

The Balance of Our Lives
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5781;
September 18, 2020

A story, from another era, those bygone days of restaurants and in-person dining: a server approaches a group of Jewish diners, after the meal is complete. While clearing plates, the server looks at the group and asks, without a trace of irony: “Was anything okay?”

We greet each other as we can now. You know the words. It’s almost automatic, a habit, a verbal tick. “Hi. How are you?” Then, a pause. “No, seriously. How are you, really?” (And, sometimes, most often swallowed: “Do you really want to know?”)

What a world, as we come together, on line and on screen. In little boxes. What a world, as the Jewish year turns, and we yearn for return to what was, or rebirth into something better. Are we even mid-way through a marathon? Is this actually happening? Strange, surreal. Scary. And, to borrow a phrase from another season: “*Dayyeinu!* Enough already!”

“*Esa Aynei el HeHarim...*” Words from Psalms, with which we opened this service: “I lift up my eyes...” What do we see? A virtual world more than a world of virtue. Pixels, not people. A Masks and shields, and frightened eyes.

From Genesis. Our mother Rebecca, years of yearning, finally pregnant. But it not easy. She is having a hard time. “*Vayitrotz'tzu habanim b'kirba'ah...* There is a struggle happening inside her. *Vatomer: im ken, lama zeh anochi?* And she said: if so, why am I? What is this for? What is this all about? *Vateileich lid'rosh et A'* And she went to try to make sense, to make meaning out of her life!”

In the midst of all this, how many times have you felt, just, if not sick, then sick at heart? If not awful, then... off? Not yourself? There is a too-strong bond between in and out. Things are not the way you want them to be. So, too often, we are not who we want to be.

My friends, I want to speak with you this night about balance, and equilibrium; about darkness and light, about the curse of Corona, and counting blessings.

But first, a word of appreciation... for asymmetry, and imbalance. Indeed, we can go too far in giving equal time to all sides.

Our very existence, literally, physically, depends on imbalance. At the moment of creation, physicists say, there should have been equal amounts of matter and antimatter – all of which should, upon contact, immediately annihilate each another, leaving only energy. Somehow, for reasons yet unknown – coincidence, accident, “God?” -- slightly more matter was made, and survived, a remnant, an asymmetrical amount which makes up everything we feel and see today.

As in particle physics, so in physiology, psychology, matters of the heart. Beauty may be in the eye, but it is a slightly skewed view. Studies show we are drawn to symmetry – but with an asterix. Balance attracts... but perfect symmetry, exact, unmarred... everything evenly spaced and precisely placed... suddenly that is not beautiful but bland. It is the *nearly* balanced face, with a *slight* imperfection, that we see as most appealing.

There is a science in how we see each others' faces! Now, though, aside from the flaunters and the taunters, we can hardly see our faces at all. Not up close and personal.

So to speak of balance, it does not need to be total, or exact. But it is a kind of... counterweight. Breaking a glass at wedding does not displace the joy; it serves as a reminder, an awareness of the "sitra atra," the other side. Eating an egg at a house of mourning, toasting "l'chayim" to one who has died, laughter and funny stories at a funeral do not negate the sadness. But smiles can peek through tears; love lingers even in emptiness. A voice can be heard without words; relationships remain, even in absence.

Fire and ice. Yin and Yang. Good and bad. Blessing and curse. At the beginning and end of darkness, there is a hint of light. In light, there is a patch of darkness. There is a link, dependence; they are almost, perhaps, defined by each other.

Derech ha'Emtza, the middle way. *Sh'vil HaZahav*, the golden path.

Rambam, Maimonides, speaks of training against excess: almost any trait we hold to too great a degree, we balance by practicing the opposite.

This year, I assume that many of you feel much the same way I do: off center, lost and afraid, “not ourselves.” What can we do, to make meaning of this mess, to feel grounded again? Where is our light in the darkness, the blessing in the midst of cursed and challenging times?

I find hope and joy and goodness in three places. I find it near, and far, and deep inside. I find inspiration in the insight of my neighbors, in lyrics from the Middle East, and in some kind of internal instinct to learn lessons and make lemonade, even now.

Wisdom from right next door. Over these past few months I have tried to check in with many of you. In some cases I have not gotten through, or have left messages.

But often I have heard a recurring theme, shared by congregants, and neighbors, and friends. It is this: “the hurricanes got me through this!”

Wait, what? The islands, we aren't even recovered from 2017. Not completely. Closures and outages and travel disruption and dislocation and economic distress remain high. What are you talking about?

But then I understood. As one woman said: "If it had not been for Irma and Maria, I would not have made it through this isolation, and disruption." Someone else, more recently, noted the storms were a kind of dry run,* preparation, training for this longer and more wide-spread disaster.

Let me be clear. I do not for one minute diminish the real suffering caused by either the storms or what we are going through now. The loss is real, of lives, of health, of dreams, even of long-looked-forward to events and celebrations. And being unable to see loved ones in need, limited in travel, circumscribed in actions, kept far by regulation and reality alike from the livelihood and social connections we depend on, this is not small stuff.

And the regrets are real, even about things we would otherwise put in perspective: a missed graduation is not at the same as a lost business, a child who can no longer breathe easily, or a parent who passed away alone. But there is sadness surrounding even smaller things. It is real, and it is alright to feel it, and to share it. Indeed, it may be unhealthy to try to keep it all in.

I do not diminish the suffering. Nor do I believe that the storms came *in order* to prepare us for this, that there was a reason, a cause, a master plan or divine purpose behind the whirlwind. The God I believe in did not send, nor control, nor determine the exact path of the storm, nor the flood waters rising

or fires raging right next to some of you, right now. Some people *do* believe that. I do not.

But grit and grace came from having gone through tough times before. That, too, is real. So yes, I get it. The hurricanes helped, if only in retrospect, and in subjective ways. There is that word unsought, perhaps overused: resiliency. Wisdom, from living here, from what has happened close to home.

And message from afar. At first, Israel's experience with the Coronavirus was very different than ours. That is changing, now, and a new national lockdown began, sadly, this morning there. But in the first wave, they simply, did it... better than we did.

My friend and teacher Yossi Klein Halevi has a great affinity for Israeli music. *Shira b'tzibur*, public singing, was a unique feature of early Israeli life. Perhaps as they did for us here in the 1960's, songs gave voice to and also shaped Israeli culture. Yossi says that having moved to Israel as young adults music was, for him and his wife, their window into becoming Israeli.

And he sees something new going on now – more relevant for Jews in the rest of the world than was that earlier Israeli music. At first, songs of new settlers in an old land reflected the secular, socialist ethos of the early pioneers – rejecting ritual, turning from tradition, being Israeli *as opposed to* anything “Jewish.” It was a denigration of the Diaspora, viewing the old Jewish ways as

a “disease,” a centuries-long psychic pandemic which crept inside and poisoned the soul. But they were the new Jews, the revolution that was Israel at its formation.

But pendulums swing. When intense revolutionaries succeed, their grandchildren relax. And now... Now we are witness to a synthesis, a kind of re-spiritualization, engagement with tradition which makes more recent Israeli music not a rebellion against, but a carrier of new Jewish content to a far-flung Diaspora.

Look, no one in the world complains as much as Israelis do. But, somehow, despite all the challenges of daily life there, despite the security situation, somehow Israelis consistently rank very highly – seventh, I think – in an index of happiness... far ahead of how we rate in that regard in the United States.

How is that? Perhaps it is an awareness of coming so far, so fast, in a country made up of those with a living memory of real hardship, survivors of the Shoah, immigrants from the former Soviet Union, *Mizrachim* from the Arab world, some of whom leapt forward centuries in a single flight.

What, then, are some of the themes, on the Coronobeat? What music has emerged over the past few months? Just one small sample for now – with a plan to offer more in the days to come.

From Hanan ben Ari, one of the superstars of the past few years, set to a backdrop in a stark video of vacant city streets and empty escalators...comes

Ga'gui'im L'vnai Adam, Longing for Human Beings:

We thought we'd won it all,
We'd built towers to the sky
[a clear reference to Babel]
Who needs human beings?
No second flood
will come in our time!
We will never, ever fall;
Forget it, we'll be fine on our own.
We're smart, we know it all
And nothing is above us.

Until you came along
And infected us,
And drove us mad

And confined us
and confused us
And terrified us
Who are you?

Oh, how you've brought back sanity
And a longing for human connection
Suddenly loneliness torments
We can't fly
from place to place anymore.
The parks are all closed
Weddings with hardly a soul
We almost lost ourselves
We almost stopped feeling.

עוד מעט זה הכל ייגמר
ואני מבקש אם אפשר
שבבוקר אחרי שתלכי
לא נהיה שוב אותו הדבר

Soon this will all be over
And I'm asking, if I may
That the morning after you leave
Let us not be the same as before.

"Lo Nihyeh Shuv Oto HaDavar; Let us not be the same as before."

Opening our eyes: it is not just that we are lost, right now. Maybe, perhaps, is it possible... can we catch a glimpse of we might, indeed, have been broken already?

Being off balance can lead us... to find ourselves again. Hanan Ben-Ari, music as prayer, for something better yet to come.

New voices rise from far away, bearing with them something never seen before – a blend, a cocktail of grit and wit, a new brew which brings together seekers of meaning, traditional sources, and the world we are in today.

You can hear more about this musical response to the pandemic, as one of the online offerings we will present as options for exploration on Yom Kippur afternoon. Watch for the links to up to ten different choices of topics at 2:00 PM on the Day of Atonement, including Yossi Klein Halevi's public presentation of Israeli music taking on Corona.

And, finally, a light within.

There are were silver linings in dark clouds. I know that each of you has your own sense of this. Each of you would phrase this in your own way.

But in counting blessings at a time of terror, in taking up Hanan ben Ari's plea, here is a sample of what I might say:

- May we remember how important it is to reach out to each other, to be conscious and conscientious about our friendships, and our family.
- May we learn to be less judgmental about appearance, and more open to the essence of who we are.
- We may well want to dress up again in fine or fancy clothes, when we can, and just to do so. But in tomorrow's world, may that be an act of choice, not of expectation.
- May we never again forget how food comes to us, and the things we use in our lives – who raises it, who packs it, who ships it, how it is able to come into our hands.
- May we maintain some of the efficiencies that has grown from necessity in some areas of our life. (I'm looking at you, BMV!)

- May we find a better way to give thanks, and to be there, for those who take risks for us, for our health, for our protection, for our education.
- May we resist divisions and divisiveness. If in Lake Woebegone all the children can be above average, may we train ourselves to view everyone – everyone as important, deserving of protection and dignity and respect. Because *everyone* is essential!
- May we learn from our mistakes, the many ways we have stumbled and fumbled in our response. And may we act now to be more fair, more equitable, and more rational in crises yet to come.
- May see what access to resources, computers, the internet, wifi means; may we address the inequities around us.
- May we dig deep to find the connection between storms and fire, disease and discrepancies, climate change and consumerism, injustice and inequity. And may we understand that working to address any of our problems can have an impact on all of them.

Some of us may be cursing more. But blessings are real as well. And the possibilities of what and who we can be, when we can truly be in person... there is excitement about what we can do together, as well.

Who counts, and how do we count? What energy is left after collision and conflict? What really matters?

And in the dark, we have begun to ask what it is we want to see. That may be the most important outcome of all.

We know that the loss is real, the pain is great, the road is rocky, planning is hard, and the end is not quite in sight. Is anything okay?

The good that comes, it's not a complete answer. It's not symmetrical. It's not an exact balance.

But it is something. We have memory, and history, and humor, and compassion. And we know that if we can get through this, we can, we will, we want to grow.

A waiter or waitress comes at the end of a meal. In English, they bring a “check.” But in Hebrew the word is “*cheshbon*.” An accounting. A reckoning. A balance sheet, telling us what we owe, and what we must do. As in the work of this season, “*cheshbon hanefesh*,” the accounting of the soul.

Some way, some day, it is up to us, to make it okay.

L’shanah Tovah.