

My friends,

Some years ago there was a popular book by Czech author Milan Kundera. It was called *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. I must confess, I barely remember the book's plot... but I think that we have all been living the title of this book: *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

After 18 months of pandemic, we see how light human life can be, and how lightly it can be taken. It has been, it still is, unbearable. The knowledge that our lives are so easily turned around, lost -- unbearable. We are subject to what biblical scholar Avivah Zornberg calls "theological vertigo." How do we make sense of our life when the ground underneath it keeps shifting at a dizzying rate? How do we absorb so much change, and so much of it for the worse?

I'm going to turn to a Torah reading for the High Holidays that we often *don't* read -- partly because it is a prime example of the unbearable lightness of being. The story is the Akedah, the binding of Isaac. It is the story of Abraham taking the beloved son he and Sarah have prayed for their entire adult lives, and following what Abraham believes is God's command, heading to the mountaintop to sacrifice his son. Isaac survives when Abraham's hand is stayed at the last minute, but Sarah is not so fortunate. The subsequent Torah portion begins, And the life of Sarah was 127 years... and Sarah died.

This juxtaposition of life and death cries out for explanation, in the view of our rabbis. There has to be a connection. Rashi in the 11<sup>th</sup> century explains: "As a result of the news of the Akedah, that her son was prepared for slaughter and was almost slaughtered, her soul flew out of her, and she died."

In other words, Sarah found out about Abraham's little adventure, and the ground shifted under *her*. Did she have a heart attack contemplating her son's ordeal? Did she give up on life in despair learning what her husband Abraham had intended to do? Theological vertigo -- everything she thought she could trust in, believe in, was whipped away in an instant.

Now in the Hebrew, Rashi's phrasing that Isaac was "almost slaughtered" is rendered *kimat shelo nishchat*. That's confusing -- literally, it means he almost wasn't slaughtered. It should be: he almost *was* slaughtered. Five hundred years later, Rabbi Judah Loew, known as the Maharal of Prague, came along to explain the curious phrase. He makes a play on words, using *kim'at/almost* in the sense of

*kimuat/something small*. He wrote: “It seems that because Sarah heard that Isaac was almost slaughtered – that just a small thing, [davar muat] kept him from being slaughtered – for this reason she was shocked. This is the way of humanity: to be shocked upon hearing that only a small thing kept one alive.”

Isn't that true. How often do we hear such things, like the doomed airplane that one person missed boarding because of being stuck in traffic; or the people who just happened that day to have a meeting outside the Twin Towers; people in Surfside whose apartment numbers ended in 09 instead of 10. Small little things, random things kept them from being slaughtered.

And that's precisely what undid Sarah. When the line between life and death becomes vanishingly slim, when trusted people betray you, when it all depends on – what? An accident? Some small twist of fate? The shock threatens one's very existence. If such a thing can happen, if my “being” is so unbearably light, what is the meaning of my life? What was I building for all these years, that it can be gone in an instant? Something small, a hair's breadth, stands between me and the end of everything I held dear.

Plagues can cause the same disorientation, and they are no stranger to our people; we have lived through many over the centuries. In the course of the Great Italian Plague of 1630-31, Abraham Catalano wrote a detailed account of the outbreak in the city of Padua. It is, unfortunately, interesting today. His book was called *Olam Hafuch – The World Turned Upside Down*. And he describes what occurred: bustling cities turned into ghost towns as people fled to the countryside; synagogues abandoned; panicked communities; using Yom Kippur prayers like *Avinu Malkeinu* and the confessionals to beseech God for mercy. And still the relentless progression of the plague.

So how did we survive plagues and other terrible destructions – all the way back to the loss of the Temple in Jerusalem? What did we do?

In a new anthology called *Torah in the Time of Plague*, Rabbi Erin Leib Smokler points to the famous passage in the Talmud [Bava Batra 60b] where the rabbis reflected on what happened after the destruction of the Second Temple. Some Jews went into a mourning so profound that they refused to eat meat or drink wine.

Rabbi Yehoshua asked them, what's going on? They replied, how can we eat meat or drink wine, both of which are associated with the altar in the Temple? Rabbi Yehoshua said, all right, then don't eat bread either, because they used grains in the Temple too. These people -- called *perushim*, those who separate themselves from society -- they said, you're right, we won't eat bread, we can do without it. And we can do without fruits too, because we can't bring our first fruits to the Temple anymore. Finally, Rabbi Yehoshua reminded them that there had been a water libation in the Temple. And the *perushim* fell silent, because they realized they couldn't do without water.

Then Rabbi Yehoshua said to them this noteworthy line: My children, not to mourn at all is impossible, but to mourn excessively is also impossible. Instead, here's what you do: When you plaster your house, leave a small area without plaster to remember the destruction of the Temple. When you prepare a meal, leave out a small item to remember the destruction of the Temple. Go ahead and marry, but remember to smash a glass under the huppah, to signify that life is never whole.

In other words, acknowledge the memory of the destruction with some small act, but do not allow yourself to lose life's larger meaning. Take the *davar mu'at* – the small thing that symbolizes the difference between life and death – and build that into your life-affirming rituals.

Yes, life is sometimes unbearably tenuous, in the words of our liturgy that we will read tomorrow --- like the grass that withers, like flowers that fade, like a passing cloud. But that's not the whole story. After all, the rabbis 2000 years ago built a whole new religious structure to replace the old. Rabbi Art Green teaches that the same Hebrew word for crisis, a *mashber*, is also the word for a birthing stone. I think there's a Chinese equivalent along those lines as well! We must have the moral imagination to seize opportunities, to envision what can be born from the crisis our world is in.

Barbara Breitman, a spiritual director in the Reconstructionist movement, quotes our ancient rabbis as pointing to one quality that a person needs in order to manage the roller coaster of life. Moses had that quality, Joseph had it, Ruth and Naomi had it. They were able to see an *olam hadash*, a new world, a new way of

being and living. The ability to see beyond the life-threatening situations in which they were living allowed them to help bring about a radically different reality.

Breitman cites Indian author and human-rights activist Arundhati Roy speaking about our current situation:

“Whatever it is, coronavirus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could. Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to “normality,” trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture exists. And in the midst of this ... despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. ... Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can ... [be] ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.”

Or, echoed in our tradition, in the words we recite from Psalm 27 each day during this season:

*Had I not had faith that I would once again enjoy the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living ...* the psalmist leaves it open for us to finish the sentence, to imagine the potential for despair in the face of the unbearable lightness of being.

But, concludes the psalm: *Kavei el Adonai ... Look to the Lord.* Or in other translations: Think big! Or in Rabbi Yael Levy’s translation: *Cultivate hope! Let your heart be strong and filled with courage. And cultivate hope.*