

Why we live
Kol Nidrei 2021
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A physicist sits down at a bar and orders two drinks. He places one in front of the empty seat next to him, while he slowly consumes the other. Upon finishing, he orders another drink. The bartender notices the untouched beverage and motions to it. "Something wrong with this one?" "No," says the physicist, "that one is for my companion." "Oh," says the bartender. "You are expecting someone, then?" "Well, not exactly," says the physicist. "You see," he continues, "I study quantum mechanics, and the uncertainty principle tells us that there is always a chance, however small, that at any moment, all of the atoms in the vicinity of this stool might spontaneously rearrange themselves into the form of a real, live, beautiful woman who will find me charming, funny, and attractive, and if that does actually happen, I'm going to offer her this drink as a way to break the ice." "Oh I see," says the bartender. "Well, it just so happens that there is already a real, live, beautiful woman, sitting right over there, all by herself. Why don't you offer her the drink, and maybe SHE'LL find you charming, funny, and attractive?" "Yeah, right," says the physicist, "like THAT would ever work!"¹

What is the likelihood that your soul mate will rematerialize right next to you? For some of you, he or she, is right here, right now. For the rest of us, we probably don't want to count on the physics of quantum mechanics. Even though there's uncertainty, we will make our choices based on what we want, what we fear, and what we hope for. Certainty and uncertainty can play significant roles in our lives in many ways such as the career path we choose, the partner we select, the hobbies we participate in, and more. It also can have a significant role in how we ascertain risk, threat, and the kind of life we choose to live. Most of us, if given a choice, would say that we want what is known. The saying that we would prefer the devil we know as opposed to the devil we don't, demonstrates that many want security and certainty even if the status quo is less than desirable.

This makes the time we are living in even harder because there is so much uncertainty about Covid 19. It's been a year and a half and we are still in a pandemic that has upended many aspects of our lives. We have gone from stay at home orders, fearfully sanitizing packages we bring into our homes, avoiding seeing or even hugging our family members, wearing masks, isolating ourselves and loved ones. And then hallelujah! Vaccines started being available last winter and more so in the spring. I've never been more excited to get a shot, much less two, ever before. Once I received my second dose of Pfizer, I booked a flight two weeks later to go home and see my family. Hopes were high that us vaccinated folks wouldn't be able to get Covid much less pass it on. Now with the Delta variant, the calculations have changed but thankfully,

they are still excellent at preventing hospitalization and death. And so, as Covid cases around our country, especially among the unvaccinated are climbing, we are still struggling with choices we need to make in how we live and the risks we are willing to undertake.

One of the things that I worry about is how the stress and fear is impacting so many of you. Working from home for some is wonderful and for others, its hell. Feeling trepidation at the idea of going to friend or family gathering, is something many are experiencing. Our basic human ways of connecting are under strain. I don't know about you but when I'm encountering someone, I haven't seen for a while, I'm always asking myself, "Does this person want me to give them more distance?" Should we mask or unmask? And then I often will ask, "Are you comfortable being hugged?" I can tell even before they verbally respond as to their answer. It's stressful because we no longer talk about when the pandemic will be over. It looks more and more likely that Covid 19 and its variants will be part of our lives. We hope that as more people choose to get vaccinated and booster shots respond to the newer variants that Covid 19 will become more like a flu but we are sometime away from this.

Fear of Covid and fear of dying has become an infliction of its own. I am worried about the stress, and physical and psychological toll of this past year and half on many of you. Some have stopped many of their activities, have become more sedentary, have put on more pounds, and have deferred basic medical and mental care. There are many of you who exhibit high levels of fear and anxiety that it's as though you have PTSD.

There was an article in the NY Times this past spring that highlighted the fear factor of Covid, even among the vaccinated.² David Leonhardt speaks of a Yale law professor, Guido Clabresi, who asks his students would they accept a great invention that would allow people to see new places, do work of their choice, and spend more time with family and friends but in exchange, 1000 young men and women would die. His students always say no. He then states that there is very little difference between this scenario and the automobile. This fabled choice teaches that people can be irrational when it comes to assessing risk and consequence. For example, people may fear getting struck by lightning or bitten by a shark more than getting into a car even though statistically speaking, we are far more at risk in our vehicles. We have the tendency, according to David Leonhardt and his Yale professor to exaggerate newer risks and minimize older ones.

The contemporary example is the risk of dying of Covid for those who are vaccinated. Yes, the Delta variant is highly contagious and some have comprised immune systems that may make the vaccine less effective. These are things to be aware of, to be sure but for most of us, does it mean that we should shutter ourselves in our homes, eschew being around others, and isolate? I'm going to say boldly, "No." Simply because we are over estimating the risk of Covid and minimizing the psychological effects of avoiding social interactions, hugs, and physical activity.

We are down playing the risk of depression and physiological effects that can come with this. We are ignoring the risks of those extra ten to twenty pounds and how it will impact our heart, lungs, and cause early onset diabetes.

What I am really saying is that we have to realistically assess, given what we know today, our health needs to make informed decisions about the quality of our lives. To reduce our basic existence to whether we will contract Covid 19 or not, I believe is a great disservice to the gift of life that we have.

Living with uncertainty is hard. We have to live with it in other areas of life. We worry about our jobs, whether there's enough to pay the bills, will our loved one recover from his illness, our children's future, and our own happiness. If only we could look into a crystal ball and have certainty that all will be well. Alas, we don't get to foretell the future and so we have to live with uncertainty. There's uncertainty about the trajectory of Covid, as there is about so many aspects of our lives. But we have to live, the best we can, with what we know.

During YK morning Torah portion, we read, in Deuteronomy 30:19:

“I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day

הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ נִתְּנִי לְפָנֶיךָ

that I have set before you life or death,

הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה וּבַחֲרָתָּ בְּיָמֶיךָ

blessing or curse; choose life, therefore that you and descendants may live.”

Our ancient people, inspired by God, knew that they would die as all humans do but they strove for faithfulness to God and Torah. Wandering in the wilderness posed many challenges for the ancient Israelites. They had to contend with hostile Midianites, Moabites, and Ammonites and the uncertainty of what life would be like in the Promised Land. Once there, we had to battle Canaanites, Philistines, and other forces. Even when the kingdom was united under King David, peace didn't last. After his son, Solomon's death, our people were divided between the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern one of Judea. But there were greater challenges than that. The Assyrians attacked and ultimately destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel in the 8th century BCE and along with that we lost the ten tribes of Israel. In the 6th century, the Babylonians attacked our people in Judea, destroyed our Temple, and exiled our people. This was a time of immense suffering and despair for our people. The book of Lamentations says, “My life was bereft of peace, I forgot what happiness was. I thought my strength and hope had perished before the Lord. To recall my distress and my misery was wormwood and poison.”³

Even though some of our people returned to the land under the Persians, the Greeks invaded and conquered Israel under Alexander the Great in the 4th century BCE. Oh and then the Romans in the first century BCE did likewise and then a hundred years later cracked down on

our people, destroyed our Temple and tortured our great sages. There were ongoing challenges for centuries under Roman tyranny and then in the Middle Ages the crusaders ransacked and killed our people on their way to the Holy Land. We had to contend with living under Muslim, and then Christian rule and back again. And even as the modern period brought promises of emancipation for our people living in Europe, there were pogroms in Eastern Europe, persecutions, and tragically the Holocaust in the 20th century.

I'm sharing this with you for the sake of perspective. Jews have lived in precarious times for thousands of years and we still celebrated our holidays, we still embraced our values, and we still raised our children as Jews. In essence, we found ways to live as fully as possible even under the most dire of circumstances. And so, if our people could do this in the past, then of course, we can as well. It is by remembering who we are and what we value.

As Jews, we value our Torah, its commandments, teachings, and ethics. We are a people of memory. We constantly recall our past, learn from ancient wisdom, and this helps anchor us in the present. We are a people. We rely on one another. It is through community that we pray, observe Shabbat, holidays, and life cycles. It's how we learn and educate our children. We can feel the connections with each other now and throughout history. We know that we are part of *L'dor v'dor*, from one generation to the next. And we know how important it is to do our best to live Jewishly for our own sake and the sake of our people.

And we take action for others. We embrace *Tikkun Olam*, repair of the world, and strive to help our fellow human beings and protect our environment. It is for today and it's for tomorrow.

There's a famous account in the Talmud about Honi Hamagel, Honi the circle maker. One spring day he rode on his donkey in the country side. In the field, he saw an old man shoveling dirt. "*Shalom Alechein*, How are you?" He called out to the bald man. "*Alechein Shalom!*" the man stood up wiped the sweat from his forehead on his sleeve. Honi dismounted from his donkey and walked over to him. "If you don't mind me asking, what are you doing?" With a smile, the old man said with a grin, "Why, I'm planting a carob tree." Honi's forehead creased, "I don't mean to offend but it is unlikely that you will live long enough to enjoy its fruits." "Oh," the old man smiled, "I am not planting this tree for myself. When I was young, there were trees for me to enjoy. I am planting this for my children and grandchildren." So much of what we do as Jews is for the next generation, for our children, and for those who will follow.

We as Jews learn from the past, garner strength from each other in the present, and we plan for the future. We focus on life, here and now, and how to do it as meaningfully as possible. And so, recognizing the uncertainty of our lives, we need perspective, knowledge, and some courage as well. We need to commit to living as best as we can, keeping irrational fear in perspective, and strengthening our connections with one another and with God.

Even with the help of quantum mechanics, Covid doesn't appear to be disappearing anytime soon. And so we have to live with what is and with what can be. We need hope in our hearts, and resilience, as we draw strength from our ancient teachings of our people who have lived through much over the years. Even in a time of Covid, we can and must be who we are and live our lives to their fullest potential. It is with such a perspective that this year can be one infused with blessing and hope.

Notes:

¹ <https://upjoke.com/uncertainty-jokes>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/19/briefing/european-soccer-league-mars-helicopter-navalny.html>

³ Lamentations 3:17-19