

EREV Rosh Hashanah 5781- Rabbi Mara Nathan What Will Our New Normal Be?

As a little kid in the 1970s, my favorite television show was Zoom- a zippy and zany PBS program created almost entirely by children...

(I'm gonna zoom, zoom zooma zoom....I'm gonna zooma, zooma, zooma, zooma zoom...)

Who would have imagined that 49 years later I'd be walking around not only singing this catchy theme song ...but living it!

ZOOM!...The video conferencing platform that enables millions of us around the world to keep connected. It can be glitchy, exhausting, and even daunting. (Am I muted?)

But it can also be wonderful! To see faces and not just hear voices can take away feelings of isolation. Classes, worship, baby namings, even memorials become more intimate. And collaborations can continue online when it is not safe for us to be together in person. But all this glitchy, exhausting, intimate essential connecting makes me wonder...what kept me from doing it before?

I don't mean the cocktail parties and book groups with people in town kind of Zoom. I'm talking about the college friend reunions, cross country cousin Netflix Party meetups, and parental video check ins. We've had this technology for years. So, why are we only doing this long distance connecting **NOW**?

NYTimes Culture writer Ali Drucker asks: *Did I really not see my parents' faces for months on end, even over a screen, simply because I had the option of socializing with my ... nearby friends instead? Was I actually "just super busy" or did I want to avoid confronting how much I missed them? How I was quietly nursing the*

*loneliness of feeling like I might not truly know the people I can't see in person anymore.*¹

It's been six months of pandemic. Seven months since I last saw my parents, my siblings and it's uncertain when it will be prudent or even possible to visit them in New York again. I miss them all so much though the reality is I've gone longer without seeing them.

So maybe it's not loneliness exactly...but a now unavoidable awareness of my own frailty and theirs. A recognition that in moving through our lives- we default to focus more on our busy-ness, and less on the relationships that keep us whole.

A little chaos is fun when you have control -- or at least think you do-- the majority of the time. But the intentional chaos of that kid's TV show is not so charming when it is the constant backdrop of our lives. I would do anything for a little structure and routine.

It's not very comfortable to be here. But so it is. And the source of so much of our suffering is in wishing we were somehow, in some way, somewhere else. So rather than spend our time lamenting what we cannot control, let's envision a better now, even better, a post-Covid reality where we are more clear about our priorities, and more focused on taking care of ourselves and nurturing others. A reality in which we don't feel quite so alone.

Tonight, you are not alone, you are with us. Tonight, we join all the generations that came before us, as this most unusual New Year unfolds. And the tools our people have relied on for millennia- tradition, community, and hope--can help us too, as we weather these daily storms of uncertainty.

One tool that speaks to this moment is the Talmudic text- *Elu divarim*.²
We read it together every Saturday morning.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/15/opinion/covid-video-calls-zoom-facetime.html>

² TB Peah 1:1 and TB Shabbat 127a

Elu divarim shein la hem shiur

These are things that are limitless

Of which a person enjoys the fruit of the world,
 While the *principal* remains in the world to come.
 They are: honoring one's father and mother,
 Engaging in deeds of compassion,
 Arriving early for study morning and evening,
 Dealing graciously with guests, visiting the sick,
 Providing for the wedding couple,
 Accompanying the dead for burial,
 Being devoted in prayer,
 And making peace among people,
 But the study of Torah encompasses them all.

Elu divarim articulates the traditional rabbinic value system that emphasizes a connected and compassionate communal life. And, as the teaching goes...there are tangible benefits NOW as well as benefits that last long after we are gone.

The particulars are straightforward: take care of your elders, incorporate hospitality, compassion, generosity, kindness, study and prayer into your life. But, our sages remind us *ein la hem shiur*...they are also without limit. The traditional reading of this text suggests, that while there is no maximum amount...a minimal effort **is** required.³ But also, these are perpetual tasks that we should always have in mind.

I'll add a third meaning. With no outer limit- we have the responsibility to interweave these traditional ideals with the modern realities of our community- finding ways to bring uplift and connection to others. And in this current moment,

³ Bartenura commentary on Peah 1:1 "From the Torah [itself, it (the corner of the field) has no fixed measure], but from [the perspective of] the Rabbis, it has (another) measure, for it is taught at the end of the Mishnah (actually in Mishnah 2), "we don't [bring any] less than one-sixtieth."

we can reimagine ways to fulfill these obligations . Staying safe while we create impact in our own lives and the lives of those we love.

Elu divarim shein la hem shiur

These are things that are limitless

Lifecycle events—they've been hard. Funerals with more than a minyan present are prohibited. We now do brides from afar. Weddings have been postponed or pared down.

Joyful moments are muted. Sad ones feel amplified in their loneliness. And yet, life does go on...and so do these core Jewish rituals in spite of the pandemic.

Look back across the expanse of our history- it is this moment that connects us to the tenacious spirit and innate abilities of our people. Slavery in Egypt, Exile in Babylonia, Expulsion from Spain, pogroms, the Shoa...Jewish existence has often been filled with uncertainty, fear and danger. So many funerals, yes, but also, brides, b'nai mitzvah and weddings to celebrate too. We have always found comfort in the structure and rituals of our faith and hope and joy in new life and new beginnings.

Elu DevarimYes, this teaching requires us to visit the sick, provide for the wedding couple, and accompany the dead for burial. But it is compassion, generosity and kindness that underlie these mitzvot and make them so important.

So, I am not asking you to ignore your disappointment and sorrow. But I am asking you to place them in greater context, and to take stock of what truly adds substance to your life. Because, lifecycle moments are markers in time. They help us differentiate between *kodesh* and *chol*- sacred moments and ordinary life. And we cherish them. But our tradition also values the daily miracles that surround us.

I was very disappointed that my summer plans for study and travel were canceled and my kids didn't get to go to camp. But it's actually the mundane encounters...

those daily miracles experienced with family, friends and colleagues that I miss the most.

Zoom meetings *are* productive- but they often lack creative energy. And I yearn for a leisurely dinner out with friends- or the satisfaction of an unexpected deep conversation at school or at shul. Whereas in Pre-Covid times, I was always in a rush to get to the next meeting, and had to motivate myself to go out just to have fun, now I am filled with anticipation when I cross the street to share an occasional glass of wine at my neighbor's fence or pop over to a friend's backyard pool. (Six feet apart of course.) Time together now feels much more special than it did when my calendar was full.

Psychologist Liz Dunn explains why: "Whatever we have, we tend to get used to it... So no matter...what wonderful things come into our life, over time...the pleasure that they provide gradually diminishes. This phenomena is often referred to as the hedonic treadmill...conveying the idea that we're stuck and no matter how hard we try to get happier, we can't. ...And it turns out, the way to fight this psychological phenomenon, ...is to deprive ourselves a little bit, [without] constant access to the things that we like." It may seem counter-intuitive, but apparently the best way to experience enjoyment is to limit our exposure to what we desire most.⁴

Whether or not we intended to sign up for this psychological experiment, all this "at home time" highlights its truth. At first, there was relief to see my life open up. No more carpool- all my kids activities were shut down. More quiet evenings at home to unwind. But now I would do anything to have somewhere to go. Any excuse to get dressed up and see everyone. I feel a wistful yearning for the life I used to live.⁵

⁴ <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/31/897673162/you-2-0-our-pursuit-of-happiness>, Hidden Brain

⁵ Hidden brain

But I also realize, I was doing too much. Maybe you were too. If this time apart has emphasized anything it is that *busy-ness fills the hours but not the space in our souls*. This is a perfect time to ask ourselves some essential questions:

What relationships nurture us and bring us satisfaction?

What rituals give us comfort?

What activities provide us with purpose and meaning?

When the pandemic has subsided and we start to reconstruct our new lives

What do we want our reality to be?

Elu D'varim shein le hem shiur...

Recently I started to think that I should make this prayer my mantra

But even better, make it my own: a list -where intentions both ancient and modern intersect that I can say to myself while I look in the mirror and brush my teeth. Maybe you want to try it too.

I started saying my personal *elu d'varim* to myself every day.

Elu d'varim shein le hem shiur:

These are things that are limitless

Of which a person enjoys the fruit of the world,

While the principal remains in the world to come.

These are ways to make my life richer now

and help me craft a legacy I am proud to pass on to my children and community.

Focus on family: Reach out to my parents, my in-laws,
my brother and my sister...weekly just to ask 'how are you'.

Reach deep for compassion

Study- Read every morning,

Hospitality- nurture relationships that bring me joy,

Visit the sick- make the call, make the time

Provide for the wedding couple- say yes to attend whenever possible

Accompany the dead for burial- be there even when it's hard....

especially when it's hard.

Prayer- work on quieting the voices in my head, work on practicing gratitude

Make peace among people- forgive them for their imperfections and missteps and pray that they will do the same for me.

I've been reading these words every morning for a month now. Here's what I've noticed: I am happier and more focused. I try to be more careful about what I say and how I spend my time. I am working on being more flexible in my expectations, and reflecting more on what our present and future are likely to be. It's never going to be perfect or even linear. And there will be loss and sadness and disappointment but ultimately, we'll get there....and that's the hope.

Our obligations are limitless but so are our opportunities. So, as we begin this new year- let us each commit to creating our own mantra, words that center us, uplift us, remind us of our potential to share comfort and joy. Let us commit to the limitless work that is set before us, because when we are authentic in our attempts to be more compassionate, patient and present, we reap the benefits now and, in the world, to come. AMEN