

Rabbi Hannah L. Goldstein
Temple Sinai Washington D.C.
Yom Kippur Morning 5783
Jewish Wisdom for the End of the World

About a month ago, I called Lynn Sweet, a member of our congregation. Lynn is the Washington Bureau Chief for the Chicago-Sun Times. Lynn was in Highland Park on July 4th, visiting her sister. She went to the Independence Day Parade, along with many others, and soon found herself in the midst of a mass shooting. While others ran away, Lynn ran toward the sound of the shots, her journalistic instincts kicking in. Lynn stood as the world that she had known, that so many residents of Highland Park had known, came to an end. Lynn was a witness to the randomness, the brutal uncertainty that we face when we rise to another day. On that sunny July morning, Lynn stood amidst 7 worlds that had ended, and hundreds more that were changed forever.

It is possible that we are living at the end of the world. For the first time in my lifetime, I am quite afraid of what the future holds. About what kind of world I will leave for my daughter. And I know that I am not alone. It is humbling and frightening to hear some of you express a similar sentiment; seasoned Washingtonians who have stood at the nerve center of the country during some of our nation's darkest moments. But our world is flooding and burning. We look to November anxious not just about who will win, but wondering if democracy can weather the storm. The life expectancy in this country is declining, the chasm between rich and poor is growing. It is hard to feel hopeful about the future.

At the same time, there is a kind of narcissism that accompanies this type of thinking. As Emily St. John Mandel writes in her recent science fiction novel, *Sea of Tranquility*, "When have we ever believed that the world *wasn't* ending?" She goes on to say, "I think, as a species, we have a desire to believe that we're living at the climax of the story. It's a kind of narcissism. We want to believe that we're uniquely important, that we're living at the end of history, that now, after all these millennia of false alarms, now is finally the worst that it's ever been, that finally we have reached the end of the world." And so, she resolves this by suggesting, "We might reasonably think of the end of the world...as a continuous and never-ending process."¹

¹ *Sea of Tranquility*, Emily St. John Mandel.

Rabbi Hannah L. Goldstein
Yom Kippur Morning 5783

On Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about birth- about Rosh Hashanah as a holiday of eternal pregnancy, and all of the creative potential that contains.² Today, on Yom Kippur, we eternally imagine the end. Sure, it's probably narcissistic to think that it will happen now...on our watch. But that's what this day is for, to consider how to live when the end of the world may be right around the corner.

But, we, the Jewish people, are uniquely prepared to meet the moment! We are great, as a people, the Jewish people, at preparing for the end of the world. We have been doing it almost since the world was created. God creates this lovely world, and suddenly...boom, a few generations later, God sends a flood nearly destroying the whole thing. It's the second portion of the Torah. This morning, I want to share some Jewish wisdom with you about preparing for the end of the world.

We can find this wisdom, right here, in our liturgy for this holy season. Earlier in our service, we turned to the text of *unetaneh tokef*. Some of our most haunting liturgy. We imagine God sitting before an open book, with all of our names inscribed, making a decision, about who shall live and who shall die...who shall see ripe age and who shall not. Then at the end, we say, “*Utshuvah, utfilah, utzidakah, ma'avirin et roah ha'gizeirah.*” We read it together in English: “But repentance, prayer, and charity temper judgment’s severe decree.”

On its face, this is an absurd and un-believable theology. To imagine that those poor souls in Florida who died as the waters rose in their homes, should have prayed a little harder, or given more to charity, or apologized to someone they had wronged. As if that is what could have saved them. Each of us knows personally, beloved, wonderful people who have suffered. I cannot subscribe to a Judaism that says it is their own fault.

But there is another way to read this text that resonates, and even inspires. First, we must confront the reality that judgment’s severe decree...that is a given. All of us will die. But repentance, prayer and charity can help us live meaningfully and well in spite of the inevitable end. And so, if the end of the world is upon us, *tshuvah, tefilah, tzedakah* help us to live with that reality.³

² [Check out](#) my Rosh Hashanah sermon!

³ I've seen this idea in a few different places, Rabbi Toba Spitzer spoke about it on a recent [episode of the podcast Chutzpod](#). Rabbi Sharon Brous also writes about this in her piece “At the Edge of the Abyss” in the collection *Who By Fire, Who By Water*.

Rabbi Hannah L. Goldstein
Yom Kippur Morning 5783

Teshuva means turning, or returning. On Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi Roos spoke about NASA's Dart mission, and that evening it successfully collided with the asteroid... That felt like a good sign that we're starting the new year on the right path. I want to build on Rabbi Roos's words from Rosh Hashanah.⁴ On Yom Kippur, we add time, our mortality, into the equation.

In the Talmud we read that Rabbi Eliezer teaches, "Repent the day before you die." His students ask him, "How do you know when you are going to die?" He replied, "All the more so—one should repent today lest he die tomorrow; thus he will spend his entire life in a state of repentance."⁵ Yom Kippur reminds us that we do not have infinite time to change course.

Now is the time to make things right. When we know that we have done harm, now is the time for repair. And, this is the time to assess if we are on the right path. Teshuva isn't just an apology for the worst things that we've done, it's an opportunity to consider if we are living the life we want to be living. If our priorities are in sync with our values, if our time is allocated to that which we truly believe is most important.

My daughter is turning two on Friday, but she's already feeling *very* two. She is extremely clear about what she wants. But sometimes, she will accept it if you say "not right now." And then she will nod her head sagely and say, "tomorrow." This is good, and it is extremely helpful when it concerns getting a donut, or drawing with sidewalk chalk while wearing a clean outfit. But most of the time, we also labor under that same assumption, that there is always tomorrow. That there will be countless tomorrows, endless opportunities to change course. Yom Kippur is a flashing neon sign reminding us that tomorrow is not a given. If we truly believed that the world was ending, how would we want to be spending our time? What do we need to change? *Teshuva* calls out to us that now is the time to make things right.

Tefilah means prayer. Now, if someone told you the world was ending tomorrow, I am not sure you would jump in the car and drive straight to Temple Sinai. But, if you had to figure out how to live in a world that was eternally ending, this isn't a bad place to spend your time. It's where many of you come when things feel scary and out of sync. When you are experiencing a loss, or trying to make sense of a challenge. Part of what made the early phase of the pandemic

⁴ [Check out](#) the inspiring sermon Rabbi Roos delivered on Rosh Hashanah!

⁵ Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 153a

Rabbi Hannah L. Goldstein
Yom Kippur Morning 5783

so difficult was our inability to find our way back to each other when the world felt like it might be ending.

Prayer is about ritual and mindfulness, it's about silence and song. It's about ordering time, and reconnecting with gratitude, and humility and hope. It's about joining our voices to a chorus that has been singing across centuries. It reminds us of all that our ancestors endured and the strength that lies dormant in our identities. Prayer is about people. Like that old joke – a man was asked why he goes to synagogue. “Well, Goldberg goes to synagogue to talk to God, and I go to talk to Goldberg.”

Prayer is about *collective effervescence*- a term coined by 20th century sociologist Emile Durkheim. It's that sense of immersive belonging that you feel when you and tens of thousands of strangers sing along to Elton John at Nats Park, when you are part of a thunderous wave of sound as your cheer for your favorite sports team, when you chant for justice marching through the streets, or when you add your voice to an ancient melody that our people has sustained through the generations. Durkheim suggests that collective effervescence is not far removed from delirium.⁶ And it makes sense, prayer helps us transcend the reality of the world around us. Not necessarily because you're speaking in tongues or are in a deep meditative trance- but because you found a bit of stillness in a busy, busy world. Or because you sang loud, not because you're great at singing, but because your soul was stirred.

Ours is a world that sometimes needs to be transcended, in order to be appreciated, in order to be mourned. Tefilah helps us to endure life in a broken and eternally ending world.

Tzedakah is how we cultivate hope even though the world might be ending. Many of us associate the word tzedakah with charitable giving. For those of us who attended religious school, it may conjure up the image of a box where you placed loose change at the beginning of class. But tzedakah is deeper, its root is tzedek, it's a call to acts of justice. To turn toward tzedakah, even in times of hopelessness, is a check on despair.

There is an F. Scott Fitzgerald quotation that is likely familiar to many of you, “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.” But what follows is perhaps more profound. “One should,

⁶ *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Emile Durkheim.

Rabbi Hannah L. Goldstein
Yom Kippur Morning 5783

for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise.”⁷

To act to make the world better, to do acts of justice, to serve and support others, in times of despair, can seem futile. But to do this, to keep pushing for change, to keep pursuing a better world, even as we see that the one in which we live is deeply and irrevocably broken, is to live with hope. It is to do our piece, just in case the world doesn't end. Perhaps, the world that is ending, might give way to the creation of a world that is new and better.

The New Yorker recently shared a conversation between Jia Tolentina and Rebecca Ehrenreich following Ehrenreich's death last month. Ehrenreich was an author and an activist, and she spent her lifetime shining a light on economic injustice and inequality. At the end of the interview she was asked, “Do you ever have to guard against feelings of futility?” She responded, “The idea is not that we will win in our own lifetimes and that's the measure of us but that we will die trying. That's all I can say.”⁸

Even if the world is ending, or if our world is ending, we are called to act in service of a more just world. Not because we will win every time, but because we have no alternative.

Teshuva, tefilah, tzedakah...today we contemplate the ongoing ending of the world. We confront the possibility that perhaps...it really is us, that we are the generation that will bear witness to the end. And, we allow ourselves to imagine the smaller endings, the more personal endings that change our worlds, the worlds that we've come to know. The loss of loved ones, and the frightening image of our whole world continuing, with us absent from it. Today, we consider how to live in a world, where we don't know what tomorrow might bring. Today we prepare for the end of the world, because it awakens us to the sacredness of the time that we have. Time that we might fill with *teshuva, tefilah, and tzedakah*.

When I called Lynn Sweet last month, it was because I wanted to invite her to speak today. Who better to reflect on trying to live in an eternally ending world than someone who stood before death at an Independence Day Parade. Who told the nation the story of the end of a world. Lynn is back in Highland Park Chicago for the holiday, so she wasn't able to join us this

⁷ The quotation comes from “The Crack-Up” by F. Scott Fitzgerald. I read about it in Rebecca Slonit's book, *Hope in the Dark*, which is beautiful and worth reading if you're worried about the end of the world.

⁸ The interview, “[Barbara Ehrenreich Is Not an Optimist, but She Has Hope for the Future](#),” was first published in The New Yorker on March 21, 2020.

Rabbi Hannah L. Goldstein
Yom Kippur Morning 5783

morning. But after chatting about what she's been seeing and learning in Highland Park since the shooting, Lynn was much more interested in talking about my sermon. She had...some advice. She suggested - and I'm paraphrasing - that I boil it down - provide the easy to understand takeaways that I want people to remember. Tell them exactly what you're going to say, say it, then remind them again at the end.

So Lynn, this is for you: On Yom Kippur, we confront the fragility of our lives- and the fragility of our world. We live in a world that is eternally ending, it is an undeniable truth. So we must make the most of the time that we have. Teshuva: we examine our path and make sure that we are living the lives we want to be living. Tefilah: we seek out community and meaning and transcendence. Tzedakah: we do our part to build a more just world, knowing we will never finish the job. We heed the advice of our liturgy...*Tefilah, tshuva, tzedakah*, our Jewish wisdom for the end of the world.⁹

⁹ Thanks to Lynn Sweet for her willingness to appear in my sermon, and for her advice, and for her tireless work to tell important stories.