

How it Gets Better
Yom Kippur 5783 // 2022
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Yom Kippur is a day of introspection. It's a day that we devote to ourselves. To be clear, there is nothing wrong with that. But I want to start by asking we try to focus on something else. Take a moment to think about the five issues in the world that concern you most. Hold onto that.

Aside from thinking about ourselves, there's a lot that makes this day stand out from the rest of the year. There's the change in wardrobe, the change in diet, the change in how we spend our time – unless you're on the payroll, you'll likely spend more time here in the next 24 hours than most of the rest of the year. Most of what we have the power to change, we do. It is a day unlike any other. Add to the list of traditional changes one modern example: today is a day we don't read the news. I realize some may but for me, for the last number of years, Yom Kippur has been the longest time and really the only time, I have gone more than a few waking hours without checking the headlines or where my phone hasn't alerted me to what it thinks I need to know.

As difficult a day as it is, this fast not of food but of news and information is, dare I say, pleasant.

A few weeks ago we read in Parashat Ki Tavo a long list of curses that will befall those who stray from God's path. We're warned that we'll experience plagues, we'll be scattered among the nations, we'll be in constant fear, that sort of thing. But the list ends with this: "In the morning you shall say 'if only it were evening' and in the evening say 'if only it were morning!'" (Deut 28:67). It's a bit of an odd finale, the stark warnings go from fearing for your life to not being pleased about the time of day. Fortunately our commentators have some explanations to guide us. Rashi says in the morning when you cry out "if only it were evening," read it as "if only it were *yesterday* evening." You're saying this because today is so much worse than yesterday. And tonight when you say "if only it were morning," it's because despite how horrible the morning was, it was better than right now. It's a pretty grim and horrifying curse.

Many of us feel like the world is spiraling, like every day we read the news, we learn of some new disaster. Another bleak climate report, another poll showing a rising percentage of Americans who support authoritarianism over democracy, another mass shooting. And yes, it's hard to point to a time in this country's history where most things were going well for most people, but it certainly feels like things are getting worse.

On Rosh Hashanah I shared some of my background serving Anshe Chesed Congregation in Vicksburg, Mississippi. I should clarify, I did not live in Vicksburg and I did not serve Anshe Chesed exclusively. For the first three years of my rabbinate, I was the Director of Rabbinic Services for the Institute of Southern Jewish Life. The Institute serves Jewish communities throughout a 12-state region and my job was to travel to synagogues without rabbis – dozens – and spend the weekends serving as their rabbi. During my time I welcomed Shabbat and holidays in the suburbs of Charlotte, in Selma, in Seminole, Oklahoma, and all the way from Fayetteville Arkansas to Fayetteville Georgia. I have strong feelings about midsize rental cars and a deep love for the Hampton Inn breakfast buffet. But through it all, I was based at the ISJL's headquarters in Jackson, Mississippi.

Jackson is in the middle of the state. It's the capital city and the largest city in the state. It's also about the size of 2.5 Davises. Put together Davis, Woodland, and Dixon and you've got Jackson. It's not a big place. All this to say, for my first year I decided to try living downtown – a few blocks from the governor's mansion (which might sound impressive but if you're downtown, you're always a few blocks from the governor's mansion). When my coworkers heard where I was living they asked me why I wanted to live so far away. It was 12 minutes. But after a year I decided to get a bit closer, and shaved it down to seven.

Jackson's art and culture district is known as Fondren. It was about a mile from my house and is home to Walker's Drive-in Restaurant – which is a sit down restaurant without drive-in service – and Brent's Drugs – which is also a sit down restaurant without drugs. And in the middle of it all on the corner of Fondren Place and State Street was the small square building, painted bright pink. As unusual buildings do, it became a landmark – both to the city and to me with my three years living a mile away from it. It was a few blocks from the aforementioned Brent's Drugs which is where you take people visiting so they can see the one thing in Jackson they've possibly seen before. It was across the street from The Bean where I would buy my coffee. And I'd run by that little pink building once I joined an early morning running group, everyone one of the 3 days I went.

That little pink building was home to a business: Jackson Women's Health Organization. As in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, as in the case that overturned a 50 year precedent granting the right to an abortion. But back when I was living there, it was simply the pink building on the corner of State and Fondren – In my three years I probably drove or walked by it a thousand times.

Of course I knew what it was. Even then it was famous. It was the only clinic in the state. I'd read articles about the doctors that flew in from other states for a day or two at a time. Every now and then I'd see a few protestors picketing outside. I had coworkers who served as volunteer escorts for patients.

I should say this is not a sermon about abortion. But I must stop to say that I stand in full support of reproductive freedom including the right to abortion as does the Reform Movement and the vast majority of Jewish denominations and organizations.

This is also not a sermon about what I learned from becoming a patient escort at an abortion clinic in Mississippi. It's not about that because I never became a patient escort. Despite my proximity I never did that, or anything else, to support Jackson Women's Health Organization. And not because I had some moral hesitancy with the clinic's work – I did not.

I can think of three reasons I did nothing:

1. Roe v. Wade has been in effect my whole life and as I learned back in high school civics, *stare decisis* – precedent is rarely overturned and it'll all be fine.
2. Even if I wanted to do something, what could I really do? There are well funded political forces that are calling the shots on all this. I as an individual have no power
3. The most significant reason: I just didn't want to. It's not like I had my hands full with other causes. No, I had my job and my life and let someone else deal with all that.

So now back to those five causes I asked you to think about earlier. The five issues facing us that trouble you most. Aside from worry about them, what have you done? This is not meant to be a binary; it's also a spectrum, even for the issues you've done something, did you do enough? What even is enough? Posting on Facebook, writing a check? Signing a petition? I don't have an answer but you do – did you do enough that you feel you contributed to the cause?

I ask this not to berate or to shame. I do not know what five things popped into peoples' minds, but I suspect few of us had trouble thinking of five. And as we are learning almost daily– on the days we do read the news – we cannot take anything for granted:

no legal precedent, no foundational values that most of us who grew up in this country learned and thought were universal and eternal.

Earlier I shared that Rashi understood the wishing for evening meant looking backward, that every day was getting worse. What makes the curse so terrifying – worse even than the threat of exile that came before it – was that it extinguishes hope. The future is so dim, so dark, that all you want to do is turn back time to try and escape. This is a terrible, horrifying way to live.

But Rashi is not the only sage to comment on this curse. Rashbam, his grandson, offers a different opinion. He says that no, it doesn't mean you'll wish for yesterday. He says think of what a person with a cold says. They don't say, "I feel terrible, I wish I could go back to right before I felt sick." No, they say, "I wish I could get through this day, because tomorrow will be better." This sentiment captures what I've come to see as the central lesson of Jewish history: It gets better. The Jewish story is one of overcoming countless dark times that must have seemed beyond hopeless to those living through them. Of course, there's a caveat and it's a big one: It gets better, but maybe not for me.

I have no idea if I will see a time where reading the news each day does not regularly leave me feeling anxious and scared. But our faith, our story, teaches that eventually it will, one day, get better.

But of course that does not just happen on its own. It takes work, a lot of work, from all of us to fight for the causes important to us. Those causes that matter to you – think what you can do, what you *will* do to support them. It's the only way we will get through to morning.