

Re-emerging with Faith

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Last year was, sort of simultaneously, both the year that was—and the year that wasn't. *It happened, alright:* we contended with a pandemic that upended our lives, our families, our work, our society. And at the same time, it is like, it didn't happen. There are few memorable markers to hold on to. Was it last summer that our havurah got together for a boat ride- *or was that really two years ago that happened?* Has it really been two years since we sat here together in this sanctuary? Since we last saw KuanFen, Miriam and our HHD choir? And we are still not all here- as we welcome those of you who join us by streaming. Last year was both long-suffering, and in other ways it feels like a year that has vanished. This pandemic has no clear endpoint in sight, as we make these societal course corrections to respond to Covid's ebb and flow. What are we experiencing personally, as we move through these cycles of emerging, and retreating from society, emerging and retreating, in rhythm with Covid's surges? As I live through this pandemic, I find myself confronting two overarching feelings- and I think many of you might feel the same way. The first is Fear- fear for the health of those I love and care about. And the second is Disappointment, at how poorly we as a society have navigated this global challenge. Disappointment, that a public health issue has devolved into a culture war about personal rights and public responsibilities; and disappointment that spills into anger, at others and the choices they make. I do not want to become a person filled with fear, or with anger and disappointment in others. So here are the two questions I put before myself, on this eve of RH, as we move into the year ahead:

How will I manage my fears?

And how will I manage my disappointment with others? Maybe those are questions for you as well. For I do not want my fears, or my disillusionment, to swallow me up into darkness, like Jonah in the belly of the fish, and spit me back out, turning me into the kind of callous person that Jonah was.

Those are the two questions that propel me as I look for Jewish wisdom so I can return to the world, as we come through this pandemic. In my gut I know the challenges of our day have all been addressed by Jewish wisdom in the past.

How will I manage my fear? In the darkness of this pandemic my fears move from fear for the well-being of my husband and children, to you, my community, and to our health care workers. I fear the continued mutation of Covid, from delta to lambda and so forth. I fear the havoc it will continue to wreak on families and our health care services, on a public grieving the deaths of more than 600,000 parents, children, sibling and spouses. Do you remember last HHD? We were horrified that we were closing in on remember- it was 250,000- lives lost! In the

dark of night my fears encompass what this means for the future of a country that can't even stand united on fighting a virus which makes no distinction about who it attacks. I fear because I am vulnerable, both to the virus and to its ability to destabilize society, and any illusion I have of control is just that- an illusion. How do I manage my fears about *all of that*?

There is a lot of insight in the serenity prayer that says "accept the things you cannot change, change the things you can, and have the wisdom to know the difference! "I **do not** have control over this pandemic, but I **do not** have to succumb to the fear that it engenders. I **do** have agency over 3 things: my inner life, my relationships with others, and how I can impact the world through my deeds. We are not the first generation to be plagued by fear of a future we cannot see and forces we cannot control. Indeed, every generation is. Who by fire, who by plague, who by earthquake, who by war, who tranquil, who troubled, who calm, who tormented? The words we utter every High Holy Days hold an honesty that cuts away any false security, they call forth all the vulnerability, all the chaos, all the lack of control that we hate but that we know is real, we who have lived through fire *and* plague in the last 4 years. And if this litany gives voice to our fears for ourselves, our families, and our community, its culmination keeps reminding me of what I **do** have control over- which is, precisely, the well-being of my spiritual self, my relationships with family and friends, and with community. Investing myself into my tefillah-my inner life; teshuvah- constantly repairing my relationships with others; and tzedakah- giving of my resources for other's sake, will lessen the blow of whatever decree life meets me with. I need this reminder of where my strength lies to meet my fears. Does this make my fears disappear? Not at all- they still exist. But when my worries for family and the world rise, I can resist the fear and foreboding that seem to linger in this pandemic, by focusing on what makes my life good, which **is** in my control.

My second question for myself is: How will I manage my disappointment in others, my anger even? Ok, here are some examples I do not want to follow: I do not want to be a Moses, who smashes the ten commandments when he sees the misguided among his people worshiping the golden calf. Every right to be disappointed—but I'm pretty sure that would not be successful anger management. And I surely don't want to take Noah's lead, when he returns, not to a post-pandemic world, but to a post-apocalyptic world. His response is to plant a vineyard and get drunk. Tempting... understandable perhaps, but no; I don't want to escape into empty pleasures, I want to manage my disappointment.

There is a Talmudic text I keep coming back to for inspiration. It is the story of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son, Rabbi Elazar, who hide in a cave from the Roman authorities in Judea-- for 12 years. (Shabbat 33b). Somehow their 12 years makes our 18 months more manageable. For 12 years they study Torah until they learn that the Emperor has died, and the decree against their life is over. It is time to re-emerge from the cave.

Shimon and Elazar dress and step out, steeped literally up to their eyeballs with Torah learning. But here is what happens. They look out and see people in the fields plowing, and sowing. The sages are disillusioned at the world they see- that people are plowing fields, not

studying Torah. Everywhere they look is consumed by fire. (Now I admit, I have given fiery looks that could kill as I have ventured back into the public square, only to pass people going in and out of stores with no masks and no social distancing- in other words, not doing what I think they should be doing.) But God intervenes at their indiscriminate wrath and says, “Do you two mean to destroy my world? Back in the cave for you!” We understand Shimon and Elazar! We get their anger at others and what is happening in the world around them! And just when they think their social distancing is done, back indoors! We can surely imagine how they felt, ready to see wives, and children, their community, to celebrate Rosh Hashanah and Shabbat again with friends after such a long hiatus. For how long will they be shut inside *this time*? But here is where the message lies: God sends them back to the cave, not because there is still an outside threat but because they were filled with so much anger and frustration at others that they are counter-productive to society! They would have come back and been at odds with others, divisive. They would have been carrying their self-righteousness and ego, and zeal with them.... And how could society heal? They are returned to the cave to find their common humanity, to lose their judgmentalness, to learn to live in society again. This return to lockdown was a lesson in acceptance of the reality of the world.

Their lesson is our lesson, not to let our anger at the world consume us, or burn out of control; to use our passion discriminately and productively. Our unchecked anger and frustration will erode us, and does not serve society in any positive way.

The Talmud reports that after 12 months, the pair re-emerge again into the world. They have had to practice patience- we are becoming pretty adept at patience as well. Rabbi Elazar the son, looks about him. Still filled with anger, his eyes destroy everything they behold. But Rabbi Shimon looks upon everything his son destroys, and his eyes send healing. “It is enough that you and I have chosen to study Torah,” says the father. In other words- know what is in your control, and what is not. It is only in sequestering that second time that Shimon learns how to engage again in the world- with compassion for others, and with acceptance. Rabbi Shimon’s compassion is able to transform his son’s anger and bring healing.

Are these not the lessons for us to take from this prolonged pandemic battle? We can let our anger at others belittle them in our eyes, rejecting them- but isn’t that sense of being unheard and unseen, so much the root of society’s divisiveness these days? Can we disagree with others and still hold them close? To pray, as mindfulness practice teaches, for strangers, as you would for your father and mother. Can we reject the behavior and not the person? That is the practice of compassion. Noah did teach us: we are all in the same boat.

Can we learn the lesson of Patience- just as those who walked at the front of the Exodus practiced patience in walking slowly so they would not leave the elderly, the children and the stragglers behind? We cannot move faster as individuals than a country as a whole can move.

And, like Rabbi Shimon, can we learn Acceptance? We do not know how long we will be living through this pandemic. But Pirke Avot teaches: Who is rich? The one who is happy with their

lot. Our happiness is not about restaurant visits, movie theatres, travel plans and summer camp for kids- no matter how essential these feel for our happiness. It is in being content in our inner lives, with our friends and family, and in giving of ourselves to better our community. Rather than being frustrated with what we cannot do and have, let us recognize how rich we are, every one of us, by the gifts we do have.

The day will come, when we will emerge from this pandemic. But as sure as we are fighting for our physical well-being, let us fight as diligently for our emotional and spiritual well-being, so that, God-forbid, they, too, do not become casualties of this virus.

Amen.