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And
Yom Kippur 5781

I've been doing a lot of reading lately. Perhaps fitting for our Covid-19 times, I've been finding myself drawn to dystopian, science fiction novels. I find it both entertaining to read about far-fetched and imagined technology and oddly comforting to think about how people cope with realities just as disturbing than our own.

But as I've been thinking about the year that has passed, I've found myself going back to a classic—William Golding's 1954 novel, *The Lord of the Flies*. The plot is a familiar one—during World War II, a plane with boys being evacuated from Britain crashes on a deserted island. After surviving the crash, the boys are elated—an island paradise with no grown-ups where they can play, frolic, and eat coconuts. Two boys, the charismatic Ralph and the bespectacled Piggy, realize that they are going to have to organize themselves, so they create a democracy where the one who holds a conch shell can speak and receive full attention from everyone else. Ralph becomes chief and establishes three rules—the boys must have fun, survive, and keep a signal fire going. The boys then organize themselves into tribes—hunters, fire preservers, and shelter builders, and their island civilization takes root.

But pretty quickly things start to deteriorate. Most of the boys are idle, not helping to create structures or keep the fire going. Paranoia about the island ensues as the boys start speaking about monsters that supposedly live in the jungle. Worst of all, comity among the boys disintegrates, as the more aggressive boys start bullying Piggy. Any semblance of order and democracy turns to chaos, as the hunters break off from Ralph's ordered society, paint their faces, and become violent. By the time the boys are discovered and saved by an adult,

Piggy has been killed, the hunters have set the island on fire, and Ralph is running for his life.

The book ends with a haunting moment—a naval officer scolding the boys and saying that he had thought they would have put on a better show than this. Ralph then bursts into tears, weeping for his lost innocence and the darkness he has discovered in man's heart.

Golding's story has been translated into 30 languages and sold tens of millions of copies.

Its popularity is clearly a product of its age—having just experienced the horrors of the Second World War, Golding portrayed the darkest depths of humanity in these boys. In a time when the cultural zeitgeist was questioning if Auschwitz was an anomaly or merely human nature taken to its logical conclusion, Golding portrayed a Hobbsian view of humanity. When left to their own devices, the boys descended into anarchy, selfishness, paranoia, and brutality. A dark view of human nature, indeed.

The events of this past year 5780 left us with plenty of examples of the darkest, most unsavory aspects of human nature. United States Senators who, when briefed with classified information about incoming threat of the Corona Virus in February, decided to sell off their stock instead of raising awareness in the general public. A black man, Ahmaud Arbery, who was out jogging, hunted down and lynched by racists. George Floyd, held to the ground for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, with an officer's knee on his neck, yelling out that he can't breathe until he died. Three other officers standing there, just letting it happen. Politicians continuing to defend the statues of treasonous Confederate military generals whose *raison d'être* was the defense of the institution of owning people. Federal agents sent to major cities to terrorize the population and kidnap demonstrators and throw them into unmarked cars. A deadly pandemic

allowed to spread unabated due to willful ignorance, a populace unwilling to fully adhere to safety precautions, and governmental incompetence.

5780 has been a hard year. It has broken our hearts in ways that we never knew they could be broken. It's enough to make us jaded, cynical, and pessimistic. Cause us to retreat into our cultural or partisan echo chambers and make us more divided as a nation. Cause us to be less generous, less kind, more self-absorbed.

As we enter this most extraordinary Day of Atonement in which we cannot even be together in the same room, we ask the question of how do we cope with the darkness? There are so many ways that our hearts have been broken by the world, by the casual carelessness and cruelty of others, and by the persistence of injustice. When we see the worst aspects of humanity, when we don't always know where to go to for hope, what is the Jewish response?

Many of us know the story of Rabbi Hillel and the convert. A man comes before Rabbi Hillel and states that he will convert to Judaism if Hillel can tell him the whole Torah while standing on one foot. Without missing a beat, the wise Hillel stands on one foot and declares: "What is hateful to you, do not do to someone else. That is the whole Torah, the rest is commentary, now go and learn it." It's a good story, but tonight, I want to make Hillel's response even simpler. Hillel managed to boil the entire Torah down to one sentence. Tonight, I'm not only going to boil it down to one word, I'm going to boil it down to one letter.

In a sermon she delivered in March, Rabbi Janet Marder pointed out the meaning of the letter *vav*. *Vav*, the sixth letter of the Hebrew alphabet, is a prefix that means "and." It is a simple conjunction whose sole purpose is to join two things together. Though we are often taught that it is gauche to begin a sentence in English with the word "and," it is actually the

most common way that verses in the Torah begin. Other than *yud*, *Vav* is the most common letter in the Torah, appearing 30,509 times. The Medieval halachic commentator Moses Isserles taught that a Torah scroll should be written so that each column of text begins with the letter *vav*, further highlighting the importance of this little conjunction.

Rabbi Marder points out that *vav*, the conjunction for “and,” also plays an important role in the story of Cain and Abel. When Cain kills his brother, God places a mark on his forehead to signify the wrong that he has done, but the Torah never tells us precisely what that mark is. The rabbinic commentator Rashi says that the mark is one of the letters from God’s name, the tetragrammaton, *Yud-Hey-Vav-Hey*, and the rabbis in the *Tikkunei Zohar* further explain that it was, in fact, the letter *vav*. Why is this significant? Because when God asked Cain what had happened to his brother Abel, Cain asked God rhetorically “am I my brother’s keeper?” It is a cold and callous question. Cain not only seeks to hide from the great wrong he has done, but he seeks to skirt any responsibility that he has for his brother. I’m not my brother’s keeper. It’s not my responsibility to look after his well-being. It’s not my responsibility to care for him, to help him, to guide him, to ensure he succeeds. I’m only out for me.

In placing the letter *vav* on his forehead, the letter meaning “and,” God rejects this mentality. By placing “and” on his face, God teaches Cain, and all of us, that yes, we are our brother’s keeper. We have to care about people besides ourselves. We are all interconnected; we are “and.” And it is this mindset of “and” that is the essence of what it means to be a Jew.

Hillel in *Pirkei Avot* asks us the famous question, “if I am not for myself, who will be for me, but if I am only for myself, what am I?” Hillel suggests that to only be for oneself, to not be

your brother's keeper, causes us to lose our humanity. Our tendency towards selfishness has to be counterbalanced by the pull towards the other. This "and" mentality means that everything you would want for yourself—financial, personal, and professional success, love, care, health, consideration—are the exact things that you should want for your neighbor and endeavor to achieve for him.

Rabbi Devorah reminds us so often that the first time in Torah when God says that something is not good is when the first human is all alone in the Garden of Eden. It is not good for people to experience existential loneliness, because we are meant to be in community. Rabbi Devorah teaches us that this means that the entire meaning of life is to live with a mentality of "and"—to relieve the loneliness of others through love, friendship, and relationship. We only find true fulfillment in our lives through breaking the illusion of self-sufficiency. This is what Joseph B. Soloveichik taught in his seminal work *The Lonely Man of Faith*. Soloveichik writes that our culture values success and the triumph of the individual. However, we who suffer from existential loneliness cannot achieve true fulfillment only through our professional and material endeavors. Our true measure of success is our ability to be in relation with each other, our capacity to reach out to each other and sacrifice for the other.

The Holiness Code found in the heart of Leviticus near the very center of the Torah teaches "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Notice the wording of this statement. Leviticus does not say "you shall love your neighbor **as you love** yourself." It says "you shall love your neighbor **as** yourself." Living the vav mentality means that we not only show consideration for each other. It means that we have to see ourselves within the other. This is a

radical call towards solidarity. For if I see myself in my neighbor, that means that I will come to his side and ensure that he does not suffer. It means that when he does suffer, I suffer as well, because I see myself in him. And ultimately, the vav mentality, the call for radical solidarity, is a call to action, for if I see myself in the other, I am commanded to act on behalf of his well-being.

In other words, the vav mentality of being a good neighbor is the very heart of Torah and Judaism. It is no coincidence that the most central prayer we recite, our most significant declaration of faith is Shema Yisrael. Hear O Israel, Adonai is Our God, Adonai is One. This verse is not only a declaration of monotheism, but also an assertion of Oneness. That there is a unity that underlies the entire universe. That there is a deep and abiding connection between all people. That the only way to foster a connection to the Eternal One is by accepting and connecting ourselves to the Oneness that transcends all. Rabbi Marder points out that in Deuteronomy where the Shema comes from the very next word is V'ahavta. "And you shall love." The letter *vav* acting as the conjunction between our central assertion of the unity of all existence and the commandment to love that allows us to respond to that Oneness.

The past six months have proven just how true the mentality of "and" is. We are currently living with the fallout of a virus that originated halfway across the world. In a matter of weeks we went from a fully functioning economy to being shut in our homes, our everyday lives completely changed. The rapidness with which the virus has spread is a devastating embodiment of the fact that our lives are inextricably enmeshed in ways that we are only beginning to understand. Like it or not, we cannot ignore the vav-mentality, as we literally see through our civilization's unique capability to spread disease.

Paradoxically, the Covid-19 crisis is one that has affected all of us—rich, poor, young, old, and yet it has also highlighted deep seeded inequalities that exist in our society. We learned quickly that the people who got sicker and died more often were those with preexisting medical conditions—heart disease, hypertension, diabetes. The health conditions that people pick up from not having health insurance or not being able to go to the doctor regularly have proven to be deadly. Meat packing plants where the workers are paid minimum wage packed in together without the ability to social distance have become hotspots of disease spread. And perhaps even more heartbreakingly is the way that it disproportionately has affected underserved communities in our country, particularly the African-American community. The inequalities and social ills that we have passively tolerated in our country are literally making us sicker.

The only way we are going to get through Covid-19 is through embracing a mentality of Oneness and solidarity, the mindset of “and.” Consider a midrash from Shaarei Teshuvah. It once happened that a lion approached a fox in order to devour it. The fox, panicked, asked the lion, “Do I really have enough flesh for you to satisfy your hunger? Let me go, and I will show you a truly corpulent man who you can eat and be truly satisfy your hunger. Now the man was sitting behind a pit that was covered up. The lion saw the man, licked his lips, but then considered something else, “A man can pray, and I am afraid the prayer will be heard by God and bring about my ruin if I eat him.” The fox said to him, “Don’t worry about that. Neither you nor your children will suffer his curse. Rather your grandchildren will suffer for your sin, and that’s a long way off.” The lion was satisfied by this advice, but as he approached the man to attack, he fell in the pit. The lion, outraged, cried out to the fox, “You promised me no harm

would come to me, only to my grandchildren!” The fox then replied, “What I said about your sin was true, but your grandfather, years ago, made the same calculation you did, and it is for his sin that you now are being punished.”

This story is filled with irony, but it is that irony we need to understand now in these pandemic times. The lion decides to listen to his appetite, despite the warning that his decisions will have consequences for others. In deciding to condemn others for his choices, he brings pain onto himself. In other words, the lion suffers precisely because he feels zero solidarity with others. This has certainly proven true for the spread of Covid 19. When we show solidarity to the vulnerable—the elderly, the immunocompromised—by wearing a mask, we can prevent the spread of the disease to nearly zero. But when we show no solidarity for our fellow human beings and don’t wear masks, we not only spread the disease, but put ourselves at risk. We are in the exact same position as the lion. We can show solidarity to others and prevent disease spread, or we can show no solidarity to others and suffer even more.

Because we are interconnected, because we have to listen to that mentality of “and,” this means that we have to endeavor to create a better society. Not one where our carelessness and neglect has led to 200,000 people dying. We cannot tolerate a society where people are so financially insecure that they feel pressure to go to work sick. We cannot tolerate a society that perpetuates cycles of poverty and oppression. We cannot tolerate a society whose people do not prioritize being a good citizen, being a good neighbor to each other. The only thing that can help us defeat this disease is kindness and sacrifice. We have to see ourselves as being responsible for each other, because our very lives depend on it.

In spite of all the heartbreak during this time, there have been so many instances of the profound goodness in people, in people who embrace the concept of Oneness. We heard of countless teachers and school administrators who worked tirelessly to make sure that their students were fed their subsidized federal lunch plans. Without those lunches continuing, many of those kids would not have had food to eat. We saw professional athletes and team owners donate their money to make sure that the staff that work on an hourly wage at the stadiums and training facilities are paid and taken care of during the quarantine. And of course, we have to mention the health care workers—the doctors, nurses, social workers, and hospital staff—who put themselves right into the thick of the battle against Covid-19. They do so, knowing the risks they face, because they know the supreme importance of their calling to be healers.

The goodness that people have done for each other, the ways people have reached out, and the ways that so many have sacrificed for their neighbors have shown us that our interconnectedness need not fill us with the anxiety and fear of infection. It can be a source of inspiration. It can be a deep well of meaning and purpose. And most importantly, our interconnectedness can be the very source of the healing that our broken world so desperately needs.

So it turns out that the scenario that *Lord of the Flies* plays out actually happened. In 1966, an Australian sea captain named Peter Warner happened upon a small deserted island in the South Pacific. When he peered through his binoculars, he saw that some of the bushes on the cliffs of the island were burned, and as he drew closer, he saw a boy jump off the cliff into

the ocean, and soon after, five other boys were screaming at the tops of their lungs to be rescued.

The six boys had been on that island for fifteen months. Their families on the Tonga mainland had held funerals for them, presumed them dead. The boys' adventure began when they stole a neighbor's sailboat at night. They fell asleep on the deck only to be woken up by a storm that caused them to be lost at sea. After eight days desperately floating with no land in sight, they stumbled upon the island that would become their home for over a year. When Peter Warner reached the island, he found that the boys had set up a commune with a food garden, hallowed out a tree trunk to store rain water, made chicken pens and even a badminton court. And they actually managed to keep a permanent fire going.

So I'm sure you're wondering if the real-life Lord of the Flies turned out like the book. Did these six boys manage to create a functional society? Or did they descend into violence and chaos? Turns out that William Golding's novel was completely wrong. Now, the kids weren't perfect. They had their fights, but they managed to keep the peace by putting themselves on time out. Their days began and ended with song and prayer. One of the boys made a make-shift guitar with wood and metal strings from their boat and played it every day to lift everyone's spirits. It was a hard life. The summers were brutal with little rain. One day, one of the boys tripped and fell off a cliff and broke his leg. The other boys climbed down to save him and set his leg with sticks and leaves and happily did his share of the work while he healed. In short, the story of these six boys lost in the middle of the South Pacific was a story of friendship and loyalty. A story that proves the strength that resides in the human spirit. And most of all, the real *Lord of the Flies* tells us that our nature is not inherently prone toward

selfishness, violence, and divisiveness. When put in the most extreme of circumstances, these boys proved the deep connection they all felt towards each other. A vav-mentality of solidarity. A connection to the Oneness that underlies everything.

As I close tonight, I want to quote the ending of *Cloud Atlas*, a 2004 novel written by David Mitchell, which I think speaks directly to the moment we find ourselves in.

“Why fight the natural order of things? Because of this—one fine day, a purely predatory world shall consume itself... In an individual, selfishness uglifies the soul; for the human species, selfishness is extinction.

Is this the doom written within our nature? [Perhaps not.] If we **believe** that humanity may transcend tooth and claw, if we **believe** diverse races and creeds can share this world as the orphans share their candlenut tree, if we **believe** leaders must be just, violence muzzled, power accountable, and the riches of the Earth and its Oceans shared equitably, such a world **will** come to pass. I am not deceived. It is the hardest of worlds to make real. Torturous advances won over generations can be lost by a single stroke of a myopic president’s pen or a vainglorious general’s sword.

But a life spent shaping a world I **want** [our children] to inherit, not one I **fear** [they] shall inherit, this strikes me as a life worth the living.

[Our lives may be no more than one drop in a limitless ocean.] But then again, what is any ocean but a multitude of drops?”