

Rabbi Scott Goldberg

What's Good?

Main Sanctuary Rosh Hashanah Morning Service 5787

Shana tova!

I'm not sure whether you remember... but you and I spoke a few months ago. It's nice to see you again.

I know, I know, forgive me, it's strange that you and I are having this conversation here right now, but I've got to get something off my chest. When we got together a few months ago, you greeted me with a question that caught me off guard:

"What's good?"

Now. If you're like me and tend to overanalyze:

- "How are you?" invites a polite but not-especially-candid summary of how I am feeling in that particular moment
- "What's new?" asks for recent life updates, but not too deep, because we don't have much time.

But *what's good?*

I suppose I answered quickly, too much like "I'm doing well, how are you doing today?" But in the days, weeks, and truly months that followed, your question lingered. It lingered because I realized I am not very well practiced at answering "What's good?" I am much better practiced at noticing what is... not so good.

Perhaps you might be, too, because, well, there is sadly plenty to notice:

- War and hardship exist across the globe, in the Middle East, and right here, at a scale that defies comprehension.
- Our country is fractured by corruption and division, where hatred in the political sphere has become ordinary, and minority communities, including Jews, carry real vulnerability.
- And our planet is at an environmental precipice, with unprecedented heat, flooding, and the worst wildfires of modernity.

It's more than enough. But you know that. We are fluent in that which is awful. It flows so naturally throughout our discourse that we need not even try, as if we unknowingly live the

opening verses of Torah, our creation narrative, which some Jewish communities in fact choose to recite this very morning as an alternative Torah reading to the Binding of Isaac.

“V’ha’aretz hayta tohu vavohu,” Torah teaches, “When God was creating the heavens and the earth, the earth was amorphous and formless, with darkness over the surface of the deep [...].”¹ Amorphous? Darkness? Chaos? That’s not good.

But you see, Rosh Hashanah is all about noticing the good.

- After God creates that unformed and dark world, God goes on to create light, and the skies and the seas, the land, sun, moon, and stars, animals and humanity. After each act of creation: “*vayar Elohim ki tov*, God saw that it was good.”² God, as it were, notices goodness *even* when there is chaos.
- And, the Shofar service liturgy this morning sings out “*hayom harat olam!*”³ Today, the world is born! After all, it’s the birthday of the world... Happy birthday, world!” Don’t you think we are supposed to celebrate today?

When you asked me *what’s good?*, I thought about it for a long time. I realized I hesitated that day, certainly not because *nothing* is good, but because, of course, I may simply be out of practice noticing it.

Tell me, what do you think of this: what if we understood today, Rosh Hashanah, as the beginning of a new year to see *what’s good?* To take stock in what is still whole and still good, all while holding the brokenness that we hold so naturally and, in this troubled time, so understandably?

In a way, that’s exactly what Judaism has *always* asked us to do. Talmud teaches that a Jew should offer one hundred blessings every day. One hundred. The rabbis arrive at this custom because they’re interpreting a verse from Torah, which says: “And now, People Israel, **what** does Adonai, your God, demand of you?” The rabbis notice that the Hebrew word *mah*, “what,” differs by only a single letter from the Hebrew word *me’ah*, “one hundred,” and instead they read the verse: “God demands you to offer one hundred blessings each day.”

Neither of us needs spiritual training to notice what is frightening, broken, unfair, painful, or missing. Noticing what is broken comes naturally. Noticing what is good... that takes practice. Maybe this is why the rabbis teach: offer one hundred blessings in a day, because otherwise we might just miss those blessings:

- That beautiful meal before you.
- A sweet fragrance drifting through the air.

¹ Genesis 1:1-2

² Genesis 1:12, etc.

³ Rosh Hashanah morning liturgy

- The gift of waking up.
- The miracle of a body that, however imperfectly, still carries you through the world.
- After all that rain on Sunday and Monday, the sight of that brilliant rainbow on Monday afternoon.

The rabbis seem to have anticipated this core finding of contemporary positive psychology nearly two millennia ago: when you and I pay attention to moments of joy, gratitude, meaning, or connection, we become more capable of noticing them in the future.⁴ Were the rabbis taking God's call in Genesis and turning it into a human discipline? If God pauses to notice what is good in an unfinished world, perhaps we are meant to do the same with one hundred blessings: to train our souls to recognize that even in a world that *is* unformed and chaotic, maybe there is still goodness worth noticing.

So, forgive me, I am certainly responding to your question a bit late. But, *what's good* this year? Here is what comes to mind:

What's good in our world of medicine and global health? Scientists have developed a series of breakthroughs in CRISPR gene-editing technology. Just this year, NIH-funded researchers developed a dramatically smaller CRISPR system, compact enough to be delivered directly into the human body, with astonishing precision and effectiveness, with expanded treatment possibilities for cancer and ALS patients.⁵

What's good for the planet we inhabit? I don't think we should gloss over the fact that, this summer, renewable energy sources including solar, wind, and hydro globally produced more electricity than coal.⁶ After more than one century of fossil-fuel dominance, technological innovation and community advocacy have shifted that balance. Humanity is fulfilling Torah's call to *l'ovdah u'l'shomrah*, to till and tend to our holy earth.

What's good in a world fractured by violence and grief? Palestinian Muslim Aziz Abu Sarah and Jewish Israeli Maoz Inon co-wrote a groundbreaking work this year, *The Future Is Peace*. Abu Sarah's brother died in an Israeli prison, and Hamas murdered Inon's parents on October

⁴ The New York Times. (Published Aug. 19, 2024. Updated Sept. 5, 2024) "How to Strengthen Your Happiness Muscle."
https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/19/well/mind/happiness-emotions-reward-sensitivity.html?campaign_id=9&emc=edit_nn_20260907&instance_id=181549&nl=the-morning®i_id=80047678&segment_id=226129&user_id=1c7e2aba5bcb2a5e27e0f238af09b670

⁵ National Institutes of Health. (2026, April 13). NIH-funded breakthrough shrinks CRISPR for precision delivery in the body.

<https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/nih-funded-breakthrough-shrinks-crispr-precision-delivery-body>

⁶ Pew Charitable Trusts. (2026, July 14). Renewable energy sets global record.

<https://www.pew.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2026/07/14/renewable-energy-sets-global-record>

7th.^{7 8} For many, understandably, such devastation would harden the heart, or worse, justify hatred. For them, however, their grief became the groundwork for friendship, then activism, and ultimately a shared vision of peace. They now spend their lives building bridges across division, bringing together Jews, Muslims, and Christians into relationship and dialogue with one another. And what I find especially good is that Leo Baeck Temple won't encounter their vision only through a book. Just a few weeks from now, on Friday night, October 9th, our congregation will sit with two members of the Parents Circle Families Forum: Maayan Inon, the author Maoz's sister, whose parents were murdered on October 7th, and Sima Awad, a Palestinian whose brother was killed by an Israeli soldier when she was only 3 years old. Like Aziz and Maoz, Sima and Maayan, too, have chosen reconciliation over despair, and in a few weeks, you and I both will have the chance to hear their response to the question, "What's good?," which is, even amid profound tragedy, they all teach that there is still room for, *shalom*, *salaam*, peace.

What's good for our souls? Do you remember when NASA launched Artemis II? There was the iconic photograph the astronauts snapped--the blue-green aurora borealis glowing around the north and south poles, the lunar eclipse, and the phenomenon of zodiacal light whereby sunlight reflects off the interplanetary dust around the earth's atmosphere... You could see Venus, too.⁹

Well, the four astronauts boarded Orion and traveled more than 250,000 miles, farther from Earth than any humans have traveled before.

There was one moment during their journey whereby the spacecraft would fly behind the moon, and they'd lose all communication. Radio signals can't travel through the moon's mass, of course. But just before that radio silence, astronaut Victor Glover spoke to Mission Control. He also spoke to every human being on Earth, including you and me: "[A]s we get close to the nearest point to the Moon and the farthest point from Earth and continue to unlock the mysteries of the cosmos," spoke Glover, "I would like to remind you of one of the most important mysteries on Earth, and that's love." He then brings a teaching rooted in Judaism. One of the greatest commandments is, Glover says: "to love your neighbor as yourself. And so, as we prepare to go out of radio communication, we're still going to feel your love from Earth. And to all of you down on Earth and around Earth, we love you, from the Moon."¹⁰

"Houston copies. We'll see you on the other side."

⁷ Silow-Carroll, A. (2026, April 17). These Israeli-Palestinian "brothers" are preaching peace. Can their message make a difference? Jewish Telegraphic Agency. <https://www.jta.org/2026/04/17/ideas/these-israeli-palestinian-brothers-are-preaching-peace-can-their-message-make-a-difference>

⁸ Jewish Book Council. (2026). The future is peace: A shared journey across the Holy Land. <https://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/book/the-future-is-peace-a-shared-journey-across-the-holy-land>

⁹ Doermann, L. (2026, June 4). A moonlit Earth as seen from Artemis II. NASA Earth Observatory. <https://science.nasa.gov/earth/earth-observatory/a-moonlit-earth-as-seen-from-artemis-ii/>

¹⁰ cf. Leviticus 19:18

Glover has trained his entire life to push the limits of what it means to be human. He was the first in his family to graduate college, went on to earn three master's degrees from three different academic institutions, and became the first and only person of color to journey beyond low Earth orbit and travel into the Moon's vicinity. He could have said anything. (If it were *me*, I would have commented on how anti-gravity is *F-U-N*.) But in that moment, Glover chose to recount one of our tradition's most profound *mitzvot*: Love your neighbor. Love your neighbor.

Why? I wonder if it's because, even at the edge of the universe, what matters most is not only focusing on the obstacles in life: what is broken, or dangerous, or scary, or unknown... But what is good and what is worth loving, as well.

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl of Central Synagogue in New York City described this moment as a form of goodness in which all of us can participate: "That experience of wonder and radical amazement or awe, are all sort of synonyms of each other in some way. It helps you understand both your smallness in this vastness of the world, but also in some ways that you actually have a role to play in it all, simultaneously. That you are both tiny and massively significant at the same time."¹¹ That's **what's good** for humanity.

And, we can't forget... What's good here, at Leo Baeck Temple, right here, right now?

- I have witnessed connection after connection happen at Leo Baeck Temple this year--*Keshet* Circles, the COE, LBT Women, our 20s+30s friends, Achim, LBT Men, Chesed, our Caring Community, the Minyan, community organizing, empty nesters, and beyond--all making meaning, celebrating, supporting one another, and walking through life together
- What's good are the seven remarkable Leo Baeckers who gathered weekly for the entire year to study Jewish text, history, theology, philosophy, prayer, and Hebrew, and in June they became b'nai mitzvah.
- This year, we celebrate and show massive gratitude for Rabbi Ken Chasen and his 24-year legacy at Leo Baeck Temple, *and* we continue our celebration and joy after our congregation voted in July to affirm Rabbi Lisa Berney as our institution's fourth senior rabbi in its now 79-year history.
- And, I know you can't see it, but I want to make sure you know – our Beit Midrash was *at capacity* this morning, literally teeming with hundreds of Religious School families connecting with Jewish tradition and each other.

So. Despite all the reasons for despair, human beings still continue to choose goodness.

¹¹ Buchdahl, A. (2026, April 7). "Since the moon and space is on everyone's mind [...]" [Instagram post by *rabbiyoshi*]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/DW2X4zjj96u/>

I know. Perhaps as you've been listening, you've been thinking: "That's nice, Scott. I'm glad Artemis II made it around the moon. I'm glad two Palestinians and two Israelis are friends. But that's not the year I've had. I don't have an answer to 'What's good.'"

And if that's what you've been thinking, then I want you to know I've been thinking about you, too:

- Maybe, like Abraham, you are grieving the death of a beloved.¹²
- Like Rebecca and Isaac, conflict and resentment may be rising to the surface of your relationship.¹³
- You may be harboring a grudge like Joseph's brothers do.¹⁴
- You may have struggled with infertility like Sarah.¹⁵
- Like Miriam, sickness or illness might have struck, and you are unsure of what the future may hold for your body, or for your mind.¹⁶
- Like Naomi, you might have taken on a new role: caregiver, which can prove debilitating.¹⁷
- Or, like Jeremiah, existential loneliness might surround you.¹⁸

The thing is... I don't think suffering is ever fully solvable. I mean... do you? Suffering is clearly part of our tradition because it's an innate part of being human. It's the ultimate problem of consciousness, one that thinkers, poets, artists, and musicians have all attempted to solve since time immemorial... yet it still remains.

When suffering, noticing the good can actually feel painful. Maybe the person you want to share today with can't be here right now, or your own body isn't well enough to be present, or you don't have the resources to fully participate and relish that which is good.

I'm not asking you to find good in the suffering. And I'm certainly not suggesting you should ignore or be dishonest about the year you've had, or the body you're in, or the grief you're holding, or the anger you're bearing. Maybe there is no silver lining.

Our Talmudic sages have a saying: "*eliu v'eilu divrei elohim chayim*, two things can be true at once."¹⁹ Suffering can exist, and goodness can exist, both of them, together, simultaneously.

¹² Genesis 23:2

¹³ Genesis 27

¹⁴ Genesis 37

¹⁵ Genesis 18

¹⁶ Numbers 12

¹⁷ Ruth 1

¹⁸ Jeremiah 15:17

¹⁹ Eruvin 13b

I wonder: is there a blessing that has found its way into your life this year?

Sometimes it can be helpful to lower your gaze to ground, or even close your eyes as you allow your spirit to do a little revisiting of this past year:

- Perhaps... you received relieving news from a doctor.
- Perhaps... you welcomed a new child or grandchild into your family.
- Perhaps you watched a child take a first step, graduate, get engaged, or find their footing after a difficult season.
- Maybe you had surgery and are healing.
- Or you finally slept through the night after months.
- Or you found a new job, or retired, or discovered a new sense of purpose.
- Might you have moved into a new home.
- Or repaired a broken relationship with a sibling, a spouse, a parent, a child, or a friend.
- Or celebrated sobriety, recovery, or another quiet victory that few people know about.
- Perhaps you paid off a debt, and you feel a weight lifted from your shoulders.
- Or you found love... or made a new friend... or connected with a group of people who have helped you feel less alone.
- Maybe you did something you're really proud of.
- Or you received a meal, a phone call from someone you love, an unexpected act of kindness, a moment of laughter, a morning when your burden felt just a little lighter.

So... while it is several months later, please forgive me, but let me finally answer your question: "What's good?"

Good is that human beings choose purpose. Hope. Love, even when the world is dark.

Good is that strangers become friends.

Good is that people gather and show up for one another.

Good is that, despite all evidence to the contrary, we, who navigate this broken world, are still capable of wonder.

Good is that you and I are here today.

When the shofar will soon sound its ancient call, I wonder if it will awaken within you and me both what is broken *and* what is good. Because maybe that is what God has been doing since the very first day: looking out at our world, still unfinished, still chaotic, still wounded, and nevertheless: "*Vayar Elohim ki tov*," seeing goodness, too.

Thank you for your question. I can finally answer:

There is still goodness here.

Happy birthday, world.

Shana tova.