

Uncertainty
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Rosh Hashanah Morning – September 7, 2021

Scott was one of my first *b'nai mitzvah* when I worked in New Jersey. He later was a two-time Youth Group President. I was touched when he asked if I would officiate at his marriage to Sarah. It was a big wedding with lots of details and would take place in Santa Rosa, California. And it was for May 2020.

The wedding was postponed in early April 2020. Scott asked me when I thought it was safe to reschedule it. People often ask rabbis questions we have no better information to answer than themselves. I told him I didn't know. The lack of clarity was a real challenge as he was eager to get married.

Uncertainty is a hard state to live in. Anticipating tomorrow is what allows us to buy groceries for the week, leave a homework assignment for later, plan a trip, buy a new outfit for later, or wait to ask someone a question.

Judaism is a religion full of certainties – we know the calendar, so we know Rosh Hashanah came “early” this year or that Shabbat will be every Friday and Saturday. God does not seem as keen on sharing certitudes in the Torah, especially with Abraham. *Parashat Lech L'cha* will be read in a few weeks by our Adult B'nai Mitzvah class – a group that was once certain their service would take place in May 2020. There God tells Abraham to head to a new land that I will show you. How many of us would take a trip without knowing the destination at all? In the Torah portion for this morning, the *Akkedah*, God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, on the mountain I will show you. Again, Abraham has to take incredible risks without any clarity or direction or the purpose of the command.

A great thinker once said: “You've got to be very careful if you don't know where you are going because you might not get there.” That was quipped by Yogi Berra.

While we may rely on assurances to plan for tomorrow, we know that uncertainty might pop up at any moment. A car accident, raging waters into the basement, a hysterical toddler, another's person's choices, a command by God, a positive COVID test can rearrange every aspect of our defined plans in a moment.

The Jewish sages understood this. In our *machzor*, we read: “On Rosh Hashanah, this is written; on the Fast of Yom Kippur, this is sealed: How many will pass away from this world, how many will be born into it; who will live and who will die.” This is not a divine pre-determined list of our fates. It is recognition that in the next year,

so much can happen to all of us that never predicted. Don't be so confident about tomorrow.

By the end of May of 2020, Scott jumped into action. He picked a new date in August 2020 after consulting his family, friends, me, and every vendor. It'd be an outside wedding and as safe as could be. He put structure into the cloudiness of his life.

But we all remember August a year ago. The wedding was put on hold again, now for April 2021, when surely things would be fine. It should have been a time of celebration and joy for this wonderful couple. Instead, it was a seemingly endless stretch of confusion and mystery.

We live in a world of uncertainty like never before. Every week, we are challenged by another issue and how we should respond to it. Israel, Afghanistan, the environment, abortion, racial injustice, voting rights – it is an endless list of concerns without a clear path. What we do know is that while we struggle with the present, God is not going to show us the mountain top. We have to make the decisions ourselves for the future.

“Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our own light,” wrote Brené Brown. Finding the path to move forward can be difficult. It is easier when we find strength in others.

A man is lost in the woods. The paths he takes all seem to go in circles, and the day is passing quickly. He has no food to eat, nor is he prepared to spend the night in the forest.

Suddenly he spots something on the road ahead. Slowly, to his great joy, he realizes that there is another person on the road. He runs to ask them to point out the path home.

“Tell me, please, which is the road that will lead me out of this forest?”

The other person looks sad and replies, “I am afraid that I cannot help you. You see, I, too, am lost in this forest. However, this I can tell you: the road we are on is not the path home. Let us travel and find our way out of these woods together.”

This is a moment to help find the way forward. Rabbi Randall J. Konigsburg wrote, “Rosh Hashanah is the time we gather together to assess the progress we have made over the past year, to see where we are running in circles, and to examine all the wrong turns we have made. We may not yet be sure where we are going, but we are

together during this holiday to help show each other, if not a better way, then at least which way is the wrong way.”¹

When the news of the day is overwhelming and uncertain, we can turn off the TV and curl up in a ball. But denying it doesn't make it go away. It's time to find someone else's strength and face it together. The pandemic made that more challenging, isolating us from many of the people we rely on and who count on us. We powered through.

When we are beset by a loss or illness, the future unclear and dark, we know we find others. Friends to hold onto, a *mi shebeirach* to share. In the shadow of loss, we come together for a funeral, for a shiva minyan; we don't do it alone.

In uncertain times, we have to be ready to try something different, change our set goals to recognize the changing world. I asked Scott and Sarah to consider what they really wanted. Was it the big wedding or being married that they wanted? “Both,” they answered honestly. “But right now, being married.”

In April 2021, we held a small backyard wedding in Brooklyn of just the couple's immediate family. It was a huge exhale to actually take a real step forward after all this time. Two weeks ago, I stood under the *chuppah* with the couple outside in Santa Rosa, California for their big wedding. It was smaller than they planned and had many safety rules in play. It was a moment of clarity in the 18 months since their originally planned wedding. They had grown closer, living together in the pandemic. They appreciated everyone who was able to come with joyous gratitude. Holding onto each other and those around them, they had come to a moment of certitude in a life that was full of clouds.

In this new year, we are still surrounded by a lack of clarity. The pandemic, politics, our own lives can be a struggle to face. We still embrace the good and possible. We still look to each other for support and hope. We travel to unknown destinations in these woods, yet we will walk them together.

¹ <https://www.sun-sentinel.com/news/fl-xpm-1998-09-18-9809170112-story.html>