

Rosh Hashanah Day 2 5785: Sermon for the End of the World

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When faced with the end of the world, we could be cynical and despair. We could give up. We could abandon societal norms and expectations. But, more often than not, we are creative and courageous. We respond. We reinvent. We reimagine.

I'm calling this sermon, "Sermon for the End of the World", which I know is odd since we just celebrated the beginning yesterday. But, in truth, we're always wondering about the end: nuclear war, climate change, threats to democracy, life after Oct 7... What's it going to be? And how will we know, REALLY know, that the end is coming?

And it's not just the end of the world we worry about. We worry about:

- the end of our career
- the end of our marriage
- the end of our carefully curated reputation
- the end of our children's innocence
- the end of OUR innocence.

And we lament. We cry. We hide. We post inappropriate messages on social media which we then delete.

But, the fact remains, if you're sitting here today, then you have survived every one of your worst days. You have endured the end of the world. Several times over.

However, I would not fault you if since Oct 7 you've been a little more paranoid, a little more pessimistic, a little more hyper vigilant about the end of our people, the end of our security and safety, and the end of the American Jewish dream



Since October 7, many of us have felt a spike in existential fear. I feel it, as well. And, what is also true, if you look back at our history, is that the Jews have been experts in existential angst for quite some time. Truly, we are like the gold medalists in the Olympic sport of “enduring cataclysmic moments”, which is right next to “Breaking” and available to stream on ESPN4.

Seriously! Think back. How many times have our people experienced an *almost-end-of-the-world*? The Torah predicts our demise throughout the 5 books, in spite of God’s promises of protection. Most of our major holidays involve feasting or fasting because someone tried to kill us. Our Temple was destroyed, twice. We were enslaved. Exiled. Expelled.

- The Holocaust.
- The War of Independence.
- The 6 Day War.
- The Yom Kippur War.
- The 7th of October.

However, we survived.

How did we do it? What have Jews done over time that allows us to endure? Arguably, we have many responses - after all, we’re Jews. When have we ever agreed there is one way to do something?

What I want to look at today is not just the tools our ancestors used to meet a moment of existential crisis, but what choosing those particular Jewish tools say about who we are, were and continue to be. I want to look at 3 examples this morning (and there’s a text sheet that will help guide us through some of the material)

The first is a classic midrash that explores Adam (and Eve’s) response to the first nightfall in the Garden of Eden. A moment of crisis and existential dread that Adam chose to endure in very particular and Jewish ways.

The second example will look at the nature of Jewish hope - employing and deploying it as a tool of resolve, action and agency.

And the third example suggests, somewhat provocatively, that the best way to meet the “end” is to imagine an even GREATER ending. Hang in there, the finale is worth sticking around for.

Example 1: Adam and the Garden’s First Sunset

What do we do when we think the world is about to end? Let’s ask Adam.

Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 8a

ת"ר יום שנברא בו אדם הראשון כיון ששקעה עליו חמה אמר אוי לי שבשביל שסרחתי עולם חשוך בעדי ויחזור עולם לתוהו ובוהו וזו היא מיתה שנקנסה עלי מן השמים היה יושב בתענית ובוכה כל הלילה וחזה בוכה כנגדו כיון שעלה עמוד השחר אמר מנהגו של עולם הוא עמד והקריב שור שקרניו קודמין לפרסותיו שנאמר (תהלים סט, לב) ותיטב לה' משור פר מקרין מפריס

Translation B: **The Sages taught: On the day that Adam, the first man, was created, when the sun set upon him he said: Woe is me, as because I sinned, the world is becoming dark around me, and the world will return to the primordial state of chaos and disorder. And this is the death that was sentenced upon me from Heaven. Adam spent all night fasting and crying, and Eve was crying opposite him. Once dawn broke, he said: Evidently, the sun sets and night arrives, and this is the order of the world. He arose and sacrificed a bull to give thanks...**

So, if we want to follow Adam’s example, when we face the end of the world:

- We lament.
- We pray.
- We feel some amount of guilt and responsibility.
- We fast.
- We weep.
- We reach out to those by our side...and we endure the moment, together.

And then, when we realize we survived, that it was NOT the end, we offer thanks. And we concretize the moment with ritual - in Adam's case a sacrifice.

The rabbis who wrote this midrash retroactively placed their best rabbinic techniques onto our ancestors, Adam and Eve. They reified what worked for them (and what they imagined would continue to work for us down the line) by using the first human beings as model exemplars.

Many of these techniques are still helpful: Prayer, community, ritual...and we have used them over the years here in this sanctuary to endure moments when we thought it was the end: a new diagnosis, a loved one's demise, a rupture in the universe that we couldn't imagine would ever be healed.

However, I'm not sure how often we focus on the moments AFTER the end of the world doesn't arrive. This too is good Torah and worth mentioning. Nowadays, when we experience a moment of gratitude after having endured a life-threatening moment, we do not sacrifice a bull.

We *might* declare our gratitude aloud to family and friends. I can think of congregants who lived through near-death experiences during surgery or while traveling on the 405. And they'll let us know, "This awful thing happened...I thought it was all over, but then it wasn't." And almost always, we'll ask "Do you want to *bench gomel*?" And, usually, it gets the same confused expression that half of you now have on your faces. 😊

Birkat HaGomel, or, in Yiddish, *Benching Gomel*, is a rabbinic invention to concretize gratitude when one has stood on the precipice between life and death, between the world almost ending...and it not.

According to tradition: When you emerge after a long illness, when you've survived a voyage at sea, when you return home after a long journey, when you are released from



captivity...You come before your community, usually in front of an open Torah, usually within 3 days of realizing, “OMG, I'm still alive,” and you offer a blessing of thanks.

As Jewish as it is to fast and weep when we think the end is near, it's ALSO very Jewish to mark the moment when we realize we HAVEN'T died. When we admit we DID NOT have all the power to avoid terror or uncertainty - but we DO have enough power to name and celebrate that we have been given another chance.

As much as we want to focus on how to get *through the darkness*, Jewish wisdom would ask us ALSO to remember what we do when the light eventually breaks through.

Birkat HaGomel declares our gratitude and links it to the community of which we are a part. It reminds us and our loved ones that it is possible to emerge from the darkness and to be given a second chance.

Commenting on this midrash, the great writer Elie Wiesel (z'l) wrote: God gave Adam a secret—and that secret was not how to begin, but how to begin again.

This may be the way of the world: Endless cycles of thinking, “This is it,” only to find ourselves on the other side. *And on the other side*, the rabbis remind us, there are words to be said, to help us begin again. Not just on Rosh Hashanah, but on every day of the year.

Okay. **Example #2: Hope as a weapon.**

If Example #1 reminded of us of classic approaches to the end of the world, example #2 is going to show us the modern-day command to see hope as a motivating force that not only helps us endure the long, dark night, but also teaches us how to reclaim our agency and push back against the end with all the holy chutzpah we have been blessed to inherit.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory, wrote the following, drawing a sharp contrast between optimism and hope:

“What has happened is a failure to understand the difference between optimism and hope. They sound similar but they are quite different. Optimism is the belief that things will get better. Hope is the belief that, if we work hard enough, we can make things better. Between them lies all the difference in the world.

Optimism is a passive virtue, hope an active one. It needs no courage, only a certain naiveté, to be an optimist. It needs a great deal of courage to have hope. The prophets of Israel were not optimists. When everyone else felt secure, they saw the coming catastrophe. But every one of them was an agent of hope.” (Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z'l)

I love this quote. First, it reminds us that our actions matter. As Jews, we can believe in a God that has agency - some might even say “a plan” - but that belief does not preclude HUMAN agency and the capacity we have to respond and return a counter-offer when the world presents us with a possible end.

Second, the excerpt draws on our prophets not just because they were courageous enough to SAY what was uncomfortable for others to hear but because they also chose to SEE what was coming and then to declare the necessary next steps to avert disaster.

As Rebecca Solnit writes in her fabulous book, Hope in the Dark: The Untold History of People Power: **“People have always been good at imagining the end of the world, which is much easier to picture than the strange sidelong paths of change in a world without end.”**

The prophets could see a POSSIBLE end but they did not agree that it was a done deal. Perhaps, as Solnit writes, they could see or sense the strange paths of change that were built into the fabric of our world, and the endurance of the Jew, in spite of all the evidence presented.

And that makes our prophets different than more traditional or secular doomsday prophets who would declare “the end is near” and then exit the stage to await the finale.

Again, some of this really should be classified under Holy Chutzpah. What other group of people do YOU know that would give “notes” to their Creator, the Source of All, essentially saying, “I know this ending might be part of YOUR grand plan, but I have some thoughts on a rewrite?”

Think about how Jews traditionally deal with death. Instead of focusing on the end...which, I do want to note, is the one “end of the world” moment that is actually certain and inevitable...Instead of focusing on the end, we write an ethical will that gives guidance and wisdom to future generations and in turn inspires us not to *shrei gevalt* and drop in despair at the thought of our own mortality but instead to live our lives and make an impact while we still have time.

Writing an Ethical Will

The ethical will is a tradition with Jewish roots (the Hebrew word for an ethical will is zava'ah). The first ethical wills are found in the Bible, where Jacob is described gathering his children around his bedside to tell them how they should live after he is gone. The Apocrypha, Talmud, and medieval and modern Jewish literature all contain examples of ethical wills left by parents.

Besides serving to pass on one’s values, beliefs, and wishes, an ethical will can also benefit the people who write one. By articulating what you value most in life, reflecting on your personal experiences, and thinking about the decisions you’ve made, you can learn more about yourself. In this way, an ethical will can be used as a tool for self-reflection and, if you’re so inclined, self-improvement. (Sinai Chapel, website excerpt)

I want to thank Sinai Memorial Chapel (in Northern California) *for that last line in particular*. How incredible is that? While you’re thinking about the generations to come



and preparing to take responsibility for them even after you're gone, you're also creating a moment for individual *teshuvah*: For recalibration and return.

Once again, when faced with our certain demise, we choose to live more intentionally and proactively. To become the best version of ourselves and to become that version sooner in light of our limitations.

Okay. Last example - the one I think is most provocative – an example which could also be called:

“What? You think THAT’S an ending?! Give me a minute. I’ll show you a REALending.”

But before I show you that...I want to tee this up with one of my favorite quotes from the author Emily St. John Mandel who wrote Sea of Tranquility.

“—and my point is, there's always something. I think, as a species, we have a desire to believe that we're living at the climax of the story. It's a kind of narcissism. We want to believe that we're uniquely important, that we're living at the end of history, that now, after all these millennia of false alarms, now is finally the worst that it's ever been, that finally we have reached the end of the world.”

“But all of this raises an interesting question,” Olive said. “What if it *always* is the end of the world?”

She paused for effect. Before her, the holographic audience was almost perfectly still. “Because we might reasonably think of the end of the world,” Olive said, “as a continuous and never-ending process.” (Emily St. John Mandel, Sea of Tranquility)

First, how great is this quote? We’re being asked to keep our egos in check and really look at the world and our history of claiming “Okay, NOW is the moment when it definitely ends.”



But rather than say, “Oops, we called it wrong...again,” the author surprises us with a radical proposition: What if it’s ALWAYS the end? What if the nature of our lives and our world is that it is always, continuously, almost-certainly, ending?

And if that thought doesn't break your brain, here’s a Jewish response, which feels equally bonkers: We talk about the Messiah, the savior of the world, as being on their way. Not here yet...but definitely en route.

“So, hold on,” we say to one another. **For as certain as we are that we live in a world that is constantly on the brink of destruction, we also are CERTAIN that we live in a world that is constantly on the brink of repair.**

i.e. You want an ending?! I’ll give you an ending like you’ve never seen before.

Perhaps this is the necessary counterbalance of faith to uncertainty. Yes, the world is fragile and spiraling towards destruction, but it’s also almost, but not quite yet, healed.

Holy. Chutzpah.

As my colleague Rabbi Matt Shapiro wrote in his sermon *Dream Bigger*: **“Messianism, the belief in and desire for a savior who brings about a new stage of history, doesn’t come out of a vacuum. It usually blooms most fully in a time of crisis or pain, and articulates the dreams of people who hope for something more, something better.”**

When faced with the end of the world, we could be cynical and despair. We could give up. We could abandon societal norms and expectations...but, more often than not, we are creative and courageous. We respond. We reinvent. We reimagine.

We use gratitude and hope as tools to shape our actions and intentions.



We see what others are afraid to acknowledge and rather than shrink in fear we rise up with faith.

We teach ourselves that when a dream has been shattered, it's time to dream a bigger dream.

Listen, I know there's a lot of evidence pointing to the end of the world...but there's more evidence that it's not. Especially, today, as we begin the New Year, what better proof could we have than to say: **We're still here.**

In this constantly ending, but not yet over, world in which we live: We're still here.

Shana Tova.

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