

## **Kol Nidre**

When my wife Tamar was 7 years old, the family travelled from Israel to the US for the holidays. I can only imagine the happy noise and wonderful chaos in her grandparents' house with her young cousins during the visit...just as her grandfather, Rabbi Joshua Haberman, z"l was getting ready for the High Holidays.

He was senior rabbi at Washington Hebrew Congregation, then as now one of the largest congregations in the world, and considered influential in the nation's capital. Many thousands of devoted congregants waited all year for Rabbi Haberman's sermons, and the Washington Post would cover them as a local news item. Fortunately, Rabbi Haberman had prepared long before the family arrived. During his six weeks' vacation each summer, he would research and write his High Holiday sermons through quiet afternoons in a cabin on Cape Cod while the family frolicked outside by the lake.

What Tamar remembers most about that visit in October of 1981 was being herded upstairs suddenly on the morning before Kol Nidre. Even at that age she noticed something was wrong – it was way too early to get dressed for services. The kids were shushed, and told to play quietly, no noise whatsoever could be heard. Food was brought up - they were not even allowed downstairs to eat.

What had happened was that Anwar Sadat had just been assassinated, three years after he and Israeli leader Menachem Begin signed a peace agreement at Camp David. Aside from the violence and political upheaval in Egypt itself, there was the sudden uncertainty whether whomever would emerge to lead Egypt next would continue to honor the Israeli-Egypt peace agreement. Israel had been viciously attacked by Egypt on Yom Kippur exactly 8 years to the day prior to the assassination – Did Sadat's killing mark the beginning of more violence ahead? No one could know for sure.

In the Haberman home that morning, the scope of large global events narrowed to a problem of household management: In the few hours before services would begin, Rabbi Haberman now needed quiet and focus to re-write his entire Yom

Kippur sermon. So Tamar and her boisterous young cousins were confined upstairs.

Among Rabbis, it's not uncommon to have anxiety-filled dreams around the High Holiday season in which something like this exact scenario plays itself out: a critically important event happens that can't be ignored. A frantic re-write is required right before services begin.

Given all that happened last year --from an onset of pandemic, the killings of George Floyd and others as well as the ongoing protests that resulted, the largest ever wildfires in the West, and so much more -- it's no wonder that many of us have the pervasive feeling of "what's next?" This really has been an extraordinarily rough year. In fact, this Yom Kippur, besides us needing to apologize for our misbehavior of the past year, we might expect the past year to turn around and apologize to us!

The last six-months in particular have taught all of us just how uncertain our lives are, how vulnerable we are, how out-of-our control is so much of what happens to us. Sadly, the waning hours of last year took yet another swipe at our sense of security as Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg passed away right before Rosh HaShanah began. She made our lives more secure through her judicial activism towards equality under the law and by her steadfast pursuit of justice, among the many accomplishments of her life...not the least of which is her being a role model for so many young women.

Uncertainty about the future direction of the Supreme Court and about the results of our nation's upcoming election is growing. The loss of Justice Ginsberg is a bitter culmination to a year that repeatedly demonstrated just how vulnerable we are to new circumstances we are never adequately prepared for, to constant change and the transient nature of all we rely on, and to the loss of our greatest assets – Justice Ginsberg very much among them....

Surely, we would like to think, the New Year will now have to be different. But we all know it won't be. Uncertainty did not walk out the door when we turned a page in the calendar:

So we can have no false expectations, no illusions: We will remain vulnerable to the always-changing circumstances, upheavals, and dangers that beset us with little we can do about it. Mathematician John Allen Paulos describes our situation in concise terms: “Uncertainty is the only certainty there is,” he says “and knowing how to live with insecurity is the only security.”

But how do we do that? How can we make peace with our uncertainty? How can we continue indefinitely, or even thrive, when we so acutely sense how vulnerable we are?

The Kol Nidre we recited this evening is helpful. Kol Nidre is actually a legal formula rather than a prayer: it releases us from the vows we made but couldn't keep. We admit we broke promises in some cases, while in others despite our good intentions we didn't always succeed. We can't always be our best or achieve what we aspire toward. In other words, Kol Nidre gives us permission to be human...

Kol Nidre launches our day of worship and atonement each Yom Kippur. Traditionally, we recite it before sundown, before our Day of Atonement technically begins. Why? Because tradition makes a clear distinction between the long list of sins we have to deal with and repent for on Yom Kippur itself, and those failures that were beyond our control: Sometimes our inability to follow-through on so many broken or unfulfilled promises made to ourselves and to others is due - not to lack of good intentions or best efforts – but to unexpected circumstances and obstacles, new developments, curveballs and constant change in an uncertain reality. We put our concerns about these to rest before we even get started repenting. We narrow the scope of atonement to the misdeeds and misconduct we committed – we don't also have to beat our breasts about the many things that were beyond our control. These, we simply need to let go of...

Acknowledging that much of what happens to us is beyond our control gives us the freedom to focus all the more clearly and determinedly on what is within our control, on that for which we must take responsibility. There is no shortage of these.

In a world that seems so uncertain, it feels almost like a gift to have a day dedicated to what is true and sure: on Yom Kippur, we spend the day within ourselves, looking honestly at who we are as demonstrated by our deeds of the past year. We are straight up with the person we encounter in the mirror. So too, with God: Nowhere else can we seek more fair judgement and compassion than, as our prayers say, with God Who sees all we do, knows our innermost thoughts and weighs our most subtle intentions: an anchor of Certainty in a world adrift on shifting tides.

This honesty about ourselves must include not only dispensing with our illusions and excuses, but also clear-sightedness about facing up to our vulnerabilities. Our vulnerability, argues social researcher Brene Brown, is our spiritual core as human beings:

“Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, [sym]pathy, accountability, and authenticity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path.”

I know many of you have experienced these last six months as a time of great spiritual awareness and growth. We can hardly forget how fragile and finite the world around us is, how we have had our bubbles of security and expectation burst. The threat of Coronavirus has forced us to acknowledge our own mortality and the mortality of those we love and care about, our dependence on others, and the interdependence of the whole world. Have you been able, as Brene Brown suggests, to gain through these circumstances a greater clarity of purpose and a deeper sense of meaning and spirit?

Through the symbol, the reminder, the exercise of our fasting throughout the day today, we dwell with the reality of our complete and utter vulnerability, meditating on it and its implications for how we can live better in the New Year. What insight will you gain from this experience today? Can you embrace your abiding sense of being vulnerable and become a more loving and connected person in this New Year? A more joyful and empathic person?

Ask yourself whether the increased sense of uncertainty with which we've been living has helped your heart be filled more fully than ever with gratitude. We know all too well now, all too palpably, how jeopardized and fragile are all those we love and care for; how precious and precarious are our lives together with theirs. Through this gratitude, can we make our peace with the difficult reality in which we find ourselves?

We have the opportunity within this crisis of uncertainty we're enduring to embrace even more tightly and with even greater appreciation, our family and friends, and community; This is the time to deepen our caring and connection and compassion for those who are suffering through this time.

If our vulnerability can help us find wisdom and inspiration to increase our capacity for gratitude and joy, to become more kind and nurturing... then we know we will have been written and sealed for another year of blessing, peace, and goodness in the Book of Life: Gamar chatimna tova...