

How Will We Ever Make it through these Uncertain Times?

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum

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In my various rabbi groups, some of my colleagues have been joking that instead of sermons this year, rabbis ought to just stand up and cry publicly for a few minutes, or perhaps lean our heads out of the window and let out a big primal scream.

So many things have been hard about this year. There are the illnesses and deaths associated with the Covid pandemic itself – staggering numbers. And, there are also the many trickle-down effects – isolation from family members and friends, job losses, stunted plans to start college or to travel, the toll on everyone’s mental health. A few months ago, things were looking up – we could see light at the end of the tunnel – and then Delta variant came along and it made our day-to-day decision-making feel impossible again.

I imagine that all of us can relate to the sheer exhaustion of this time. I think that much of this stems from the fact that we are being forced to live with a degree of **ambiguity** and **uncertainty** that we don’t tolerate very well.

Perhaps you remember the feeling from school of preparing for a big test, and feeling anxious about it, and then experiencing an incredible flood of relief when it was over, even if you did poorly. For many people, even an undesirable outcome (like a bad grade on a test) feels better than the period of uncertainty that comes before it, with the test is looming.

And yet, this kind of uncertainty is precisely what we have been navigating for the past year-and-a-half now. And, I hate to say it out loud, but there’s not a clear end in sight to this pandemic.

A colleague of mine, Rabbi Shira Koch Epstein, recently explained it this way: “I think this is why it is so very hard and exhausting to manage all of the technical details of the uncertainty of the moment – because radical uncertainty doesn’t seem temporary. **The uncertainty of this pandemic time is hanging over another more fundamental uncertainty we’re holding in a longer-term way, about climate change and the future of human life and our planet.**” Gulp.

Anyway, this is what I want to address today: Why uncertainty is so hard for us, and what spiritual tools we have in our toolbox that can help us make it through these uncertain times.

First, let’s start with why it’s so hard.

For some insight, I turned to the field of psychology – and Kavana partner and psychology professor Dan Rosen directed me towards the work of a psychologist named Kelly Wilson. Wilson writes: “Humans don’t just suffer when things are bad. They also suffer when things *might* be bad. In the experimental literature, it is readily shown that organisms prefer environments in which painful things are predictable over environments where they are not.”

Wilson also turns to evolutionary biology to explain the connection between **Ambiguity** and **Suffering**. Wilson invites his reader to imagine that we are “early hominids out on the savanna.” We see, off on the horizon, a vague shape. He goes on to describe that the shape might be a blueberry bush, or it might be a bear. If it’s a blueberry bush, then there’s no danger at all; in fact, it’s great to approach it. But if it’s a bear, then it’s a threat and the early human had better to get back into the cave quickly. “Our ancestors, the ones who survived and passed on the genetic material of which we are all made, were selected for their caution... This means that ambiguity itself will often be experienced as aversive. **Clinically, ambiguity is often a constant source of considerable suffering.**”

During these ambiguous times, so many people are indeed suffering.

In the Atlantic, science writer Robin Marantz Henig recently published an article entitled “We’re All Second Guessing Ourselves Now.” It’s about the challenge of grandparenting through the Delta variant. She writes, “So I’m left watching helplessly as my daughter and son-in-law negotiate the scary path ahead for their two daughters, ages 6 and 3. That’s hard for someone like me, who’s always been uncomfortable with the gray areas of life. Delta presents us with a moment of true uncertainty, when decision making is new terrain for all of us.” And she concludes: “Maybe our accumulated wisdom is most valuable now not in providing all the answers but in demonstrating how to do the best we can in the face of vulnerability.”

So, we’ve established that humans beings – all of us – are conditioned to experience ambiguity with suffering. And yet, right now, from the time we wake up in the morning until we go to sleep at night, we are forced to navigate radical uncertainty with every plan we try to make. What are we to do? **What tools do we possess that can help us as we enter this New Year, a year of uncertainty?**

As Jews, we know a thing or two about living with uncertainty! And on Rosh Hashanah in particular, we lean into the uncertainty, beginning with our history.

One way of understanding the Torah readings for these days of Rosh Hashanah is that they focus in on the question of continuity with regard to Abraham. From the very beginning of Abraham’s story, God has repeatedly promised him offspring – you will be a great nation, you will be as hard to count as the dust of the earth, you will be as numerous as the stars in the sky. Abraham’s biggest anxiety is that this promise won’t come to pass – in chapter 15 he cries out “O Lord God, what can You give me, seeing that I shall die childless, with my servant Dameshek Eliezer in charge of my household.” God reassures Abraham: none but your very own issue shall be your heir. But there are continued challenges, first fertility issues, and then – even once Abraham does have offspring – family dynamics that call continuity of his line into question.

On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, we read of the expulsion of Abraham’s first son Ishmael and his mother Hagar by Sarah, and just how close Ishmael comes to dying in the wilderness. It’s almost the end of Abraham’s line. On the second day, we read the story of the *Akeidah*, during

which Abraham himself nearly kills his own son, Isaac. The future of Abraham's progeny – that continuity about which he's felt so desperate – is totally called into question. Year in and year out, as we read these stories on Rosh Hashanah, we are invited into Abraham's anxiety over this precarious situation... will there be continuity? Will we have a future?

It's also hard to think about uncertainty in Jewish terms without noting that a good 70% of Torah – the middle of Exodus through end of Deuteronomy -- takes place in the wilderness, the *midbar*. Important things happen in the wilderness; that is where Torah is given, not in spite of, but precisely because of the openness that it represents. The wilderness is uncomfortable terrain and yet offers it potential for growth:

Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah (1:7) teaches: "If you desire change, if you hope for anything new to come from within, you must first open yourself up like the wilderness (*midbar*)."

It is the place where possibility arises. **Uncertainty itself is the place where possibility arises.**

The wilderness also comes up in Jeremiah 31, the haftarah we read on Rosh Hashanah day 2:

כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה מִצָּא חוֹ בַּמִּדְבָּר עִם שָׂרִידי תָּרַב הַלּוֹד לְהַרְגִיעוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Thus said the LORD: The people escaped from the sword, When Israel was marching homeward, **Found favor in the wilderness. *Matza chen bamidbar.***

That's a beautiful prayer for us in this year too... that in this wilderness, this place of uncertainty where we currently find ourselves, we might also experience *chen*, favor.

Our rabbinic tradition, as well, has an awful lot to say about living with ambiguity. There's a teaching in the Talmud (Pesachim 54b) that explains that seven matters are concealed from human beings – are utterly unknowable by us:

תָּנוּ רַבֵּינוּ: שִׁבְעָה דְבָרִים מְכֻסִּים מִבְּנֵי אָדָם, אֵלֶּיךָ הֵן: יוֹם הַמִּיתָה, וְיוֹם הַנְּחֻמָּה, וְעוֹמֵק הַדִּין, וְאֵין אָדָם יוֹדֵעַ מָה יִבְלֶיךָ שֶׁל חֲבִירוֹ, וְאֵין אָדָם יוֹדֵעַ בְּמָה מִשְׁתַּבֵּר, וְיִמְלֶכֶת בֵּית דָּוִד מִתִּי תִּהְיוּר, וְיִמְלֶכֶת סִיְיַבֵּת מִתִּי תִּכְלֶה.

The Sages taught: Seven matters are concealed from people, and they are: The day of death; and the day of consolation; the depth of justice; and a person cannot know what is in the heart of another; and a person cannot know in what way they will earn a profit; and when the monarchy of the house of David will be restored; and when the wicked monarchy will cease to exist.

By claiming that all of these things are hidden from human ability to know, the Gemara is emphasizing that truly, we're always living with a high degree of fundamental uncertainty.

Uncertainty is so uncomfortable for us, though, and causes us so much suffering, that most of the time we go to great lengths to mask it. In a typical year, therefore, one of the important functions of these High Holidays is that they remind us of this fundamental truth: that life is, in fact, uncertain.

But this year, I feel like we don't need the High Holidays to drive home the point. We are living it. We are living in the uncertainty of these pandemic times. We are living in the wilderness of with a sense of impending doom about the fate of our planet. We are living it day in and day out.

So another way to think about the function of these holidays, and really, the whole of our religious tradition, is that **Judaism exists precisely to help us navigate the uncertainty that is life.** This Rosh Hashanah, we ask: how can we best do that? So, a few ideas:

First, **this is the time to ground yourself a spiritual practice** – some kind of daily practice, a regular rhythm, something to remind us of the fundamentals of life and help us hold it all. Any spiritual practice has the potential to offer us structure, community, a wider context, moral grounding, and ultimately, coping skills.

Krista Tippet – host of the podcast “On Being” – recently interviewed Sharon Salzberg, a teacher of Buddhism and meditation, who talks about equanimity as the huge capacity of our hearts to hold it all, darkness and light, love and pain. In the episode, entitled “The Healing is in the Return,” Tippet wrote down some of Salzberg’s words and then read them back to her almost like a poem – here it is:

“I do the best I can,
I try to learn from my mistakes,
and the world is the world
of constant change
and pleasure and pain
and being thanked and not being thanked —
all of those things.
And so that’s where equanimity comes in
as a kind of comprehension
of, this is the way things are.”

Of course, this impulse of trying to hold it all is also there in Judaism. In the words, again, of my colleague Rabbi Shira Koch Epstein, this is absolutely one of the messages Torah has for us: “that our tradition knows there is always both radical uncertainty AND the ability for faith, divine love, belonging, wisdom, and human initiative to help us manage through it.” Taking these High Holy Days seriously, giving yourself space to reflect and be present now through Yom Kippur, and then not stopping there but taking the practice with you into the year... this is a way of cultivating equanimity, the capacity of the heart to hold it all, a powerful tool for moving through uncertainty.

Second, this time of year, we are reminded of the importance of compassion, patience, and forgiveness. These are Godly qualities, and as we repeat them over and over again in our liturgy, we aim to imitate the Divine and employ them, not only towards others but also and **especially towards ourselves.**

The Austrian poet Rilke puts this beautifully:

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

May this be a year in which we nurture our own capacity for patience and self-compassion.

And third, **one more spiritual tool we have at our disposal is that we are entering into a Shmita year.** Shmita is a radical Jewish concept, a biblical commandment to imagine a better life. In Leviticus, the Torah instructs us to observe a sabbatical every seven years so that the land, the workers, the social and the economic system all get to rest and reset. The year as we enter on the Hebrew calendar the year 5782 (divisible by 7), we are once again in the seventh year of the cycle, a year of radical release.

“Shmita” literally means release. Every seven years, the earth has a sabbatical, so it is released from having to produce. Every seven years, all debts are forgiven; everybody is released from those obligations and gets a fresh start. As our world still grapples with a deadly Pandemic, as we hang over the abyss of climate change, this Shmita year provides us with an opportunity for reimagining all sorts of things: our lives and gaps of prosperity, strengthening our accountability to one other, and spurring a lifelong commitment to protecting our shared earth.

For this Shmita year, Kavana will be partnering with Shmita Project Northwest for local, Seattle-based programming, beginning with a Shmita festival during Sukkot. We are also part of the Jewish Emergent Network, which, in partnership with Hazon, Reboot, and the Israeli Shmita Project, is creating a year of compelling conversations offering ways to take Shmita to the next level and make it more meaningful and helpful to us all. Over the course of the coming year, we’ll focus on a number of themes: In the fall, we’ll focus on better balance between work and home, body and soul. In the winter, we’ll be exploring racial justice, indigenous land rights and the demand for better equity and equality. In the spring, we will return to the Holy Land, learning with our partners in Israel about new ways to mark Shmita, to honor the sanctity of land and the lives of all who call it home. And in the summer, we’ll focus on the big picture of our current climate crisis - how can we do more to decenter human supremacy and be better at taking care of mother earth, for the sake of all living beings and future generations.

When we experience ambiguity as suffering, our human response is to try to control everything. By instead pushing ourselves to instead release – on all of these levels, over the course of the coming 12 months – this shmita year may be the best tool yet for helping us make our way through these uncertain times.

Returning to psychologist Kelly Wilson, he suggests a couple of experiments we can run ourselves, and I encourage you to actually try them. The first one, he calls “To Eat or Not to Eat.” Wilson’s suggestion is to prepare a meal, sit down at the table. Dish up a plate. Pick up a bite of food with your knife and fork. “Now,” he invites, “raise it toward your mouth and stop at the cusp right between eating and not eating. Linger right there at the cusp. Find that place right at the tipping point between eating and not eating. Your mind won’t like this.” Then, he says, “choose to not know whether you will eat the meal or not.” In the end, you will ultimately either eat or not eat the meal. But meanwhile, the purpose of the exercise is to notice how intolerant your mind is of the unknown.

The other experiment he suggests is to consider a question with fairly high stakes, while intentionally not deciding one way or the other what you want to do about it. Rather than decide or conclude (which is precisely what we’re hard-wired to do), let yourself wonder what you will do. That is a great *kavana* (intention) for High Holiday prayer – to see if you can sit in the ambiguity of not knowing and not deciding, and see what you can discern from that place of uncertainty.

“Minds,” Wilson says, “don’t like the places in between. We don’t like these places that we don’t know, but **it’s in precisely these foreign places that possibility lives.**”

On the High Holidays, this year as always, we acknowledge the radical uncertainty of this moment, the radical uncertainty of the world around us. Sitting in this uncertainty is uncomfortable, and yet, being able to name it is important, and that itself may help alleviate the suffering associated with this ambiguity.

This Rosh Hashanah, we ground ourselves in the gifts of time, of community, of ever-present love and compassion, of expansiveness. We remind ourselves that although we are indeed living with a high degree of ambiguity and uncertainty, we also possess the tools we need not to experience this as suffering. We have the capacity – within us, and from within our Jewish tradition – to hold ambiguity with equanimity, to cultivate patience in ourselves, and to use the concept of Shmita to spend a year intentionally focusing on release. Or if all else fails, maybe we should just set a time to open our windows together, and let out a giant primal scream.

May 5782 be a year of sweetness and blessing. *Ko amar Adonai, matza chen bamidbar* - May we, like our ancient ancestors, find favor in the wilderness.

Shana tova.

