

**Rosh Hashanah 5781-2020**  
***Gam Zeh Yaavor: This Too Shall Pass, The Curses and The Blessings***  
**Rabbi Yael Ridberg**

When I was an emerging adolescent, everything seemed like a crisis. Physical changes clashed with emotional rollercoasters that would often have me “ugly crying” until my dad would reach into his shirt pocket and hand me a neatly folded handkerchief to dry my tears, and my mother would hug me and recite the 3-word mantra of my childhood: *gam zeh yaavor* – This too shall pass.

My parents taught me early that human beings endure crises that are lightweight and those that are crushing – and we are in fact wired to deal with them as we mature. Their understanding (and I’m sure, finger crossing) gave me permission to feel the crisis and anticipate that it would pass, eventually.

These past six months have been painful and challenging, as we and our loved ones have wrestled with illness, loss, financial instability, isolation and uncertainty. But we have also learned so much during this time. These months have forced us to confront our mortality. They have surfaced deep systemic inequalities in our country. They have pushed us to consider our priorities, our time, our relationships and more.

The waves of economic, political, social, and spiritual crises each of us has been navigating individually *and* communally impact differently. Some of us are deep under the water, some of us are floating, and some of us are riding the waves to the shore.

In all the tumult and heartache, we have grown years in a matter of days, and we have had to keep a modicum of hope alive for how everything will be when this time does pass. The curses and the blessings. The crisis of COVID-19 which continues to impact us has led me today to explore this idea of *mashber*<sup>1</sup> – the Hebrew word for crisis – on this Rosh Hashanah.

This is not the first time our people or humanity as a whole has had to grapple with transformative experiences on the way to something we don’t yet know.

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<sup>1</sup> I’m deeply indebted to Melila Hellner-Eshed at the Hartman Institute, for her session this summer *Spiritual Sustenance in a Time of Crisis*.

Is it a crisis that will break us or one that will bond us? Will there be elements that we cannot wait to unburden and those we will be sad to see go? It's not always clear if this crisis, or any crisis is an end or a beginning, and perhaps that is the very point. In the words of Sikh activist and author Valarie Kaur, "There is a moment on the birthing table that feels like dying. The body in labor stretches to form an impossible circle, a ring of fire, the contractions are less than a minute apart, wave after wave, there is barely time to breathe...But that moment - called simply "transition" - is when a woman must breathe, and then push, so the baby can come forth."

Kaur begs us to consider birthing as a metaphor for the creation of something new - that every one of us is a "midwife" for the world at this moment, and we must ask, in her words: "If this darkness that we face today, is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb."

What if our America is a country that is not dead as we thought we knew it, but one that is waiting to be born, as one that reflects our ideals? What if the story of America is one long labor? What if the generations that came before us, who survived hardship, oppression, colonization, slavery, and genocide are whispering in our ears today – like Kaur's own mother when she was in labor: "You are brave – breathe – and then push!" We might all just be laboring in love for a country and a reality - waiting to be born!"<sup>2</sup>

That is, after all what we celebrate on Rosh Hashanah – the birthday of the world. *Hayom Harat Olam* we recite in the liturgy. And whether we are still in the ancient biblical description in Genesis of "*tohu vavohu*" – *the chaos of the deep* or the "*tov meod*" – *the qualitative goodness that follows*, only we know. But our job is to gain perspective and help others to do the same.

We can look back all the way back to our forefather Jacob for inspiration. After running away from home and from his twin brother Esau for 20 years after deceiving his father Isaac to receive the birthright blessing, he prepares to reunite with Esau.

He spends the night alone and vulnerable, and a stranger, attacks him in the middle of the night. The two wrestle until morning, and it's the most intense

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<sup>2</sup> <https://valariekaur.com/see-no-stranger/>

struggle of his life. And Jacob has seen struggle—with his brother, his father, his father-in-law --- but his time, he has met his match. The stranger is strong, fierce, unyielding. Jacob is badly injured—his hip is dislocated. But then, as dawn is breaking, and his attacker pleads to be released, Jacob grabs the stranger and insists: “I will not let you go until you bless me!”<sup>3</sup>

Jacob has been through hell. He knows that in this sunrise, at the end of his long, dark night of exile, even when the wrestling has left him exhausted and injured physically and psychically, some good has got to come.<sup>4</sup>

My friend and colleague, Rabbi Sharon Brous teaches that “Jacob got his blessing. The stranger, who turns out to be an angel, a servant of the Holy One, gives him a new name, a new identity, a new understanding of self: “*Lo Yaakov ye’amer od shimcha ki Im Yisrael*” - No longer will it be said that you are Jacob. You are now *Yisrael*— one who wrestles with God and humanity and prevails.”<sup>5</sup>

After all, it was the same Jacob who acknowledged only a few chapters earlier, that God was present *even* when he thought God absent, or more pointedly, even when *he*, Jacob, least experienced God.

It is so human, what Jacob asks for: “I need you to show me how there is still good, even in a world of hurt.” I need to know *gam zeh yaavor* – this too shall pass, even though I may not know when. I need to know that this *mashber* that I am confronting, this crisis may in fact lead to the birthing of something new, literally the threshold before birth, even if there appears to be no strength to push forward.<sup>6</sup>

We know our coming together this Rosh Hashanah feels qualitatively different from any other year. All the uncertainty, all the loss, and all that *is not the same* as it was before the world turned upside down. Yet, we are creating a sacred community nonetheless. Our prayers are no less heartfelt because we are each in our own sanctuary; our Torah is no less profound because we will learn it

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 32:27

<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Sharon Brous, <https://ikar-la.org/wp-content/uploads/KN-Grief-1.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 32:29

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 37:7; Rashi commentary on Isaiah 37:7

without the expected ritualized service; our minyan - prayer quorum - is no less constituted because we are all looking at a screen rather than each other.

But blessings don't always mean that everything is ok. Everything may not be ok. But hope means believing that there will be a tomorrow. That if you go weeping into the night, In the words of the Psalmist, joy will wake you in the morning.<sup>7</sup>

CDH member, Jeff Rabin, shared with me that at age 41 he was diagnosed with lymphoma. After four months of chemotherapy and the next couple of years fearing that every cough signaled a recurrence, he and his beloved Ilona married, as she had not left his side through it all.

Jeff reflected, "If not for my illness I don't think I would have had the courage or the confidence in our relationship to ask her to marry me, which I did in September 1997. We were married a year later by Dor Hadash Rabbi Alexis Pearce. I had been told that after chemotherapy the odds that I could have children were only 50-50, but we were undeterred and in July 2001 our daughter Melina was born. Her middle name is Joy."

Betsy Schneider shared her struggle with infertility, and the grieving process she and David went through upon deciding to end the odyssey of trying to have one more child. "We sealed our handprints in cement as a dedicated family of 3, and we count the many blessings of close family, a strong marriage, and a healthy child every day."

So are the crises we bear a necessity for progress? Are they part of the structure of development?

The sacred story of the Jewish people is built on two primary pillars – hope and accountability. One is a trajectory of living from darkness to light, from degradation to dignity, from slavery to freedom, as outlined in the Exodus story. The story has been retold in the aftermath of every devastating era in Jewish history, and ultimately is what has strengthened our people. Pain followed joy and joy followed pain.

But the story's second part is equally potent. Its "eternality" comes when Israel

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<sup>7</sup> Psalm 30

steps over the border into the promised land and into sovereignty. The Torah's central message is for us to learn how to *treat the vulnerable stranger*. It gives former slaves a way to build a counter-Egypt and a way to give to someone else the care they were once denied. A crisis becomes an opportunity when we are able to fold the lessons of our experience into helping someone else in need.

CDH member Shari Ciancio shared with me that when her parents' health was declining and she was managing everything long distance, it was the kindness of strangers that not only helped in an emergency but helped navigate the bureaucracy of care. The passing by nurse who saw her mother in distress and called Shari to tell her, the administrator who overheard Shari's uncertainty about caring for her father and sensed that she could help, and so she did.

Hope and accountability, optimism and responsibility are called forth in moments of crisis. At 7 pm every night in NYC for months, residents flung open their windows and cheered, banged on pots and pans and clapped loudly for all of the front line workers.

Nurses arranged phone calls for dying patients with their families who were unable to be at the bedside and hold their hand as they took their dying breath.

Teachers reached deep into their love for children and imparted knowledge and experiences to them in their mastery of Zoom and online platforms for every subject.

All of us learned to "pivot" – working from home, "crisis-schooling" kids, tele-medicine with doctors, more stress despite less movement.

Dr. Betsy Stone, an adjunct lecturer at Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion wrote this summer: "We also pivoted, some of us, to simpler lives. Adults who are home for dinner; families doing jigsaw puzzles together. I am sure that there are many of us who have relaxed into quarantine, finding this lifestyle, while restrictive, more pleasant than our previous work lives...We have learned that community matters a great deal, that we need each other more than we might have expected. We have slowed down enough to experience outrage at our covert and not-so-covert racism, outrage that is long overdue. The pace of life has

eased, with less rushing and lower energy. Our lives are less formal, less complex. And full of grief.”<sup>8</sup>

I’m not pollyannaish about the hardships of the last 6 months. Families with challenges have had to negotiate them in tougher circumstances. Working parents used to a compartmentalized life, have had to juggle between academic and professional titles one minute, and chief cook and bottle-washer the next.

And yet, this isn’t completely new to us either. As a Jewish community we have lived in ambiguity, where there is no obvious end to the crisis. Our people have never really loved being in the wilderness -not then and not now.

Our ancestors were masters of living through experiences where there is no end in sight, and the trauma, the rupture, the quarantine, just keeps going – on and on and on. And as it does, the pressure, and the exhaustion builds on itself.

But our ancestors “were connoisseurs of hope and resilience. And not only did they survive, but they also managed, to keep loving each other, to work to make the world a better place, and to claim their Judaism MORE, not less. All the loss did not disabuse them of wonder and holiness in the world, they just worked harder to find it, and strove to make their communities places of joy, solace and comfort.”<sup>9</sup>

The story is told that King Solomon once sent his trusted advisor, Benaiah ben Yehoyada, on what the king thought was an impossible mission: to find a ring which was reputed to make the sorrowful glad and the glad sorrowful. Benaiah searched far and wide but failed to find such a ring. But just before he was set to report his failure to Solomon, Benaiah found the ring he sought. Around the silver band were written the Hebrew words: “*Gam zeh ya’avor.*” This, too, shall pass.

*Gam zeh ya’avor*, this too shall pass. It’s a powerful phrase for us right now, in this time of heightened anxiety, of the thousands of lives lost, grief for the loss of milestone events, concerns over our personal and communal economic realities we are reminded that this *too shall pass* – there will come a day when we aren’t

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<sup>8</sup> Dr. Betsy Stone, [Tisha B’Av in Our Day](https://www.ejewishphilanthropy.com), [ejewishphilanthropy.com](https://www.ejewishphilanthropy.com)

<sup>9</sup> Rabbi Jordie Gerson, Facebook post.

in quarantine, wearing masks, and refraining from the hugs and physical proximity that we have missed so much. We will recover, and a new normal will arise.

It's also a reminder that in the sweetest moments of the last months, if we've been blessed to have and recognize them – the silver linings – that we might savor them. The time spent with children who might have been gone 8 hours a day, the books we might never have read, the reconnection with far away friends and colleagues in zoom reunions that might never have happened, the family dinners when everyone is home, the cleaner air and reduced traffic congestion. We might do well to savor these moments, because, *this too shall pass*.

The blessing of *gam zeh ya'avov* is the invitation to *presence*. To the joy and discomfort. What does this moment have to teach us? What have you learned this past year about yourself? About your community? About the world?

I want to believe that's what drove our ancestor Jacob too. Not the fantasy of a fresh start, but the realization that even in the unexpected, something new can arise. There is so much our eyes have been opened up to this year, things many of us pretended not to know, things we wished were not true, as well as blessings around us we only came to fully appreciate at this time of *mashber* - crisis.

As we look toward this coming year, we anticipate the sounding of the shofar. A stunning teaching about the 4 blasts *tekiah*, *shevarim-tru'ah*, *shevarim*, and *t'ruah* and why, when we blow the shofar, we always do it in the pattern of “tekiah - other blast – tekiah” can offer us an understanding of this moment:

Each series of shofar blasts begins with *tekiah*, a whole sound. It is followed by *shevarim*, a tripartite broken sound whose very name means “breakings.” “I started off whole,” the shofar speech says, “and I became broken.” Then follows *ter'uah*, a staccato series of blast fragments, saying: “I was entirely smashed to pieces.” But each series has to end with a new *tekiah*, promising wholeness once more.

The shofar cries out a hundred times on Rosh Hashanah, “I was whole, I was broken, I was even smashed to bits, but I shall be whole again!”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Aruch HaShulchan, Orah Hayim 590, 1-4. As cited by Rabbi Arthur Green in *Seek My Face, Speak My Name*, and adapted by Rabbi Rachel Zerlin in [Shofar: The Voice of Trauma The Voice of Redemption](#).

To return to Valarie Kaur's profound question: "If this moment *does* represent the darkness of the womb rather than the darkness of the tomb, what if *this moment* is *our time* of great transition?"<sup>11</sup> Our ability to survive this transition depends on whether we *show up* to the labor of the moment with love and courage, strength and hope.

*Gam zeh yaavor* – this time, this *mashber* on the birthing floor and the waves of despair will pass. And when they do, may we embrace the new possibilities of 5781 of life, health, justice, and joy.

*Shanah Tovah u'Metukah* – A sweet year of abundance for us all.

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<sup>11</sup> Valarie Kaur, [Breathe! Push! The Labor of Revolutionary Love](#)