

KN - To stand in the eye of the storm

What do I talk about on Kol Nidrei? There is only one thing on our minds, one thing we want answers to. You don't even need me to say it. We are at the beginning of the second wave of the coronavirus pandemic. We are told that new restrictions could last for another six months. It is a time of deep uncertainty and not a little fear.

And what is clear to me is that we are still in the middle of the crisis so there is no clear perspective yet, no overarching view from which we can look back and say – this is how it was. Because it's still happening, this virus that we can't see, the early symptoms of which look like flu, but which can, in the worst cases, kill within weeks – and the prevention of which causes a different kind of devastation. At a certain level it is just beyond words. It's too big. So what do I say when there is nothing to say?

One of the ideas embedded in this season is that of tipping the scales of life and death. It is said that the future of the world and everyone who lives in it, hangs in the balance this week. The Spanish philosopher, Maimonides, said we should see ourselves as balanced on a knife edge, half worthy, and half guilty. If we do one bad thing we tip the balance of our own life and that of the whole world to the negative side. But with just one good deed, we can

alter the balance of our lives and that of the whole world to the side of blessing and life.

That is the impact of what we do. And this year, that idea isn't just theology, it's real. This year, actions that at any other time would seem minor, can save lives. Wearing a face mask or not. Washing your hands properly or not. Keeping your distance or not. This virus has already travelled across the world, via thousands of people who each, individually, unwittingly, did their bit to spread infection. And every sacrifice we made this year – the funeral we didn't attend in person, the exams we couldn't take, the months of home schooling, the isolation, all these acts tip the scales towards life. It's a weighty thing, this sense of personal responsibility for the world. But it's here and it's real.

Tomorrow we read again the Untaneh Tokef prayer which speculates on who will live and who will die in the coming year. It's a question that we're really asking ourselves this year. We know that everything is ephemeral really, that change is a part of life. All religions grapple with the ultimate fact of our mortality and the mortality of everyone we know. But we have rarely been so aware of it as we are today.

And yet in the middle of this challenging year, this year of rupture when everything closed down, we have also found resilience and connection.

One of the biggest impacts that the pandemic has had for so many of us, is to make us live so much of our lives on screen. We're participating on screen tonight. We socialise on zoom, we pray on zoom, we work on zoom. It's a blessing and a curse – many of us miss the personal face to face interactions that confirm our sense of value, our place in the world. And I am aware that some of us live on our own, and participating on your own can be a lonely experience.

The word for lonely in Hebrew is connected to the word Bidud, meaning, isolation, has the word l'hitboded, meaning meditation, or giving yourself time alone in order to search your own soul. Perhaps we can use this time of isolation, and restricted socialising, as an opportunity to look inwards into our own journey and to replenish our spiritual resilience in order to enter this year with renewed strength.

And we will need to renew our strength because for the first time in my lifetime we cannot really rely on the state or on experts to sort this out for us. The Government can set us guidelines but they cannot really make us stick to them. We have never been in this position before, when nobody, at any level of our country, has any experience of this crisis. We are all a bit in the dark. And as a result I think, we are, as a society a bit traumatised. And ironically there is something about being a society in trauma that can give us hope –

because we are all in this together. A society in trauma gives opportunities to people to go through things together, rather than suffer alone. . We need to find new ways to live with our fears and discomforts and to build new bonds, perhaps even to build a different kind of society, post-pandemic, as we did after the second world war.

In the words of the psychoanalyst, Susie Orbach, we cannot escape unhappiness. It is part of being human, as is creativity, courage, ambition, attachment and love. Let's embrace the complexity of what it means to be human at this uniquely difficult time as we think about how to make it through this pandemic wiser and more connected.

In our new Rosh HaShanah machzor, one of the options for the Haftarah readings is chapter 8 of Nehemiah. The people have spent 70 years in exile from their homes and the Persian empire has just allowed them to return and Nehemia goes back with them. Chapter 8 describes a scene in which the people gather together in the square, and Ezra the Scribe does the first public Torah reading, while the Levites go round and explain what it all means. It is a scene of renewal after exile, a time of celebration and hope. Like them we too need to look to the future and find new and creative ways of carrying on.

Towards the end of the Torah Moses looks into the future and tells his people that they will go into exile but that they will return, that they will be gathered in. And then, he says, God will open up your heart and the hearts of your children and you will return. The word return, from the root shuv, is teshuvah, in Hebrew. It's what Yom Kippur is all about. This may feel like a time of exile, when we are prevented from gathering together. But it's not. It's a time of teshuvah, a time of forgiveness and reconciliation. A time of returning to where we begin to rediscover our true selves and the divine spark that lies inside each one of us.

We need each other. We need to look after each other. We are all of us incomplete and imperfect and we cannot survive without a spiritual community that can give us what we need and what we don't have. And what we need most of all is to be able to give. To give of ourselves to each other – and in so doing make ourselves complete. Tonight each one of us is called home, home to our community and home to our place in the sea of life. And we know that together, we will weather this storm and we will make it through to the other side. Ken yehi ratzon.