

Shanah Tova!

Once upon a time, there was a Jewish man walking alone in the forest. Suddenly, he comes upon a bear and is frightened. In his panic he starts to run, but the bear follows him. He finds a cave and hides inside. Thinking he is safe, he pauses to catch his breath. That's when he hears footsteps and realizes that the bear has followed him into the cave. He is trapped. With seemingly no possibility of escape, the man closes his eyes and begins to recite the shema. "Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloneinu, Adonai Echad." When he opens his eyes, he sees the bear, and the bear is closing his eyes as well and seems to be mumbling a prayer. The man goes from despair to sudden elation. Could it be that he has encountered a Jewish bear? How rare must that be? This animal he was so afraid of turns out to a member of the tribe!

And then he listens to what it is that the bear is mumbling, and he hears: hamotzi lechem min aaretz...a blessing before eating.

Like this poor man, what a roller coaster of reality and emotion we have been riding over the past two and a half years. Just as we think we understand our situation, something happens and things change again, entirely. It's hard to settle into a pattern of expectations and behaviors.

Truth is, life has always been like that, but it used to feel like some things were more predictable. Like planning for High Holy Day services. Before the pandemic, we knew where each of our services was to be held. We knew approximately how much things would cost. We knew about how many people to expect.

But, of course, planning our High Holy Day celebrations in the last few years has been entirely different. Would people be willing to come in person? How do we keep people safe and healthy? Is it even possible to have a cohesive community experience?

We could probably take almost anything in our lives and see the same shifts. How do we plan a vacation? How can we go on a life cycle celebration? How do we mourn the loss of people in our lives? How do we anticipate the process and experience of going to school, or going to the office? What do we have to take into consideration to run an errand? We used to feel so certain of some of these regular occurrences in our lives. How difficult has it become to establish a sense of normalcy when these basics of our routines are so much more uncertain?

And then there is the world around us. There is so much in our society and our country that also gives us that sense of insecurity and uncertainty. Reproductive freedoms being taken away, ongoing gun violence, increased anti-semitism and racism, climate change...and if only that were an exhaustive list.

All of this, the uncertainty, the disappointment, the fact that we are carrying so many challenges and so much burden into the new year can make the celebration of Rosh Hashanah hard. How do we feel like this is a new start when so much continues to feel uncertain and unclear about what the future will bring? How do we feel a sense of renewal when not everything is renewed?

As you might imagine, Jewish tradition has a lot to say about living with uncertainty. Indeed, we have lived through many difficult eras where our stability was overturned, our way of life threatened and even destroyed, yet, we as a people persist, and we do so by not allowing the uncertainty to overwhelm us.

The book of Judges helps to give us some perspective. Through the way the book is written, it demonstrates that good and bad times move through cycles. The entire book covers a little over 400 years in Israelite history, yet the narrative is told as a seemingly quick succession of judges and leaders, time of peace and times of war, challenges and victories. So, we read that Ehud kills Eglon of Moab and the Israelites defeat Moab, and then there is peace in the land for eighty years. Then the Israelites do what was evil in God's sight and the people are plunged into war again. Then Deborah, Barak and Yael rise up and defeat Sisera and the Canaanites and the land is then tranquil for forty years. And, then the Israelites displease God and they are delivered into the hands of the Midianites for seven years. Then Gideon rises up and defeats the Midianites and, we are told, the land is then tranquil for another forty years. And on and on, for 400 years.

The resulting impression that we get from the book, through the way that we are given this succession of war and peace, is that victory and defeat come in cycles. Tranquility does not last, but neither does upheaval. Book of Judges demonstrates that history is a pattern of ups and downs. This perspective reminds us, as we live through this period of uncertainty, that the discomfort and the difficulty will not last forever. That times change and so will our experience of them. That we will adapt. That new leaders will rise up and will bring ever new possibilities and visions for the future. There is comfort to be found in remembering that good and bad, joy and sadness, certainty and uncertainty move in cycles.

The Rabbinic tradition takes a slightly different take on dealing with uncertainty. Dr. Elana Stein Hain of the Shalom Hartman Institute juxtaposes the biblical prophets with the rabbis, explaining that the prophets always spoke with certainty. They knew all the answers and explained to people exactly what they should be doing. Do the right thing and God will reward you, do the wrong thing and God will punish you. Period. The rabbis, in contrast, undermine certainty with the ways in which they question rulings and pose every possible scenario to try to understand what one is supposed to do under every nuanced situation.

In tractate Yoma of the Babylonian Talmud, there is a question of determining the Jewish or non-Jewish status of an abandoned child. A discussion ensues. If the child is found in a city that is predominantly Jewish, the child is considered Jewish. If the child is found in a city that is predominantly gentile, the child is considered a gentile. If the child is found in a city that is half Jewish and half gentile, it is ruled that the child is considered Jewish, however, when it comes time for the child to marry, the child is not assigned a specific lineage and therefore may be restricted in marriage. If the child is female, for instance, she would not be able to marry a priest, for priests are only allowed to marry people from specific lineages.

What does this discussion say about uncertainty? You don't have to be perfectly certain about circumstances in order to make decisions. Deciding that the child is Jewish because the city is predominantly Jewish is not a precise way of making a decision, however, under the circumstances, you do the best you can with the knowledge that you have. Additionally, the decisions that you do make can have caveats and can be left somewhat open ended. Though the community will have to decide how it designates the child when it grows up, we don't have to establish all of the parameters right now. There are decisions to be made now and ones that we can make in the future as we reassess the specifics of the situation. And the fact that there is a discussion at all, instead of just a ruling, demonstrates that there is more than one way to make decisions.

In this way, there is some liberation to be found in uncertainty, as there is not a single answer, a single right way of moving forward. Rather, there is debate and weighing of values, and personal perspective that are necessary parts of the conversation. There is no one right answer, which gives space for creativity and new approaches. For the rabbis, the possibilities are enriched because of uncertainty.

Our liturgy for the High Holy Days, too, has a particular view on how to cope with living in an uncertain world. On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur mornings, we experience the *unataneh tokef*. The prayer that evokes a sense of awe and of fear as we ask, who shall live and who shall die? Who by fire and who by water? Who shall be serene and who shall not? Who shall be brought low, and who exalted? After this great long list of so many uncertainties that we face in the year to come, we are told that repentance, prayer and charity temper judgment's severe decree.

Often, when we think of that final part, that repentance, prayer and charity temper judgment's severe decree, we think of it as a promise of reward and punishment. If we do good, we will live and be exalted. Behave righteously will temper a negative decree against us. However, perhaps the sentiment is not a statement of belief, that righteousness will be rewarded, rather, it is actually the means by which we deal with the uncertainty of what is to come. The severe decree may not be whether we live or die, instead, the severe decree is that human beings are to live in a perpetual state of uncertainty where we don't know what will happen to us. Repentance, prayer and charity may not determine whether we live or die, but it may help us to deal with the fact that we don't know whether we are going to live or die. Life is uncertain. But, we soften the difficulty of that reality when we focus on that which we can control rather than dwell on that which we cannot. We deal with times of uncertainty, then, by finding direction through repentance, prayer and charity.

Through repentance, we focus on bettering ourselves. We reflect on our actions and work to make intentional choices about who we are in the world. Through prayer, we remember that we are a part of something greater. That our lives do not represent the whole of reality, rather, we are participating in a system far bigger than us, and we try to work in that system in a positive way. And through charity, we make others' lives a little more certain and a little more stable. We outward to the needs of those around us. Dwelling on the uncertainty will make us afraid.

Obsessing over what we cannot control will only make us feel powerless. But, focusing on doing better for ourselves, for others and for our communities will give us a sense of purpose and forward motion. Even if we do not ultimately know what will happen to us, we will spend our lives and our efforts on actions that are positive, helpful, and meaningful.

Indeed, we live in times that feel uncertain and unpredictable. That makes life harder and more stressful. So, Judaism teaches us to remember that times of difficulty run in cycles with times that are easier. Things will change again, because they always do. Judaism teaches us that there is creativity and change to be found in times of uncertainty. We find new possibilities and opportunities to be thoughtful and centered on our values. And, Judaism teaches us to dwell, not on what we cannot control, but to focus ourselves and our efforts on that which we can. If we live in fear of what might happen, we lose the potential to better ourselves, to better the situation of others, and to help direct the path of humanity. No matter what happens in the world around us, we can work to live with purpose and fulfillment.

Let us take these teachings from tradition into our hearts and minds, so that in this coming year we may be empowered to live intentional and meaningful lives, despite these uncertain times.