

**The Delta of Change... and Possibility**  
**(*Gam Zeh Yaavor*)**  
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**Yom Kippur 5781**

These last seven months have been months in which nothing has happened, and also everything has changed.

As I'm sure you remember, it was right around Purim that our lives changed dramatically. In a way, that felt fitting, as one of the themes of Purim is "*v'nahafoch hu*" a quote from the megillah that speaks to the topsy-turvy nature of life, and the degree to which things can be flipped on their head.

Now, here we are, nearly 7 months later, thinking about change yet again. After all, many commentators have reflected on the similarities between Purim and Yom haKippurim, which they read, quite literally as Yom K' Purim - a day like Purim. There are, in fact, many commonalities between the two holidays... but that's a sermon for another day. For now, I just want to point out that both of these holidays highlight the precarious nature of life – the sense of fate or lottery, and the potential for huge change in negative or positive directions. Both holidays remind us that in life, dramatic swings are always possible, and the potential delta of change is huge!

Looking back on the past year – or thinking about where we were and what our day-to-day realities looked and felt like a year ago today versus where we are now – the delta of change has been bigger than I think I ever could've envisioned last High Holidays. And, as we look forward to the coming year of 5781 – with a global pandemic still underway, no firm end date in sight, and an election a mere 37 days away, and again, a great degree of uncertainty about whether it will be fair and conclusive, the delta of change we are preparing to hold over the coming year also feels huge. In a typical year, the potential change delta feels to me like a sliver of pie, a tiny slice offering a narrow range of possibilities. But this year – both thinking back and thinking forward -- the angle is large, and it's a huge wedge. We are all holding a lot of uncertainty about what the coming year might bring.

With so much uncertainty, both past and future, I've been thinking a lot about how we hold it all, and I want to tell you a story that's been rolling around in my head. There are many versions of this tale – that's what happens with folktales – and as with the story I shared over Rosh Hashanah, there are analogs in lots of cultural traditions. Here is the Jewish version I like best:

*One day King Solomon decided to humble Benaiah Ben Yehoyada, his most trusted minister. He said to him, "Benaiah, there is a certain ring that I want you to bring to me, so that I can wear it at the Sukkot festival. That will give you six months for the search.*

*"If it exists anywhere on earth, your majesty," replied Benaiah, "I will find it and bring it to you, but what makes the ring so special?"*

*"The ring has magical powers," answered the king. "If a happy man looks at it, he becomes sad, and if a sad man looks at it, he becomes happy." Now, Solomon knew that no such ring existed in the world, but he wished to give his minister a little taste of humility.*

*Spring passed and then summer, and still Benaiah had no idea where he could find the ring. He went to the finest jewelers, goldsmiths, and silversmiths to inquire about rings, but none of them knew anything about this one. He met caravans returning from foreign lands, from Babylon, Damascus, and Tyre, but none of them had heard of such a ring either. He traveled south to Beersheva, and north to Jaffa, but no one in any of those places knew anything about this magical ring.*

*Now, it was the last night before the eve of Sukkot. Benaiah was about to give up when he decided to take a walk in one of the poorest quarters of Jerusalem. He passed by a young jewelry merchant who had begun to set the day's wares out on a shabby carpet. "Have you by any chance heard of a magic ring that makes the happy wearer forget his joy, and the broken-hearted wearer forget his sorrows?" asked Benaiah. No, the young jeweler shook his head. Benaiah began to walk away sadly.*

*But meanwhile, the merchant's old grandfather had been listening in, and he now emerged through a doorway and called to Benaiah. Benaiah turned around. He watched as the grandfather took a plain gold ring from his carpet and engraved*

*something on it. When Benaiah read the words on the ring, his face broke out in a wide smile. "This is the ring!" and he paid the merchant all the money in his purse.*

*That night the entire city welcomed in the holiday of Sukkot with great festivity.*

*"Well, my friend," said Solomon to Benaiah, "have you found what I sent you after?" All the ministers laughed and Solomon himself smiled. And then, to everyone's surprise, Benaiah held up a small gold ring and declared, "Here it is, your majesty!"*

*As soon as Solomon read the inscription, the smile vanished from his face. The merchant's grandfather had inscribed three Hebrew letters on the gold band: gimel, zayin, yud, which began the words "Gam Zeh Ya-avor" — "This too shall pass."*

*At that moment Solomon was sharply reminded that all his wisdom and fabulous wealth and tremendous power were but fleeting things, for one day all of it – and he too – would be nothing but dust.*

*"Benaiah," he said, "you are not only faithful, but wiser than I. I shall wear it on the same finger as my signet."*

This story speaks powerfully to the theme of impermanence. That Hebrew phrase "*gam zeh yaavor*" is an incredibly powerful one. "This too shall pass" – it has the effect of flipping one's perspective in either direction. Change is not only possible, the phrase teaches us; it's inevitable.

In the story, "*gam zeh yaavor*" – "this too shall pass" – has two different effects:

First, it "can make a sad person happy." During this Covid time, I can certainly relate to that sentiment. It's a relief, and a comforting thought, to hear that this challenging moment we are in will not last forever. I've heard lots of people talk about how great it would be if there were only a clear end date in sight to the pandemic. Of course, we know it doesn't work that way, and the uncertainty is hard to hold. But this "*gam zeh yaavor*" idea – that this too shall pass – comes to assure us that there will be an end at some point.

Yom Kippur does the same. The liturgy of the day takes us through such a span of Jewish history – from Aaron and his sons who carried out the ancient ritual of atonement in the wilderness, to Temple times where their descendants, the high priests of subsequent generations, traveled into the Holy of Holies on this one day of the year to proclaim God’s mysterious name. Throughout our day, we check in with martyrs, rabbinic and medieval, and our liturgy takes us to times of other plagues. This broad sweep of human history is comforting, in much the same way that I found it fascinating back in the spring to read up on the Spanish Flu of 1918. Historical context reassures us. *Gam zeh yaavor*. This too shall pass. Don’t worry too much. At some point, this will be merely a blip in the face of a much bigger cosmic map of time.

And then, *gam zeh yaavor* means precisely the opposite. That’s the second valence to the phrase. Remember, the ring also has the magical power to turn a person from happy to sad. And this is how Solomon takes it: that this moment and all the satisfaction it contains, will also not last forever. That thought is incredibly sobering, even depressing.

The bottom line of that lesson – the second meaning of *gam zeh yaavor* – is that all that we experience is fleeting. Time is ticking; life is finite.

And once again, Yom Kippur comes to remind us of the same theme. On Kol Nidre, the liturgical poem we use to introduce the Selichot set is called *Ya’aleh*. It was written by an anonymous composer in the middle ages as a backwards alphabetic acrostic, running from *tachanuneinu* which starts with *tav* (the last letter) to *Eileinu* which starts with *Alef* (the first letter), through every letter from the end of the alphabet to the beginning. Like sand out of an hourglass, the alphabet slips through our fingers. The words of each stanza follow a pattern: *Yaaleh tachanuneinu mei’erev. V’yavo shavateinu miboker. V’yeira’eh rinuneinu ad arev*. It follows our prayers and our cries, *mei’erev*, from dusk, *mi’boker*, with the dawn, *ad arev*, until the dusk again. This, of course, follows the arc of any day on the Hebrew calendar – from nightfall, to daylight and back to nightfall. And when we say it here on Yom Kippur, we think about the day of Yom Kippur that’s about to unfold before us: from dusk, to dawn, to dusk. But it also follows the span of a human life. From dusk, to daytime where we reside now, to the dusk

that we will ultimately encounter once again when we die. The pattern of the piyyut reminds us that we are running out of time.

When time is short, we all know the classic *carpe diem* response, and we try to embrace what we do have. There's been so much of that over past 7 months. How grateful we've tried to be for the simple pleasures – for flowers blooming in spring, and for sunshine in summer, for walks and cups of tea, and movies, and phone chats with loved ones, for having enough food to eat and for rooves over our heads. And how grateful we are for what we once took for granted... we can feel this as each small slice of normalcy is restored. In August, I dropped off two of my kids at the JCC day camp for the first time. With masks on, of course, and a counselor who leaned into the car for a quick temperature check. And then, they were off, and Israeli dance music was playing, and my eyes welled up with tears of gratitude too deep for words that my children could once again spend a day, however constrained, playing in the company of other children.

In this year – which, for me has felt more than a little bit time-warpy – I have a dramatic sense that both interpretations of *gam zeh yaavor* truly apply: *gam zeh yaavor*: that this too will pass, these hard times will not last forever. Covid will not last forever. The Trump presidency will not last forever.

And, *gam zeh yaavor* is also true in the sense in which Solomon takes it: wisdom, wealth and power are fleeting. As much as it pains me to say this, our American Democracy itself won't last forever. Our health and our bodies will not last forever, as our lives are finite.

The first sentiment is such a relief to me, and a comfort. The other, a weight, a fearful truth, a sobering reality. The struggle is in trying to hold them together.

Before we hold them together, there are two other features of the Solomon story I want to unpack.

First, it's an interesting detail – and, I think, a very purposeful one – that the *gam zeh yaavor* story pivots around the holiday of Sukkot. Because I've been thinking since March that this moment we're living through sure feels a lot like living inside the holiday of Sukkot all year long.

On Sukkot, we spend a week dwelling outside, in a sukkah, a booth, a rickety shack with a hole-y roof that exposes us to the elements. In order to be kosher, a Sukkah needs to be strong enough to withstand normal rain or wind, but just unstable enough that it would collapse if there were a big gust of wind or a major storm. In other words, it's a holiday on which we lean into the instability and fragility of life, and yet, despite that, find ways to celebrate joyfully. Sukkot is our most colorful, multisensory holiday!

We have felt the fragility of life and all, in this year, too... Our system of government, that most of us grew up to believe was so strong it might endure forever, now feels shaky under threat of a corrupt, fascist leader who uses propaganda to manipulate and is trying to consolidate money and power into his own hands. This Covid pandemic has laid bare our society's infrastructure on many basic fronts. Our ability to provide health care for the sick, to feed and clothe the most vulnerable, to educate our children, and to ensure jobs and opportunity across the board – all of these feel like they are on shaky ground. On a smaller scale, as all the places we go have peeled away – and in my family, that has meant no Tae Kwon-do classes or violin lessons, no school, no going to the office to be with colleagues – many of us are left asking: what's left? Is it worth getting out of bed in the morning? Our lives feel so small, and so very fragile.

The Sukkot association in the story is also a good one because if you remember the history of ancient Israel, it was King Solomon, David's son, who built the First Temple in Jerusalem. In the liturgy, the Temple is sometimes referred to in sukkah terms. In Birkat Hamazon (the blessing after the meal), for example, the extra line we recite on Sukkot says: *Harachaman hu yakim lanu et sukkat david hanofelet...* May the Merciful One establish for us the fallen sukkah of David. The "fallen sukkah of David," is of course understood to be the temple; the prayer asks for its re-establishment after it has collapsed under the weight of a foreign empire that blew it down like a strong gust of wind. That even the Temple – the grandest structure our ancient ancestors could possibly have imagined, one built from enormous stones, atop the very mountain where according to tradition Abraham almost sacrificed Isaac, adorned with precious materials, that very same Temple that had a *Kodesh Kodashim*, an inner sanctum called the Holy of Holies, where the High Priest would go on only one day of the year (and we read about this in

tomorrow's Avodah service) – even that Temple was a sukkah that could not stand forever?!

This notion of everything being fleeting – Solomon's wisdom, wealth and power – is most famously expressed in Judaism in the book of Kohelet, or Ecclesiastes – which we read each year – yep, you guessed it – on Sukkot. And though scholars have other ideas about the book's origins, the opening line of the book seems to attribute its authorship to Solomon. The book opens with the often repeated refrain "*Havel havalim, hakol hevel.*" – Utter futility, everything is futile.

But the most famous section of the book is the opening section of chapter 3:

לְכֹל זְמַן וְזְמַן וְעֵת לְכָל-חַפְצֵי תַחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם

A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven:

A time to be born and a time to die, A time to plant and a time to uproot the planted;

A time to slay and a time to heal, A time to tear down and a time to build up; (And so on.)

The famous 20<sup>th</sup> century Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai, played with these lines of biblical poetry in a way I appreciate, and I want to share at least the beginning and ending of his poem with you. It is called:

*"Adam b'Chayav," "A Man in his Life,"* by Yehudah Amichai

*Adam b'chayav, ein lo z'man she-yihyeh lo zman lakol...*

A man doesn't have time in his life  
to have time for everything.

He doesn't have seasons enough to have  
a season for every purpose. Kohelet  
was wrong about that.

*Adam tzarich lisno v'le'ehov b'vat achat...*

A person needs to love and to hate at the same moment,  
to laugh and cry with the same eyes,  
with the same hands to throw stones and to gather them,  
to make love in war and war in love.

...

He will die as figs die in autumn,  
Shriveled and full of himself and sweet,  
the leaves growing dry on the ground,  
the bare branches pointing to the place  
where there is time for everything.

And indeed, this is what feels truest and most resonant to me in this year. In the story, the phrase *gam zeh yaavor* has the power to flip emotions in much the same way that Purim does – to turn everything on its head, to invert relationships – to make a sad person happy by providing relief, and to make a happy person sad, by providing a sobering dose of reality and mortality.

But for us, in this year, though, we are happy and sad “*b'vat echat*” (in Amichai’s words) – “all in the same moment.” And the flipping that happens when we step back into this “this too shall pass” perspective can move us in all sorts of directions.

For many of us, this time is revealing something to us about the breadth of possibility. Some people have felt quite constrained during this time, while others have made bold decisions, moving or changing jobs, or pulling their kids out of school structures altogether and embracing homeschooling. College students who might otherwise have had to work very hard to convince their parents that it would be a good idea to take time off from school to work on an election campaign, in this year, with classes happening online anyway, no longer have to work so hard to justify that decision. We often think of our range of possibilities

as rather constrained and narrow, but with mortality looming on the horizon, with Covid having stripped away so many of the things that used to fill our time, we are freed up to make some very different decisions, to think about what's most important to us.

Collectively too – the wide uncertainty of this year has revealed breadth of possibility. Because, it turns out, things have already changed far more than we thought could be possible. Think back to last winter, if you can, or even further back to a few years ago. Thinking about the environment: by what percentage might we have thought we could reduce carbon emissions, or air travel, if we really tried? I can tell you that the Paris Accords called for a 20% reduction in emissions over the next decade. And I remember thinking that that was a virtually impossible target to even imagine, and as you recall, the US withdrew. Well then Covid hit, and everything ground to a halt. And in early April, with shutdowns widespread, daily global carbon emissions were down by 17 percent compared to last year. Air over China and India was clearer than it had been in years, and wildlife was showing up everywhere, taking up some of the space that had been vacated by humans under lockdown. Now of course, those effects haven't lasted fully, as reopening has begun, but even in a short time in the spring, we saw more change, more quickly than almost anyone would have thought possible. For me, it led to a hopeful aha – that perhaps we are capable of far greater change than we give ourselves credit for!

On my optimistic days (which isn't all of them, but it is some of them), I feel the same way about our American society on so many levels. This year laid bare many of the problems... so, all of a sudden we were talking about race in a different way, affirming that Black lives indeed matter (and they do!) and our vocabulary about whiteness and systemic racism grew and deepened. On a collective level, data shows that this past year contained the biggest attitudinal shifts about race and racism since the 1960s era Civil Rights movement – may it continue!

Ditto with health care. In a pandemic, it's been so much harder to claim that only people who can afford care should have access to it, that only the people who have white collar jobs should be able to not come to work on sick days – so the range of possibilities for how we might rethink so many fundamentals is again opened up, cracked wide open. All of this has opened up new conversations that

could have been unthinkable just a year ago, about basic health care for all, and about paid sick and family leave for all. To be sure, we are not there yet, and in this week especially, it sure feels like we will have a long uphill climb ahead of us in every branch of government if we are going to ensure that our country implements fair, just and moral policies. But, for just a minute today, it's okay to linger in the hope. The shocking degree of change that we've already seen (and so fast too!) expands our imaginations and helps us consider new possibilities that we couldn't have previously even fathomed.

This kind of imagination, or hope, is precisely where I want to land today.

In Rebecca Solnit's 2004 book entitled "Hope in the Dark," she writes:

"Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act. When you recognize uncertainty, you recognize that you may be able to influence the outcomes – you alone, or you in concert with a few dozen or several million others. Hope is an embrace of the unknown and unknowable..."

In other words, finding hope is contingent upon embracing the precariousness of life and the inevitability of change. As on Purim, we pause on this Yom Kippur day to acknowledge how widely our lives might swing, to embrace the uncertainty and the variability, change, and unpredictability. And in that range of the unknown, Solnit argues, we find an opening to empowerment, to understanding that we might be able to affect the outcomes, to make a difference in our own lives, in the lives of others, and in the world.

There's one last piece, and this is the deep irony of the story of *gam zeh yaavor*. In order to maintain that kind of hope, that belief that change is possible, we have to confront our own mortality and admit that we personally might not be around to see it happen. Change will come. I may even be able to help make that change. But there's also a very real possibility that I will not live long enough to see the fruits of my labor. It's a sad thought, but so real.

At the tail end of the story, Solomon says to Benaia, "you are wiser than I."

I want to quote another very wise person, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, who died last week. Several years ago, when asked about her many dissenting opinions, she said:

“Dissents speak to a future age. It’s not simply to say, ‘My colleagues are wrong and I would do it this way.’ The greatest dissents do become court opinions and gradually over time their views become the dominant view. So that’s the dissenter’s hope: that they are writing not for today, but for tomorrow.”

This is a wisdom greater than Solomon’s, perhaps. This is the wisdom of a person who can hold the uncertainty of life, and her own mortality, together, with humility. This is a person who can strive to make change in the world, even with the understanding that she is doing so, not for today, but for tomorrow.

So this Yom Kippur, let us seek to embrace “*gam zeh yaavor*” – “this too shall pass” – in both senses of the phrase. These troubled times that we are living through will not last forever. In the scheme of human history, this too shall pass.

And, all that we have now – it also will not last, it cannot. We must make the most of life while we can.

This year, more than ever, we will be ready to embrace the holiday of Sukkot that begins this Friday night. We will sit outside. If it rains, we’ll get wet. We know that every single one of us will someday shrivel like figs in autumn and return to dust, and yet, this Sukkot, we will feed the hungry, and get out the vote, and celebrate *zman simchateinu* – the time of our joy – with joy.

From Purim, to Yom Kippur, to Sukkot and on, we will embrace the wide delta of change, and the many possibilities it brings.

May it be God’s will. Kein yehi ratzon.