

Rabbi Scott Goldberg

Good Things Come to Those Who Wait

Rosh Hashanah Morning Main Sanctuary Service 5783 - September 26, 2022

One of the great benefits of transitioning from a Leo Baeck Temple Rabbinic Intern to a Leo Baeck Temple rabbi is that, come June of 2022, when all my rabbinical school classmates, now colleagues, packed their bags and moving trucks and flew to Seattle, New York, Miami, Kansas City, Toronto, and thirty other amazing communities to begin their lives anew... Liz and I remained here in Los Angeles, in our home.

We have been living in our apartment for about a year and a half. We're home-bodies, it's been the perfect place for us. The inside feels charming and homey, filled with photos of family and friends, an entire corner dedicated to my musical instruments, and maybe one too many houseplant. The location is unbeatable: a ten-minute walk to the superb restaurants of downtown Culver City, and a ten-minute walk to the quaint streets of Beverlywood. Our large windows have been invaluable throughout the past year: we rarely run the air-conditioning or the heat because the cross-breeze makes us feel like we're at the ocean.

We are blessed. We are grateful to be in our home. We are elated to be here in Los Angeles. We are even more grateful to continue being part of our Leo Baeck Temple community. For all these reasons, Liz and I say: *dayenu*--if we had any one of these blessings, it would be enough.

One evening this summer while I was resting by our giant, open windows, enjoying the brisk wind at golden hour, I heard someone walking the sidewalk that intersects the entrance to our apartment: She was on the phone--she said: "I waited, and I waited, and I finally started this business during COVID. And while I was waiting, I was panicking!"

I wonder if the English proverb applies here: "good things come to those who wait."

In recent months, I have started thinking about how challenging it is to make decisions in our daily lives. If the past few years have taught us nothing else, we now know more certainly than ever before that, apart from death and taxes, we have *no idea* what is going to happen next.

Some days I keep in mind our aforementioned proverb: "good things come to those who wait." Other days I sign my emails with a short phrase: "can't wait." And it's true--sometimes I feel like I just cannot wait any longer.

How might we reconcile with the fact that our futures are uncertain? That this coming year of 5783, we do not know how the Book of Life is going to read for us?

Living with uncertainty is part of everyday life: from not knowing whether you are going to be accepted at your top college, land that dream job, have that date text you back, hear back from your doctor... Life is uncertain. Being able to live amidst uncertainty is inextricably, and routinely, linked to the human experience.

So in this way, it's fair to say we have always been living in uncertain times. We can never tell the future.

However, I want to propose that perhaps this past year feels different. This past year has offered us a healthy reminder that we are living in a world full of *prolonged* uncertainty. And not merely prolonged--it's heavy, too:

- Russia invading Ukraine feels unreal. It feels ancient and barbaric, and apocalyptic, all at the same time. There are still injuries, deaths, and over ten million refugees to this day.
- Mass shootings continue to terrorize this country. The elementary school shooting in Uvalde, Texas was particularly cruel and awful, but words are never enough.
- And, no matter how we feel about COVID-19, even though caseloads are the lowest they've been in months, there is a giant elephant in the room: we are still wearing masks. And that can feel strange, because the masking rules are different everywhere we go.

Dayeinu- it's enough.

We may be walking around with heavy hearts; we may feel beaten down or that the ground underneath our feet is unstable. And it makes sense. Our political, economic, and environmental fates may feel like they are at a tipping point. And indeed they may be! We simply do not know. And if so, we do not know when.

Some days, I am exhausted. Some days, I know you are, too.

We, who are subject to the relentless 24-hour news cycle, surely do not need yet another indication that uncertainty reigns supreme over us. Unfortunately, Rosh Hashanah only comes once per year, and the day's liturgy offers a reminder that we cannot avoid. We actually recited these words a few moments ago:

“On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed: [...] who will live and who will die? Who will be calm, and who will be tormented? Who will be rich, and who will be poor?”¹

And it's true. We made it through this past year, but not without challenge. And this year, as we dip our apples into our honey, we will hold in our hearts the notion that we have no idea what the

¹ *Unetane Tokef*, HHD Liturgy

future will bring: who among us will prosper and who will suffer... who will become sick, who will heal... who will live, and who will die.

Life is uncertain--especially now--and sometimes it's difficult to confront.

Our tradition teaches that we ought not "be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief," but I imagine that our tradition teaches this *precisely* because of how *hard* it is to remain undaunted, especially when we cannot see our suffering coming.²

This feeling, this experience of not knowing what is going to happen next, is as scary and fatiguing and anxiety-producing for me as it is for you and your family members and friends.

In this past year, what were the sudden, surprise moments that wounded *your* spirit? How did you move through them? In this next year, how might we cope with these feelings of fear, fatigue, anxiety, or really anything else, amidst uncertainty?

There are many responses that can help us move through these feelings. Some ways that come to mind:

- We can name the feeling that we are experiencing
- We can connect with others, for a walk, for a phone call, a cup of coffee
- We can engage in mindfulness exercises and intentional breathing
- We can keep healthy to the best of our abilities and get outdoors
- And American professor Brene' Brown offers an intriguing mechanism: "calm is contagious."³ Our "calm" can not only soothe us... it can also soothe others *around* us.

I plan to maintain a running list as our new year, 5783, unfolds – and I invite you to contribute your own methods as well.

There is one approach about how to cope with these feelings that I have not yet seen in contemporary literature, but which Judaism has lauded over time:

That approach? **Wait.**

Pause.

Sit with them.

Take a moment.

² *Wisdom of the Jewish Sages: A Modern Reading of Pirke Avot*, Rabbi Rami Shapiro, 1995

³ *Anxiety, Calm, and Over-/Under-Functioning*, Brene' Brown, 2022

And just wait.

Our Torah starts teaching us the power of waiting from its very beginning. Rosh Hashanah celebrates the creation of the world. After God forms the world, we know it is imperfect: we see greed, violence, corruption. And so, God decides to flood the entire land and all its inhabitants, but not without instructing Noah to build an ark and enter with his family and animals of varying species so that they may remain safe. They dwell inside for five months until the water completely drains from the Earth.

Our earliest rabbis taught that right before God says to Noah, “Come out of the ark,”⁴ Noah thinks: “Well, since I first only entered the ark with permission from God, may I then leave the ark without permission from God?” God then says to Noah: “Are you seeking permission to leave the ark? In that case, I grant you permission to leave the ark.”⁵

When I picture that exchange, I imagine Noah feeling scared, exhausted after all he has been through. He had been told to leave his home. He had experienced the annihilation of the world. He must have been terrified to return back to Earth. I can totally understand why he cannot seem to make a decision right away, why he seeks permission to move forward. I get why he wants more time. And so, Noah waits.

Like Noah’s waiting, the type of waiting *we* are currently experiencing is ambiguous: we may not know why we are waiting, or for what we are waiting, and we definitely do not know for how long.

But an unpredictable world does not necessarily mean a grim one, and sometimes, the world becomes less grim while we wait: With COVID-19 vaccinations, boosters, and widely-accessible second boosters, there is now a lower, *significantly* lower rate of hospitalization and death. And only last month, our country took long-needed action to confront key issues such as inflation, widespread healthcare, and climate change.

Of course, waiting does not engender change. And there is a lot more work to do as well. But, for our psyches, we must remember that good things can come our way in uncertain times, too. We know this from experience.

⁴ Genesis 8:16, all translations based on JPS 1985

⁵ *A Word of Torah: The Courage to Live with Uncertainty*, Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, 2015. The Midrash comes from Midrash Yelamdenu as seen in *Buber’s Tanhuma*, published in 1885.

Does our waiting actually help us trudge through uncertainty? Can it help us make peace? Can it help us make change? How might our waiting embolden us to look past uncertainty toward the future that we desire?

For forty years, the Israelites traverse the Sinai desert before they are allowed to enter the Promised Land. No, our ancestors do not embark upon a forty-year road trip for fun. They do not wait forty years by accident, either. They do so because God commands that the generation who departs Egypt necessarily must perish before the following generation can enter the Holy Land.⁶ They do so because God commands them to wait. So waiting – and the wisdom and readiness it produces – is in our collective DNA. It is, in fact, our defining story as a people.

Our biblical ancestors experience forty Rosh Hashanahs while waiting, forty years before they can enter the Promised Land. During that time, they go hungry, they complain, they are upset. They struggle with leadership, mistrust one another, ask questions, and seek creative solutions. They dance, sing, and grieve, all at the same time, all knowing that they must wait before entering the Promised Land.

Year after year, they wait. And year after year, while they wait, they continue to live.

We can do this, too.

While *we* wait, we are going to experience all of it: some of us will get rich, some of us will find rest, and some of us will wander. Some of us will suffer, some of us will experience harmony, and some of us will grieve.⁷ And so, too, will our waiting -- and all the living we do during it -- help us to understand, and prepare us to act.

So it was for Noah after the flood – and so it is for us. You see, there was one of our ancient sages, Judah bar Ilai, who said, “‘If I had been in Noah’s shoes, [I would not not have asked permission from God to leave the ark; rather] I would have smashed down the doors of that ark and taken myself out of it.’”⁸

Noah had already waited quite a long time. Maybe Judah bar Ilai was right; maybe Noah’s waiting left him ready to take the next steps in his life.

The waiting we do through times of uncertainty is not just idle paralysis. Waiting is what ultimately produces the clarity to walk ahead purposefully in our lives.

⁶ Numbers 14:29-33

⁷ *Unetane Tokef*, HHD Liturgy

⁸ *A Word of Torah: The Courage to Live with Uncertainty*, Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, 2015

Noah waited. He felt it all. And it enabled him to take those important first steps off that ark.

You and I - we have been waiting. Sometimes, it feels like Noah's five months on the ark. And sometimes, it feels like the Israelites' forty years in the wilderness.

In our waiting, we, too, have felt it all. The fear. The anxiety. The confusion. It is normal *not* to feel normal when living in radical uncertainty. But as Judah bar Ilai taught, there will come that time when you can feel your permission – to break down the doors of your own ark and move forward, whatever that means for you: You can sense the permission to feel hopeful. The permission to cry. The permission to learn, grow, laugh and share. And if you'd like to do all of that while sharing in the gift of community this year, guess what – you can join a Leo Baeck Temple *Bubble Up* group. Just tell me you are ready to break down the doors and step in with us, and we will look forward to welcoming you with open arms and open hearts.

Life is uncertain--especially now--and sometimes it's difficult to confront.

But as biblical scholar Ellen Frankel teaches “[j]ust as God once created a new world out of the void, so too can we reshape our world to renew that creation.”⁹

During this Rosh Hashanah, and the entirety of our new year of 5783, I pray:

- May we accept that our fates are undetermined,
- May we know within ourselves that however we feel about it is valid, and
- May we continue to reshape our world to renew creation.

The Torah of our lives is a tree of life: there are blessings all around us, and they are ours unto which we can hold fast. We have the permission to open our hearts and receive them. *Dayeinu*—they are all ours.

In this new year, may good things... abundant good things... come to we who wait.

⁹ *The Five Books of Miriam*, Ellen Frankel, 1996