

## It's Been a Hell of a Year

By Rabbi Michele B. Medwin, D.Min.  
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My mother had many expressions. One of her favorites was, “Whatever doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” So are we stronger?

It has been a loooooong year. Who would have imagined last year, that COVID would still be with us today. We will take time throughout this High Holy Day Season to reflect on what this year has meant for us, as individuals and as a community.

We have made it to the new year 5782. On Shabbat I ask you to reflect on the past week – thanking God for the blessings in your lives and asking God to give you strength for the challenges you face. On Rosh Hashanah, we do the same, reflecting on the past YEAR! And oh what a year it has been!  
As the Torah says – a year of “blessings and of curses.”

Last year we all sat in front of our screens for HH services, frightened, not knowing what was to come. And here we are one year later, again in front of our screens, so has anything changed?

We have lived through so many losses over the past year – most deeply felt, the loss of loved ones. And sometimes that was exacerbated by not even being able to travel to be with family or friends in mourning. But there were so many other losses we experienced too – loss of freedom, loss of personal contact, loss of innocence, loss of the sense of feeling safe. I don’t think I fully understood all the losses we experienced until that fateful day on Jan 30<sup>th</sup>, 2021, when I got my first COVID vaccine. I sobbed tears of joy and relief. All the pent-up fear, anguish, disbelief that we were really in a global pandemic, was suddenly released.

And just as we thought we were moving forward in the pandemic, we had to close our doors again. I try to take each day as it comes, almost putting blinders on to avoid the stresses of the virus and politics, but every once in a while, when I let myself, pause, it hits me – how amazing it is that we made it through to this point.

Some of you shared with me your experiences over the past year.  
What was the most difficult about the pandemic:

For many, it wasn’t having to wear a mask, or stay indoors, it was separation from family and close friends. The freedom to hug and touch friends and family.  
I think we took for granted, that we would always be able to visit, so we put it off saying, “I am too busy now. It can wait.” And then when we had all the time in the world, we couldn’t visit.

I remember, as cases started to slow down in NY and NJ, our daughter and I realized that we had all been isolating so we would be safe to get together. When I saw her for the first time since the pandemic hit, I grabbed her in a giant embrace, and we both sobbed.

The Jewish expression, Gam Zu l'tovah – you can find goodness even in times like these. So what are the things we have learned from the pandemic?

Here are some responses from you:  
How much we really do need each other  
Life is a balancing act that takes thought and effort and a bit of luck.  
It taught me how and when to say 'no'.

Some felt we even benefited from the pandemic  
The best part was calls from and to friends and family I hadn't spoken to in sometimes several years. A plus is that we have now reconnected and are staying so.

A deepened spiritual path.

Someone shared, 'Many of my fears of growing old and being less physically able have been eliminated. What will keep me busy, productive, and not bored after an infirmity or worse, disablement? Quarantine closed my sports, entertainment, and volunteer venues. I discovered keeping involved has many paths.

A greater connection to the temple community because of Zoom.

People even expressed there are things they would miss:

I will miss the lessening of responsibility for the several organizations I am very involved with giving me time to catch up on several too often put aside "projects".

Slow paced lifestyle

Having all the time in the world to get things done.

For me, I have learned to be more patient, to focus on the positive, and that I do have limits, and the need to honor those limits.

We did make it through physically, but emotionally, I am not so sure. As a mental health therapist, I know what trauma can do to a person. The trauma we have experience over the past year has been deep, unending, frightening, and exhausting. It is Ok to admit that. It is Ok to admit you don't have the energy you used to, or the ability to tolerate stresses as well as you

used to. We have lived under a constant state of stress. I imagine there will be a myriad of research and PhD theses on the mental health effects of living through the pandemic.

**It will take time to heal.** Give yourself permission and time, to grieve all the losses. You need to do this so you can move forward. You may not even realize all the losses you have experienced. One way to help in the healing process is to write the losses down, acknowledge them and reflect on how they have affected you. It will be easier to focus on, and rally appreciate the positives by taking time to acknowledge the losses. Perhaps when we meet tomorrow for Tashlich at Dehoyos Park, in addition to tossing away our "sins," we can imagine each leaf we collect as a loss we experienced, as we toss it into the water, say good bye and send it on its way.

The way to heal from loss is to acknowledge, name, and think about what each of us has lost. Use this time for grieving, reflecting, as a way towards moving forward.

We have been living in fear, but fear looks back, hope brings us into the future. So let's focus on the future as we learn from the past.

Oh Guide My Steps

**“How do we heal our loss and trauma while the pandemic continues on?” (Boston Globe 7/29/21)**

**Katherine Gergen Barnett**

Part of healing from trauma comes from stopping to mark what has been lost.... But in these transitory days of the pandemic when we must keep running forward into the unknown, there have been no collective moments of silence, no memorials built. How do we heal our loss and trauma while the pandemic continues on...?

### **Psalms 118:5-6**

מִן־הַמְצָר קִרְאתִי־יְהוָה, וְעַנֵּי־בְמִרְחֹבֵיהָ: יְהוָה־לִּי אִלֹּהִים, אֲנִי־מִהַיֵּשׁוּעַ־הַלְיָאֵדָם:

From the narrow place, I called to the Eternal, the Eternal answered me from a spacious expanse.

### **B. Menachot 99a**

דברים י, ב אשר שברת ושמתם בארון תני רב יוסף מלמד שהלוחות ושברי

לוחות מונחין בארון

(Deut. 10:2) [At that time the Eternal said to me: Hew for yourself two tablets of stone like the first... And I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets,] **which you broke, and you shall put them in the Ark.** Rav Yosef teaches that the tablets and the broken tablets were placed in the Ark.

### **“Motzi Matzah”**

#### **Ebn Leader**

Our practice has thus become an embodiment of the rabbinic teaching that “the tablets and the fragments of the tablets were put in the Ark of the Covenant” (B. Menachot 99a). Both the tablets that Moshe shattered when he witnessed the Golden Calf and the second whole set of tablets he brought down as a sign of God’s forgiveness find their place in the Ark. As we hold the broken and the whole pieces together in our hands on Passover night and then take them into our body, we do well to reflect on the spiritual challenge posed by holding them both together. Putting the broken tablets in the Ark implies that our shortcomings, our failures, and our worst moments are no less central to our relationship with God than our best moments. Do we dare, do we even know how to bring that kind of fullness into a relationship, human or divine?

### **“The Broken Tablets” Rodger Kamenetz**

The broken tablets were also carried in an Ark.

In so far as they represented everything shattered everything lost. They were the law of broken things.

The leaf torn from the stem in a storm. A cheek touched in fondness once but now the name forgotten.

How they must have rumbled. Clattered on the way

even carried so carefully through the waste land.  
How they must have rattled around until the pieces  
broke into pieces. The edges softened  
crumbling. Dust collected at the bottom of the ark  
Ghosts of old letters. Old laws. In so far  
as a law broken is still remembered.  
These laws were obeyed.  
And in so far as memory preserves the pattern of broken things these bits of stone were  
preserved  
through many journeys and ruined days  
even, they say, into the promised land.

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Im ain Ani li mi li?