

Not Everything's Gonna Be All Right
Practices for Staying Human in a Difficult World
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Almost two years ago, we were sitting around the Shabbat table having one of those conversations that has become increasingly common: a conversation about the world we are living in and the world our children will inherit.

Ebn had been reading articles and studies about artificial intelligence and the future of humanity. He shared some of what he had been reading with us, and then, almost as a passing comment, he said something that was very hard to hear. He said he had read an article arguing that we are doomed. That maybe in five years there would not even be a world to live in.

And then we moved on.

The conversation continued. We finished dinner. We talked about other things. Our daughter Ariel, who would turn 10 in a month, went into the living room to read, as she often does after a meal.

Later that evening, I found her crying.

At first, I did not understand what was wrong. And then she said:

“I will be fifteen when the world ends.”

She had heard that conversation differently than we had. For the adults at the table, it was a conversation about the frightening possibilities of our time. For her, it became something much more immediate. In five years, she would be fifteen years old. And she was wondering whether there would even be a future.

I went into the kitchen, where Ebn was doing the dishes, and I told him, “You need to fix this.”

Because there was something we needed to do. Not pretend that there are no dangers in the world. Not offer the false reassurance that everything will always be okay. But help Ariel understand that fear cannot be the only story we tell about the future. Even in a world filled with real dangers, human beings have the capacity to respond, to create, to care, and to repair.

Ebn sat with her, and they talked about our responsibility to shape the world around us, about the choices we make, and about our ability to repair what is broken. But the question that emerged for me that evening has stayed with me. Because Ariel's question is more than a child's question.

It is the question that keeps many of us up at night:
Are we going to be okay? Is everything gonna be all right?

I imagine many of us felt this deeply, in some way or another, twenty-five years ago, on September 11, 2001. Those of us who were alive, or old enough to remember, watched the Twin Towers crumble before our eyes — a vision we could never have imagined possible.

I was living in Jerusalem. The day after the attacks, I went to see one of my mentors from rabbinical school. I burst into tears and said to him, “The world has come to an end. How can we keep going?”

I wept. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't imagine how there could possibly be a next day. I knew too well the shock of hearing about a terrorist attack that had killed a loved one. I knew too well the struggle to comprehend how something so terrible could happen in a place where you never imagined it could happen.

My teacher held me and let me cry. I recall him saying something like, “The world has not come to an end.”
I'm not sure either of us believed it.

And yet, somehow, we kept going.

We woke up the next morning. We mourned together. We watched the world change before our eyes. And we went back to work and school. We made plans. We fell in love. We had children. We built lives in the shadow of something we could never have imagined before. And yet, we had to find a way to live in a world whose future we could no longer take for granted.

So how do we live when we do not know what the future will bring? What happens when we cannot honestly promise one another that everything is going to be alright? How do we live into this uncertainty?

I want to offer four practices to help us with this question.

The first is *Teshuvah*: Often translated as repentance, but today I want to translate it as the practice of returning or of recentering ourselves and becoming the best human that we can become.

The second is *Emunah*: Translated as Faith or Trust, which today I offer as the practice of remaining in relationship — with God, with one another, with our deepest values — even when we do not have answers.

The third: *Tikvah*: Hope, the practice of discovering and living into our purpose.

And, finally, *Hakarat Hatov*: Seeing the good, Gratitude, The Practice of articulating the blessings in our life.

Teshuvah, Emunah, Tikvah and Hakarat Hatov:

So, let's start with ***Teshuvah*:**

There is a rabbinic teaching from Rabbi Eliezer in the Tractate of Shabbat¹ in the Talmud. And if you were here last night, you may recognize this teaching. Rav Leah quoted it in her sermon! We did not realize until after we had written our sermons that we were drawn to the same teaching.

¹Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 153a.

רבי אליעזר אומר: שוב יום אחד לפני מיתתך.

Rabbi Eliezer said: “Do *teshuvah* one day before your death.”

His students immediately ask:

אמרו לו תלמידיו: וכי אדם יודע איזהו יום ימות?

“But how can a person know on which day they will die?”

And Rabbi Eliezer replies:

אמר להם: וכל שכן, ישוב היום, שפא ימות למחר; ונמצא כל ימיו בתשובה.

“Precisely. Therefore, do *teshuvah* today, lest you die tomorrow, and in this way all your days will be lived in *teshuvah*.”

I love the honesty of this teaching.

Rabbi Eliezer is not asking us to figure out the future. He is asking us to live faithfully in the present — to become the people we want to be now, precisely because we do not know what tomorrow will bring.

The uncertainty of not knowing what tomorrow will bring is not meant to lead us to despair. It is meant to awaken us. The fact that we do not know how much time we have is not an argument for giving up. It is an invitation to *teshuvah*.

Teshuvah is often translated as repentance, but it is much richer than that. It means returning: returning to the person we are capable of becoming, returning to our deepest values, returning to God, returning to one another, and returning to ourselves.

Rabbi Eliezer is saying: don't wait.

Don't wait until life is less complicated. Don't wait until the world feels safer. Don't wait until all your questions have been answered.

If there is forgiveness that needs to be asked for or offered, begin that work. If there is a relationship that needs healing, take the first step. If there is courage you have been postponing, practice it now. If there is kindness you have been meaning to show, offer it today.

That is the Practice of *Teshuvah*.

Now, let's talk about ***Eemunah***: *Eemunah* can be translated as faith or trust.

To have faith is not to assume that everything will turn out alright, or to place our trust in some abstract promise that it will. *Eemunah* is remaining in relationship — with God, with one another, with our deepest values — even when we do not have answers.

In his essay “The Thirst,”² the Jewish thinker Hillel Zeitlin imagines a person wandering around the world, searching for God.

“Have you seen my God? Where is my God?” He asks those passing by. He gets different unconvincing answers.

And then Zeitlin turns to the words of the psalmist:

צָמְאָה נַפְשִׁי לֵאלֹהִים, לֵאֵל חַי³

“My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.”

Zeitlin writes:

“Even before I taste the waters before me, even before I know their nature, I well know that I am thirsty for them.”⁴

² Hillel Zeitlin (1871–1942), “The Thirst,” *A Vision of the Heart* (Sifrut 4, 1910).

³ Psalm 42:3.

⁴ Translation from Shraga Bar-On, “Hillel Zeitlin in Search of God: An Analysis of Zeitlin’s Meditation ‘The Thirst,’” in *On Faith*, ed. Avi Sagi, Moshe Halbertal, and David Kurzweil.

The longing for God is the thirst for water. That longing comes before certainty. *Emunah* is the capacity to keep longing for what we cannot yet taste.

When we look at a broken world and still long for justice, peace, compassion, and human dignity, the longing itself is our practice of Faith, of *Emunah*.

And then there is ***Tikvah*** — Hope.

The Austrian neurologist, psychiatrist, philosopher, and Holocaust survivor, Viktor Emil Frankl, famously quoted Friedrich Nietzsche in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, writing, “He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how,”⁵ arguing that human survival depends on having a future aim. He maintained that suffering itself is endurable as long as a person holds onto a specific purpose or responsibility waiting for them beyond their current hardship.

Rachel Goldberg-Polin, the mother of Hersh, one of the 251 hostages abducted on October 7 from the Nova festival and murdered by Hamas after 328 days in captivity, tells in her profoundly moving and heart-wrenching book, *When We See You Again*, about learning more about Hersh’s time in captivity from Or Levy, who was eventually released.⁶

Or explained that Hersh repeated Frankl’s words like a mantra:

“He who has a WHY can bear any HOW.”

“What is your WHY?” Hersh kept asking the other hostages.

They talked about their individual purposes and reasons to live, reminding themselves that their WHY could give them the strength to survive.

Or knew his WHY was his son.

⁵Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (New York: Pocket Books, 1963), 121.

⁶Rachel Goldberg-Polin, *When We See You Again* (New York: Random House, 2026), 139–140.

When Or was eventually freed and strong enough, he had the words “He who has a WHY can bear any HOW” tattooed on his arm.

When his young son saw the tattoo, he asked, “Daddy, what is that?”

Or answered:

“It’s you.”

That is perhaps a way to understand *Tikvah*, Hope.

Hope is not simply believing that the future will be good. Hope is having a WHY. It is having something worth moving toward. Hope is the practice of discovering and living into that core purpose in the world.

And last but not least, ***Hakarat Hatov***: the practice of Gratitude.

The practice of gratitude, so embedded in our tradition. According to our tradition, the first words that come out of our mouths when we wake up are מוֹדָה/מוֹדָה אֲנִי *Modah Ani/Modeh Ani*: “I am grateful.”

At TBZ we have made this practice a part of our daily ritual.

On our daily Boker Tov Zoom morning service, we ask people to share what they are grateful for on the chat.

On Friday night Kabbalat Shabbat services, we invite people to meditate and lift up moments of gratitude in the week that is ending. Often, you hear me inviting you to be specific, concrete in articulating that which we are grateful for. I, personally, find this practice, not only grounding, but urgent when I am feeling a sense of despair, it helps me move forward, it helps me appreciate the good, the sweet, even in the midst of difficult times.

I am offering these practices of *Teshuvah*, *Emunah*, *Tikvah*, and *Hakarat Hatov* at a time when many of us feel a sense of anguish, at a time when the sense that not everything is going to be alright looms heavily on us.

We are living through so much fear and despair:

We are living at a time when antisemitism has become increasingly visible and frightening. Many Jews are carrying the pain of seeing ancient hatreds return in new forms, while parents wonder what it means for their children to grow up Jewish at this moment.

We are living at a time when immigrants and refugees are being treated as though their humanity is somehow dispensable. People are living in fear of being separated from their families, detained, or forced from the lives they have built.

We are living through profound political fracture, the rise of authoritarian movements and extremism, the erosion of trust in institutions, and a growing inability to speak across our differences.

We are still living with the trauma of October 7th — with the memory of those who were murdered and kidnapped, the fear so many Israelis continue to carry about security and survival, and the threat of expanding regional conflict. At the same time, we are witnessing the devastating suffering of Palestinian civilians in Gaza and the West Bank — destruction, displacement, loss of life, fear, and insecurity.

We are also living through continuous war and displacement, a climate crisis that increasingly feels irreversible, and a technological revolution in artificial intelligence that forces us to ask what kind of world we are creating for those who come after us.

The list is long...

For many of us, none of this is abstract. It touches our families, our communities, our relationships, and the choices we make about how to live in this uncertain world.

Perhaps these practices of returning, trust, hope, and gratitude can help us stay human in an increasingly hard world, in a world that is stripping away our humanity.

Lately, I have found myself thinking a great deal about the Titanic, this great and gigantic ocean liner that sank in the North Atlantic Ocean in April of 1912.

Sometimes that is what this moment feels like, as if we are sinking and there is nothing we can do to stop the tragedy. There is a kind of quiet pessimism that can settle into the soul—a feeling that perhaps the forces shaping our future are simply too large for us to influence and that all we are doing is re-arranging the chairs in a sinking ship.

Rabbi Lee Moore, whom many of you know because she was a rabbinic intern here two decades ago, is the granddaughter and great-granddaughter of Titanic survivors. Her grandfather, Meier Moore, was seven years old. Her great-grandmother, Beila Shapiro, was 29 and was traveling in third class, where the chances of survival were much lower. Rabbi Lee Moore shares their story,⁷ which feels almost like a miracle.

When the call came to save women and children first, a wealthy, older woman gave up her place on a lifeboat so that Lee's great-grandmother and her seven-year-old son could get on.

They survived. Think about that.

There was a future on that sinking ship.

The choice of one person — to give up her place — changed everything for Lee's family.

And there is another story from that night on the Titanic that makes me think about the choices we have when we cannot control the outcome, when we feel as if we are sinking: the musicians who continued to play as the ship was sinking.

We often think of them as a symbol of denial: why keep playing when the ship is going down? But perhaps we can ask a different question: Why did they keep playing? They could not steer the ship or stop the water. But they could choose what to do with the time they had left, and what kind of presence to offer the people around them. Perhaps continuing to play was not an act of denial, but an act of courage, dignity, even love, a way of staying human amidst fear but also, perhaps inside their own hope.

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/live/rYvAO6sBdVc?is=pA5wlbYaDaNZZ178>

The author Barbara Kingsolver writes in *Animal Dreams*:

“The very least you can do in your life is to figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance but live right in it, under its roof. What I want is so simple I almost can’t say it: elementary kindness. Enough to eat, enough to go around. The possibility that kids might one day grow up to be neither the destroyers nor the destroyed. That’s about it. Right now I’m living in that hope, running down its hallway and touching the walls on both sides.”⁸

I love that image: living inside hope. Not waiting for the future to become the world we long for, but beginning to inhabit that world now.

If what we hope for is kindness, then we practice kindness now. If we hope for a world in which children can grow up neither as destroyers nor as the destroyed, then we build that world in the small ways available to us today.

Hope is not standing outside the future and wishing for it.
Hope is entering it, even before we can see it.

And perhaps this is where our own High Holiday prayer begins.
Not with certainty about what lies ahead, but with the courage to approach the gate anyway.

This brings us to the song we have chosen for this year’s High Holidays:
Sha'arei Shamayim Petach—“Open the gates of heaven.”⁹

The image at the center of this piyyut is not a person who has found certainty. It is a person standing at a gate, knocking.

שְׁעָרֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם דּוֹפְקִים כְּעֲנִיִּים וְדָלִים

She'arekha hem dofkim ka'anizim ve-dalim

⁸ Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal Dreams* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991), 299.

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=slJydCUVDhk>

“At Your gates they knock, like the poor and the needy.”

We come to the High Holidays because we know that we do not know.
We do not know what the world will look like in the year ahead. We do not know
whether our efforts will be enough, or whether we will be able to prevent every loss,
repair every fracture, or heal every wound.

And maybe the question our tradition asks us is not:
Will everything be alright?
Because the honest answer is that some things will not be alright.
The question is: Who will we become in the face of an uncertain future?

We cannot guarantee the future.
But we can choose.
We can choose to love when fear tells us to close our hearts.
We can choose to repair when despair tells us that our actions do not matter.
We can choose to remain connected when the world tells us to turn away.

So as we begin this new year, I encourage us to choose and explore the practices of
Teshuvah, Emunah, Tikvah and Hakarat Hatov.

This is what the High Holidays ask of us.
Not to pretend that everything is fine.
Not even to convince ourselves that the ship will never sink.

But to stand at the gates and knock.
To bring our brokenness, our hopes, our fears, and our longing before God.
To thirst for what is good.
To ask the questions we cannot answer.

To return, today, to the people we want to become.
And then, having knocked, to listen for the gates that are ours to open.

Shana Tova.