

*Erev Rosh HaShanah 5782 Derasha Man Plans*  
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*Der mentch tracht un Got lacht* says the Yiddish proverb: “Man plans God laughs.” The theology and characterization are quintessentially Jewish. We don’t control God, we can’t even fully control our circumstances. But is it really funny this past year and a half? Some humor. As in so many realms we and our synagogue have spent countless hours planning, only to revise plans. We began to re-open this spring, and then issued a new set of guidelines in August. As a guy whose own Hebrew name is Yitzchak, laughter, I’ve felt more stymied than joy. I’m thankful not to know the terror of my original namesake, whose near-sacrifice we read about in the morning. I’ve faced only frustration and disappointment. I originally expected to speak to you tonight about our Jewish wisdom around re-mergence. When I groused to my friend Father Joe he teased: “Eric, put it in the subjunctive.” Alas, that’s not the right message for this Rosh HaShanah. We’re still hunkering down, be it with these masks or watching on Vimeo.

Our lives continue to revolve around the pandemic: its symptoms and effects, the restrictions and impacts. We strategized on containment, and considered the bravery of front-line workers. While most have not gotten the virus, some did. Most recovered, though for some long covid issues linger. We’re especially grateful to our volunteers who organized to help others – mask-making during the early days, shopping and errands. Later many of the vaccinated amongst us expressed gratitude or relief for our good fortune, often comparing side-effects to the job. As restrictions loosened some of the lucky began to reflect on how not all of quarantine was necessarily terrible. Some took it as an opportunity to re-center, save on discretionary spending, or enjoy family meals.

But as we know restrictions have returned with delta, and much is again on hold. Anxiety is again high. People are getting sick again. An adult congregant here was relieved to learn of a Lyme diagnosis. What’s particularly bedeviling is how policies and procedures are slow to match the new threat, including risks to children. Tonight Sephardic Jews chant: תְּבִלָּה שָׁנָה וְקִלּוֹתֶיהָ  
*Bring an end to the year and its woes.* Last Rosh HaShanah completed the year, but not the woes. This *Erev Rosh HaShanah* we reflect on how every time we thought we had this licked, we’ve been disappointed.

*Der mentch tracht un Got lacht.* In experiencing the ups and downs, even should our circumstances remain troubling and sadly farcical, our planning is in no way either frivolous or superfluous. Just the opposite: life demands contingency planning. The Torah tells us we are created *B’tzelem Elohim*, in the Divine Image. Maimonides interprets the aspect of God distinct in us to be our cognitive abilities, how we think and reason. We are taught to celebrate and nurture the intellect; we are taught that predicaments worsen in the absence or disregard of judgment and the mocking of science and public health guidance, as has happened in many states, accordingly with devastating results. Notice how the vast majority of those objecting to mask and vax protocols have little expertise in the subject. Maybe that contributes to their anger and tenacity.

*Der mentch tracht un Got lacht* counsels us not to throw in the towel, but to humbly acknowledge complexity and our limitations, to accept our vulnerability. Goals are elusive, success transitory. Perhaps that's why most of the Torah's narrative is set *outside* the promised land – its metaphor for life as a trek forward, not a settled point. Our Rabbis explain that just as a builder uses architectural plans to erect a home, so were Torah and *Teshuva* (Repentance and Return) used by the Holy One to construct our world. Rosh HaShanah, the birthday of the world, serves as an occasion for us to take stock in our actions and with hope re-engage with our values.

As regards the pandemic, admittedly most of us are doing many things right. Connecticut has high rates of vaccination and mask compliance. Our Jewish community is highly-educated and generally follows best practices. We tend to be cautious and protect our families. We remain patient and vigilant. You might wonder: what else can we do? There is something else: we must also be strong advocates of the social good. A sustained response to our ills must include support for liberal religious institutions and the values we espouse. I see it this way – vaccine and mask-wearing denial didn't emerge overnight. Americans previously embraced inoculations against smallpox, polio, tetanus and the like. I think we're in our present mess because Americans' worst instincts have been allowed to fester in the vacuum resulting from diminished commitment to previous established norms, including mainstream institutional religion and its rational impulses. Mainstream religion has been increasingly eclipsed by the poles of fundamentalism and secularism, to our collective detriment. As I see it, the increasing absence of public worship has made it less likely to be on one's best behavior, thereby further coarsening public discourse.

People inevitably believe in something. If not a Divine Unity than maybe celebrity and consumerism; if not reason than maybe hokum; if not vaccines than horse de-wormer and Hydroxychloroquine. With the Covid-19 virus, at the worst possible moment, we witness a concomitant explosive viral spread of misinformation fed to the alienated and the scared. We watch quasi-religious political cults and their virtual echo-chambers supplant broader faith-based gatherings. It's not that Reform Judaism will readily be accepted as the antidote for Qanon, or that we should be paratroopers jumping into every cultural divide. But the promulgation of ultimate worldviews matter, and we must not shirk from our responsibilities as a distinct presence.

Portraying themselves on Facebook last year as *victims*, extremists in our area tried to appropriate the holocaust by presenting mask wearers as deportees to Auschwitz. So too, members of Congress – Representatives Thomas Massie, Marjorie Taylor Greene and Lauren Boebert –have likened public health measures to curb the spread of Covid-19 to the *Shoah*. These are offensive, obscene analogies that cheapen the memory of the millions of lives cruelly lost. It's also part of an increasingly pervasive viewpoint conflating personal autonomy with a pass to endanger others. Jewish authorities, in contrast, have argued otherwise. Our past leaders emphasized the need to protect the *entire* community. In 1805 a leading rabbi in Prague was asked that as the vaccine against small pox was only available on Shabbat, was it

permissible to get inoculated, including babies? The answer: it's not just permitted it's an obligation. The answer: it's not just individual whim, it's a collective mandate.

Our experience matters. Part of the world's oldest monotheistic tradition, we are far from naïve. We've learned from past exiles. The Temple was destroyed in 586 BCE as a consequence for ignoring the stranger, the poor, widow and orphan; and again in 70 CE on account of over-zealotry and senseless hatred. More recently, the Holocaust taught us how mass delusion leads to death. We know a religious life grounded in rationality and empathy, rejecting falsehoods and exploitation offers the best path forward. But we can only demonstrate this by our own example. In a time of tumult we must be role models of rational faith and ambassadors of rational outreach.

Judaism is not simplistic. *Yisrael* means to wrestle with God, and that we do. The good news is that this approach continues to engender solidarity. A recent pew research survey indicated that 88% of adults who were raised Jewish continue to identify as Jewish. Recommitting to *Teshuva*, re-engagement and return, let us harness that loyalty as a vanguard of hope. Let us respectfully promote science and reason, in our conversations and social media postings. *'When decent people turn away some of the worst ones seize the day.'* Let us support the synagogue, model caring especially for the marginalized, and push back against extremism, zealotry and delusion. Let us act in a way that loves our neighbors as ourselves.

Farfetched? Laughable? Other Covid-19 variants, infectious diseases and a myriad of other challenges lay ahead. The understandings and plans used to address them will be critical. Given what we've learned during this pandemic we grasp the danger of disinterest and denial. Rather, hearkening to the themes of this day, we must raise a respectful, religious voice to inscribe people in the Book of Life.

The Book of Proverbs reminds us: גַּם־בְּשִׂחָק יִכְאַב־לֵב *Even in laughter the heart may ache.* Indeed, take it from a Yitzchak: we must expect 5782, like its predecessors, to take unexpected turns. While still in modified circumstances we must not let our limited capacities, frustrations or disappointments overwhelm us. Instead, grasping the subjunctive may we make our little corner of the world more engaged, more self-aware, more wise, more safe, more caring and more blessed. Perhaps then, with God's help and along with God, we may have the last laugh.

*Cain yehi Ratzon.* Be this God's will.