

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5782
You are here! Deciphering the map together
Rabbi Mara S. Nathan

At the beginning of the summer, things looked good. Covid cases were down if you were vaccinated you didn't need to wear a mask. The world was opening up. I anticipated if not a totally full sanctuary, a large number of people at Temple for the Holy Days.

And yet here we are. So many joining online. Those here in the sanctuary are spread out and masked. It's challenging to predict what this New Year will bring.

For the most part we understand where we are. We pay attention to our medical experts, do our best to make safe choices, but at the same time I can't help feeling totally lost.

It's as if I am standing in front of a huge map at the mall. You know the ones. The categories are color coded and mysterious: Children's shoes? Sports and Leisure? Accessories?

It's pretty easy to find the STAR that says YOU ARE HERE. Great! I'm here! But I have almost no idea what "here" really means or how to get where I want to be. It's supposed to be intuitive. But really, it's not.

How DO we get where we want to be?

From a COVID perspective- the sooner we get everyone vaccinated and control the spread of the Corona virus, the sooner we'll be able to gather safely and mask free. Yet as daunting as that seems right now, that *should* be the easy part.

Because living through a worldwide pandemic has heightened our awareness of the incredibly complicated social and economic inequity that surrounds us. There is so much we need to do to make our world, our own city better.

But the pandemic has also led to more subtle trauma. For people who live alone, for working parents, for students that spent a year learning from their bedrooms on chrome books, for seniors who were denied visits from their loved ones for months on end. What can we do to ease the devastating effects of isolation and loneliness that affect us all?

In the first week of the pandemic in 2020 more than half of Americans told the Pew Research center that they believe most people in this country look out for themselves rather than helping

others. Pew noted, “The less interpersonal trust people have, the more frequently they experience bouts of anxiety, depression and loneliness.”¹ How much more acute is that sense of isolation 19 months later!

We thought by now we’d be ‘returning’ to normal. But our current reality forces us to admit, that the only normal, is what we are living through at this very moment in time. And the only way we can *find* our way is if we commit to doing it together. But it won’t be easy.

Anna Sale, host of the podcast *Death, Sex & Money*, writes, “Many of us have fight or flight responses when uncomfortable things come up. But we also have a deep need to share. We all want to be understood, and we all want to look like we are handling setbacks, pain, and alienation gracefully. But life is not so simple, and it doesn’t help to pretend it is.”²

So, at this season of return when we are meant to ask hard questions of ourselves, let us share, or at least think about how we can be better listeners, how we can find the courage to be more vulnerable, how we can experience the holiness that results when two people are truly attuned to each other.

Most of us think we are good listeners. No one sets out to be a bad one. But listening deeply requires humility and compassion. We know how it feels when the person who is sitting across the table from us- is not fully there. And we also know what it's like when we experience someone’s full attention and concern. It’s what Wendy Moffat calls “inverse charisma”- a sense of being listened to with such intensity that we have to be our most honest, sharpest, and best self.”³

This idea is inherent in Judaism. It is at the core of our faith and connection to God. Think about the word “Shema!” In the Torah it means many things: to hear, to listen, to pay attention, to understand... to respond, to obey. It's a concept that is so fundamental that we take it for granted. But it is actually quite radical.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks z’l explains:

“The twin foundations on which Western culture was built were ancient Greece and ancient Israel. They could not have been more different. Greece was a profoundly visual culture....It produced some of the greatest art, sculpture and architecture the world has ever seen...This

¹ Sales, Anna, *Let's Talk About Hard Things*, p.9

² Sale, Anna, p. 5

³ Grant, Adam, *Think Again*, p. 158

idea – that knowing is seeing – remains the dominant metaphor in the West even today. We speak of insight, foresight, and hindsight. We offer an observation. We adopt a perspective. We illustrate. We illuminate. We shed light on an issue. When we understand something, we say, “I see.” [But] Judaism [requires] faith in a God we cannot see, a God who cannot be represented visually..... God communicates in sounds, not sights. God speaks. God commands.... God calls. That is why the supreme religious act is Shema. When God speaks, we listen. When God commands, we try to obey.”⁴

And the emphasis on Shema- on a radical sort of listening extends beyond our relationship with the holy one to the way we learn and the way we understand each other. When we sense that someone is truly listening to us, we feel deeply respected.⁵ To be fully present for others we need to give them the same attention we crave ourselves.

But of course, sometimes *we* are the one that needs to be heard. And when we are stressed or overwhelmed, we often put-up roadblocks when what we really need is an open gate. It takes courage and humility to talk about the things that make us uncomfortable, to reveal our insecurities or start a conversation that makes us feel vulnerable.

When I was a young person, if I was upset or embarrassed, I was quick to cry. I was and remain a people pleaser but I’m also fiercely competitive. Not only did I want to be well regarded, I wanted to be the best...always. But when things didn’t go my way, it was hard to keep the tears from coming whether I didn’t get the role in a play I wanted, or I had inadvertently hurt someone else’s feelings.

As I got older, I realized that my tears made other people feel uncomfortable and they made me feel out of control. So, I willed myself to stop and was successful most of the time. But here’s the thing: by losing the tears, I gave up a natural way to release my stress and the emotional pain of the moment.⁶ And I gave up an opportunity to express my vulnerability.

No, crying is not the appropriate response when things don’t go as planned. But, if we want to forge deep connections with other people, (and we do) then we have to be willing to let them in.

⁴ https://rabbisacks.org/eikev-5776/#_ftn1

⁵ Sale, Anna, p. 12

⁶ <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/is-crying-good-for-you-2021030122020>

Anna Sale writes: “When we share and listen to each other about our deepest hardships and needs, we start to see one another more clearly, and the connections between us are reinforced.... Vulnerability softens us to one another, and it encourages humility more than self-righteousness.”⁷

A sense of ‘being out of control’ takes many forms. When we are forced to confront illness, or imminent death (for ourselves or someone we love) those feelings can be especially intense. COVID of course has emphasized this for us all. And those of us who may have imagined ourselves immune now understand all too well that subliminal feeling of dread.

It can be hard to deal with. But it's actually a powerful reminder that we should talk about death and dying with those we love. I mentioned this to a friend a few weeks back. A single mom with a single adult child- she is strong and healthy but still sometimes worries about what her daughter will be left to figure out when she is gone.

“Have you spoken with her about it?” I asked.

“No, but I know I should.”

“Do you know what you want?” “Yes of course.”

Avoiding conversations about death will not protect you from its eventual arrival. And while it may sound morbid, it can be quite cathartic. The time to think about and talk about these things is NOW. It could start with a simple conversation with me- your rabbi. You may have lots of questions...from the practical to the theological. I probably won't have *all* the answers, but I will most definitely send you back to family and/or dear friends to discuss what you want and why. Because a conversation about how you would like the end of your life to unfold and how you would like to be memorialized actually opens up an amazing opportunity to have deeper conversations. About the rituals and customs that are important to you and about how *you* want to be remembered.

You know, just about every time I step up to one of those maps at the mall I experience a kind of tunnel vision. I'm embarrassed that it takes me so long to find what I'm looking for. I feel like I'm the only one who doesn't know how to get to the Apple Store!

Even when there is someone else there, I do my best to make NO eye contact. But maybe they're also trying to figure out where or what to do next? Maybe they've already been where I need to go, I can help them. How much holier our lives would be if we had the courage

⁷ Sale, Anna, p.10

to turn to each other and ask each other for the help we need.

R'Chaim of Tszanz told this tale...A man had been wandering about in a forest for several days, not knowing which was the right way out. Suddenly he saw a man approaching him. His heart was filled with joy. "Now I shall certainly find out which is the right way," he thought to himself. When they neared one another, he asked the man, "Brother, tell me which is the right way. I have been wandering about in the forest for several days."

Said the other to him, "Brother, I do not know the way out either. For I too have been wandering about here for many, many days. But *this* I can tell you: do not take the way I have been taking, for that will lead you astray. And now let us look for a new way out together."⁸

I do not believe that we are more concerned for ourselves than we are interested in helping others. I see the kindness and generosity you show each other every day. I know that you belong to a congregation like Temple Beth-El because you are invested not only in figuring out the map but writing a new map with each other. A map that leads us to better understand each other's joys and sorrows. A map that points us to our most vulnerable and lonely members. We are *all* looking for someone else to help us find the way.

This New Year is not the one we expected. But it's what we've got. As we prepare ourselves to journey through 5782, let us commit to opening our ears, our minds and our hearts to each other. For when people sit together and sacred words pass between them, there God's holy presence is found.⁹ AMEN

⁸ Agnon, S.Y., Days of Awe: A Treasury of Jewish Wisdom for Reflection, Repentance, and Renewal on the High Holy Days

⁹ Pirkei Avot 2:4