



Rabbi Scott Goldberg

The World As It Could Be

Rosh Hashanah Morning Main Sanctuary Service 5786 - September 23, 2025

Shana tova.

Within the first few weeks of my infant son Julian's life, I took on an important task in our new household of three: I was responsible for handling one of his daily feedings... at 2:30... in the morning.

All joking aside, our 2:30-in-the-morning feeding sessions were quite **peaceful**. Although I had never been more exhausted, night after night I witnessed a never-before sense of calm. No traffic buzzing along the 405. No afternoon leafblowers. No breaking news alerts pushed to my phone. We knew that food filled our refrigerator and freezer, and Julian had books galore, with deep thanks to our community. Once I remember experiencing a full moon shining directly in our living room. Those feedings were indeed peaceful in the truest sense of the word.

Our ancient rabbis revel in attempting to make sense of peace, perhaps because they do not experience much of it in their time. The world that they know? War, expulsion, political and economic instability. They often yearn for safety, authority, and independence... They call their world by a special name in Hebrew: ***olam hazeh***, meaning "this world." For the rabbis to survive in *olam hazeh*, this world, is a harrowing task.

However, our sages are captivated by even the semblance of peace, so much so that in their compendium of literature they depict an additional "world" beyond their corrupt and fractured one. The world they dream of? They dub it ***olam habah***, "the world to come," or "the world as it could be." They teach: "more precious is one hour of peace in *olam haba*, the world to come, than all the life in *olam hazeh*, all the life in this world."¹ Our ancestors yearn for *olam habah*, a world rid of pain, rid of difficulty, rid of hunger and strife... but, you see, one can only ascend to *olam haba* after their earthly life. That may be why the religious cosmological notion of heaven derives from the rabbinic understanding of *olam habah*. The rabbis do tell stories of individuals ascending to this oasis... but, well, they are only stories. No one ever reaches *olam habah* during their lifetime.

Nevertheless, Rebbe Tarfon of the Mishnah has instructed us over the past 1,800 years: "You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to refrain from it."² **We are obligated to try to make *olam hazeh*, this world, more like *olam habah*, a more perfect, just,**

¹ Pirkei Avot 4:17

² Pirkei Avot 2:16

and righteous world, even if we feel like *olam hazeh* reduces us to helplessness and numbness.

Those middle-of-the-night feeding sessions felt peaceful, as if I was granted one taste of *olam haba*, a truly perfect world. But simply tasting *olam habah* made me feel sick to my stomach... because as I experienced peace, I understood that there was an *olam hazeh* out there. There was a real world out there, in which I lived, and I knew just how much pain resided within it.

Outside our apartments, our homes, our city, our country, and our world... **this world is not peaceful.** From our literal doorsteps to far corners of this earth, crisis reigns supreme:

- The horrific challenges that are occurring in Israel and Gaza to this day, as Rabbi Chasen spoke about last night, that painfully continue.
- For many, our American society is falling short of its promise. Our economic, education, immigration, and healthcare systems are broken, and there is no end in sight.
- Climate disasters, including fires in the Palisades and Altadena, have destroyed homes and turned lives upside down. When so many of us are suffering from such devastation, we are all a part of that struggle as a community who lifts up one another... and it's still painful.
- And to be publicly Jewish is at best worrisome, and at worst tragic, after a year of antisemitic violence in Jewish institutions around the globe in proportions unprecedented during most of our lifetimes.

And so, I cannot help but reflect on those perfect middle-of-the-night feeding sessions because they also make me feel **helpless**. Not because the perils in our society are too much for any individual to hold--it is our duty to hold them, and we must. Rather, it is because I feel as though I am not doing enough to remedy them. **And my sense is that many of us here in this room feel this way, too.**

I cannot count on my two hands the number of conversations I have had this past year during which I have heard something akin to: "I protest, I vote, I donate, I sign petitions, I volunteer, I write to my senators and congresspeople... but nothing happens. Everything seems to be getting worse. I don't know what to do." And that's not to mention personal tragedies--losing a home, grieving the death of a loved one, going through treatment, the difficulties of caregiving for a beloved, something else... No matter, I hear you say: "Nothing changes, and I am exhausted." And so, in this space today, I know feelings of helplessness linger, that you believe your actions ripple with little-to-no effect, leaving society untouched.

If it's any consolation, we are not alone in our helplessness. **It is precisely helplessness which colors our collective Jewish story**, ever since the very first Rosh Hashanah in our people's history. In his work *Mr. g*, physicist and professor of humanities at The Massachusetts Institute of

Technology Alan Lightman narrates the story of the creation of the universe, perfect for light reading on Rosh Hashanah. Lightman tells this tale not from the third-person perspective, as our Torah does, but from the point of view of God. Writes Lightman, in God's voice: "My universe had come into being! It was tiny at first, but beautiful, a lovely little sphere. Its surfaces were smooth and silky, yet infinitely strong. It glistened. It spun slightly. And it vibrated with energy."³

But among the first words of Torah, just before Lightman's description occurs, we learn that it's not all perfect: "the earth was *tohu vavohu*, formless and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep."⁴ The creation of all things good *only* exists after chaos and emptiness, a sort of cosmic helplessness before order and light emerge. And to think: after six days of creating the earth, the sky and the seas, the sun, moon, and stars, plants, animals, and humanity... even God cannot keep going on the seventh day. God is fatigued. God cannot create any more goodness, despite trying. If God can feel spent and tired and helpless, it makes sense that we can, too.

While a small dose of helplessness can be humbling, too much can be paralyzing. I overheard one particular conversation this summer that went like this:

- It's a great time to be an Angeleno!⁵
- No, it's a great time to be an American!
- Come on, it's a great time to live on this planet!
- [Sigh] Yeah... in all seriousness, I've decided I'm not reading the news anymore.

When the troubles facing humankind seem overwhelming, as they did this past year, and still do, one common impulse is to shut off and turn away. Many Americans are now publicly dissociating and disconnecting from such brokenness. Some case studies: our country's major news outlets, including The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal, among others, have begun publishing the name of the most-clicked article from the prior day's publications. So... what did Americans choose to have on their minds this year?:

- The day after a spread highlighted the intense fear and uncertainty this summer for Latinos due to immigration raids, Americans instead clicked the most on an article entitled: "The Story Behind Brazil's Viral Beatboxing Nuns."⁶
- And, during a critical lull in the Israel-Hamas War, instead of Americans clicking most on a feature entitled, "Israel Wants to Resume Truce Talks With Hamas Soon," they chose to click on "THE 100 BEST MOVIES OF THE 21st CENTURY."⁷

³ Lightman, A. P. (2012). *Mr g: a novel about the creation*. Pantheon Books.

⁴ Cf. Genesis 1:2

⁵ Names hidden for anonymity

⁶ June 30, 2025, *The New York Times*

⁷ July 3, 2025, *The New York Times*

- After readers were alerted that flooding in Texas claimed over 100 lives, including scores of campers and staff members from Camp Mystic, the most popular read from the day, alternatively, was: “Here Are the 120+ Best Amazon Prime Day Deals.”⁸
- And, lastly: after a shooter opened fire at Annunciation Catholic Church in Minneapolis one month ago, what did Americans click instead? “Taylor Swift’s Engagement Ring Marks a Return to Vintage Elegance.”⁹

Though these articles may seem rather frivolous within the context of this past year, they actually provide the kind of information that remains digestible for consumption during challenging times. Too much hardship becomes a kind of white noise to our souls, and we turn toward those things we are confident we can take in. Overwhelmed by everything happening around us in real-time, we cannot even bear to witness our own helplessness, and so we shut down from what is actually happening “out there.” **We turn numb.**

After the Babylonian empire destroyed the First Temple and the entire city of Jerusalem over 2,500 years ago, the prophet Jeremiah wails, “My eyes are spent with tears, my heart is in tumult, my being melts away [...]”¹⁰ Jeremiah has no room left for tears. He dissociates and pours out until nothing endures except avoidance. His whole being melts away.

What happens when helplessness takes over, *we* become numb to the pains of society? What happens?

In the mid-1960s, psychologist Martin Seligman experimentally discovered what happens when animals are repeatedly exposed to unpleasant stimuli that they cannot escape: they stop *trying* to escape. Instead, they lie down and accept the next shock without attempting to flee, in spite of the fact that they are given opportunities to jump over a barrier to safety.¹¹ Seligman and his team coined this condition “**learned helplessness**,” an illustration of how the brain internalizes powerlessness so deeply that it fails to recognize new opportunities for change. In more recent years, cognitive neuroscience has traced learned helplessness to specific brain circuits, affecting our ability to perceive control and act on it.¹² To translate, that’s neuroscientific and psychological speak for surrender: our hearts and minds cannot bear any more pain, yet our souls feel like they need to scream.

⁸ July 11, 2025, *The New York Times*

⁹ August 26, 2025, *The New York Times*

¹⁰ Lamentations 2:11

¹¹ Seligman ME (1972). “Learned helplessness”. *Annual Review of Medicine*. 23 (1): 407–412.

¹² Geffen, I (2025). “Neuroscience has a name for the way so many Jews are feeling today: learned helplessness,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*.

So... how might we remedy, observe, or even acknowledge agony, when we may feel more drawn to simply look away? This year, **how might we reinforce our agency and reverse the effects of learned helplessness?**

Judaism offers a framework as to how we can free ourselves from learned helplessness. The dichotomy between *olam hazeh* and *olam habah* exists only in rabbinic literature, not in our sacred Torah. Why? The Vilna Gaon posits: **in the eyes of God, participating in *olam hazeh* is more important than worrying about *olam habah*.**¹³ This doesn't mean we are required to act on every heartbreaking event... however, if we constantly exist in states of woeful ignorance and helplessness, then we certainly cannot begin to meaningfully participate in building *olam habah*, the world as it could be. Rebbe Ya'akov confirms this in Pirkei Avot, dated almost 2,000 years ago. He teaches: more precious is one hour spent doing good deeds in *olam hazeh*, than all the life in *olam habah*.¹⁴ Even if it's just one hour of good deeds this year, we must try.

When it comes to battling learned helplessness, this Jewish response is echoed by contemporary neuroscience findings. When a human being is helpless to the point of numbness, researchers have now identified that their brain has cemented an understanding that it cannot make a difference. But, that mechanism in one's brain, the one that tells us we can make a difference can be relearned.¹⁵

How?

First, the data suggest that **small interventions make a significant impact.**¹⁶ When we increase our locus of control, our brain literally rewires and reframes how we interpret events... not as unchangeable fate, but as temporary and specific challenges within our capacity to influence.¹⁷ And when we surround ourselves with actionable change-making opportunities in addition to reading about or watching global adversity unfold, we embody what Seligman later calls *learned optimism*, a habit of mind that can be cultivated through disciplined and mindful practice of alternative narratives. These opportunities might look different for each one of us: whether it's volunteering with a particular population, cleaning litter or planting trees, helping rescued animals, using one's talents for good... In Jewish terms, this is like remembering that each one of us, every human being in our city, country, and planet, is endowed with the divine spark of agency, still when despair whispers otherwise, and it is our duty to understand that we have a

¹³ Editors of the Jewish Vues (2025). "OLAM HAZEHS VS. OLAM HABAH?" *The Jewish Vues*. Retrieved August 15, 2025, from <https://jewishvues.com/articles/olam-hazeh-vs-olam-haba/>.

¹⁴ Cf. Avot 4:16-17

¹⁵ Baratta MV, Seligman MEP, Maier SF (2023). "From helplessness to controllability: toward a neuroscience of resilience." *Front Psychiatry*.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Aggeler, M (2024). "How did 'learned helplessness' become commonly used to describe US voters?" *The Guardian*. Retrieved September 1, 2025, from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2024/sep/22/voters-learned-hopelessness-helplessness-democrats-trump>.

voice, we have agency, and we have capacities and capabilities meant for others in need. When we embrace our agency, we begin to embody *learned optimism*.¹⁸

Second, **one of the most potent antidotes to learned helplessness is building community**.¹⁹ Associate professor of health management and policy at Drexel University Sandra Bloom, who also serves as the co-founder of the Center for Nonviolence and Social Justice, teaches that when we feel alone in our struggles, our feelings of helplessness deepen. For this reason she recommends digging deeper into community-driven work, whether attending protests, inviting a fellow community member to join you in collecting Judaica items for families who lost theirs in the fires, participating in get-out-the-vote initiatives, or providing clothing or food items for those in greatest need--even if feelings of helplessness remain--because community-driven work is critical to rendering our souls sturdier and more resilient.

Contemporary Jewish-American scholar, poet, and liturgist Marcia Falk offers a beautiful rendering of the traditional imagery of the *unetane tokef* we find in our High Holyday prayer books, which expresses how living today can sometimes feel too much to bear. Writes Falk: “We begin in earth and we end in earth. We spend our lives earning our bread. We are like broken vessels, dry grass, withering blossoms, passing shadows, vanishing clouds, drifting wind, scattering dust, a fleeting dream.”²⁰

We are but broken vessels, withering blossoms, attempting to stay afloat amidst the crises in *olam hazeh*, this world.

At times I yearn for those 2:30am feeding sessions with Julian... certainly not the sleep deprivation... but those few moments where I envisage *olam habah*, the world as it could be: one of peace, and safety, and justice, and health of ourselves, of the Jewish people, of all people, and of our holy planet.

In the year 5786, may we shift any learned helplessness just a bit closer toward learned optimism, and may this new year bestow such bountiful blessings.

Shana tova.

¹⁸ Based on the teachings of 16 c. Kabbalist R. Isaac Luria, Ha”Ari

¹⁹ Aggeler, M (2024). “How did ‘learned helplessness’ become commonly used to describe US voters?” *The Guardian*. Retrieved September 1, 2025, from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2024/sep/22/voters-learned-hopelessness-helplessness-democrats-trump>.

²⁰ Falk, M (2014). “Un’taneh Tokef,” *The Days Between, Blessings Poems and Directions of the Heart for the Jewish High Holiday Season*, Brandeis University Press, 2014