

## **Moving Mountains: Facing Life's Big Problems Rosh Hashanah 5784 Day 2**

We are living in the future. Artificial Intelligence in the form of ChatGPT has developed human-like abilities to think and process. It can write term papers and movie scripts and even solve complex problems. This year's Detroit Automotive Forum will include self-driving vehicles and cars that fly. Private individuals are taking joy rides in space. Vaccines for COVID were developed in less than a year, vastly surpassing the previous record of 3-5 years in development. In our pockets we hold the ability to access any piece of information and communicate with anyone in the world at any time.

We are living in the future. But it's not all rosy. Weather events that climate scientists warned about twenty or fifty years ago, once the stuff of apocalyptic science fiction movies, are happening now. This summer heat reached record levels worldwide, with peak temperatures everywhere from the arctic seas to the hottest desert. The heat caused massive fires, hurricanes, and typhoons, producing constant headlines about toxic air, burned homes, flooded cities. In Texas a woman baked a loaf of bread in her mailbox. Where once we wore masks indoors to protect against disease, now we wore them outside to protect against smoke. Around the world, more than 70,000 people died from the heat.

Who shall live and who shall die? Who by flood and who by fire? This year the liturgy doesn't feel as much like a metaphor. Today, choosing where to live feels like a matter of choosing what kind of climate disaster we're most willing to contend with: water, fire, wind, earthquake? This is the harsh and unforgiving world of the Anthropocene Era, the world that we humans have created.

This summer thermometers sounded off like shofars, waking us up to the reality of climate change. But it's easy to go back to sleep, our consciences hibernating as temperatures cool with the autumn winds. If we are to change our circumstances, however, then we must keep our eyes open. We must face head-on the truth of our fragility, and the fragility of our earth. It is easy to turn off the TV and continue shopping and traveling and living as normal. But in this way we will sleepwalk to the destruction of the earth, and the demise of future generations.

The Yamim Noraim, the Days of Awe and Terror, are here to help us stay awake. At every point of the holiday cycle we are reminded that life is precious, and not to be taken for granted. On Rosh Hashanah the shofar blows shatter our complacency, awakening us from the stupor of routine, and showing us that *hayom harat olam*, the world is renewed and pregnant with possibility. On Yom Kippur we rehearse our deaths, fasting and wearing white like shrouds, reminding us of the dire consequences of inaction. On Sukkot we live in fragile huts that help us experience viscerally what it means to be exposed to the elements, opening our eyes to how thin our veil of protection really is.

Staying awake is not easy. If burying our heads in the sand leads to inaction, then so, too, does paralysis in the face of an overwhelming problem. Watching the beautiful documentary on Netflix called "Our Earth" with David Attenborough, I saw beaches so full of garbage that native birds began to eat it, and died with bellies full of bottle caps and spent lighters. I grew so disgusted that I stopped watching the series. So far from these creatures and their pathetic plight, I felt helpless to aid them, and this helplessness turned to paralyzing despair.

So what do we do when opening our eyes is painful? Though human-induced climate change is a modern experience, the presence of enormous, overwhelming problems is an eternal experience; every

generation faces one. In her book *Number Our Days*, anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff interviews older Jews in Venice, California about the process of aging and survival.

One Holocaust survivor, a man named Heschel, says that he has a way of surviving, “but everytime I say anything about it, people shudder. ...The thing I am talking about is ‘pain.’ ...You got to go about pain the right way. You couldn’t escape it, so you go into it. Then it melts. ...When the pain comes, I am patient. I shut up, active silence. I bear it, I don’t take a tranquilizer, a sleeping pill, some schnapps, or watch television. I stand before it, I call the pain out. After you go through this, you discover you got choices. You become whole. I want to live this way so I can be alive every minute. I want to know when I’m awake, I’m altogether awake. When I’m asleep, I’m asleep.”

We can’t avoid pain, fragility, mortality, or tragedy. The only way forward is through.

Like Heschel, the Rebbe of Piaseczno faced the terrible pain of the Holocaust. He and his community were forced into the Warsaw ghetto and ultimately perished in the Shoah. His writings are known because they were found buried under ground when the Warsaw ghetto was raised.

In a commentary on Parshat Vayeshev he writes about a time when suffering becomes so great that people go mute, ceasing to learn or speak torah, desiring only to adjust to the difficult circumstances of the world. The righteous, too, would like to simply live in peace. But God commands that they take courage and cry out to shake others from their complacency. In so doing, they will save Israel. Thus Moses is forced out of his peaceful shepherd's life to lead the people to

freedom, and Mordecai begs Esther to break her silence as a Jewish queen.

Judaism, which has endured through countless generations facing enormous problems, tells us that in the face of daunting reality, we must summon our courage and our humility. *Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor*, you do not have to solve this problem entirely, our sages teach us in Pirkei Avot, *v'lo atah ben chorin l'hivatel mimena*, neither can you turn away from it. You must do something, even if you know that it won't be enough.

**To achieve balance between the courage and humility required to live through huge problems, there are two steps. First, we must acknowledge the reality of life's fragility, to face it head on, and then we must commit to small but significant actions to change our circumstances.**

This theme of balancing humility and courage is found throughout our literature. Rabbi Simcha Bunim, an 18th century Polish Hassidic master, taught that, "Every person should have two pockets. In one pocket should be a piece of paper saying: "I am only dust and ashes." When one is feeling too proud, take out this paper and read it. In the other pocket should be a paper saying: "For my sake was the world created." When one is feeling disheartened and lowly, read this one. "We are each the joining of two worlds," he said. "We are fashioned from clay, but our spirit is the breath of Adonai."

This is an esoteric way of putting it, but recently I heard a fictional story on This American Life that describes our humble human origins in a funny way. It was written from the perspective of aliens probing Earth, deciding whether or not to establish contact. One alien who has

been studying human life reports to another: "They're made out of meat." "Meat?" asks the other, disbelieving.

"There's no doubt about it," says the first. "We took them aboard our recon vessels, probed them all the way through. They're completely meat."

"That's impossible," says the second. "What about the radio signals, the messages to the stars?"

"The signals don't come from them, the signals come from machines."

"So who made the machines? That's who we want to contact."

"They made the machines. That's what I'm trying to tell you. Meat made the machines."

"That's ridiculous. How can meat make a machine? You're asking me to believe in sentient meat?"

"I'm not asking you, I'm telling you. These creatures are the only sentient race in the sector, and they're made out of meat."

The aliens go on this way, with the second wondering in disbelief, asking whether perhaps this was just a meat phase of a more intelligent being, or perhaps it was only part meat. No, insists the first, this being is made entirely of meat for its whole life, brain and all.

"Thinking meat, conscious meat, loving meat, dreaming meat."

You're serious? Says the second. Yes, says the first. They're made of meat. And they've been trying to get in touch with us for almost a

hundred of their years. Skeptical of their ability to connect with meat-beings, the aliens move on to another planet.

Indeed, we are made of muscle and blood and bone, and remembering that is humbling. Yet somehow we are also so much more than that. Despite our origins, we are sentient, we communicate, we create, we destroy, we have responsibility. We are alive.

There are certain moments in life, aside from the high holidays that bring this fragility, our dust and ashes, “meat” nature, into sharp relief. The death of a loved one, an experience of illness or a near-miss accident can show us the thin veil between this world and the next, awakening us to the reality of life’s fragility. These experiences are painful, but they can also motivate us to live more fully here and now.

For me, pregnancy is such an experience. Feeling a kick from a being who is somewhere in between existence and non-existence reminds me that life and death are more of a spectrum than a binary. This is readily apparent during the process of creating life: those who have had difficulty conceiving or a miscarriage or an infant in the NICU know how easily life can turn into non-life and vice versa, how fragile and tenuous is the threshold of existence.

Faced with such deep uncertainty in our very existence, how is it that humans have continued to live and even thrive on this planet? Because, meat though we may be, we are thinking, dreaming, loving beings. And so we imagine possibilities beyond mere survival: agriculture, cities, machines, flying cars.

Sometimes our plans can be foolhardy. Consider the story of the Jews of Chelm, whose town grew so large that they ran out of space for the cemetery. The town elders held council to think of a solution until, after

seven days, they had it: they would move the nearby mountain to make more space. The next day they gathered the strongest people in Chelm and went to push the mountain. Heaving, huffing and puffing, they pushed as hard as they could. They worked up a sweat and removed their jackets and heavy shirts. A group of thieves watching them seized the opportunity and stole their clothes. Consumed with their task, the group did not notice and simply continued pushing until finally they grew tired and stopped. "Look!" said one, "my coat is missing!" "So is mine!" said another. How could this be, they wondered? Smiling, a third said, "we must have moved the mountain so far that we can't even see our coats and shirts anymore!" They all rejoiced and returned to town triumphantly.

The story ends there, in foolish ignorance. People cannot move mountains! But then, one wonders what happened when they went to build the cemetery on the non-existent extra land. Did they figure out the error of their ways? Did they despair that their plan didn't work? Or perhaps, believing that they had moved the mountain, they found a solution they hadn't seen before, some space they hadn't noticed.

There are many seemingly immovable mountains in our world. Climate change is one of them, but so is anti-semitism and racism, so is political division, so is economic inequality, so is war. Which one keeps you up at night? Preparing for this sermon, I asked a few of our members of different generations to share what big problem troubles them most. They named concerns about climate change, gun violence, and drug overdoses. There was concern about the isolation and polarization of our day, which I spoke about yesterday. These problems seem insurmountable, yet people shared hopeful solutions, like inviting someone you don't know well to your Yom Kippur break-fast, or starting a casual interfaith dialogue group.

Despite the enormity of the mountains before us, there are people who, in every age, have called upon us to move them. Dr. Martin Luther King helped to inch forward the mountain of racism. Mahatma Gandhi moved the mountainous British Empire out of colonizing India. In our own day, Swiss climate activist Greta Thunberg calls upon us to take real steps toward reversing the decline of our planet. Thunberg began her “Fridays for Future” campaign back in 2018, calling for students to strike from school and sit in front of parliament, demanding action to ease climate change. By the following year, the movement involved some 4 million students in 150 countries.

According to a Swiss University, 30 percent of Swiss residents surveyed said that they had made changes in their lives because of the protests. This included looking for alternatives to driving, such as walking or cycling, avoiding flying by choosing holiday destinations closer to home, seeking out local, organic produce, eating more vegetarian meals, and making a bigger effort to reduce plastic waste.

We, too, can take these small but significant actions. We can look at our lives and see where we could generate less waste, travel less or differently, make alternate food choices. Already, our Green Team has been helping implement some changes at Beth El, which we hope to share with other congregations to collaborate and spread the word. What more could we be doing, at shul or at home?

This very weekend Greta Thunberg is leading a school strike to end fossil fuel use. On October 1st there is a Climate Convergence here in Harrisburg. Across the U.S., youth are suing the government for better protection against Climate Change. This summer Rikki Held won a case in Montana state court, in which she and some peers sued the state for failing to consider greenhouse gas emissions when making deals to extract fossil fuels. In August of last year, there were 25 fires



within 50 miles of Held's home, and 2,000 recorded across Montana. Perhaps next year there will be fewer.

If we reach into our pockets and acknowledge that we are just dust, just meat, vulnerable to challenges of life, but also that each of us has the capacity to change the world, then we, too, could be the righteous people, like Moses, Esther, King or Thunberg, leading the call for behavioral change. It doesn't have to be as frustrating as pushing against a mountain. Actions can be large or small, loud or quiet. It can be a shofar blast outside of a government office, or it can be small but important daily actions like those Greta inspired among the Swiss. It can be both. It must be both.

*Hayom Harat Olam*, today the world is pregnant with possibility. The important thing is not to go mute, not to become paralyzed or complacent, even if we know our recycling bins and compostable utensils cannot, by themselves, prevent hurricanes. As our sages taught us, *Lo aleacha hamlacha ligmor*, it is not upon you to finish the work, *v'lo atah ben chorin l'hivatel mimena*, neither are you free to walk away from it. May our small contributions coalesce into a strong arm and a mighty hand, and may we indeed move mountains.