

Uncertainty
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The Reform Temple of Forest Hills
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We love certainty. The idea that we can leave our homes in the morning, and it'll all be there when we return. That when we say, "see you soon," we actually might see that person soon. But the world around us is not complying. There is despair, overwhelm, and constant change to go around. We live in uncertain times.

In 2019, Dr. David Nicoll wrote, "The 21st Century is barely two decades old, but already it's clear that it's going to be a century unlike any we've ever known...It will be the challenge of a lifetime, an experience marked by uncertainty and anxiety."¹ He was reflecting primarily on the 9/11 attacks and the recession of 2008. Since he offered those words, we've seen a global pandemic, an insurrection of the American government on January 6, and weekly once-in-a-hundred-year weather events.

How do we act when the present is full of such disruption? How do we act when the future is such in doubt? How do we not just give up?

The Jewish people know from uncertainty. Starting from Abraham and Sarah's journey to a "land that God will show you," we have always lived in unclear circumstances. But we crave certitude. When Moses went up to Mount Sinai, the Israelites lacked any connection with God that they could see or touch or hear. So they turned to idolatry and built a Golden Calf to meet their needs for something tangible.

We, too, yearn for a more direct connection with something outside ourselves. We need something to hold onto when the sky is cloudy and full of dread. On Yom Kippur, we offer prayer to create that link. But "Thoughts and Prayers," as so often posted after acts of violence, are clearly not enough. It is action that makes a difference in the face of uncertainty.

"Action is the antidote to despair," singer and activist Joan Baez taught. It is easy to throw our hands up and say whatever we do doesn't matter. That's why we have to share the story of the starfish every few years.

A boy was standing on the beach throwing starfish that had washed up back into the ocean. An man approached him and asked, "What are you doing?" The boy explained that he was saving the starfish by throwing them back into the sea before the sun's heat killed them. Upon hearing this, the man commented, "Young man,

don't you realize that there are hundreds of starfish all along the many miles of this beach? The few dozen starfish that you throw back can't possibly make a difference!" At this, the boy bent down, picked up another starfish, and threw it into the ocean. As it met the water, the child said to the man, "It made a difference for that one."

When we hear the names of people who are sick before the healing prayer on Shabbat, we recognize the pain and uncertainty in their lives. That's a start. When we move beyond prayer to reaching out, making a call, providing meals or a ride, our actions speak more than our best wishes. It makes a difference to that person.

I like lists. There is something so satisfying about crossing off an item or finally completing a set of tasks. We rarely get that luxury in life. Most things remain open-ended, with more to do, if not today, then tomorrow. In the comic strip *Zits* by Jerry Scott and Jim Borgman, teenager Jeremy complains to his mom that cleaning his room doesn't make sense. It will just get dirty again. She simply replies, "Jeremy, why should I feed you? You're just going to get hungry again."

What we do today actually matters and challenges despair. The kindness you show right now is still kindness, even if tomorrow is uncertain or full of woe. Eric and Kathy got married after knowing each other for three years. "I knew she was the one the first time we met," Eric said. They wed knowing that Kathy had been diagnosed with ALS, sometimes called Lou Gehrig's disease. There would be no cure, and every day forward would be a greater struggle than yesterday. "We've always had the saying of 'I love you more.' It's not that I love you more than you love me," added Eric. "It's that I love you more than what's happening or what's going on around us."² We are never going to be given guarantees for tomorrow, so it is our actions today that have true meaning.

Moving from day to day without having the ending revealed or guaranteed can paralyze us. Not knowing what might happen can keep us from applying for a job or asking someone on a date or trying something new.

Knowing the results can give us comfort. When we watch a romantic comedy, we are certain the couple will find each other. A fairy tale will end, "They all lived happily ever after." Those moments are rare in real life. Usually, we are faced with ambiguity, and moving ahead takes incredible courage. When the Israelites kept going towards the promised land for four decades in the wilderness, it was hope that motivated them, but their action of moving forward was what made the difference.

In this moment of Yom Kippur, we pray, we learn, we support each other. We have that responsibility. The burden sometimes seems too much. The despair is all around us. What can we do? In the Talmud, Rabbi Meir said: An opponent may bring an argument against you and challenge you, saying: 'If your God loves the poor, why doesn't God support them directly?' In such a case, you should respond: 'God commands us to act as God's representative in helping others.'³

We are the answer. What we do combats the dread and uncertainty of the moment. We can hold onto that as true and real. Love and kindness persevere even as we face renewed worry and stress. These are challenging times, and we are tempted to surrender and go back to bed with the covers pulled over our heads to block out the world.

It's tempting to pretend we have no options. With so much happening, primarily out of our control, our own actions are the way to respond. Our family, friends, community, and world are essential. We can make a difference. Abandoning what is important because it isn't going the way we want it to or how we think it should be is abandoning what matters to us. Every Mets fan knows this. We still have to stay connected because now matters.

So we remember that the State of Israel matters. We struggle with the situation in Israel today and are tempted to say, "It's such a mess. I just can't." Fifty years ago, on this day, the future looked dark for Israel as the Yom Kippur War began. Some gave up on the Jewish State. Whatever happens, we hold onto what is essential to us now and act in the moment. If we let go of it in the present in desperation, then we are hypocrites to come back should things work out.

The future of The Reform Temple of Forest Hills has clouds ahead, too. But today still matters. We are here together, supporting each other and living our values and faith. We still need to be here right now for RTFH with our presence, donations, our time, and our caring. If we turn away in the face of uncertainty, we abandon our truest selves.

Rabbi Israel Friedman tells a story about a small Jewish town. It was far off from the main roads of the land, but it had all the necessary municipal institutions: a mikvah, a cemetery, a hospital, and a law court, as well as all sorts of craftsmen: tailors, shoemakers, carpenters, and masons. One trade, however, was lacking: There was no watchmaker. Over the course of years, many of the clocks became so annoyingly inaccurate that their owners just decided to let them run down and ignore them altogether.⁴ There were others, however, who maintained that as long as the

clocks ran, they should not be abandoned. So they wound their clocks day after day, though they knew that they were not accurate. One day, the news spread through the town that a watchmaker had arrived, and everyone rushed to him with their clocks. But the only ones he could repair were those that had been kept running despite everything. The abandoned clocks had grown too rusty!⁵

We are the watchmakers. Time will always tick into an uncertain future, but we can keep our watches wound. We can make this moment, this time, matter. We'll never finish our to-do list, never solve all the woes before us.

Songwriter Ingrid Michaelson said it beautifully:

Do it right now

Don't waste a minute on the darkness and the pity sitting in your mind

*And do it right now.*⁶

What will you do to combat the darkness and make a difference now?

¹ <https://medium.com/growing-up-waking-up/living-in-an-uncertain-world-774cd57236e8>

² <https://www.fox9.com/news/wisconsin-man-in-hospice-care-with-als-marries-soul-mate>

³ Babylonian Talmud Baba Batra 10a.

⁴ Once upon a time, you need to wind a watch. Winding a watch is what gives this mainspring its power and this can either be done by hand or automatically. As the name suggests, a manual watch needs to be wound by hand. By not winding it, eventually, your timepiece will stop working.

⁵ Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man's Quest for God* (1954).

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liBr59f8drl>