

## Let's Not Go Back to "Normal"

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When will we return to normal? That question is always in the back of our minds. When will we be able to gather freely, to travel, to hug love ones, to have full time normal schooling? When can we enjoy all the wonderful aspects of ordinary life that we blissfully took for granted before this pandemic? We know that no one is going to blow a whistle and sound the all-clear, but we are surely eager for the process of recovery to begin.

"Return," going back, is also a theme of this High Holiday season. The key concept of *Teshuvah*, "returning" or repentance, implies going back to the way that we should be living. This season is one of making amends, asking forgiveness, and forgiving others so that we can get *back* on track. But *Teshuvah* as *merely* "going back" and "returning," is not enough right now.

The theme I'm exploring during these Days of Awe is "Don't let a crisis go to waste." We are facing multiple crises right now, but crisis can also mean opportunity. To paraphrase my teacher Reb Zalman, the current *emergency* can be the moment for something new and better to *emerge*. So much as we long for normal life, we can't *just* "go back to normal."

When I look back at what we considered "normal" in 2019, it wasn't all so normal. Last year, our American normal involved going to school or university...but at risk of a mass shooting. It involved freely going to synagogue...but then locking our doors and worrying about violent attacks by anti-Semites. Normal was freedom to travel...when our destination was not affected by fires or floods of climate change. Normal was going to the office... but also hours spent commuting and rushed lives without enough time for family and leisure. Are those the kinds of normality that we really want to go back to?

Instead, let us use this crisis as a starting point to make new beginnings in our society and our personal lives. America has been the land of freedom and opportunity for many, but this pandemic has highlighted our persistent problems of racism and inequality. Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg famously said, "What's the difference between a bookkeeper in Brooklyn and a Supreme Court Justice? One generation." But she knew that not everyone had the same opportunities and rights, and she fought her whole life to expand them to every citizen.

To honor her legacy and the Torah's imperative of "Justice, justice you shall pursue," we can't just go back to "normal."

We also desperately need a new beginning with our environment. The unintended and painful changes in our way of life brought about by the pandemic are merely a foreshadowing of worse and more permanent consequences of the environmental crisis. In the early lockdowns, we looked with wonder at clearer skies and water as a kind of silver lining, but unfortunately most of these improvements were just temporary. As climate scientist Corinne LeQuere described the pollution drop this spring: "It's like you have a bath filled with water and you're turning off the tap for 10 seconds." We have a big opportunity now to respond with positive changes, but our country hasn't taken it yet. The U.S. has spent roughly 12% of GDP on discretionary stimulus spending, but we have spent the smallest share on green spending, at just over 1%. By contrast, the European Union has spent 10.4% of GDP on discretionary stimulus with more than **20%** going toward clean energy. Going back to normal on the environment is a recipe for disaster.

While most of the world is focused on ending the pandemic through medical research and public health measures, some leaders are looking ahead to how we can create a greener future. According to a publication of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, "For the economic recovery from the COVID-19 crisis to be durable and resilient, a return to 'business as usual' and environmentally destructive investment patterns and activities must be avoided. Unchecked, global environmental emergencies such as climate change and biodiversity loss could cause social and economic damages far larger than those caused by COVID-19. To avoid this, economic recovery packages should be designed to 'build back better'... to trigger investment and behavioral changes that will reduce the likelihood of future shocks and increase society's resilience...Central to this approach is a focus on well-being and inclusiveness." Such a visionary approach will take true leaders at all levels.

We need new beginnings in our personal lives. It has taken a pandemic for many to question the lion's share that goes to work and careers. While parents with young children are struggling and overwhelmed right now because they are expected to work from home, supervise education, and still do their jobs, some have told me that there has been an unexpected joy: greater time together with their families. Going back to our long commutes, late in person meetings, and workaholic, nonstop busy lives is a normal that no longer feels acceptable to many.

This season, I encourage you to note for yourself what lessons you have learned from this pandemic time, what values clarified, what meaning found. As we gradually get “back to normal,” savor the opportunities but also remember what needs to change. During these difficult months, many have been motivated to become more active citizens, to work for social justice and against racism, to live greener lives and support environmental organizations. As we embark on a season of choosing our political leaders, we need to demand that they articulate a clear vision for building back with a stronger, more equal, and compassionate society.

Judaism emphasizes our individual but also our communal responsibility. As my teacher Reb Zalman said, “the only way we can get it together is together.” Personally, I’ve been awed to see people uniting to make positive changes in our world. During this pandemic I’ve kvelled to watch my grown kids raise impressive sums for state elections, march in protests for justice, and lead anti-racism book groups. Even my six-year-old grandson Sam got up early, put on his booklight in bed, and wrote a list of ways to combat global warming. Their engagement gives me hope for the next generations. Everyone has a task now; what is yours? As Rabbi Tarfon said nearly two millennia ago in Pirke Avot: “It is not up to you to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.”

I started with the word, *Teshuvah*, repenting or returning. Like many Hebrew words, *Teshuvah* has a multi-layered meaning. *Teshuvah* also means “to renew,” and “to respond.” Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel famously said, “In a free society, some are guilty but all are responsible.” *Teshuvah* is response-ability, our *ability to respond*. As a result of the painful lessons we are learning now, we can resolve to renew our society as well as to refresh our personal lives.

The book of Lamentations offers this prayer that became part of our Torah service and High Holy Days: “*Hashivenu Adonai elecha venashuvah*—bring us back to you, God, cause us to return. *Hadesh yamenu kekedem*,” renew our days as of old. That might be understood to mean that we want to get back to some kind of “good old days,” but when we think about it, the good old days were not always so good, or even so normal. Instead, we can understand this prayer to mean, “Help us, God, to renew every day, to make our lives and world new, as you and we have done countless times before.”

In 5781, let us embark on the *Teshuvah* that our world desperately needs. May we delight in slowly getting back to normal, but not be content to stop there. Let us join together to renew our days and repair our world. With God’s help, we have done it before, and together, we can – and must - do it again.