

Where Are We and What Can We Do About It?

I have been imagining this moment for a year. A year ago, we held the most unusual High Holy Day services with barely more than a *minyan* in our Main Sanctuary.

Given all the hardships we have experienced, I expected this *Rosh Hashanah* to be more than the beginning of a new year, commemorating the Creation. I expected us to be free of this *dever* – this pestilence that continues to afflict us.

But, alas, it has not yet happened.

That is not to say that there are no aspects for which I am grateful nor amazed.

I am both.

I am grateful for what we have done as a community.

That many of us have been able to gather in various ways with friends and family. I am grateful even though it has not been perfect.

And I am also amazed.

It is truly a modern miracle that the vaccines came to fruition so quickly and that so many have been vaccinated. As someone who believes that the Divine flows through us, that we can be God's hands in this world – seeing this process of discovery and the creation of this new medicine on a timeline the world has never seen before, at a time when the world never needed it more, has been wondrous. And everyone I have spoken to in our community who is eligible and able to receive the vaccine has done so. Thank God. *Barukh Hashem*.

That said, there is sadness, there is loss. So many families bereaved, including my own.

Some of the losses were unnecessary – due to those who did not lead, due to people who did not take precautions, who did not heed medical advice, who did not organize quickly enough to distribute the vaccine to those most vulnerable.

And, I am still mourning my father and I am appreciative of all the support my family and I have received from our Emunah family. And of course, it's not just me – so many here have had losses due to Covid or have been impacted in other ways by the pandemic. Too often, there was no closure when our loved ones died and we could neither bury nor mourn properly. Until the summer, we could not say *Kaddish* in person. I felt that loss most acutely for myself and for others in our community.



In addition, Covid has caused isolation, exacerbated mental illness, substance abuse, and domestic violence. It has disproportionately affected those who were already most vulnerable.

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A month ago, I asked our community to reflect on this pandemic, to think about how it has changed all of us. Many answered thoughtfully from your own experiences; I'll share a few:

We have learned about how interconnected the world is – *l'tov u'l'ra* – for good and for bad. Every human being can catch this virus; we are all vulnerable. And, at the same time, we can track a pandemic and share information around the globe, something that would have been unfathomable a hundred years ago during the 1918 influenza pandemic.

There have also been other challenges: isolation, depression, the loss of communal singing, and in-person sharing. While these are of a different magnitude, they add up to give us a sense of who we are as human beings.

There have also been some unexpected benefits. We have shared at Zoom-*shivahs*, creatively adapted our traditions to the needs of this time, and found new ways to be close.



Zoom has allowed families to gather from around the globe, as well as to attend lectures around the world. Who would have believed that more than 200 computers and their many viewers from places like New Zealand, Los Angeles, New York, Lexington, and London would be Zoomed in to classes on Israeli poetry by Rachel Korazim in Israel twice a

week? Study weeks and the Rabbinical Assembly



convention through an app on my phone. Holidays on Zoom, or sharing at “bring your own food and drink, table and chairs” basis – all of these have never felt more inclusive. We have enjoyed the extra time gained from less travel and commuting, helping us focus on what is truly important.

As a community, we have learned how to come together...safely.

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So given everything we have learned, where *are* we now? And are we there yet?

But like the child who asks that question with a sense of resignation, I have to admit that I have no idea where we are; this experience seems not to have a clear endgame, but I know that we have learned a lot.



I have learned a tremendous amount from you, from our community. I have learned about resilience and have learned about letting go. If there is one thing that Covid has taught us, it is that we have little control over our lives. There is a basic impermanence to life and to our existence that pervades everything.

Or, as the book of Proverbs says: *Mahashavot rabot b'leiv Ish, v'eitzat Adonai hi takum* – freely translated into English: humans plan and God laughs; or in Yiddish: “*A mensch tracht un Gott lacht*”; it does sound better in the Yiddish.

Our rabbis teach “*olam k'minhago noheig* – the world operates according to its own custom.” The Talmud explains that if one steals seed for grain, the grain should not grow if this were a just world, but, of course, the grain does grow.

The world works by its own physical laws, not by some overarching Divine control. *Olam k'minhago noheig* – here the rabbis admit that the universe operates by itself, without intervention from above.

Nor do we control it; *olam k'minhago noheig*: it operates on its own, and while we can do what we can, most of life is beyond our control.

Even today, when we declare *hayom harat olam* – this is the birthday of the world, we are aware of our limitations, that we cannot do everything. And while human beings are capable of incredible feats of discovery and

healing, it is in the awareness of our fundamental fragility that we can begin to understand what we are.

Humans do not control very much.

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So while we cannot control much of the world, and we have seen that over the last 18 months, let us think about what we can control.

The aforementioned phrase from the liturgy – *hayom harat olam*, which we recite after the *Shofar* is sounded in *Musaf*, may be interpreted differently. *Hayom* – today; *harat* – like the word *heirayon* – pregnancy; *olam* – which can mean space – the universe, but also time; all time. Today is pregnant with all time, with Eternity, as the late Professor Gerson Cohen taught. It is with the Eternal One, a sense of God's presence and a new beginning to time.



If today is pregnant with Eternity; today is the day we can shift our own possibilities. In fact, every day, in every moment, we can start again – each of us is building each day, each moment into a sliver of eternity. Today is the day we can make a new start, aware that we are limited in what we accomplish.

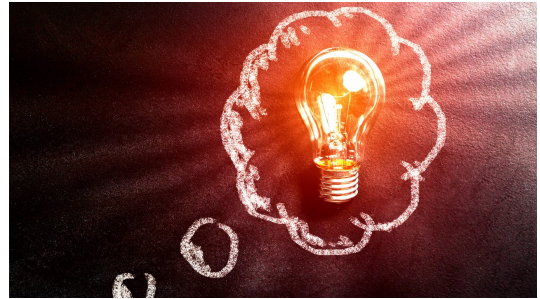
But how do we do that?

We can begin by knowing ourselves – *da et atzmehka* – which can help us wake up and notice our thoughts and behaviors, thereby giving us more control over ourselves.

The *Kabbalah*, a core of our mystical tradition, teaches that the most distant, unknowable aspect of God is *Keter* – the Crown of the Divine. That is where God begins to have the first inkling of the idea of creating the

Universe. It is that first spark of a new thought that creates the universe or in the language of physics, begins the process of the Big Bang.

This is similar to a scientist who sees a new way to create a vaccine or a musician who creates a new song.



Similarly, like God, we can begin the process of creating or re-creating ourselves when we begin to notice where we are, when we have the thought of the first spark of an idea of what we are thinking.

We find a teaching in our Torah reading this morning that can be helpful in this regard. Today, we read about Hagar and her son Yishmael. After being thrown out of their home, Hagar is lost in the wilderness. And then – *VaYifkakh Elohim et*



eneha – vateire b'eir mayyim – God opened her eyes and she saw a well. The Source of all Awareness helps Hagar become aware of the water that was right there.

Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel Wisse, a 19th-century commentator, known as the *Malbim*, citing Maimonides, writes “that the well of water was always there, but before, [Hagar] (she) was unable *lasim lev* – to pay attention enough to see it; but now, she was able to see it. She was unable *lasim lev* – to become aware. But then her heart broke open over her fear of losing her son and then God entered it.



She abandoned herself to the grief of the moment. She allowed herself to feel fully, deeply.

Hagar had enough awareness to acknowledge and feel the bottomless depths of her pain; that led her to see the well which was always there.

This reminds us that we have the power within ourselves to see what is there – literally or metaphorically.

This phrase – *lasim lev* – contains layers of meaning. *Lasim* means to place or to put, *lev* is heart. To place your heart in something is to give it all your attention, all your care.

In this moment for Hagar, it was the full embrace of her situation that enabled her to save the life of her son. In the Book of Psalms, God is described as the healer of broken hearts – *harofei l'shvurei lev*. Rabbi Menahem Medel of Kotzk, the great 19th century Hasidic master, taught that there is nothing more whole than a broken heart. Perhaps that is what allowed Hagar to truly see and feel her situation. She did not push away her grief, but embraced it, allowing its pain to enter her heart.

Lifto'ah et halev is to open the heart. Opening our hearts is to feel deeply, and *lasim lev* – to place your heart is to be fully experiencing this moment.

If we apply the Kabbalistic approach, the first step is to notice where we are, what we are thinking.

Human beings have a tendency to struggle to be fully present in the present. When we were younger, perhaps the age of a toddler, we were totally in the moment – sometimes joyful and at other times in a tantrum.

As we get older, our minds wander.

So let me ask: Are you fully present right here, right now?

Perhaps your mind may be wandering. You may be thinking: “How long is this sermon?” Or: “Did I forget to heat the brisket before coming to *shul*?” Or if you are at home: “Can people see my overflowing laundry basket in my Zoom frame?”

The Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron elaborates on this idea in her book: “When Things Fall Apart.” Even when we are meditating, or especially when we are meditating, when we are trying not to think of other things and focus on our breath, it does not work. Our minds wander. It’s hard to maintain our focus on one thing when we are quiet. Distractions, other thoughts, feelings tend to rise to the surface.



Chodron speaks of the moment when we realize that we are thinking about something else. While our mind has wandered, she invites us to the practice of gently noticing that we are thinking about something else. And simply to mark it by saying the word “thinking” to yourself.

Noticing a thought pattern, especially a negative one, can help us create some distance and not be as overwhelmed by the thought.

Our thoughts tend to be looking back at what has already happened, the past. Or, they can be focused on the future.

What am I worried about? Our long lists of things to do. Usually, it is most difficult to be in the present, in this moment.

In our Torah, being fully present is indicated by the word: *Hineni* – here I am, as Avraham responds to God in tomorrow’s Torah reading at the beginning of the narrative of the Binding of Isaac and again to his son questioning the absence of a sheep for the sacrifice as they walk toward

the place of sacrifice, and finally, when Avraham responds to the call of the angel of God who orders him not to harm his son. Avraham's triple response of *hineni* is what enables him to respond first to God's order, then to his son's suspicion, and finally to raise his eyes and actually see the ram caught in the thicket by his horns, which had probably been there all along, like Hagar's well. I suspect that Avraham couldn't see the ram until he was no longer torn between his love of God and his love of his son, until he could focus entirely on the moment at hand, knowing that the moral action was NOT to kill his son.



That simple act of noticing that we are thinking about something else or we are anxious or we are afraid reminds us that our minds can be easily distracted. Like the Kabbalistic concept of the spark of a new idea, noticing where we are and where our hearts are can begin the process of change. Awareness can lead to modifying our behavior.

We do not have to be stuck in old patterns of thinking. We can create new patterns for ourselves. We can begin again; we can create new possibilities for ourselves.

When things go wrong, we can forgive ourselves and others. A helpful approach might be to say “*over, next*” instead of holding onto anger, pain, or disappointment. Each new moment contains a new world.

This deeply relates to this pandemic. This pandemic has taught us that *olam k'minhago noheig* – we cannot control the world, that we are

fundamentally vulnerable, that the world will continue to operate, often beyond our ability to change it.

But we can learn to control our responses. If we can develop our awareness of our thoughts and emotions, then we can begin to grow as people. We can create new patterns of how to live, we can recreate our patterns of thinking.

And that is also what this moment is about; *Rosh Hashanah* teaches us that we can reset and start anew.

Both Hagar and Avraham become fully aware; they become present in the moment.

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While this year and a half has been a struggle, there have been some silver linings. Sometimes, extreme situations like a pandemic can help us experience life more fully, when we feel God's presence closest to us. It is often when we are broken open, when our *lev* – our hearts are broken open, that we can let new emotions in, that we can realize that we are part of something greater than ourselves, that we can be open and let God in.

Hayom harat olam – This is the day to be fully here as we begin a new year with hope.

We can appreciate that noticing how we are reacting or feeling is the beginning of understanding ourselves and this understanding can lead to deeper growth. This is the response to *olam k'minhago noheig*, this is the response to this moment of uncertainty.

Ultimately, our goal is to expand what is possible; to see things differently, and to do things differently. The awareness helps us realize that we do not need to be locked into the way things were.

That first spark of awareness, of noticing, as in the creation of the world is the beginning of a new world.

Instead of berating ourselves or lacking a spirit of generosity towards others, we can notice where we are: *lasim lev*. We can have more control of ourselves than we think we can.

Rosh Hashanah and its liturgy remind us that beginning with a journey into ourselves can propel us into the world, perhaps lessening the severity of the decree as we recite in the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer.

May it be a year of noticing, helping us to sustain ourselves, lessening the challenges of an uncertain world. While we see and feel *olam k'mihago noheig*, when we *lasim lev*, we begin the spark of a new creation.