

Yom Ki-Purim 5782: Tips on Living in a Topsy-Turvy World
Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, September 16th 2021

“I want to tell you about Dave,” Sarah Tuttle-Singer writes. “Dave drives a taxi in Manhattan, and he picked me up from the Upper West Side near Central Park on a rainy morning in April.”ⁱ An American living in Israel, and a journalist, Sarah never misses an opportunity to hear someone’s story:

“How long have you been driving a taxi?”

“Since September 11, 2002,” he paused. “You know, a year after 9/11.”

“What happened?”

“I was in the North tower - I’m a lawyer. I mean, I **was** a lawyer. I was late to a meeting because the taxi driver was new and got lost. This was before GPS, and the guy barely spoke English. So the plane hit. And I was late so I was just getting to the building. But I wasn’t where I was supposed to be. Being late saved my life.”

“Oh my God.”

“It was a catastrophe. The smoke, the ashes. All the screaming. But that was a crazy day. I remember I was just getting to the door and boom it happened. Then for a second there was only nothing, like it was only a second but it like the whole world got sucked out into this nothingness for that one second and then it was noise and chaos and screaming and people and everything.”

“It must have been a nightmare.”

“No, it was worse because we were awake. I still had my coffee in one hand and my briefcase in the other, and I couldn’t let go of either. I just stood there like I grew roots and then this young cop told me to move so I did like I was told and I just walked and walked trying to find my wife. She was pregnant.”

“Was she ok?”

“She was fine. She was at home not far from where I picked you up,” his voice lowers like he’s ashamed. “I came home and I couldn’t cope. I just couldn’t cope. And she couldn’t cope with me and she lost the baby. It got worse. And I couldn’t concentrate. The only thing that calmed me down was riding taxis - because that

driver had saved my life by being late. I just felt safe in taxis. So I would finish work and just ride in them...”

“That must have been so hard.”

“It was. But then my wife said to me in the middle of a fight ‘why don’t you just quit your job and drive a taxi?’ And then this warm feeling washed all over me. I knew it was what God wanted me to do. So I left the firm and became a taxi driver on the first anniversary of 9/11.”

“That’s amazing,” I said with a lump in my throat.

“It was just the right path. That taxi driver saved my life because of a matter of seconds and missing some stupid turn. But I know it was really God watching over us. Maybe I’ll be able to do the same for someone else.”

Dave looked up at the roof. “God is in charge but we are His partners here on earth. And this is what I’m meant to do. Hashem take the wheel.”

It’s hard to believe it’s been twenty years since 9/11. That year, Rosh Hashanah began on September 17. I was living in New York and studying to be a rabbi. Lower Manhattan, where my classes were held, was still smoking. It was my first High Holy Days giving sermons.

Two years later, I started as assistant rabbi at Rodeph Sholom in Manhattan – on the Upper West Side, near Central Park. It was there that I really heard the stories. Of the firefighters from the station around the corner who never came back. Of the congregant who worked in finance, whose son took his first steps that day, while his father died in the towers. So, I feel a certain pang when I hear stories like the one Sarah Tuttle-Singer recounts. It’s not that I don’t believe what happened to Dave; I do. It’s that that split-second difference – being early or late, taking the right turn or the wrong one – always works both ways.

On Rosh Hashanah, we read the story of Abraham, taking his son Isaac up the mountain with a knife. Soon after their return – the sacrifice having been averted at the last possible moment – Sarah, Isaac’s mother, dies. Why? Because, Rashi says, Isaac was *almost* slaughtered – *kimat she’lo nishchat*. That “almost” – that near miss – was what killed her. “This is the way of humanity,” says another commentator, the Maharal of Prague: “to be shocked upon hearing that only a small thing, *davar muat*, kept one alive.”ⁱⁱ

All this is brought together by Erin Leib Smokler in a powerful new anthology, *Torah in a Time of Plague*. She says that there are moments in our lives which put us into

theological vertigo – when the world just stops making sense.ⁱⁱⁱ Or rather, there are times when we realize what we usually ignore: that there is always just *davar muat*, just some small thing, making the difference between life and death.

It's a heavy message, appropriate for Yom Kippur: *Who will live, we ask, and who will die*. But the brilliance of Judaism is not just that we bring these existential themes into the cycle of the year – the brilliance of Judaism is that sometimes, we realize it's too much. Sometimes, those themes are already close to home. Sometimes, we need to respond to this theological vertigo not by embracing it, but by turning it on its head.

And so, twenty years after I gave my first High Holy Day sermons, I want to talk about Purim on Yom Kippur.

You know, Purim. That holiday where we get dressed up and eat lots of food and do silly things. When this bima gets transformed into the set for the Purim shpiel, becoming a Jedi training ground or Hogwarts or the Land of Oz. Now, this connection between Purim and Yom Kippur isn't just some newfangled idea from your friendly neighbourhood Reform rabbi. It goes back to the Vilna Gaon, the genius 18th century sage. *Yom Kippurim hu Yom Ki-Purim*, he said, punning on the names: "Yom Kippur is like Purim."^{iv}

And so, if not now, when? What better time to make the connection between Yom Kippur and Purim than this topsy-turvy year?

The connections run deeper than the names. As silly as our celebrations may be, Purim too is based on existential themes. The fate of an entire people determined by an evil counsellor and a drunken king? The date of the disaster set by random draw? A biblical story without God? That's Purim. We often describe Purim as, "they tried to kill us, we won, let's eat." But not so fast. Haman's plans almost succeeded. Just like Isaac almost didn't make it down the mountain. Or Dave almost got to work on time. Both Purim and Yom Kippur confront us with the contingency of our lives.

Shanah tovah.

Just kidding. I won't leave you there.

So now what – *az mah?* Let me suggest we take the four central *mitzvot*, commandments, of Purim and apply them to today.

One: *kriat megillah*. Read the Megillah. Tell the story. I told Alice, my 11-year-old, that she should write an account of her experience in these strange times, for when

her grandchildren ask her what it was like. Good pre-teen that she is, she turned the challenge back to me: “If you think it’s so important, why don’t you write something, mom?” I told her that her account would be more dramatic. But the truth is, each of us has a story to tell from the pandemic. Who we worried about. How we helped. What we lost, and what we gained. Telling those stories will help determine how we go forward – whether the world we re-enter will be better than before.

Two: *mishloach manot*. Sending gifts and food to friends. We’ve done a lot of this one. You know how when you order groceries, you don’t always get what you wanted? In our home, we’re still laughing about the Passover order when we were sent seltzer as a substitution for matzah. But it gets more complicated when there are things you just don’t eat. What happens when you order a plain cheese frozen pizza and get pepperoni instead? Or when you order vegetarian baked beans and get the ones with pork? Fortunately, some of my best friends don’t keep kosher, so our loss is their gain. Except as often as not, they have something they got too much of or they baked up a storm, and I never come back empty handed. These upside-down times have led us back to sharing and bartering, to giving and receiving. Which of course, is what we did for millennia; our delusions of self-sufficiency are the product of modern times. But over the past eighteen months, through times of isolation, we have found ways to reconnect. Temple has done this too, giving food and gifts for Purim, yes, but also for Passover and Rosh Hashanah. Our new Kugel Club sends home-cooked meals to our members when they’re experiencing illness or grief, a new baby or a move – whenever a little something extra would help. We all need to give. We all need to receive. And not just once a year.

Three: *matanot l’avyonim*. Gifts to the poor. This is different than giving to the people we know, to our fellow congregants and friends. This is our Caring Cooks, who pivoted from cooking together in Temple’s kitchen to each preparing food in their homes. Since January, they’ve made over 2770 meals for Share the Warmth – and over 6535 sandwiches, 1835 muffins, and 1028 cookies for Resilience by Cabot Square. This is Tushes and Toes, where we gave hundreds of pairs of new socks and underwear to people in shelters or on the street. But as Jews, we are called not just to meet immediate needs, to feed the hungry and clothe the naked; we are also called to change the system that leads to these very needs. So yes, we respond to the needs of the people in Cabot Square, many of whom come from the First Peoples of this land – but we also are commanded to do more. We are starting a working group on truth and reconciliation, developing a land acknowledgment, listening and learning and acting. Giving is not charity; it is justice.

Fourth, and last: *Se'udat mitzvah*. The festive meal. Apologies – I am not about to announce that we are serving lunch after the Yom Kippur service. But just like our fast should be meaningful, our feasts should be meaningful too. It's never just about the food. Maimonides writes:

...whoever locks the doors of the courtyard, and eats and drinks with his wife and children, and does not provide food and drink for [others], this is not a 'celebration of a mitzvah,' but rather a 'celebration of the belly'... and this type of celebration is a disgrace."^v

Build a longer table, not a taller wall. When we do gather freely again, and we will, I want us to challenge ourselves to lengthen our tables, so everyone has a seat. People without family here, or without Jewish family at all. Widows and widowers, students and seniors. Your table doesn't need to be perfect. It just needs to make room.

My friends. We do not know what next year will bring. We don't even know what tomorrow will bring. And so, on this day of Yom Kippur, in this topsy-turvy world in which life and death are separated only by *davar mu'at*, by such small things – may we live like it is Purim: telling our stories, caring for our community, acting for justice and making room at our tables. These small things are in our hands – and maybe they are not so small after all.

Shanah tovah.

ⁱ Sarah Tuttle-Singer, "God, Take the Wheel," *Times of Israel*, Sept. 11, 2020 (<https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/hashem-take-the-wheel/>).

ⁱⁱ Cited in Erin Leib Smokler, "Introduction: Theological Vertigo in Proximity to Plague," in Smokler, ed., *Torah in a Time of Plague: Historical and Contemporary Jewish Responses* (Teaneck, NJ, 2021), pp.1-2. I first heard her teach these ideas in her lecture, "Torah in a Time of Plague," at the Hartman Rabbinic Torah Seminar, July 11, 2021 (<https://www.hartman.org.il/torah-in-a-time-of-plague-contemporary-and-historical-jewish-reflections/>). Her lecture, and conversations with my chevruta Rabbi Michael Latz, inspired this sermon.

ⁱⁱⁱ The phrase "theological vertigo" comes from Avivah Zornberg, also cited in Smokler's introduction.

^{iv} Pachad Yitzhak, Purim 8 (Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner, citing the Vilna Gaon in reference to BT Pesachim 68b).

^v Mishneh Torah, Laws of Festivals 6:18.