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**Rosh HaShanah Sermon 5781 / September 19, 2020**

I recently watched a video of one of my musical heroes. He's always been a humble person, almost meek in the interviews and programs I've seen with him, and he regularly addresses others with an extraordinary gentleness that's disarming coming from a master of any craft. Rather than the interviewer holding deference to this living legend, the roles are reversed, and this giant of the instrument leans quietly into the microphone answering questions with a charming shyness, as if he is honored to be in the presence of the journalist, unaware of why anyone would be interested in his thoughts. At the beginning of his career he was celebrated in small groups for championing his own corner of the music industry, but in the past few years he accidentally stepped into a more popular sphere, and has experienced a bit of celebrity. He doesn't post very much, like me not a social media maven, but every couple of weeks I enjoy a new surprise from him on YouTube.

This video seemed like any other, something designed for a wide audience that was significantly adapted due to the pandemic. A music festival moved to everyone's home. Most of his videos are not terribly polished, a single camera set on a tripod or some old books and a decent microphone kept out of sight of the lens, but to be honest this video jarred me.

It started awkwardly, the way videos always do when recording across Zoom and COVID. It began before anyone spoke, just a few strange moments adrift in the wide world of the Internet, the musician staring blankly at the camera, and in that moment my heart sank.

His shirt was dirty, a little oily, and what might have been a hip collection of threads looked like they had been lived in for a number of days without regard to hygiene, like

they had been slept in a handful of times over without a change or a shower. He had his hair out of his face, but it looked like it was pushed there quickly before the call, and in contrast to his usual glow, that beaming wonderment at his own success and the honor to share himself with millions of other people, sitting playfully on a stool and swaying back and forth behind a microphone, wondering with delight at an ordinary question offered by an interviewer, instead he had a terrible look of defeat, deep shadowy pockets under his eyebrows. He looked like he hadn't eaten in some time and his eyes were dark red, not the kind of bloodshot that comes with using, just utter exhaustion, as if he couldn't bear the violent act of focus, eyelids strained to protect those windows to the soul.

The interviewer offered a real softball pitch for the first question: how did he begin on his path. He started his answer with the standard fare, a story that I imagine he has given any number of times, and one that any one of us could have guessed at and offered for ourselves with the expected variations of our own experiences. A mentor, someone close to him, etcetera. His answers in the past have all been slow but honest, reflective, the question itself an invitation into a field uncharted before but his automatic response continued to betray his mental state. While his eyes were fixed on the camera, and his words addressed the question he was asked, he was somewhere else, and one look into those eyes revealed that that was a place of pain. A frequent collaborator, he was isolated during the pandemic, to go part of the way into talking about himself might have led to going all the way, and he wasn't ready to break down and cry on screen in front of thousands of viewers. This dear gentle man was suffering.

There has never been a time like this in history. Not like this, where the world has shut down because of a fastly spreading virus, and society has shut its doors, and we are tasked with an entirely new set of rules for safety and day to day living, but where somehow, miraculously, in the middle of the world stopping, we are still expected to keep doing the same work we did before the shutdown. Our technology, while a

spectacular blessing of communication, keeping us connected and working, also brings these challenges. The same responsibilities that we had before the pandemic are still there, the same societal pressures and basic needs. We are holding Zoom meetings while providing for our children, caring for loved ones but now without the same support networks previously set into place that kept us just level before the pandemic. For so many of us the demands of daily life were enough to keep things barely on balance 8 months ago, and now with a myriad of additional complications our capacity is not as great as our needs. The much broader section of our society is now conducted via screen, with email, social media and video conferencing. Ironically this makes us more efficient. The more productive technology makes us, the more pressure there is to work longer and more intensely. It's no longer the case that we are bringing work home, our work is already there and so any one of us could easily spend every waking hour of the day, and through the night at our jobs, but it is not possible to do everything that needs to be done. And for many of us, the lines that once defined a separate space between work and home, office and living room have dissolved terribly quickly. What's worse is we all know that about one another and instead of slowing down, instead of pacing ourselves through a tectonic shift in society, we ratcheted up, and many of us are working around the clock.

It's ok to be struggling right now. Especially in an era where we can curate so completely the face that we share with our wider community, our choice of camera angle on Zoom, the stories we chose to share over the phone, and the photos selected for Facebook, it can seem like everyone else is really holding it together while we alone are faced with the challenges of making life work when it's confined to the walls of our homes. We have lost our second space, work, and our third spaces as well, our community centers, favorite coffee shops, the temple. For many of us the place to get away is in the driveway stuffed behind the steering wheel pouring our hearts out over our cell phones in the only space that feels private but still has windows on every side. This time, this situation, is enough to make any person break and as we continue to

move our way through it, the veneers of polish, composure and confidence will likely continue to fall away and that's ok. This time is extremely difficult. How odd that we are approaching a worldwide pandemic with a pedestrian cavalier. We are watching a slowly unfolding catastrophe, invisible and at the same time all-consuming, and it is only natural to receive it with horror. Almost 200,000 people have died in the United States alone in the past 7 months due to the virus, more than 900,000 around the world.<sup>12</sup> Friends, siblings, partners. It is a particularly odd thing to be in mourning when the world continues to turn around you, I know this. To have your world come crashing down and then step outside and find that people are still mowing their lawns, still showing up for work, and you are dumbfounded that such mundane things could take place with such profound events happening simultaneously. We are all experiencing this loss now, and I invite us to recognize to each other that we are feeling it. We can relate to one another right now. There are only a few of silver linings to this time, but here is one: we are all in this together.

This holiday we begin the *aseret yamei tshuvah*, the ten days of teshuvah, of return. It's customary during this time to reach out to people in our lives and ask them for forgiveness. As we look to a new year, the custom allows us to reflect on what we might have done this past year that we wish we hadn't, the things that could have been done better, and make the first step to grow by reaching out to people that we may have wronged and letting them know we pledge to act differently in the future. This year I invite us to do something a little different, I invite us to turn to ourselves and ask for forgiveness. There is no way that we can meet all of the demands on us at this moment. A not so gentle reminder that we are not the overall agents of our own world, that there are powers bigger than us and that we do have limits, sometimes tragic ones. Let us be gracious with ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#cases\\_totalcases](https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#cases_totalcases)

<sup>2</sup> <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>

Years ago I spent some time living on a kibbutz in the Arava region of Israel. I packed up a giant suitcase, stuffed every last inch of a black Jansport backpack and carried a guitar in a case that weighed twice as much as the instrument through the handful of airports that made up the various stops on my way to Ben Gurion, the Tel Aviv Airport. When I arrived at the kibbutz they took me to my address, an old house on a dirt residential road not far from the front entrance. My housemate met me at the door and showed me to my room. I rested the American Tourister suitcase and backpack on the floor, opened the guitar case and checked that it was still intact, then latched it shut again and went out to meet my fellow communers. Over the following days and weeks, I got up in the morning, dug through my suitcase for a clean shirt and socks, worked the requisite 8 hours, and then shared the evening with new friends and travelers around campfires, on front porches and in our house's beautiful backroom half-open to the dry and moderate elements of the Mediterranean region. I loved meeting so many new people, hearing their fascinating stories and engaging in the kinds of conversations you can only breach with people you know you won't see again after they continue on their travels. There's an intensity and trust that comes with a friendship that holds a limited timeline that I haven't found in many other places. I loved that time, but after a few weeks I realized that while I was deeply enjoying the experience, I still felt like one of the travelers, much more so than a kibbutznik, the place still felt new in a stark and uncomfortable way. I took an evening to myself and holed up in my room with a book, and time after time I would jump up after just a few minutes and adjust something in the room. First it was the angle of the two-level pinewood desk, the height of the chair, then I arranged the few books I had brought or borrowed from the kibbutz library, lined them up with the edge of the shelf. I found a place for my shoes and hung up my shirts. Eventually my suitcase was completely empty and I stored it underneath the bed. I set the backpack by the door with supplies for the next day and leaned the guitar up against the wall. Then I went back to reading and lulled into a cozy sleep. I didn't realize it then, but I hadn't yet made the place home, I was too busy with all the exciting people I was meeting and the fresh set of daily work that used my hands, something I've

always loved and still seldom do. The next day I woke up and something felt different. It's hard to describe, but it's the moment when you realize you are no longer taking a place in, you have an intuition for it. You reach for the light switch without looking and move more quickly around the architecture. The place sets in and becomes home.

We have had enough time now under the pandemic. We know the protocols for wearing a mask, washing our hands, and distancing 6 feet outside to keep ourselves, and perhaps even more importantly, others safe. What a sinister virus that we can carry violent pathogens in our body and not even know it. What a surprise that what is invisible in ourselves can cause harm to others. We've had time to set up our offices at home, whether in a side room or kitchen, and we know more about video conferencing than we ever thought we would. It's time now to think about how we want to live over the next however long. To set our lives in order not from a professional standpoint, not by putting things into place that can help us deal with or simply meet the expected demands of everyday life but instead the greater goals that we have for our lives. This is the way we are living right now, what are our greater needs? How are you caring for your physical self, emotional self? What does your spirit need in order to know that you live in a beautiful world?

I recently had a conversation with someone about what things will look like after the pandemic. We went back and forth about all the theories and scenarios. The different ways that things might pan out. Will things look exactly the same, a powerful vaccine sweeping across the globe cooling down both the pandemic and our nerves, or will we continue to move forward in a similar fashion, always chasing after an adaptable virus that causes us to come up with more permanent measures to limit contact, and provide the most possible connection in the midst of isolation. A fearful prospect to be sure.

One of the most frightening elements of this pandemic is that no one knows the way out exactly. Another powerful reminder that we are not the ultimate arbiters of this

world, a fact we turn to every High Holy Days. We look to all the things are we are not in control of, we set out rituals that remind us of our mortality, we focus on forgiveness as we are more often than not asking for grace as a result of own involuntary actions, we sing melodies meant to move us in a way that we can't will otherwise. And here is another reminder, that this world is bigger than we are, this pandemic is more than any person, any country.

Our liturgy does have an interesting perspective on this however. It then asks us to turn inward, and reflect on the things that we do have agency over, the things that we can make an impact with, the choices we do have. We look back at a year that cannot change, and stand on the brink of a year that presents with it an incomprehensible amount of options. We today stand on that precipice, reflecting on the year that has gone by in order to think more meaningfully about the year ahead and my mind immediately turns to the India Gate in New Delhi. Very shortly after the world began to turn inward, shut its doors, photos started to emerge over the internet of how places have been changed by this worldwide shift. The Great Mosque of Mecca, famous for having thousands of people circle it throughout the day and night was empty, freeways cleared out in the middle of the day, a dear friend told me she could see the LA mountains from her house, a view she hadn't seen in a very long time. And the India Gate in New Delhi was pristinely visible. The image that went around the Internet had the arch during the pandemic juxtaposed right next to the way it looked before the shutdown. The swirling mass of exhaust fumes, usually invisible to the naked eye were keenly on display given his contrast. Our pollution levels have plummeted in the months of the shutdown.<sup>3</sup> Our consumption of fossil fuels so low that oil tankers off our coast here in Long Beach remain adrift, unable to bring the commodity to the shore because there is so little demand for it that there is no desire to refine it for use.<sup>4</sup> We

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/03/22/climate/coronavirus-usa-traffic.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/27/845921122/dozens-of-oil-tankers-wait-off-californias-coast-as-the-pandemic-dents-demand>

have an opportunity right now. This pandemic has been catastrophic in so many ways, but how can we use the opportunity of change to live a little better, and make the world a little safer for each other and our children. This year is a hard reset, and we are resuming our lives differently because we have to resume our lives differently, but what choices are there for what it looks like when we start again.

We have made a profound impact on our world by slowing down our travel. Working from home and flying less. How can we continue this trend moving forward? Many of us are now working from home. Not without its challenges, as I mentioned earlier, but what conveniences does it also bring? Especially after all schools can safely reopen for the full school day and for all students. Can we cut down our commute to another room in our house? Or switch to half time in the office? One day at home? The impact on our air could be profound. A quality we have recently been reminded of by our gray skies and red sun this past week.

And who have we been in touch with that we've been meaning to talk to before? What family member is no longer lonely because of this time? What are the things that we can take from this time to let ourselves live better in the future? Because the world is always going to throw us a curveball, always going to change, the least we can do is change with it, and for the better.

Shannah Tovah, wishing us all a good new year ahead.