

Tichleh Shana v'Kil-loteha. Tachel Shana u'Virchoteha.

May the year end and with it, its curses. May the new year begin and with it, its blessings.

Inspired by a passage from the Talmud, these lines appear in a 13th century piyyut or liturgical poem known as Achot Ketana. Part of the traditional Rosh Hashanah liturgy, the poem isn't included in the Reform machzor. But if ever there was a time for this prayer, it is now.

Standing in the space between the year 5780 and 5781, challenged and battered by the past six months, -- and now literally battered this week by Hurricane Sally, we full heartedly beseech, May the year end and with it its curses.

May the close of 5780 bring with it, we pray, an end to the curses we read about each morning in the newspaper. The daily tally of covid cases and deaths that dominate the front page. The now to common headlines announcing the bankruptcy of century old businesses. The weekly reports on how many millions of our fellow Americans are without work.

And may the close of 5780 bring with it the end of the countless, individual curses that have come with this pandemic.

The curse of facing illness or enduring a loss alone, isolated, longing for a friend or the sustaining embrace of community. Being at socially distanced funerals, it is

clear no words can replace a hug. How difficult to be denied this source of comfort.

And the loss of so many small things, at least by comparison, that bring us joy and happiness. The visits with grandchildren that had to be put off and the senior proms that were cancelled. The mornings not spent sipping coffee at a favorite café and evenings absent dinner with friends. Seeing familiar faces at a sisterhood luncheon. Schmoozing at Shabbat oneg. The freedom to do so much, including simply going about the day without worry.

In the age of Covid, every little decision seems a million times more fraught than it was before. I want to pick up groceries without first strategizing when it is safest to be in the market. I want to respond to a friend's invitation without inquiring about how vigilant they are with social distancing.

Intellectually I know that it doesn't matter, but when I am out on a jog and I come across someone else, I feel like I have to hold my breath as we pass. In these strange times I feel like I am always holding my breath. I want to breathe free. I know you do too.

How desperately we long for this curse of Covid to end. For life to go back to normal. We are ready for a new year and, God willing, for it to bring blessings.

But as we pray for normalcy, paradoxically, the blessing we may be granted is recognition that things are forever changed; life will be lived differently. More

importantly – the realization that we are forever changed and that we can live differently.

Countless articles have been written about how after the pandemic office culture will be different; consumer behavior transformed; how some industries will be forced to radically evolve. These changes will, in part, be a response to health concerns, but others the result of examining and questioning aspects of life previously taken for granted.

Change is happening on the societal level, and on the personal level as well.

With life put on pause, the patterns that governed our schedules and, in many ways, dictated our priorities are being challenged. As Rabbi Hannah Estrin puts it, “we have awoken from the routine of our lives.”

A respondent in a recent Vox Magazine piece shared, “Quarantine has forced me to slow down in ways I haven’t since I was a kid. . . I have been on the go constantly for half my life. I always said I was one who liked to be busy, but . . . months of forced slowdown has really called on me to think about what I want my life to look like moving forward.”

The reader is not alone.

Having enjoyed the chance to share daily meals with our families, many of us wonder why we were ok only sitting down together a few times a week.

Why we bought into the belief that spending the afternoon shopping for something new was a better use of time than strolling down a trail to see a tree in bloom.

Why the activities that are nourishing our souls during these difficult months, baking, gardening, taking time to read outside or pluck away at an old guitar, were previously ignored or put on the dreaded “when there is time list.” As Hillel warns in Pirkei Avot, don’t say I will study when there is time because then there will never be time.”

Notably, the Hebrew word most often used for sin is *chet* – a term from archery that means missing the mark. Life sometimes gets a bit off target. Unfortunately, we are usually moving so fast that it is hard to notice, at least until it is too late. But we’ve been given, as a silver lining to Covid’s very dark cloud, a chance to pause and make a course correction.

So many of us are living differently now – and not just the changes we have to make because of Covid – but because this time of uncertainty has clarified our priorities and values. I pray that continues long after our fear of the virus abates.

One aspect of life that has taken on newfound importance and prominence, is the past.

With Coronavirus limiting our activities in the present and the future hard to imagine, memories, so often ignored, are being given newfound attention.

In many homes, old photo albums are being dusted off and carefully thumbed through.

Newly fluent in technologies like zoom, we are reaching out to friends from different stages in our lives. 25 years after parting ways at JFK Airport, my teen Israel Trip held a virtual reunion. I know others in our community are connecting with old camp buddies, friends from college or basic training.

The pull of nostalgia is even helping connect generations. In speaking with other parents of teens and tweens, a unifying experience of being stuck at home seems to be the joy of watching, alongside our kids, movies we enjoyed at their age. It is fun to see them respond to the films and then, inevitably to reminisce and share stories of how we navigated this ever-changing stage of life.

But most impactful, in the strange quiet of this time, our minds are finding the opportunity to wander freely in the realm of memories.

In a brilliantly titled article, "How to Travel from your Sofa," the philosopher Alain de Botton observes, "We are careless curators of our own pasts. . . We squeeze only a portion of the pleasure from our experiences and then toss them aside to seek fresh thrills. Part of why we feel the need for so many new experiences may simply be that we are so bad at absorbing the ones we have had."

But now, with most new adventures put on hold, we are revisiting in the mind's eye moments, journeys, and conversations. Remembering inspirational teachers and how we felt in their presence. The actions and words of loved ones, as well as their warmth.

Memory, *Zecher*, plays a prominent role in Judaism. That is especially true during these High Holy Days, when we reflect back on the past to learn from our mistakes and pause on Yom Kippur for Yizkor – to recall those, now gone from this earth, who shaped our lives.

These rituals are important and powerful. But we don't have to limit memory to a specific time or place. There is too much to absorb, and learn, and take comfort and pleasure from in the past -- for us to ignore memories except on special occasions.

In Hebrew the word for past, *Kedem*, is closely related to the word for going forward – *Kadima*. As we go forward into this new year, and God willing, our opportunities for new adventures expand, I pray we continue to honor the past. It is a treasury of guidance and experience we are blessed to carry with us.

Finally, I hope we emerge from these difficult months with increased empathy and compassion.

This summer Andrea and I, like parents with school-age children across the country, spent weeks agonizing about what option we should select for our children's schooling this fall. It was hard. We didn't have all the information and the information we did have kept changing. Night after night, we'd lie awake playing out different scenarios. No matter how many times we thought things through, we never felt comfortable because in truth there were no good options.

I pray that my girls can soon return to school, to walk through the halls, see their friends, and sit in class with the same carefree joy they had before Covid. But I also pray those nights Andrea and I, and other parents of relative privilege, spent worrying about school helps us better empathize with those moms and dads who feel, not only in times of pandemic but all the time, as though they don't have good options.

Many of us struggle with the platitude that everything happens for a reason. But as Jews we do believe that our experiences and troubles shape us in profound ways.

The Torah commands time and again, "Do not oppress the stranger for you know the heart of the stranger having been strangers in the land of Egypt." We now know the heart of parents who must choose between unsatisfactory choices. We now know, having endured a month's long stay at home order – the heart of those who spend their days in isolation, unable to go out and do the things they once enjoyed. We now know, having been shaken ourselves by these

unprecedented times, those who are made unsteady by the uncertainty of the world.

May this knowledge and knowing, painfully attained, guide our actions going forward.

Throughout the TaNaKh, the wilderness – a difficult, uncharted, and isolating place, is also the sight of holy encounter; where Jacob wrestled with the angel, Elijah heard the still small voice through the whirlwind, and most famously Moses encountered God in a burning bush atop a desert mountain.

The second half of the year 5780 has felt like passing through a wilderness. Life has been hard, uncertain, and often lonely. We are more than ready for this year and its curses to end. But, like our ancient ancestors, our journey in the wilderness has included holy insights and profound revelations. As we move into this new year of 5781, and God willing, into a time of blessing, let us carry this wisdom with us, for it too is a blessing.

Tichleh Shana v'Kil-loteha. Tachel Shana u'Virchoteha.

May the year end and with it its curses. May the new year begin and bring with it, its blessings.