

This Too Shall Pass

There is a story of the great biblical King Solomon, who struggled through an extended period of sadness. No matter what he tried the king continued to be unhappy.

The greatest experts came to the palace and tried their best, but to no avail. Then one day, an old man in tattered clothes arrived at the palace gate. Without uttering a word, the man approached King Solomon, handed him a simple wooden ring, and left. The king looked at the ring, read the inscription that was etched on it, and slipped the ring onto his finger. For the first time in months, the king smiled.

"What does it say, Your Majesty?" asked the king's counselor. "What could it possibly say?" The king looked up. "This, too, shall pass," King Solomon replied, nodding his head. "This, too, shall pass." In Hebrew, the same expression is uttered in three words: *gam zeh ya-avor*. This too shall pass.

It's an expression many of us have uttered to ourselves in difficult moments or offered as advice to friends during their challenges. The expression has taken up such a place in Jewish lore that *gam zeh ya-avor* is a whole industry. Venture down the touristy Ben Yehuda street in Jerusalem, and you'll find all sorts of rings, bracelets, and other trinkets emblazoned with the seemingly wise advice *gam zeh ya-avor*: this too shall pass.

But right now these words struggle to offer comfort as we observe the holiest days of the year from the shelter of our individual homes. This quotation feels naive as we continue to suffer from the earthquake that is this global pandemic and as we navigate the storm-tossed waves of this election season. And *gam zeh ya-avor*, this too shall pass, even comes across as insulting as we bounce back and forth from the antisemitism of QAnon and white supremacy on the right to the antisemitism of the BDSers as well as Farrakhan and his disciples on the left, and as we struggle to rectify the injustices suffered daily in ways small and large by people of color in this nation.

This too shall pass? Yes, we should be hopeful about the future, but we cannot simply sit on the sidelines and wait. On the contrary, as we mark this New Year 5781, simply riding out the storm feels like giving up, like hiding, like abdicating personal responsibility. This too shall pass for some, probably, but not for all: for others, it will be years before they recover physically, emotionally, or economically. This too shall pass but how much suffering and how many dead must we endure before it passes? This too shall pass ... or will it? We know that racism, antisemitism, and injustice do not go away on their own. Rather, as we embark on 5781, let us not be passive in saying, "this too shall pass." Rather, let us make the decisions and act in such a way as to make this crisis pass.

Though the leaves are just beginning to change outside, for many it feels like we are in the midst of a national and perhaps even global wintertime, and we Jews know from winter. Several months ago as spring turned to summer, I immersed myself in books about *halachah* -- about Jewish legal decisions -- made by rabbis and communities throughout history who, like

us, confronted decisions that were quite literally life and death. Though Shabbat observance is central to Jewish practice, the Talmud discusses at length how the laws of the Sabbath may be suspended to save a life. Later, as a communal response to our suffering during the Crusades, medieval rabbis created the Yizkor service and transformed the Kaddish from a prayer said in the house of study into a prayer in honor of the dead. And, over the centuries, many rabbis found *halakhic* justification for starving Jews to consume *treif* or to eat bread on Passover because we are meant to live by our commandments, not to die by them.

And so, as difficult and unprecedented as were the decisions in our own time to stay home and to tune in digitally to our prayer services, these decisions are actually a link in the chain of rabbinic tradition that goes back more than 2,000 years that put the preservation of life above nearly all else. Additionally, the innovation in our synagogue experiences reflects the halachic ingenuity and creative Jewish legal interpretations necessary for Jewish continuity. On that note, while I am desperate for us to be safely back together again in person, I am well aware that the incredible success of our online services has inaugurated another new chapter in Jewish history. Sometimes technological advancements are a blessing so, even though we will be back in this beautiful building ... we will be back in this beautiful building ... we will nevertheless continue to connect with each other as well through the digital platform -- and all of us are called upon to deepen our understanding and use of Judaism online.

In the midst of another winter in history, the early rabbis embraced a similar message of human agency and innovation. They did not simply wait for the situation to pass. Two thousand years ago, the Second Jewish Commonwealth had been brought to its knees. The mighty Romans had penetrated the walls of Jerusalem and set fire to the Holy Temple. At the time, biblical Judaism had placed Jerusalem and the Holy Temple at the very center of Jewish practice, with the sacrifice of animals, grain and wine as the medium by which we communicated with our Creator. As such, the fire that consumed the Holy Temple nearly consumed Judaism with it. But in that moment, a sage named Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai took it upon himself to usher in a new era in the history of the Jewish people: an era that brought an end to biblical Judaism and began what we now call rabbinic Judaism. While the Romans laid siege to the Holy Temple on their way to destroying Judea, ben Zakkai faked his own death and had his disciples smuggle him out of Jerusalem in a coffin. Eventually he made his way to a town called Yavneh where he established a center for Torah teaching, learning and living. Quite literally out of the coffin, ben Zakkai resurrected Judaism by transforming our faith from a Judaism based in sacrifices to a Judaism in which God's presence could be felt through Torah study, prayer, and acts of loving-kindness. It was springtime again for the Jewish people. That school ben Zakkai founded produced two generations later a rabbi named Tarfon, who in Pirkei Avot taught us: "It is not your job to complete the task, but you are not free to desist from it either." We cannot solve every problem in the world, but we have more power and more control than we admit. If Judaism teaches us anything, it is that human agency based on God-given values is the key to overcoming crises. The efforts of humankind shape our world, and the actions of good people bring an end to periods of crisis.

So, like ben Zakkai before us, we cannot simply wait for winter to pass. We must find our personal mission; we must discover our own role to play; we must act upon the strengths, opportunities, and resources we possess in order to develop our individual calling. For six months we've understandably and appropriately hunkered down out of concern for our own health and in an effort to preserve our resources for whatever might come; more importantly, we've stayed home in order to show compassion for others' vulnerabilities. We've simplified our lives and pulled inward. For six months we've done what we needed to do to keep safe and to keep others safe. Now the time has come to carefully transcend our spiritual enclosures and to wisely utilize our conserved resources -- not yet for indoor physical gatherings or unmasked interactions -- but for the sake of further extending our compassion toward others while still keeping ourselves safe and healthy. Indeed, in the midst of this winter, we must prepare our communal snow blowers and rig our collective snow plows, so that together we will survive these storms. And what our springtime looks like in a few months or in a few years will be shaped by what we do ... right now.

Among the silver-linings for me of the pandemic shutdown was the opportunity every day to prepare breakfast and lunch for my children. There is something instinctually satisfying for parents to provide food to their kids. Most of you know what I'm talking about: the joy of preparing a loved one's favorite dish: of cutting crust off peanut butter and jelly sandwiches or breaking open the package of cookies, or in my house, of whipping up challah French toast, waffles, or pancakes -- usually with chocolate chips mixed in. And, since my wife Rebecca is watching, always with a side of celery and carrots too. But what about the fathers and mothers, *abbas* and *eemas*, dads and moms right here in our own area who, despite working perhaps multiple jobs, cannot provide enough food for their children: who, probably through tears, send their children to school hungry, longing for something -- anything -- to fill that void in their bellies. While we were understandably hunkered down in our own homes, the pandemic has exacerbated terribly the plight of food insecurity: far too many adults and especially children are hungry or malnourished. We Jews, after our experience in the Holocaust, should never let another go hungry. I would like to ask for volunteers -- leaders and participants -- to help Shaarey Zedek mobilize its membership to perform our biblical obligation to feed those in need. From just picking up an extra jar of peanut butter while grocery shopping to engaging in an entire shopping trip for someone else, together we must work to make a real difference in the lives of children and their parents who are just like our kids and our grandkids. Can I count on you?

In addition to the growing problems of hunger, the pandemic and its need for physical distancing has caused tremendous loneliness and isolation for those who are aged or vulnerable or living alone. I am proud of how our Board and volunteers assisted the clergy in reaching out to our membership over these last many months. We have learned that, whether it's the empty halls of senior living facilities or those of us growing weary from our inability to engage with friends and with family, there is a deep and true loneliness out there. We've had members of our synagogue family who have gone for months without a hug. For our own members, then, as well as for the broader Jewish community, we must organize even more friendly callers, pen pals, Greeting Card senders, and mask makers. We must also continue to lead as we've done in the past in fall cleanup efforts for the homebound. We Jews are forbidden from letting our own be lonely. Can I count on you?

The pandemic too has swept away the thin veil of racism in this country. The internet is bursting with hate speech and incitements to violence. All we have to do is to say the names George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery and we know we have not yet achieved the just society we are commanded to build. Certainly, we must support the vast number of good police officers and other first responders who are genuinely seeking to serve and to protect everyone and especially our minorities, and we must truly respect as well our neighbors who have taken to the streets in peaceful protest of the injustices rampant in the world around us: we should honor those who are “praying with their feet” as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught. We can and we must engage in listening, in learning, and in bridge-building with our inter-group and our interfaith partners. We can and we must be mindful that people of color in this country experience extreme prejudice from individuals and, perhaps more often, from the sheer structure of our society. We Jews know from discrimination and we especially know from systemic oppression, and we cannot let others go through what we know all too well. Can I count on you?

For the sins of not doing enough to battle hunger, isolation, and racism ... The *teshuvah* starts now. Who of you has just a little time, a little energy, and the inner strength to look outward toward those in need? Who of you has the resources and the desire to help even just a little? We need you. I need you. I’m committing to make the extra effort and I’m asking you to join me. There is so much more work that we can safely do to care for each other and especially the vulnerable among us: to be the *kehillah kedoshah* -- the sacred community and synagogue family -- that we long to be. I am calling upon us as a congregation to feed the hungry, to befriend the lonely, and to pursue justice in the realm of antiracism. Please contact me after Rosh Hashanah to let me know that you can help or look for the email that will be coming your way. Together we can make a difference and I’m asking for your help.

For many of us, it feels that winter is here and the ground is very icy. The world is changing rapidly around us and it’s difficult to gain our footing. I believe, though, if we in our own time act with vision and with purpose, with belief in God and a renewed commitment to strengthen the Jewish people and to sustain Judaism, then our future can be one to which we look with joy. After all, 2,000 years ago, through innovation, faith, and hope, rabbinic Judaism emerged from a coffin to resurrect our people and our religion. And less than a century ago, through determination and hard work, the founders of Israel caused a new light to shine upon Zion and the State of Israel rose from the ashes of the Holocaust. I am excited for the Jewish future and I am profoundly confident as well in the future of the United States of America. I do believe that this crisis period shall pass ... that this too shall pass when we unite in defense of the most vulnerable, when we work to uplift the fallen and heal the suffering, when we seek to celebrate the best in humanity. The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., reminds us that the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice; this is true when good people summon their strength to act ... to act in caring for others.

After all, it was through collective efforts and tremendous sacrifice a half-century ago, through peaceful protests and determined marches, that people of every color in this country worked together to advance the cause of freedom and liberty. It was through collective efforts and tremendous sacrifice, that, three quarters of a century ago, Rosie the Riveter and G.I. Joe of the Greatest Generation not only defended us against armies that threatened our existence,

but also brought redemption to the huddled masses yearning to breathe free. And it was through collective efforts and tremendous sacrifice that, a century ago when America last experienced a pandemic, the Spanish flu of 1918 gave way to the Roaring Twenties.

May we too in our own day advance the cause of freedom and liberty to all; may we too be another greatest generation; and we too know from the Roaring Twenties. May we again come together in joy the way they came together in joy, and may we soon dance just as they danced. May we also remember that whether or to what extent the winter in which we find ourselves will pass is entirely dependent on us, and our time to act begins now in this New Year.

Yes, we can quote the legend of King Solomon and whisper, "This too shall pass." Better though, that we should sing that which King Solomon sang in Song of Songs, when he called out, "Rise up my love, my fair one, and come away. For lo, the winter has passed. The rains have come and gone. Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come ... Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me" (Song of Songs 2).

I wish to each of you *shannah tovah um'tukah*: May this New Year be for you and all who you love a New Year of health and joy, of innovation and tradition, of justice and compassion, of hope and of peace. And let us say, Amen.