

Once in the Talmudic days, Rabbi Hiyya fell ill, and medicine was not then what it is today. His teacher, Rabbi Yohanan, showed up to visit. He came in and asked him, “are you enjoying this suffering?” I can only imagine Hiyya's initial reaction to that question. He answered, “not this, nor its reward.” So, Rabbi Yohanan said, give me your hand. Hiyya did, Yohanan pulled him up, and miraculously, Hiyya was healed.

It could have been coincidence or contagion, but Rabbi Yohanan soon became ill. This time, his friend Rabbi Hanina came to visit and asked him this same unusual question. “Are you enjoying this suffering?” Yohanan responded with the same answer. “Not this, nor its reward.” So, Hanina said, “give me your hand,” he pulled him up, and again, miraculously, Yohanan was healed.

You might be thinking, shouldn't Yohanan have been able to help himself? He had the powers to help Hiyya, after all. The Talmud answers us: a prisoner cannot free himself from that which imprisons. Yochanan could heal another, but not himself. He needed help.

Today, we, like Hiyya and Yohanan, need help healing. Everything that could hit seems to have hit at once, and when we're thinking, nothing else can go wrong, well, we all know how that goes. The hits keep coming.

In trying to figure out how to support the community at the start of COVID, I remember picking up a book called the *Disaster Spiritual Care Manual* on the recommendation of colleagues. The manual, defining different disasters at different scales, marked a small-scale disaster as a building fire, an act of violence. A medium-scale disaster could be a regional event—a hurricane, or for some of us, a pre-COVID New Jersey Transit strike. And large-scale disasters, a drought, a nuclear accident, multiple large storms in a short period.

We are now beyond the scope of this book.

Over the past 18 months, we have seen more than 640,000 deaths in the United States alone and counting. Haiti. Afghanistan. Israel. Economic upheaval. Political unrest and racial injustice. Irreversible climate change, Antisemitism, and last week's storm, to name a few.

In our own circles, some of us are grieving from the death of a loved one; some are healing, recovering from the virus. Some of us have lost jobs, some, our homes. Some are working in ever-changing, stressful conditions. Some are parenting teenagers, some, young children, and some are alone and looking ahead to a winter of isolation. Some of us are tired, some of us are furious. The little moments of daily life, once normal and safe, can now be triggers and risks.

Making matters worse, too many of us are trying to work through these large-scale disasters on our own. We don't have energy left to share what we're going through, we don't want to be judged, we think we're the only ones suffering. And though many of us are going through similar traumas, in our thinking ourselves to be alone, we've turned perception into reality.

We had a glimmer of hope. Things were getting better. Despite the unfortunate number of people opposed to taking vaccines, COVID was on its way out. And then Delta, and flooding. I look around, knowing so many of you could not come in person today. It's been brutal. The world that felt safe in recent memory now seems dangerous and unpredictable.

We feel alone, and all we want is that healing hand that Rabbi Yochanan offered and then accepted.

Judaism and science agree that the first step to healing is in naming the problem. And one of the problems we are all facing is trauma. We have experienced and are continuing to experience psychological and spiritual trauma. Some of us physical, too. This trauma has been significant and enduring, individual and collective. We've been upset to our core, and our worldview may be permanently altered.

Trauma is a response to a deeply disturbing or distressing event that overwhelms our ability to cope. It causes feelings of helplessness. It often diminishes our sense of self, our ability to feel or enjoy a full range of experiences and emotions. Simple stressors are now cascading, triggering other stressors, and we feel overwhelmed. That which we found nourishing is suddenly bland and unhelpful.

To make matters worse, to treat our trauma, some of us turn for comfort to things that may be more destructive than helpful, like alcohol, drugs, over and under-eating. Some have turned to violence against self and others. Again, in the times when we need our social networks— when we need to feel like part of humanity—we often lash out, we react, we push our loved ones away, and we close off. From others and from God.

Yet, these High Holy Days, we are here, together, in person and virtually, to connect. We're taking the time to show up because deep inside, we still know that we need the meanings and rhythms of life to sustain us; we need to know that we're in this together.

The rabbis teach us that while we each show up for the *Yamim Nora'im* alone before God with all revealed, we are never actually alone. We each count to God, and we each count to each other. We gather together, an entire people, throughout the world, to do the work of repairing our lives, of finding ourselves, of coming back together. We have the tools, of the liturgy, of the shofar, of the Torah readings, to remind us of who we were, before these crises, and who we ought to be.

We were and still are human beings who as soon as we are able, stand together, look after each other, and join in repairing everything crumbling around us. We join with God and each other, as Jews, as human beings.

This means that we can't go it alone; we can't give in to trauma and self-isolate and assume that we're alone because we're not. If you didn't know before, please know now that we're all going through trauma, and we can all support each other. And we all need each other.

Trauma can cut us off from the world, but we cannot allow this cutoff to be permanent. Even in mourning, we know that the period of greatest intensity has a limit, in *shiva* and *shloshim*. We then begin our return back to the world, reintegrated after that first year. Grief remains with us, *and* we go back to life. We go back to connecting with and being there for friends, family, community. We share, we ask for help, and we show up when asked.

As a parent, one of the most comforting things I can do is spend time with another parent. Sometimes it's to bond and chat with someone who, it turns out, *is* experiencing something similar to what I am. If it's a good day, their kid is acting up. Why? Because then I see that their kid does nearly the exact same thing as mine. Though it does not change my circumstance, I feel better knowing I am not alone. It's the same in business, with friends, and family. Let's share experiences and open up, because sharing in our weaknesses, though risky, can only bring us that comfort of being in it with others. It's why we plead *Avinu Malkeinu* together; it's why next week we'll offer our *Vidui* as a collective.

I remember the first time this spring that I saw a few of you in person at the Temple entrance for the first time in God-knows how long. Seeing you in person was euphoric. Speaking with you in person was euphoric. We are social; we exist in community. We need each other.

Sometimes, there will be disappointment; when we take a risk in a relationship by opening up, we may experience pain if a loved one fails to be there when we need them or reacts negatively instead of in support. We've all had these moments: a nasty word in a time of vulnerability, an absence when we just needed that hug.

Relationships are never perfect. We have our issues; we focus inward and miss what's happening around us. And for various reasons, of which there are many, we may miss our friend's suffering, and they may miss ours. They may fail to notice that we're sick, that we're Hanina or Yochanan in bed, or we may fail them. This does not mean that we're alone, and this is not abandonment. It means that our friends need a nudge, a reminder, or God-forbid, a direct call for help, one that forces us to again admit that we're vulnerable. Then, if they fail, we call them out. And if they are true friends, they will apologize and be here for us again. If *we* have failed, we will do the same. That is a real relationship, flaws and all.

We don't get through COVID by ourselves. We don't get through disaster and destruction and tragedy by ourselves.

We only get through when we've got each other's backs, when we sit down or stand up together, when we name our trauma, and reach out when we need help. When we show up to volunteer, to march, to loan a fan or tool, to share love virtually with an emoji or give a physical hug, to have a backyard conversation or meal together.

We only get through when others do the same for us, because they've noticed or because we've

asked.

As we learned with Rabbi Yochanan, when we are locked in, sometimes, the only real way out is to find another human being to open that latch and pull us out. Sometimes, we'll be needed to open that latch for others. And we will.

This doesn't mean that this all gets better. COVID will be here tomorrow. Disappointments and trauma will continue, people bent towards hate and destruction will still be around, life will remain in flux and unpredictable. But it'll be better going through it together. We'll have support, and we'll have more strength to make it through the day.

There are so many teachings about how in coming together from brokenness, though changed, though hurt, though the trauma may forever be present, we will come through greater than before.

The Japanese have an art of putting broken pottery pieces back together with gold— what was once broken is now, with its flaws, more robust and beautiful.

In his song *Anthem*, Leonard Cohen writes, "Ring the Bells that still can ring, forget your perfect offering, there is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in." We need those cracks to heal, and grow.

And the rabbinic tradition teaches us that the first set of tablets, the ones that Moshe broke after witnessing the Israelites and the Golden Calf, were there right alongside the new whole set of tablets. The Ark of the Covenant—the center of worship in ancient times—held the broken and the whole together.

Brokenness is part of who we are, but being alone is unsustainable. Please know that brokenness is not the same as being alone. Choosing light over darkness, blessing over curse, life over death, as we do in these holy days, means choosing to go through this together. We are the gold; we are the glue; we are the Ark of the Covenant. We are that healing hand for someone else. And we are not alone.

This new year, regardless of whatever comes, *uvacharta bachayim*. Choose life in whatever way we can. Let us come together and show up however we can. To shul, to school, to work, to each other. Let us ask for help when there's even a slight chance we might need it; let us be vulnerable and open to each other so that we can stand together and make it through. This is how we choose life. This is how we envision and celebrate a new year and God-willing, a new era, for us, for the Jewish people, and for all of humanity.

This new year, may the light shine in, and may we receive it and share it together.

L'shana Tova.