

Overwhelm, Cynicism, and Despair: What are we to do? Yom Kippur 5784

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What's the difference between a Jewish pessimist and a Jewish optimist? The Jewish pessimist says, "Things can't possibly get any worse." The Jewish optimist says, "Sure they can!"

Each year when I think about what I might address on the High Holidays, I ask friends and colleagues "What is the sermon you need to hear right now?" And in the end, I usually end up giving the sermon I need to hear. I hope it is meaningful to you as well.

One thing I am wrestling with this year is looking at our world through a lens of overwhelm, cynicism, and despair. It seems like every morning I wake up to another day of news of mass shootings, climate devastation, rampant racism. White supremacy. Antisemitism. Threats to democracy. I am overwhelmed by the barrage of frighteningly bad news.

And the overwhelm morphs into cynicism. The efforts at sensible gun legislation have not accomplished their goal. The protests in Israel aren't changing the direction of government extremism. Forests keep burning. Cities keep flooding. Racism and white supremacy persist. I slip into a cynical space of feeling that nothing seems to make a difference, so why bother? And from there, despair.

When I think about the crazy world we live in I often have to remind myself that we are not the first generation to feel this way nor, I suppose, are we the last. I suspect that in every generation people wonder if it has ever been *this* bad. I'm sure my parents' generation thought so when they were coming of age during the Great Depression, and then WWII.

My grandparents lived through pogroms and displacement. When I look at the long scope of Jewish history, I *know* we're not the first generation to experience the cycle of overwhelm, cynicism and despair. Slavery in Egypt, the Babylonian exile, the Second Temple destroyed. Crusades, expulsions, pogroms. Imagine what our forebears must have felt, every generation fearing they were the last.

We're still here, and we are probably not the last generation, but the cycle of overwhelm, cynicism, and despair is real. Krista Tippett has said "I don't think we are equipped physiologically or mentally to be delivered catastrophic and confusing news and pictures, 24/7."¹ I think she's right. So we need strategies to help us deal with it, and our Jewish tradition, supported by psychology and social science, has guidance for us.

This sermon was written in collaboration with Rabbi Sharon Stiefel

¹ <https://onbeing.org/programs/living-the-questions-1/>

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/07/08/how-to-fix-news-media/>

First, overwhelm; and yes, it is a noun according to the Oxford English Dictionary. Overwhelm is described by one writer as “the sensation that many of us experience just before we shut down, break down, blow up or blow off our responsibilities.”² Sound at all familiar?

In Pirkei Avot, Rabbi Tarfon recognizes the feeling, then offers an antidote to it: He says: “the day is short, and the task is great.” I hear him heaving a great sigh before he continues: *Lo Aleicha Hamlacha ligmor, v’lo atah ben horin l’hibatel mimena.* It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it.”³

He’s telling us to just start. It’s OK if we can’t get the job done, but at least we can make a dent. We can fight overwhelm by just focusing on the task at hand - that is, staying present in the moment we are in. By saying “Hineini - I am here, now, in *this* moment” - and meaning it. In the colorful wisdom that is uniquely Yiddish: One tuchus can’t sit in 10 chairs.

If we do lose perspective and become overwhelmed, we might protect ourselves with cynicism. Not the ancient Greek philosophy, but the attitude of scornful, jaded negativity that can come over us in tough times. The allure - and the danger - of cynicism is It frees us from obligation: If nothing works anyway, why bother? If everyone lies, why be honest? If the politicians are deceitful, why vote? Cynicism is the enemy of positive change, trapping us in a world we don’t want to live in.⁴

In the Harvard Business Review, Psychology professor and neuroscientist Jamil Zaki says cynicism is also contagious. When we think the world is zero-sum, everyone becomes a potential enemy. And that then can infect our personal relationships, causing us to imagine a version of others that is much worse than the flesh-and-blood folks actually out there. And when we interact with that imagined worst version of someone rather than with their true selves, we will lash out with preemptive strikes, causing harm and spreading cynicism further.⁵

My dad used to tell the cautionary tale of the man who wants to borrow his neighbor’s rake. “But,” he thinks to himself, “If I borrow his rake, I’ll probably break it or forget to return it, then he’ll get mad, and probably tell his wife, who will stop speaking to my wife, and then she’ll get mad at me and we’ll have a fight. That will spoil our anniversary plans, and the kids will probably start feuding too and we might even have to move...” He goes on like this for a while, until finally he storms over to his neighbor’s house and bangs on the door. When his neighbor opens the door the man yells “Keep your damn rake,” stalks off, and never speaks to him again.

Again, Pirkei Avot has an antidote for us. Yehoshua ben Perachia says: *Dan kol adam l’caf zechut*: Judge every person favorably. Cultivating a habit of giving others the benefit of the doubt will slowly melt away the hard shell cynicism can give us. It takes a leap of faith, perhaps,

² https://www.cjr.org/language_corner/overwhelming-overwhelm-whelm-grammar-noun-verb.php

³ Pirkei Avot 2:16

⁴ Jamil Zaki https://www.ted.com/talks/jamil_zaki_how_to_escape_the_cynicism_trap/transcript?language=en

⁵ <https://hbr.org/2022/09/dont-let-cynicism-undermine-your-workplace>

But it can be developed with practice. Try this: Remember that every person is created in the divine image and is valuable for that reason alone.

Look for any one thing, however small, that might be good in that person annoying you; remember they are a human being. Don't assume you know their motivations or the outcome of any interaction.

A related tool to combat cynicism is *Hakarat HaTov* - Recognizing the good. The Talmud teaches that we should say at least 100 blessings a day. From the moment we awaken till we go to sleep at night we have opportunities to be grateful. Opening our eyes to the blessings around us softens the blow of all the bad news that comes our way and opens the heart that is closed by cynicism. Therapist Debbie Gutfreund suggests this daily meditation:

"Just for today I'm going to see the opportunity instead of the obstacle. Just for today I am going to recognize the kindness instead of the apathy, the light instead of the darkness, the love instead of the hate, the beauty instead of the chaos, the blessing instead of the lack."⁶

Another defense against both overwhelm and cynicism is to consider the very foundation of Judaism: Shema Yisrael...Adonai is One. One is a powerful number. One can make a difference by taking one step. We don't really know who said it first, but it is not just a truism that a journey of 1,000 miles begins with a single step. The Red Sea parted for the Israelites because Nachshon took that first step into the water. It was either the Dalai Lama or an African proverb that said "If you think you are too small to make a difference, try sleeping in a room with a mosquito."⁷

Still, there will be times when we fall victim to despair, which has been defined as "the belief that tomorrow will be just like today."⁸ Yom Kippur tells us the opposite: we have the power to make tomorrow different than today. To despair is human. But it isn't Jewish.

In fact, Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav said it is forbidden to despair,⁹ not that that really helps. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote: "To be a Jew is to be an agent of hope in a world serially threatened by despair. Every ritual, every mitzvah, every syllable of the Jewish story, is a protest against escapism, resignation or the blind acceptance of fate."¹⁰

Every ritual, every Mitzvah. Let's take Yom Kippur, for starters. What we are doing here today is an antidote to despair. Yom Kippur is founded on the assurance that things *can* get better

⁶ <https://aish.com/10-quotes-on-cultivating-gratitude/>

⁷ [Times of India, July 6, 2023. The Dalai Lama Turns 88.](https://www.timesofindia.com/2023/07/06/dalai-lama-turns-88/) It is also said to be an African proverb. Like many of these statements, the true original source is unknown.

⁸ Rob Bell, quoted by Brené Brown, *Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts.* Random House

⁹ Sicut HaRan 3:6

¹⁰ <https://www.rabbisacks.org/archive/future-tense-how-the-jews-invented-hope/>

and that we have agency to make them better. This is the day when even the most subtle redirection of intention is enough to write a different ending to the story. The liturgy of this day gives us very specific tools to fight despair: At the end of Untanneh tokef we say: *U'teshuvah utefilah utzedakkah ma'avirin et ro'a hag'zerah*. Teshuva, Tefilah, and Tzedakka can change our future.

The common translation - Repentance, prayer, and charity - doesn't even begin to capture the power we have to change the future.

Teshuva is better translated as return. The Holy Days urge us to return to God if we have lost faith, to our loved ones and communities if we are estranged or lonely, to look inward and return to our own strength and courage and if they have waned. Return by definition, is a change of direction. And a change of direction, no matter how small, means that tomorrow will *not* be just like today.

Even if we can change nothing else, we can change ourselves. Rabbi Israel Salanter said: "When I was young I wanted to change the world. But it was too difficult, so I tried to change my country. When I couldn't change my country I began to focus on my town. I discovered that I couldn't change my town, and so as I grew older I tried to change my family. Now as an old man I realize the only thing I can change is myself. I've come to recognize that if long ago I had started with myself, then I could have made an impact on my family. And, my family could have made an impact on our town. And that in turn could have changed the country, and we could all indeed have changed the world."¹¹

Tefilah, translated as prayer - again, barely scratches the surface. Tefilah comes from the root Peh Lamed Lamed, which carries the meaning of intervention, intercession, taking account. The verb form, Hitpalel, is reflexive - that is it reflects back upon us. Prayer, especially on this day, is a self accounting, which, like teshuva, makes a difference. "Prayer matters. It changes the world because it changes us. It brings the Divine Presence into our lives and gives us strength we didn't know we had."¹²

Although on the surface it may seem like praying is leaving the work of solving our problems up to God, it actually can inspire us to come up with our own solutions. Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "Prayer cannot bring water to parched fields, or mend a broken bridge, or rebuild a ruined city; but prayer can water an arid soul, mend a broken heart, and rebuild a weakened will."¹³ And with those, we can begin to work on the bridges, fields and cities.

Tefilah is also a connector, to our own souls, to God, and to each other. Our most important prayers are said only in the company of community. Rabbi Harold Kushner said "Something miraculous happens when people come together seeking the presence of God. The miracle is

¹¹ I have not found a written source, but this well known statement is generally credited to him.

¹² Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Introduction to Koren Ani Tefilah Siddur edited by Rabbi Dr. Jay Goldmintz.

¹³ I have not been able to find the original source.

that we so often find it.”¹⁴ They say there is strength in numbers, and praying in community gives us strength to tackle things we couldn’t on our own. And many of the prayers in Jewish liturgy are gratitudes, and gratitude not only combats cynicism, but it is a proven antidote for despair.¹⁵

One last thing about tefilah that can help pull us out of despair: Tefilah is different from meditation in that it engages the voice. Saying, or especially singing the words out loud not only helps focus our attention, but brings healing as well.¹⁶

Finally, Tzedakah. So much more than charity. “Tzedakah is almost impossible to translate, because of its many shadings of meaning: justice, charity, righteousness, integrity, equity, fairness and innocence.”¹⁷ In a world seemingly steeped in meaningless cruelty, forging a path of tzedek revives meaning and can pull us out of paralysis and into the fight for justice.¹⁸

Isaiah says: *B’tzedakah tikonani...ki lo tira’i*;¹⁹ “You shall be established through tzedakah... And shall have no fear; “Acts of tzedakah, even small ones, can lift us out of despair. Psychotherapist Viktor Frankl survived Auschwitz by dedicating himself to giving other prisoners the will to live. He helped each of them find a task that was calling to them, something they had not done yet, but that only they could do.²⁰ He helped them survive the present by teaching them to hear the future calling to them.²¹

Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory said: “One question, asked in faith, has the power to change a life. I know, because it changed mine. It happens when you ask: ‘what is God calling on me to do in these circumstances at this time? ‘Each of us has a task. Every life has a purpose. We can bear the pain of the [present] when we discover the future we are called on to make.”²²

Jewish tradition offers us many strategies to combat overwhelm, cynicism, and despair. And, still we may need help. And so I pray: In this new year, God, When we are overwhelmed, help us find perspective. When we are cynical, direct our eyes to blessing, and when we despair, open our hearts to know the task you have set for us.
Ken Y’hi Ratzon; May it be God’s will.

Anthem: <https://rabbidavid.bandcamp.com/track/there-is-hope>

¹⁴ Harold Kushner, *Who Needs God?*, Touchstone, 2002

¹⁵ <https://positivepsychology.com/neuroscience-of-gratitude/>

¹⁶ <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/06/070622090727.htm>

¹⁷ Jonathan Sacks in https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2269078/jewish/Tzedek-Justice-and-Compassion.htm

¹⁸ Rabbi Michael Rothbaum https://www.bethelohim.org/drashot.html?post_id=1114315

¹⁹ Isaiah 54:14

²⁰ Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, [A Call From the Future, Covenant and Conversation, Chaye Sarah 5776](#)

²¹ Rabbi Michael Rothbaum https://www.bethelohim.org/drashot.html?post_id=1114315

²² <https://www.rabbisacks.org/archive/when-in-despair-think-of-your-set-task/>