

“What If?”
Yom Kippur 2020/5781
Rabbi Lester Bronstein, Bet Am Shalom, White Plains, NY

I.

WHAT IF?

On Wednesday afternoon, March 4, 2020, our then-president of the synagogue Ilene Semiatin and our board chair Susan Roth called an emergency meeting of the synagogue staff and leadership. We included our congregant David Abramson, who is an expert in disaster preparedness.

We knew that persons exposed to COVID-19 – though not our own members or students - had been in the building in the previous days. We knew through contact tracing that one such person was in critical condition. He was the second known case of Coronavirus in New York.

Ilene began the meeting with the phrase, “What if?” What if our office and custodial staff are already exposed? What if our teens have already picked up the virus from surfaces while here for class two days earlier?

What if our rabbi, who is “of a certain age,” gets sick? What if our cantor were to become unavailable on Kol Nidrey night six months hence?

What if members of the congregation or their close relatives start dying?

I picked up the legal pad that’s always on my office coffee table. I wrote in big letters, “WHAT IF?” That afternoon we shut down the physical operations of Bet Am Shalom Synagogue.

At that moment we vowed to find ways to comfort the mourners that we would inevitably have, even if it meant holding online funerals and burials, online shiva minyanim, even an online daily minyan for kaddish sayers.

We vowed to give our upcoming b’nai mitzvah families a supportive and joyous experience, even if not in person; to contact each and every vulnerable congregant; to continue providing a Jewish education for our children; to keep holding classes and lectures and vital meetings, all online; to redouble our ongoing outreach to the hungry in our community – *not* online; to provide a second-night *seder* and a *tikkun leyl Shavu’ot*; to stream weekly Shabbat and holy day services into cyberspace; to keep our employees paid and covered and safe.

In short, we vowed not to let the precious tablets that constitute the covenant of our community to break.

It would be many weeks before I walked back into that office. There on the coffee table, waiting for my masked and gloved return, was the pad with the auspicious words: WHAT IF? And I knew that this would be the beginning of my Yom Kippur talk to you.

II.

Here I pause to apologize to the thirty or so people who heard my *d'var torah* on the second Friday evening service of the pandemic back in March, audio streamed because we had not yet turned to Zoom to provide a visual experience. The parashah was *Ki Tissa*, the selection from Exodus where Moses descends with the tablets of the covenant, witnesses the Golden Calf, and smashes the tablets; and where he later returns to the mountain to receive a second set of tablets and a second chance for his people, *our* people.

This *d'var torah* is an expansion of that talk. It really needs to be. For tonight is the night we need to revisit the receiving of the second tablets, as I shall explain.

For our ancient Rabbis, who imagined that all of the earth-shattering events in the Torah correspond to dates on the Hebrew calendar, and who expected us to move through the months of the Jewish year as if we were reexperiencing those events and all the lessons they contain, ...

Our Rabbis taught that on the fifteenth of Nisan in the spring we left Egyptian slavery (that's *Pesach*); that seven weeks later, Moses ascended Mount Sinai on the sixth of Sivan in early summer and received the tablets of the Torah (that's *Shavu'ot*); that he stayed on the mountain forty days and nights to absorb the full breadth of the Torah's essence, and that on the seventeenth of Tammuz he descended the mountain to give this precious gift to our people, only to see them dancing around a calf of gold; that he smashed the tablets, thus marking that day, *Shiv'ah Asar b'Tammuz*, as a dark date forever in Jewish history;

That three weeks later, on the Ninth of Av, Moses purged the Israelite community of its rebels; that on the first of Elul in late summer, Moses returned to the mountaintop with a new, blank pair of tablets; that he remained there forty days and nights; and that on the fortieth day – you guessed it – the tenth of Tishrey, which is this very day – he descended one last time with new tablets and a new lease on life for us all.

Hence *Yom Kippur*, the Tenth of Tishrey, is the day we both get and give a second chance.

But with one caveat: We are not allowed to throw away the fragments of the first set of tablets! We must keep them always to remind us of what we have lost, and to remind us of *how* we lost what we have lost. To remind us of what we did terribly wrong, either *bish'gagah*, by negligence or carelessness, or *b'meizid*, by willful intent.

And you will hear those two words again and again throughout the Yom Kippur liturgy: *bish'gagah*, by negligence, and *b'meizid*, by willful intent. One, says the machzor, is entirely forgivable if we own our carelessness and examine our ways. The other *may* be forgivable, but unfortunately it may be too late to make a difference.

III.

Let us go back in the story to Elul, to late summer, where Moses prepares to ascend a second time. God will invite Moses to begin this journey of penitence by carving a new set of tablets “like the first ones *that you broke*” – *karishonim asher shibarta*.

This is like saying to your spouse, “Honey, don’t worry, I took care of the Con Ed bill – *which you forgot to pay.*”

It doesn’t help the relationship to add that last phrase. It may reflect the naked truth of one’s resentment, but it does more to break the relationship than to repair what may already be less than whole.

Is God being vindictive here? The Rabbis certainly don’t think so. In the words “*asher shibarta*,” “which you broke,” they hear a word play. They hear God saying “*sh’koiach*,” meaning “Good for you – may your strength increase.” “Good for you, Moses, that you broke those tablets!” “*Yasher koach asher shibarta.*”

First of all, the Rabbis are telling us that the tablets are merely a written record of the true promise. The true promise has already been broken. The tablets in their “whole” form are now useless, even if they could be glued back together.

By breaking the tablets, Moses is providing something truly useful in the project of repairing the broken trust between themselves and God, and between themselves and themselves.

The Talmud tells us, “*luchot v’shivrey luchot munachim ba’aron.*” “Both the tablets and the broken tablets rested in the portable Ark.”

Here is one of the most radical statements in the entirety of Rabbinic literature. Yes, the Rabbis are saying, the new (whole) set of tablets will be precious – priceless - to this people as they slowly re-learn the terms of the covenant, re-learn the “new normal” of social contracts, and press ever onward.

But the fragments of the first set will become equally valuable, perhaps *more* valuable, in that they will serve as a constant reminder of how fragile this world can be. The shards, shaking around in the box the Israelites will carry with them all the way to the Promised Land, will remind these worse-than-negligent folk to do everything in their power *not* to break what is whole, and to repair what is broken. To learn to say, in effect, “WHAT IF?” *before* they let matters get out of control.

IV.

“*Shkoiach*” to our leadership in this micro-community of ours for saving lives by acting quickly and conservatively. We continue to be far more cautious than our neighbors in this regard, and our fears that members would leave us because of it have not panned out. On the contrary, our young and old congregants have redoubled their commitment to the synagogue, the Torah La’am Hebrew school, the services and activities we offer, and the social action projects we devote ourselves to. *Shkoiach* to all of you.

In our larger community, however – our country and our world – we will need to do a lot of backbreaking bending over to pick up the many pieces scattered across the ground - the million pieces of our social contract lying shattered at our feet like Moses’s original tablets.

What shards will we need to place in our Ark going forward from this intractable place?

First, our dead. Our two members of Bet Am Shalom and seven members of our extended Bet Am Shalom family who died of COVID-19, and the twenty souls in our extended family who died of other causes during these months, but most of whom died alone because we were not allowed to visit their death beds.

Our two-hundred thousand American dead. Our million-plus dead among the family of humanity: Our dead who might have died no matter what, and our dead who died from our negligence, *bish'gagah*, and of course our dead who died *b'meizid*, from our inexcusably arrogant, willful policies and practices. From our bickering and lying. From our rejection of the Rabbis' most precious decree, *pikuach nefesh*, the placing of life above all else.

Those million shards alone will make this box heavier than any of us can carry alone. It will continue to weigh on our shoulders and our backs, and, one hopes, on our collective conscience, until we can learn the lesson of our own idolatry, our worship of what we want over what we need to do.

And there are so many more shards to put in that box, some of them personal and some of them shared with all of society: Our broken promises; broken aspirations; broken health; broken healthcare systems; broken societies; broken faith; broken relationships.

Brokenness is now more or less the norm in this world. But the attempt to *heal* the brokenness – that, too, is normal. It's human. It's Godly. It's what the kabbalists call "*tikkun olam*." Repairing the broken world. Or "*teshuvah*," if you will. "Returning" to a state of wholeness. Or more realistically, to a state where we can *recall* some modicum of wholeness, enough so to replicate it in a newly rebuilt world, a new set of tablets *like* the first ones *that we broke!*

V.

On this night, and throughout the day ahead of us, we will make many sounds from our throats, as well as from our stomachs as the fast wears on. We will sing at the top of our vocal range, and we will sing *b'kol d'mamah dakah*, in a still small voice from within our trembling souls. As we sing, let us listen for the sound of the shards shaking around in our Ark, grating against one another as if to say, "Please, people, don't we represent enough suffering for one lifetime? Please listen to our miserable crackling, and vow to do better."

On this night when everything feels broken beyond repair, it is good to hear those shards rattling around in the holy ark we carry with us through life. It's good to remember that we can carry that burden together, and that together we can do even more: We can carve out a new set of tablets for humanity and our world. A new *better-than-normal*. *We can do better and be better.*

The job of decent human beings is to keep the world together; and when that world breaks, as it inevitably does, our job is to try to put it back together. That is a daunting task, but it is the only task worth pursuing. It is the task of the Tenth of Tishrey – *and ever after.*