

## Devar Torah for Erev Rosh Hashanah, 5781/2020

**Rabbi Josh Weisman**

It's time for that annual checkup. I know a lot of us have been putting off preventive care, or just doing it online. But the kind of checkup I'm talking about doesn't require leaving your home. It doesn't even require making an appointment. The appointment has been scheduled for you, and you're already at it. This check-up is mostly self-administered. We ask the questions ourselves and we provide the answers.

As you've probably guessed, the checkup is called Rosh Hashanah. There's a follow-up appointment – again, already scheduled for you – ten days from now. That's Yom Kippur. The time between now and then is for thinking about the results of your checkup, and figuring out what you want to do to maintain and improve your wellbeing over the coming year. A lot of the important work of self-examination on Rosh Hashanah is individual and is done in the privacy of our hearts. Maybe we think that God – however conceived – is part of that conversation, and maybe we don't – the work is the same either way. But another component of the work is communal. All our prayers of confession and forgiveness on the High Holidays – and pretty much all our prayers year-round, for that matter – are in the first person plural: **we**. So, while the results of your individual checkup are up to you, I want to take this opportunity for a kind of collective checkup.

This year more than ever, we may be afraid of what we might see when we look in this moral mirror. The world has thrown us some real curve balls, and it would be understandable if we hadn't responded to every one of them with grace under pressure. Yet that pessimism does not serve us, and it may not even be accurate. So don't worry, this is not about wagging fingers.

So, where are we as this annual checkup rolls around?

The pandemic has consumed over half a year of our lives and collective history. More than 920,000 people have died from COVID-19. I began writing this in a moment and in a position that seems perfectly fitting for this time — trapped at home by the pandemic, literally sitting on the floor on the morning of Tisha BeAv, in the traditional posture of mourning for that day, which has never felt more appropriate to the moment. Rabbi Alan Lew wrote that Tisha BeAv is the proper beginning of the High Holy Day season, when “the walls of the great house that surrounds you crumble and fall,”<sup>i</sup> the start of the season of *Teshuvah* — turning and returning. This is where introspection naturally begins — from a place of brokenness. We have never been more broken in my lifetime than we are these days, and therefore there has never been a better time for introspection. As a spiritual season, the main questions the High Holiday asks of us are spiritual ones, not historical ones, and for the sake of the future, not the past: “Spiritually,” Lew writes, “the only question worth asking about any [...] catastrophe, is this: How can I prevent it from happening again?”<sup>ii</sup>

So I took the time between Tisha BeAv and now to look back and consider what has happened. When we look back, what do we see? What have we done, who have we been, and what can we learn from this debacle *for the future*?

Believe it or not, here's what I see from where I sit: **we** — you and I, everyone I know, most Americans, and most of the world, as far as I can tell — **are rising to the occasion in the most important and holy way: we are preserving life**. Crisis has shown us who we really are, and **that's who we are – we are champions of life, of *pikuach nefesh***, the Jewish principle that saving a life is of paramount importance, superseding even our most precious institutions like Shabbat. We have acted – or refrained from acting – in order to preserve life at the expense of not only conferences and family visits, large weddings and in-person prayer services, school and sports, but that most untouchable of American idols: constant economic growth. Most of our Jewish communities are being especially zealous — often choosing to stay closed or severely limiting our activities longer than is required — but really the same is true of most Americans. Despite all the sound and fury around the dissenters, [a recent poll](#) showed that 86% of us are wearing masks outside the home and 75% of us support requiring everyone to do so. Most importantly, almost three quarters of us say that virus-prevention restrictions eclipse concerns about economic damage. Don't get distracted by the drama; the reality is that we the people are doing this right. It's true that that has not been enough to stem the tide of the pandemic, but to be totally blunt – that's not our fault. There has been a lack of coordinated centralized leadership that has prevented *our* willingness to sacrifice from adding up to a successful suppression of the virus. But when we look at our *own* behavior *as people* and when we

examine our hearts, we see that we have sacrificed and prioritized life. For the first time I can remember, the people of the world are engaged in one giant exercise in Jewish, religious, and humanist values: we are putting life above all else. We are responding in the affirmative to the Torah's great challenge to us — issued near the end, in the portion we read just last week — to “choose life, that you may live.” (Deut. 30:19)

And then in the midst of that, a sudden national turn towards preserving Black lives, with massive numbers of people taking to the streets and still more explicitly acknowledging the need to preserve Black life against systemic racism. It is still too soon to know exactly how much our majority-white society will be willing to change in order to prevent more unnecessary loss of Black lives, but there is no doubt that a major shift in how we recognize Black life has taken place.

This is how we are showing up in these intertwined moments of crisis. This is good news, and I hope you can take it in!

But what if we don't feel that way? Maybe we individually feel like we haven't always been champions! Maybe we've made some mistakes, some COVID judgment calls we aren't proud of — especially early on, when it was so hard to grasp just how serious this was and just how very drastic the measures that would be required of us would be. Or else more recently, as it has dragged on and on and as the end point has receded ever further, we have gotten restless and maybe started to get looser.

So here's what I want to say as clearly as I can – We are allowed to be imperfect, because we are allowed to be who we are and humans are always imperfect. That recognition is actually built right into the High Holidays. And we are allowed – required, I would say – to recognize that still, after the imperfection, on balance, *we are champions of life!* We have showed what we are made of, and it is goodness. Yes, we can and should try to tighten it up as best we can for the year ahead – that's *Teshuvah*. But this year, I think it's at least as important to know that we have done well – very well – and we are good – very good. Because it could be a long road ahead, and we'll need to know our goodness so we can continue to lean into it.

**I want to address the students and young adults in our community this evening directly right now. There are a lot of eyes on you, and they're not all as generous as they should be. There is talk – often in psychological terms – about young adult risk taking and decision making and even pre-frontal cortexes. You get a bad rap. This is what we call ageism. So, while I absolutely think you – along with everyone else – should continue to step up, and while I know the sacrifices that are being asked of you are really grueling, and I want to honor that – nonetheless, despite whatever infractions you individually may have committed, *as we surely all have*, you too are proving yourselves to be champions of life! In fact, your generation is being shaped by this in a way that others have not been, at least not since those who lived through the Holocaust and World War II. You have more future ahead of you than most generations alive today, and you will have more opportunity to leverage the lessons of this time – including, most crucially, what you have discovered about your own capacity for**

**goodness – for a long time to come. Just as the generation that survived the Holocaust made the watch-words Never Again their life-long mission, so too you will have the opportunity to translate this travesty into a positive program of action that will make what you’ve learned about the world and yourselves concrete, for the good of our own future and future generations.**

And you’ll have plenty of opportunity to do that! Remember that long road ahead I mentioned?

The next and probably most vital of those opportunities is right in our faces.... in our lungs, in fact. In this year that just won’t end, after COVID hit, after the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, our beloved West Coast has been hit with dozens of climate-change-fueled fires, and right here in Seattle we were blanketed for a week and a half in smoke that was officially categorized as “very unhealthy for everyone.”

Since we’ve shown up against the pandemic, and since we’ve shown preliminary promise in showing up for Black Lives, an urgent question presents itself: how can we relay our willingness to “choose life” against the threat of COVID into a willingness to do the same with respect to many other threats to life? This is not merely an exercise in speculation about human nature, it is the most fundamental question of our time.

Put another way, how will we turn our willingness to “choose life, so that you may live” into one that also fulfills the next few words of the verse: “you and your descendants?”

**Again, believe it or not, even amidst the fire and smoke, there is good news.** Just as the pandemic and the collective awakening to Black lives have shown that we are capable of prioritizing life, the pandemic has also given us an unexpected boost in the task of preserving life in the face of climate catastrophe. The UN says that the world’s carbon emissions must fall almost 8 percent each year from now until 2030 in order to avoid catastrophic climate change. It’s a goal that seemed incredibly daunting, at best, just a year ago. But guess what? The pandemic has resulted in an 8 percent drop in coal use in the first quarter of 2020, and an increase in the use of renewable energy.<sup>iii</sup> In other words, because of the pandemic, we have taken the first necessary step towards saving the future of life. The task is now a little simpler — to continue that trajectory. Imagine what a joyful way to mark this Rosh Hashanah – to affirm our collective will to live.

So, as we look back on this year, let us recognize the moral strength we have shown, forgive ourselves for our imperfections, and resolve to apply our newfound will to live to the challenges facing us. And may we stitch our individual goodness together into a collective response to the remainder of the pandemic, to the call to protect Black Lives, and to the urgent need to preserve life for the ages, a response in which, together, we “choose life.”

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<sup>i</sup> Lew, Alan. *This Is Real And You Are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation*. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 2003. p 3

<sup>ii</sup> *ibid.* 45

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/30/climate/global-emissions-decline.html>