

**Crushed Expectations:**  
**“When the world closed in around us, we proclaimed that even with darkness, we can harness light.”**

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Rabbi Zachary R. Shapiro  
Temple Akiba of Culver City

Earlier this year, I travelled to Washington DC with our 10th graders as we lobbied on Capitol Hill with the Religious Action Center. How awesome it was to see these young people raise their voices, advocating for greater justice from our elected leaders.

Travel was a little different than normal. I was advised to wipe off my seat with a wet wipe. I was told that the right thing to do was to bring an extra wipe for my seat mate. Perhaps three people on the plane wore a mask. And yes, they all got a second look from many passengers.

That was the end of February.

By the beginning of March, the entire world seemed to implode.

It happened so fast. So fast.

I didn't anticipate just how deeply it would affect me in those first couple of weeks. As the international pandemic was just beginning to take root, Ron was off on a business trip, and our Nanny had to take a short leave to care for her father.

I was a mess. Each day, the news of COVID-19 was getting scarier. I was paranoid with each cough, every headache. Schools and businesses were closing down. The stock market was tumbling. We were contemplating what it would be like to turn the lights off at Temple Akiba - a place where our light shines brighter together.

And I was alone with the twins (with part time help). Each morning I would search for the strength to be happy around them. At night I would read them stories. I remember in particular reading Eric Carle's "The Very Hungry Caterpillar." When we got to the page where the caterpillar builds a cocoon, I wanted to curl into that cocoon and hide.

Every day, I spoke with Ron and I would just start crying.

I felt lonely. I felt vulnerable. I felt scared. And I felt robbed, as though the world took all my plans and crushed them up and threw them away.

Yes, I was a mess. And I would imagine many here went through similar emotions.

The sense of loss and vulnerability in these past months has been immense. We have all suffered COVID-19. Some here have contracted it. Some have lost loved ones to it. The economy has taken a beating. Our social lives have gone upside down. Couples have had difficulties coping with spending so much time with one another. People have been suffering severe depression. Those with medical conditions have put off treatments.

And then there were the protests because of racial injustice.

And then there was the awful looting.

And then there were the curfews.

And then there was the second wave of the pandemic.

And then there were the fires.

And the great political divisions in our country with the national elections does not help our mood.

Weddings have been postponed indefinitely.

B'nai Mitzvah have been pushed back.

Confirmations, graduations, and ordinations ...

Seeing a newborn grandchild....

The 50th wedding anniversary family trip - the one that everyone had been saving for and dreaming of for years.

No summer camp.

Indeed, this has been a time of **crushed expectations**.

## **God - DAYEINU!**

Every single crushed expectation we endure, every unrealized dream, every life disappointment, every opportunity lost ... they all leave wounds, **scars** deep in our souls. Sometimes we try to put them in perspective. We might call what happened to us “a first world problem” or a “minor inconvenience” when compared to how others might be faring. And perhaps there is an element of truth to this.

But it doesn't diminish that we are going through very real and very tangible losses. It feels the world rejected our life plans and dreams.

In his book, Overcoming Life's Disappointments, Rabbi Harold Kushner shares: “*The question is not, Can I get through life without some failures and rejections? because you can't, and the more you aspire to in your life, the more you yearn for, the more scars you will accumulate along the way. The real question is, How will you respond to those disappointments? Will you respond with bitterness, envy, and self-doubt, or with resilience and wisdom?*”

I look to my children and ask this of myself: How am I going to emerge from this very difficult year? Will my children become the generation of missed opportunities? Or will they be the generation whose dreams took flight?

And then I look to our community... Will the zoom Bat Mitzvah, the wedding, the baby-naming ... will they define us with resentment - or will they become badges of resilience? Will the loneliness of being sick in bed, the cabin fever we endure, the monotony of each day — — Will

this define our era as a new Dark Age, or will we press into the dawn of a new Enlightenment? Will we be able to say:

***“When the world closed in around us, we proclaimed that even with darkness, we can harness light.”***

I am reminded of a story, a modern *midrash*, based on Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. It's called, “The Gift of Tears.” Adam and Eve have just eaten from the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge and now face exile from paradise. I invite you to witness their emotions:

*“You ate from the Tree of Knowledge,” God said, “and now there is much you will know. You will know fear, and you will know sadness but you will also know surprise and joy. For the first time, you will know pain and hard work-but that means you will also know the excitement of dreaming and the delight of accomplishment. You will know good times and bad. There will be times when life seems too hard, and for those times, I am giving you something that will help.”*

*“Is it something from Paradise?” asked Eve.*

*“A tree, or a fruit, or a rainbow? asked Adam.*

*“No,” answered God, “it is not from Paradise, but it will help you remember. This gift will come from yourselves. Whenever you are feeling sorrow- the way you feel now- whenever the pain gets too hard to bear, whenever you are truly sorry or frightened or lonely, I will give you tears, so that you can cry. And though tears are not from the Garden of Eden, they will lighten your hearts and give you a glimpse of Paradise again.”*

*Eve turned to Adam and saw that tears were already running down his cheeks. Her own cheeks burned hot, and when she touched her eyes, they felt wet. Her tears turned to sobs, and finally her whole body shook as she cried.*

*Memories of their days in the Garden flowed freely as her tears. The peaceful animals, the wondrous flower petals, the glorious sunlight. Then came memories of their curiosity, and the Tree, and the fruit she had eaten. Eve's tears flowed on and on.*

*There were more images- this time of the future. Eve could see herself carrying a baby as she worked in her own garden. She saw Adam turning soil and harvesting vegetables. She saw visions of homes built and people gathering to eat and drink and celebrate. She felt the comfort a good night's sleep after a hard day's work.*

*When Eve opened her eyes, everything seemed clearer and sharper. Her body still throbbed with sorrow, but that terrible pain in her heart had eased, and her head felt lighter. Eve turned to see that the gates of the Garden of Eden had closed. She saw Adam drying his tears with the back of one hand. When he looked up his face, too, shone with a new kind of peace. Ever since that day, people have found comfort in tears. Although both bitter and sweet, tears are a little taste of Paradise.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> “The Gift of Tears” p.187-190, A Year of Jewish Stories, Maisel, Grace Ragues and Shubert, Samantha, illustrated by Keiser, Tammy L., (UAHC Press, NY, 2004)

Those are the tears I felt in the darkest moments when all this began. I think we all felt that same, intense pain. But at the time, the tears just didn't seem to be anything like a taste of paradise. At least - not at first. I had a job to do, to raise these infants. But I was sapped of energy, and I had no laughter through the tears.

It was my mom, in her incredible wisdom, who gave me insights that I had not read in the talmud or a midrash. I asked her, *"How do I be a good daddy to Maya and Eli. I just don't have it within me to be joyful right now?"*

Mom recognized my tears and said, **"If you can't do it with joy, do it with love."**

"If you can't do it with joy, do it with love."

And so that's what I did. The more love I poured into my sacred duty as a father, the more the joy came back in droves. Through the weeks and months, Ron and I both captured new joys - revealing untapped strength we never knew existed.

As any parent knows, it's not easy. And for those who have been home-schooling their kids and working from home at the same time, you are true heroes.

No, love doesn't stop the tears, it doesn't erase the losses, and it doesn't bring back the crushed expectations. But love does connect us to one another. And that's what our world needs more than anything right now.

I don't accept my identity as a exile from the Garden of Eden. So let's take the shattered sparks of those **crushed expectations** and create a holy vessel through our actions. That's how the future will understand what this generation is truly made of.

The volunteers, like Melissa York and Cindy Knopf who bought groceries for the home bound. That defines us.

The Elkenson family, who constructed an Ark and a podium at home to celebrate the original B'nai Date of their twins - that defines us.

Bob Knopf, who ensures that older adults, like Shirley and Morry Price, and Don and Mickey Mann are cared for ... that defines us.

Elizabeth Zlotowitz, Lauren Varsano, and Myrna Kayton - who enthusiastically reach out to our members to inquire on their well being - that defines us.

Adrea and Will, whose May wedding was postponed until next year.... They gathered all their guests via zoom on their original date and shared toasts. That defines us.

Craig Newman, who gave regular street concerts from his lawn - just to bring smiles to others. That defines us.

Kirsten Korkis, who came to my home before the online family camp to deliver dough so Ron and I could make fresh challah. That defines us.

No - it doesn't negate or erase the reality of what we are enduring. But we are ready to make a name for ourselves through our determination and through our love. And one day, we will be recognized as the ones who created unity in the face of division. We will be known for our voice of compassion that outlasts the sarcasm of our age. And we will be commended for our loving embrace - one soul at a time.

Dr. Rick Stevenson, founder of the 5000 Days Project, shared a teaching from an unknown source:

"A bird sitting on a tree is never afraid of the branch breaking, because its trust is not on the branch but in its ability to fly." —

He adds, "our branch may have broken, but we've all been born with wings. It's time to use them."

Yes, it's been a year of crushed expectations. But it's also been a year of that has revealed God's soul-print.

So go out. Take the love in your hearts, make a difference in the world, create new dreams, and soar.