

Renew Us and Improve Us
Sermon for Erev Rosh HaShanah 5782
Rabbi Greg Weisman – Temple Beth El of Boca Raton

“Set it, and forget it!”

“But wait, there’s more!”

“Guaranteed or your money back!”

“New and Improved!”

As a child of the 80s and 90s, TV commercials, infomercials, and product tag lines were as much a part of my life as Saturday Night Live jokes and the Michael Jordan’s Chicago Bulls winning championships. Cable television exploded in the 80s, and mine is the generation of dozens of TV channels (my kids are the generation of hundreds and thousands, heaven help us). Broadcasters’ need to fill so much airtime with advertising that they created a new genre: the infomercial. A change in FCC regulations in 1984 opened the door, and by 1995 90% of stations were airing infomercials.¹ A few over-caffeinated people standing around a table, shouting into the camera about a world-changing product, a graphic showing the price slashed by 40%. The pitchman tells us that this version is new and improved, convincing us that the one we bought last year should be thrown out, and we should make just two small payments of \$19.95 (plus shipping and handling) to have our lives changed again.

New and improved. Just like we’re used to, but better. Has all my favorite features, and some innovations too. Tonight, as we enter into this new year 5782, I am praying for a year that is new and improved. 5781, you offered us so much potential, with the promise of a new vaccine, leaving my mask in my car, and a return to normalcy, but for that product I’m leaving a one-and-a-half star review: “Didn’t live up to expectations and left me feeling like I was back at the beginning

¹ “TV Infomercials Draw Mixed Reactions,” by Linda Saslow, *The New York Times*, December 4, 1994, Section LI, Page 13.

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when it was all over. I need a new one.” Thank God it’s Rosh HaShanah, because imagining and visioning a year that is new and improved is what this season is all about.

Over the next few weeks we will repeat the phrase *Hashiveinu Adonai Elecha V’Nashuva, Chadesh Yameinu K’Kedem*- Take us back, Adonai, let us come back to you. Renew in our times the days of old. We say these words in any service when we return the Torah to the Ark, but they take on a special meaning during this season of *teshuvah*, of return, and repentance. We ask God to literally make our days, our lives new, just like they were in olden times. Make us new and improved, holy one, just like we used to be. Make our future as good as our past. After suffering for nearly two years from this pandemic, I can’t think of a sentiment that feels more apropos for the moment.

Just a few short weeks ago, we felt like we were finally making our way out of this pandemic. All along I kept reminding myself that we were in a tunnel, not a cave, that there would be light at the end, that there would be an exit. Earlier this year we saw light, but as soon as we exited one tunnel, we seemingly entered a second, a short respite of sunlight followed by re-entry into darkness. For many of us, this latest regression feels emotionally unbearable. The Delta variant has taken over our lives, our community, our conversations, our decision-making, all in a moment when we thought we were in the clear. Back in the tunnel, peering forward for a glimmer of light, I need hope.

Hope is what has helped our people survive the tragedies that have befallen us in generation after generation, century after century, millennium after millennium; our tradition’s disposition is a hopeful one. *Od lo avda tikvateinu*, our hope has not been lost, our people’s national anthem sings. Even out of the depths of the Shoah, we retained our hope for a better world, built a nation-state in

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our homeland, and have flourished around the world in ways not seen since the times of the Temple. Our hope was not lost, and mine is not now. Hope relies on a vision of a world improved, of a future that takes the best of our past and makes it even better. *Chadesh Yameinu K'Kedem*, renew in our times the days of old is a hopeful plea.

What am I hopeful for? The obvious, that this pandemic will, eventually, come to an end. Our bodies and our immune systems are wired to learn how to manage this new virus, and between the miracle of the vaccines and the ever-increasing number of people who have been exposed, they are learning how to fight it. We will come to a point where getting this virus will be like getting the common cold or the flu; not a pleasant experience, but one that the vast majority of us can tolerate.

But just getting through this pandemic isn't enough. When we pray *chadeish yameinu*-renew, make new our days- we are pleading for improvement. We need to, and have every reason to be, hopeful that our post-COVID world will not only be normal, but it actually will be better than our days of old. We are learning from this pandemic. We have had to change how we do everything, since the smallest daily activities like going to school or work, shopping in the grocery store, eating in a restaurant, or spending time in each other's homes became threats to our lives and health. We relied on our ingenuity to be able to do *k'kedem*, like we did before, in these new days, and came up with all kinds of COVID keepers, changes that we want to keep when we come out of a world where we hold the fear of our lives and livelihoods with each human interaction.

So tonight I want to share a few examples of these COVID keepers, of the new ways that we are doing and thinking that really are improvements that we have generated because of the challenges this pandemic presented. I am speaking to some of you tonight inside our synagogue, and

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a great many more are joining us digitally. Our temple's ability to meet the needs of our community, to celebrate the joyousness of a wedding or a bat mitzvah, or mourn the loss of a loved one, to educate our children and engage adults in the study of Torah had to continue through this pandemic. So we shifted to our online platform, Virtual Beth El. Dozens of lay leaders and staff members have spent hours and hours developing new capabilities, which opened up whole new avenues for us to pursue our mission to inspire a passionate commitment to Jewish life, learning, community and spiritual growth. The pandemic kept most people from attending lifecycle events, but long before this relatives or friends who were not able to travel had to miss out completely on important family events. But now, because of what we have created, a grandfather in New York can have an Aliyah at his granddaughter's bat mitzvah, and a grieving son in California can offer a eulogy for his mother. We look forward to the time when travelling to Boca Raton for those moments is once again second nature, but our ability to meet the spiritual needs of our congregation and community has been permanently improved, and our congregation's future is brighter for it.

It shouldn't be surprising that a global pandemic has challenged our healthcare system to improve. Already some of us have reaped the benefits of that improvement, with the skyrocketing of access to telehealth, which allows us to consult with a medical expert remotely. Before, we would have to take time from school or work, sit in an office with a bunch of sick people, wait half an hour, have the 10-minute conversation to get the advice we needed, and then pay the \$50 co-pay on the way out the door. But the pandemic was the catalyst needed to remove the barriers² and

² <https://www.bu.edu/articles/2021/what-if-real-change-for-a-better-world-came-from-the-pandemic/>

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prompt insurance companies and providers to embrace this technology. Going forward, when we are through this pandemic, this new and important tool in maintaining our health will remain at our disposal, and our day to day lives will be all the better for it.

The pandemic has also cast into stark relief some of the underlying inequalities that have continued to gnaw at our society. Varying access to testing, medical care, and the vaccine has broken down along lines of socio-economic status, race and ethnicity, and geography, creating pockets of safety and pockets of danger. That hasn't been helped by too many people's individualistic notions that they are only responsible for their own well-being, and have disregarded how their decisions affect the livelihood of those around them. Virginia L. Bartlett, the assistant director of the Center of Healthcare Ethics and a professor of Biomedical Sciences at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles put it bluntly: "The pandemic has laid bare and exposed our interdependence in ways that deeply challenge the American mythos of rugged individualism. It has exposed the raw injustice we all suffer as what philosopher Herbert Spiegelberg calls 'fellows in the fate of existence': those persistent and deeply ingrained inequities that are taken for granted simply because some are born to more resources, safety, health, and community than others."³ Early in the pandemic, we were saying "we are all in the same boat." That lasted a few weeks, until we realized that frontline healthcare workers, essential employees, and the financially insecure were working in person when most others were at home. I heard an interesting corrective on the idea that "we are all in the same boat." No, it said, we are all in the same ocean, weathering the same storm, but some us are on rafts, and some are on yachts, some have lifejackets, and others do not. We learned

³ https://www.zocalopublicsquare.org/2021/02/24/medical-ethics-covid-19-pandemic/ideas/essay/?fbclid=IwAR2m4WaQAU-R_2ERE4FhKVyF2_Bth_0VnMNeShEecW97uznb3h7x0CXYFmc

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the important lesson from Pirkei Avot, וְאַל תִּדְיִן אֶת חֲבֵרְךָ עַד שֶׁתִּגִּיעַ לְמִקוֹמוֹ, “don’t judge your fellow human until you have stood in their place.”⁴ Professor Barrett offers this hopeful conclusion: “If we are able to “see with new eyes,” as Marcel Proust invites us, perhaps we can connect our individual, interpersonal experiences and needs to our communal, collective challenges and actions.”⁵ Professor Barrett’s insights remind us that we have a lot to learn, but if we do, the future of health care might be better as a direct result of what we have experienced during this pandemic.

Home life has been drastically affected by the pandemic, in ways both good and bad. For those who live alone, the months of 2020 became tortuously lonely, without the opportunity for human contact that is wired into our evolutionary biology. But for those of us who were struggling with work-life balance, as so many parents do, there certainly were silver linings. Personally, the chance to have dinner with my wife and children every single night is not something that I had ever had the ability to do, nor do I expect to once the pandemic is over. But, in the moment it was wonderful, and I do hope that I will be able to continue to make that one of my priorities once we are fully back. We also used that time to reconnect with friends from other cities, setting Zoom dates over a glass of wine to catch up and console each other. I have to admit, as the world has continued to open up I’ve been doing less of that, and one of my goals for 5782 is to return to that practice.

At the same time, there have been significant challenges to the home life throughout this as well. Listen to this reflection: “Overnight we were at home working two full-time jobs with little to no support. Some of us learned how to homeschool, others learned how to Zoom while secretly

⁴ Avot 2:4

⁵ See note 3.

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breastfeeding. We abandoned sleep and any notion of self-care so we could do our best to stabilize our families and do our jobs. Alarms were sounded, but no help came. A year has passed, we get emails now about wellness days and making sure we walk to destress ourselves. And all we can do is laugh as bitter tears of rage run down our Zoom-filtered faces.”

That was written by two university professors and working mothers, Professors Wally Fulweiler and Sarah Davies. It was nice being home with the kids for the first few months, but by last fall, as so many went into virtual school while parents were working from home, it has become increasingly difficult. The writer Dan Sinker just published a piece simply entitled “The parents are not OK,” that noted “Parents aren’t even at a breaking point anymore. We’re broken.”⁶ The wail of their distress, like the sounding of the shofar, ought to wake us up to the reality that institutions large and small need to do their part to be more supportive of working families and mothers in particular, and not just those who have the disposable income to afford it.

The list of potential improvements could go on: including expanded mail-in and early voting opportunities that protect and grow the franchise; more flexible work from home policies that offer improvements in productivity and minimize the time spent and emissions caused by commuting; curbside pick-up; arts institutions using digital platforms to share their treasures with a global audience, like virtual walks through the Louvre, the Disney Family Sing-a-Long series, or the YouTube channel “The Shows Must Go On,” offerings free screenings of world-famous musicals; western nations taking up the practice common in Asia of people wearing masks when they are coughy and sneezy when out in public.

⁶ <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/08/parents-are-not-okay/619859/>

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None of these are new ideas, new technologies, or new moral positions. We had video capabilities, were concerned with bioethics and healthcare access, and understood the plight of working moms long before March of 2020. But as we are, God willing, nearing the end of this pandemic and we begin to imagine the world after it, it would be a shame if we let these new ideas dissipate with the case count. We shouldn't squander the opportunity that this radical reimagining of how we live our lives has presented us, and instead use it to make lasting change for the good.

Chadeish Yameinu K'Kedem, renew in our times like days of old. As much as we want to go back to how it was in the days of old, let our path towards easier times be filled with hopes for an advancement towards a better world. Let us take our knowledge of the past and the present and use it to make a better future. Renew us in 5782, Holy One, and improve us, to a future of wholeness and peace.