

What We Can Control

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Temple Shalom Emeth

Yesterday morning I was putting the final touches on this sermon. I was going to begin by talking about how my son Aaron just started his new job clerking for a Federal District Judge in Tacoma, Washington. I was going to describe how every time I walk past his room I look at all the memorabilia and can't believe how dramatically he has changed over time and by extension how profoundly it has changed all of us.

I was going to talk about how at this unique moment in time, we stand on the cusp between memory, Yom Hazikaron and the uncertainty of the future, symbolized by the wailing call of the shofar. I was going to say that this particular moment is a safe haven in a safe place, when we have the luxury of reflecting upon where we have come from, what our lives were like last year at this time, how and with who we have spent past holy days, and looking within, considering our goals and how far we have come in achieving them.

Then I got a text message from Jeremy Kasanov, our First Vice President. He was going to give the president's address tomorrow on behalf of our temple president, Andy Feit, who tore his achilles tendon a week or so ago and is recovering from surgery which he had three days ago. I had just tutored Jeremy's son Jacob for his Bar Mitzvah Wednesday evening. Then I listened to him practice blowing the shofar, which he has done so beautifully for our Rosh Hashanah morning service for the past couple of years. He and his brother Hayden were going to be our two madrichim aids for tomorrow's children's program.

The text message read "Hi. Bad news about Jacob. He woke up not feeling well and tested positive for Covid. No symptoms last night. But now he has bad cold symptoms and 101 fever."

My head started to spin. What? So we have no shofar blower. We have no madrichim to help with the children's program. Someone needs to pinch hit for Jeremy who was stepping in for Andy. After a minute or so I realized: Wait a second. I was talking with Jacob for a while after his lesson in the front hall. None of us were wearing masks. Should I even be here to lead all these services? And if so, will I need to wear a mask which will muffle everything I'm going to say? Then I listened to the weather report. What? The hurricane may not be completely missing us out to sea as they predicted a couple of days ago.

All of this compelled me to suddenly rewrite my message for this evening.

As we sit here, contemplating the course of our life on this holy day, we reflect upon the fact that no matter what we do, how hard we try, so much of life is unpredictable. Everything from my son growing up to be a lawyer clerking for a judge, ending up in Tacoma of all places, where a first cousin of mine happens to live, to our temple president rupturing his achilles tendon, to Jacob coming down with Covid two days before Rosh Hashanah, to the track of a hurricane.

As unexpected for better, but mostly for worse, as all of this is, it pales in comparison to the unpredictable shock waves and devastation of an earthquake in Morocco last week, suddenly snuffing out hundreds of lives, flooding in Libya killing thousands, a sudden fire in Hawaii resulting in so much devastation.

Life can be unexpectedly good or bad. It might suddenly result in our having to change all our plans and alter the holiest of our observances. God doesn't promise us a rose garden, as the saying goes. On the contrary. The *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer we read on these holy days reminds us of the litany of everything that might befall us in the future. Who by fire? Who by water? Who by earthquake? Who by stoning? Who by beast?

Our tradition tells us that we may not have control over what may befall us, but we do have control over how we respond. The prayer ends by telling us that we can temper the severe decree through teshuvah, repentance, t'filah, prayer and tzedakah, charity. On this night we are painfully or elatedly aware of the precarious

nature of our lives and the world. We consider how well equipped are we to respond to the unexpected highs and lows of the year ahead?

The second last-minute lesson I have learned from all of this is how interconnected we all are. This has amazed me throughout the pandemic. Because Jacob was unknowingly in contact with students and teachers at his school in Weston who themselves didn't know they had Covid, many aspects of our program for the holy days here in Burlington has had to change.

On this night of introspection, as the Gates of Heaven symbolically open and God judges our deeds, we think about our interconnectedness. Just as the most trivial encounter can result in the spreading of a virus, the ways in which we casually or off-handedly speak or act toward one another can also have a profound impact on a person's wellbeing. We never know when a kind word will make someone's day and enable that person to spread that feeling of happiness on to others they encounter. Or conversely when we lash out at someone, how that hurt and negativity not only impacts the victim but to untold others to whom that person could pass on the hurt. I know from my own personal experience that my spirits can be lifted just by having a pleasant encounter with a neighbor while I'm walking the dog. Conversely, if someone sends me a negative email, or even if a total stranger is rude, it can impact my mood for hours.

Our tradition tells us that we all have within us the *yetzer hatov*, the inclination to do good and the *yetzer hara*, the inclination to do evil. The rabbis tell us that every interaction we have can tip the scales not just for us, but for the whole world. If someone is contagious with Covid, they can spread the disease to others with just 10-15 minutes of contact. We recognize that we can just as easily spread good will or negativity toward all the people with who we come into contact.

The third last minute lesson I took from all of these changes, is that our community is here to help us ride out the unexpected changes in life which will inevitably come our way.

When I heard about Jacob, I immediately called Val Jacobs, our religious and ritual chair, Ben Silver, and Alicia McGee, our new religious school director. We set up emergency meetings to see how we could navigate these new circumstances. Everyone jumped into action. We had an emergency ritual committee meeting. Everyone showed up with only a few hours notice to brainstorm how to deal with these changes. Others volunteered to step in.

Our temple community is here for us, not just to celebrate the holy days, but to share our joy when good things happen and support us no matter what befalls us. Tina Torman and her Chicken Soup Brigade, our temple board, our committees, our members. In our community people pitch in at a moment's notice. We cover for each other. We soften the blow when bad things happen. We rejoice with each other when good things happen.

In this new year, we are reminded that for better or worse, we can't stop the unexpected from happening and there is at least as much uncertainty in the world and in our lives as ever before. But we are comforted in the knowledge that we have each other for support. On this night in particular, as we reflect upon our many blessings, we don't take them for granted.

It is so tempting to ask why our lives change in such crazy and unexpected ways. Does God have some incomprehensible master plan? Why do bad things happen in our lives? Our answer is that the world works in mysterious ways, but we have the ability to temper our response to these challenges, to make life better for others, and that we have our community to lean on for comfort and support.

My wish for all of us in this new year is that we relish the good fortune and the good times, that the unexpected twists and turns are minimal, that we have a year of health, peace and contentment and that we find comfort, solace and support from one another when we need it.