

The Limits of the Emergency Room

I couldn't put down my phone. I was in Galena, on a short vacation with my family. We rented a house in the midst of nature. It was glorious. The space to breathe without a mask was healing. The time away from responsibilities was liberating. But I couldn't stop checking my email. And my texts. And my calendar.

I'm not normally like this. When I work, I focus on work. And when I take time away with my family, I completely tune in to them. But not this time. No matter how much I tried to be fully present, the tightness in my chest, the voice buzzing in my head, kept saying: there might be a crisis to manage, what if there's another fire to put out?

And that got me thinking: what changed? What's wrong with me? Why am I stuck in this emergency room mentality?

And the answer was obvious. It's been since March. Since the beginning of this pandemic. Everything in life has felt like a crisis. Do we have enough food in the pantry? Are we being safe enough? How will I educate my kid *from* home, while two parents are working full time jobs?

And here, at Anshe Emet, what programs and initiatives need to be postponed, or changed? Who must wear masks and when? How distant do people need to be?

Everything in life that was once predictable needed to be debated, reinvented, and revisioned.

I imagine many of you can relate. We've all been practicing Emergency Room Medicine for months on end.

When we treat life like the emergency room, we run around like chickens with our heads cut off, flitting between work and homeschooling and family, at lightning pace. When we treat life like the emergency room, some of us might say, "There's no time to think about healthy eating or exercise." Instead, we snack on brownies and drink a few too many glasses of wine, just to get through the stress. Or some of us might say, "What's the big deal if I binge-watch Netflix all day?" We disengage from social contacts, staring at a screen because after all, "it's only temporary."

Whether you are at home alone, isolated and bored, or you are juggling more responsibilities than you know how to handle, most of us have come to treat our lives like an emergency room: we are choosing the quick, easy fixes. And that has a benefit, but it also has a cost.

Think big picture. As a society, when we treat life like the emergency room, we provide more security officers in our synagogues, but we don't dig into the cultural roots of widespread global anti-Semitism. We recycle our soda cans, but we don't shift the tides of climate change. We provide Chromebooks for students, but we don't get to the heart of embedded educational disparities. We say the *words* "black lives matter," but we don't confront the cultural underpinnings of systemic racism.

Short-term *solutions* are a good idea... for short-term *problems*. But for **long-term** challenges, if we always choose the quick and easy fixes, we'll never get to the heart of the matter.

In March, many of us confronted the coronavirus as if we were addressing a short-term crisis. So we chose short-term solutions. *That* did make sense... in March. But the thing is, now it's September.

For long-term challenges, those emergency room strategies just don't work. We end up burned out and depleted. The pace of a sprint will kill you in a Marathon. And this is a Marathon.

If we only treat the symptoms, we'll never cure the disease. I can take as many pain killers as I want, but the tooth ache isn't getting resolved until I see the Dentist. In your life, are your coping strategies, your patterns, your behaviors, treating the symptoms or the illness?

In the Torah, we see this dynamic play out in the Desert years. After escaping slavery and leaving Egypt, God employs an emergency room mentality, solving the immediate crises of the newly liberated people quickly and efficiently.

The people are hungry: God rains manna down from the sky.

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה הִנְנִי מְמַטֵּיר לָכֶם לֶחֶם מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם ,

And the Lord said to Moses, "I will rain down bread for you from the sky."

In the ancient text, Mechilta d'Rebbe Yishmael, the Rabbis underscore the miraculous nature of the manna: "Scripture comes to apprise us how the manna descended for Israel: A north wind would come and "sweep" the desert. Then rain would come and clean the ground, and the dew would rise and the wind would blow on it and make it like golden tables, on which the manna descended." The Jewish people just sat back, and God addressed our hunger with miracles.

But it doesn't stop there. The people are thirsty, God makes a well of water spring up wherever the Prophet Miriam goes. The people are disloyal, God destroys those who built the Golden Calf. The people rebel against Moses, God opens up a huge pit and swallows the rebels into it.

In those moments of crisis, God does what needs to be done to feed us and to protect us, even from ourselves. Those solutions work to treat the emergent symptoms, but they don't get to the heart of what is aching within- that doubt, that fear, that loneliness within the soul of our people... that won't be resolved with a quick fix from on High.

How do we change to begin resolving our challenges not fast, but smart?

When our people wandered in the Desert, God wisely shifted from emergency room miracles, to long-term sustainable solutions. The *symptom* was the hunger and the thirst. The *disease* was the lost soul in need of guidance and comfort. God prescribed manna for the symptom. God prescribed Torah for the disease.

In our own lives, God does not rain down manna from Heaven, there are no dewdrops turning into golden plates. Instead, we gain guidance and wisdom from the Torah that God gave us in that very same desert.

We just finished putting the Torah in the ark, having read the tales of our forefathers and foremothers. Those narratives are God's long-term medicine: they sustain us and advise us even when the night is long and dark. And so when we returned the Torah to the ark, we used a precious analogy: we called it a tree.

עֵץ־חַיִּים הִיא לַמְחַיִּים בָּהּ וְהַמְכִּיחַ מֵאֲשֶׁר

She is a tree of life to those who grasp her, and whoever holds on to her finds joy.

The Torah is our tree. She guides us beyond the obvious leaves and branches, and home to the heart: to our roots. In addressing the roots, we *can* find true and lasting joy. Miracles resolve immediate crises; the wisdom of the Torah has sustained our people for generations.

One of the sacred tools the Torah gives us, one of the brilliant pieces of God's long-term medicine is the Holiday Cycle, beginning with Shabbat, and including, of course, Rosh HaShanah. In that same desert, after the seas split and the manna fell, God taught us to breathe, pause, and reflect... so that we can slow down our ER pace, and instead become open to life-sustaining long-term solutions. Ahad Ha'am, one of the foremost pre-state Zionist thinkers, famously said: "More than Jews have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews" The practice of pausing and reflecting has cared for the soul of our people, through light and through darkness.

RoshHashanah too has kept us as a people, by mandating that we pause and reflect. We need that today, more than ever. A true *Cheshbon hanefesh*, an accounting for our souls, means we must pause and ask: even in the face of unfathomable challenges, how do I strive to align my vision and values with my day to day actions?

So how do we do it? We can think practically and spiritually...

First thing's first: we slow down. It's Rosh HaShanah. We are gifted with a pause button at this season. Slowly breathe. Reflect. Reassess. Not everything is an immediate crisis. A little time to think is one of the greatest gifts God has given us today. Take it.

Next, we reassess our priorities. Think to yourself: in my life, what are the two or three things that matter most? And then, ask yourself: am I actually prioritizing those things? If not, what needs to change? It may sound simple, but it's not.

In my life, family matters most. But when my son needs to remind me, "Papa, put your phone away," he's right, and I'm wrong. I know what needs to change.

And let's return to that question about symptoms vs disease, branches vs roots. Problems aren't truly resolved until we dig deep enough.

As individuals...if the problem is: I'm scared for the future and overwhelmed by the present (I know that's the case for lots of us), then wine and brownies aren't going to address it. We need to tackle that anxiety directly, head on.

And collectively... if the problem is: our nation is not living up to its promise of equity, of judging people by the "content of their character rather than the color of their skin," and the costs are human lives, then t-shirts and slogans and Facebook memes aren't going to address it. What will it take to tackle systemic racism at its toxic roots?

If the answers were simple, the problems would already be solved. But if we keep trimming the leaves, and never get to the diseased roots, the trees will tumble. The long road is the only road.

And beyond the pragmatic, there are spiritual tools which can also aid us in carving a path forward: On Rosh HaShanah there is Shofar, and there is Tashlich.

Shofar is the instrument of emergency room medicine. It is loud and quick. We need that medicine! Shofar is not unlike the miracles that God did in the desert: it is rapid and powerful, and God willing, we are transformed and awakened. Like the Manna, it nourishes us: a sacred gift on a golden platter.

Tashlich is the long-term strategy. For Tashlich, which takes place tomorrow afternoon, we toss pieces of bread into a body of water, representing the behaviors or patterns which we are hoping to release this year. Tashlich is a little slower and a little more work than Shofar. Tashlich is about resolving long-term issues: slowly and meticulously contemplating who *I* strive to be and what *I* need to change in order to get there.

If you're too hasty, the waves will wash the crusts of bread right back onto your feet. Nothing will have changed. If we address the branches and not the roots, we'll simply beat our chests again, year after year, on that same *al cheyt*, that same confessional.

So imagine yourself at the lake. You've got bread crumbs in your hand. You have all the time in the world. There's only you and the water.

What choices have you made that served the short term, but not the long?

Which priorities have you put first, and which ones have gotten lost along life's arduous path?

What symptoms have you addressed, and which diseases have you left untreated?

As you toss your crumbs into the waves, may this season give you the space *and* time to reclaim who you've *been*, who you *are* at your core, and who you *could* be.

We're in it for the long haul.

Take your time, take a breath, lean in... No rush.

Shanah Tovah.