alone**.

¹⁶ Proverbs 24:16

¹⁷ I'm thinking of the famous story in the Talmud of God smiling at us, Baba Metzia 59b