

RH1 - Covid-19 - Reflections on an extraordinary year

There's an old Yiddish saying that you might know: We plan and God laughs. It has rarely been more true than this year. I don't know how you thought the year would pan out this time last year, but I certainly never imagined we would have spent months under lockdown, that the schools would be closed, that we would be running our community on something called Zoom, and that we would be gathering together online today.

It has been a painful year. Lockdown has had devastating consequences for many people's mental health and more than 40,000 people in this country alone died this year of Covid-19 - many dying alone in hospital.

And we are not out of it yet. Many of us will have cancelled Rosh Hashanah lunches with extended family and friends because we can only mix with up to six people at a time. We don't yet know if there will be a second wave. We are facing levels of uncertainty that most of us have never seen in our lifetime. No-one alive has been through a global pandemic of this nature before. Nobody knows what the outcome will be.

We have just sung Avinu Malkeinu - one of the most haunting prayers of the season. The words were written almost two thousand years ago and yet, this year, they sound almost contemporary. Keep

your children safe from disease, violence, hunger and persecution. The word for disease is actually magesa which means plague. I imagine the editors translated it as disease because they thought we no longer had plagues in the modern world and disease would seem more relevant. But we are in the middle of a modern plague and it is beyond our control and right now all we can do is pray. Avinu Malkeinu was originally conceived as a prayer for rain, for a good harvest, which in those times meant the difference between life and death. So today we stand poised between life and death. Avinu Malkeinu, grant us a new year of goodness, spare us. May disease not rampage through care homes again. May we not have mass unemployment and may those whose businesses have collapsed find new ways to support themselves and their families. May the schools stay open. May those with underlying conditions survive. Our prayers are very basic this year. May we and our loved ones survive in good health. Of course that's always the case to some extent. My father used to say – as long as you've got your health, that's all that matters. But we have never before been conscious of it to quite this extent.

The authors of our prayers had a keen sense of crisis. As the Untaneh Tokef prayer says, after the Torah reading, We never know how and when we are going to die. We are not in charge. We are always governed by forces beyond our control – not perhaps perishing by

wild beast but from a disease carried by bats. This is real. The only fiction is that our fate is written on Rosh Hashanah and sealed on Yom Kippur – we know that it's happening all the time. Every day we have the opportunity to work out what kind of people we want to be. If we aspire to the best of ourselves then we can unlock energy that enables us to shift the boundaries of what is possible.

What got unlocked this year was enormous kindness.

Neighbourhood groups where we finally learned who else lives on our street. At Kol Chai an army of volunteers emerged to help those living on their own or isolating. And we provided scrubs and other PPE to local NHS workers. Each of us, whatever our circumstances, can do our part in making the world a better place.

What we are really doing this morning, this process of prayer, is documenting the human condition, it's where we step outside our normal lives and think about who we are, and where we are going. And the key themes of Rosh Hashanah - teshuva, tefillah and tzedakah – are reflections on what it is to be human.

Teshuva means to return – a reminder that we are in a constant process of moral orientation, hopefully returning to what we know to be the right path. Tefillah, meaning prayer, is about our self-awareness, our introspection, and goodness knows, we have had enough time to reflect this year. Tzedakah often used to mean charity but actually from a Hebrew root, meaning justice, is the most

profound of the three. In the Talmud it says there are ten strong things in the world and tzedakah is the strongest of all - even stronger than death. And this is not about buying yourself into the Book of Life which we know can't be done and we all know someone who was a paragon of giving but who died before their time. It's not about that. The point of tzedakah is to save the recipient from death. It's not a metaphor. If you take action, if you get somebody the help they need, then somebody else survives. That's the power of Tzedakah - to save lives - not yours, someone else's. And if you help somebody stay alive through Tzedakah then you have done something incredible. Giving physical help to somebody else - that's a force that can be stronger than death. We've had a lot of curses this year. But the blessings are in our hands.

We are about to hear the Torah reading and the powerful but bleak story of the Binding of Isaac. It says God tests Abraham - it doesn't specify what the test is - Abraham assumes he is being tested to see if he would be willing to sacrifice his son, but that's an assumption he makes. There's a pivotal moment right at the beginning of the story when God calls out to Abraham. Why does he call his name? And why does Abraham answer, Hineini, here I am, as if God was asking him where he was? The Biblical God knows everything. God certainly knows where Abraham is. God isn't checking where Abraham is physically, God is asking a more existential question - he wants to

know where Abraham's inner self is located. Where is he at exactly? What's going on for him? Is he present? Really present? We often ask each other where we were when historical events happen, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the release of Nelson Mandela, 9/11 - perhaps in the future, where were you when the Government announced a complete lockdown. Like God in the story, we're not really trying to establish physically where somebody was. We're asking something deeper about their connection with the moment.

Where are we? Where are we really? Are we really here in this moment, are we paying attention? I am told that the word crisis, derives from the Greek word, meaning decision. What personal decisions emerge from this crisis we have found ourselves in? And what drives those decisions? Is it love, is it compassion? One thing we have learned this year is how to look after each other. How to make sure that no-one is left behind.

Today is the birthday of the world. After the Torah reading we will hear the shofar, and the sound mirrors the cry of our soul, the cry that comes from the frustrations and difficulties, and pain, of this most challenging year. The shofar mirrors the cry that comes from the constraints of our lives and it opens up the channel of blessings. May this year be a year of hope, renewal and healing. May it be a year in which we continue to come together in love, friendship and

community. May it be a year of health and prosperity and let us say,
Amen. Ken Yehi Ratzon and Shana Tovah.

Please turn to the middle of page 102.