

Benj Fried

The Time We Are Given
Rosh HaShanah 5782

“Out of the Past” was the name of the store, and its products consisted of memories: what was prosaic or even vulgar to one generation had been transmuted by the mere passing of years to a status at once magical or even camp. This line which speaks of the power of nostalgia to make things from the past seem whimsical and desirable comes from the 2011 Woody Allen fantastical comedy *A Midnight in Paris*.

The film centers on Owen Wilson’s character Gil Pender, a disillusioned Hollywood screenwriter who finds the city of Paris romantic and full of culture. Gil’s fiancée encourages him to sell out and garner success in the screenwriting industry that leaves him feeling unfulfilled, but wandering the streets of the city of lights, Gil realizes he wants more. At the stroke of midnight, something magical happens—an old style 1920s car pulls up, and Gil hops in and is instantly transported back in time to the Paris of the Lost Generation. He enters the literary salon of Gertrude Stein, meets Ernest Hemmingway, Cole Porter, Zelda and Scott Fitzgerald, and Pablo Picasso. Gil is elated by the opportunity to live in the Paris of the 1920s and see the birth of so many momentous pieces of art and culture. He revels at the opportunity to receive feedback on his novel from Gertrude Stein, and he falls in love with Pablo Picasso’s lover Adrianna. But when day breaks, he returns back to 2010, the bar where the 1920s literatti were drinking has become a laundromat.

Undeterred, Gil finds he is able to return to the 1920s each night at the stroke of midnight and deepens his relationships. He is at the cusp of deciding to live in the Paris of the past permanently, when he discovers that all the people he surrounds himself with are not as

happy living in the Lost Generation as he is. They long to go back to the Paris of the 1890s, the Belle Epoch. They long to be around the art of Toulouse-Lautrec, Paul Gauguin, Edward Degas. The literati of the 1920s describe this era as the greatest era since the Renaissance and think of their present as drab and ordinary in comparison. It's at this moment that Gil realizes that everyone longs for the past, no matter when they live, that any time can seem like a dull present, and that the only thing we can do is embrace the time we live in.

The past year, I have found myself sinking into nostalgia more than I usually do. I've longed for the places I used to travel to with my parents when I was a kid, I've been listening to the music I loved when I was younger, and I've been thinking a lot about the friends, teachers, and loved ones I was close with when I was younger. The lure of nostalgia has been strong I think because it provides a sense of escapism from our present. We long for the idealized past, a simpler time, because our present is so hard.

The year we have just concluded has been hard beyond our wildest imaginations. Think about the fact that we had to deal a pandemic worse than 1918, an economic collapse worse than 1929, and racial tensions and reckoning on par with 1968 all in the same year. And I haven't even gotten to January 2021 yet. Since then we witnessed on January 6th a terrorist assault on the seat of our democracy perpetuated not by a hostile nation, but by our country's own citizens who refused to allow the peaceful transfer of power to the winner of the presidential election. We have seen COVID-19 continue to spread with more dangerous and deadly mutations as our country has failed to reach herd immunity. We lived through yet another flare up of violence between Israel and Gaza and seen horrific instances of anti-

Semitism bubble up in our country in response to Israel defending herself. We have continued to see the horrific effects of Global Warming wreck havoc on our world. The Pacific Northwest and British Columbia were trapped for days and weeks at a time in June and July under a heat dome, with temperatures reaching into the 120s in areas we thought could be safe harbors from extreme heat waves. The Taliban are back in charge of Afghanistan. And the political divisiveness, stalemate, and animosity in this country continues to play out not only amongst our political leaders, but also on social media and amongst ourselves in our communities and in our families.

To put it shortly, the challenges that we are forced to deal with are really, really hard. There are no silver bullets; there are no easy solutions to our problems. And we cannot choose escapism, because the more we try to ignore the problems of the pandemic, of racism, of the environment, of our political divisions, the more they fester and get worse. All of this is to say, in the year 2021, in the year 5782, it is really hard to be a human being.

The burdens we carry collectively can seem so unfair at times. Why do we have to deal with challenges that seem so insurmountable? Why are these our burdens when the challenges of our parents and our grandparents seem to pale in comparison? When I ponder these questions, I think of a beautiful moment in J.R.R. Tolkien's epic *The Lord of the Rings*. For those of you who haven't read it or seen the movies, the main character Frodo, a hobbit, is given a horrible burden—a magical ring that if reunited with its owner, the Dark Lord Sauron, will result in the enslavement of all humanity and the destruction of the world as they know it.

This little hobbit, Frodo, has to, against all hope and odds, carry the ring in secrecy behind enemy lines and destroy it in the volcano that it was created in.

In a moment of despair along the journey, Frodo turns to the wizard Gandalf and says, “I wish none of this had ever happened. I wish the ring had never come to me. I wish that this burden wasn’t mine.” Gandalf responds, “So do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us.”

None of us chooses when we are born. None of us chooses what problems the world has to face during our lifetime. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us.

We shouldn’t lose sight of the time when J.R.R. Tolkien wrote these words. The author fought in his youth for the British in World War I, a war that saw new heights of humanity’s capacity for destruction and cruelty. Young men lived in trenches on the fronts, living in the stink and filth of the earth in an environment that felt like a living grave with the ever-present threat of chemical weapons that wrought such havoc on the respiratory system that people literally drowned on dry land. In his adult years, he would then bear witness to the Second World War, a time where civilization fell dangerously close to enslavement to Fascism, Nazism and totalitarianism—the very worst of what the Ring in the novels could have unleashed. Tolkien wrote these words having witnessed perhaps the darkest moment of humanity. A time when so many were called on to make sacrifices to preserve the values of human dignity and democracy. A time when so many did not make it back. He reminds us when we come to moments of darkness, we cannot wallow in the unfairness of circumstances or long to be in a simpler past. All we have to decide in the darkness is what to do with the time we are given.

This is, of course, a lesson that our people are well acquainted with. Remember Joseph? The boy with the amazing technicolor dream coat. The man who rises to prominence to become Pharaoh's viceroy and save the region from starvation during the years of famine through his uncanny dream interpretation and administrative capabilities. Of course, we have to recall that Joseph's story isn't one of triumph and glory the whole way. It is one of pain and anguish. When he engenders hatred in his brothers, they dig a pit and throw him into it so they can kill him. His brother Judah decides to save him only so that he can sell him into slavery. And then when he goes to the house of Potiphar as a slave, he is falsely accused of sexual assault and thrown into prison. And then when he has just a sliver of hope to change his circumstances, when he correctly interprets the dream of the butler and asks him to put in a good word for him when he is released from prison, the butler promptly forgets about Joseph.

This is truly what we might call a dark night of the soul. He has experienced the pain of betrayal by his own flesh and blood, experienced the degradation and humiliation of slavery, experienced the pangs of injustice, and experienced the hopelessness of being forgotten. And yet we know the whole time that this is not where Joseph's story ends. Even in the darkest of circumstances, Joseph knows he has a role to play in the larger narrative. Because he never succumbs to despair, Joseph fulfills his destiny and brings redemption to Egypt and his family. There's a key moment at the end of the story, when Joseph's brothers are nervous that he might still bear a grudge against them for the role they played in his suffering. When they bow before Joseph in humility, Joseph quickly puts them at ease declaring, "Although you intended

me harm, God intended it for good, so that I could bring the intended result, the survival of millions of people.”

Notice what Joseph does there. He has completely transformed his personal narrative. He does not sink into resentment and anger because of the suffering he experienced through his trials and tribulations. He rather sees it all as part of a bigger plan. You intended me harm, but God made it good. I was meant to be on this path, so that I could save the world. What if Joseph is right about all this? What if instead of feeling burdened and victimized by the challenges we have to face, we share in this belief? That there was a reason why we were born when we were born in the circumstances that we were born into. That we were meant to be alive precisely at this moment because we have a role to play in facing the challenges of this moment.

Viktor Frankl taught us this same message. You may remember Frankl as the renowned psychiatrist and developer of logotherapy, a therapeutic method that focuses on the search for life’s meaning as a central motivating human force. He was also a survivor of the death camps in the Holocaust, a witness to the ultimate darkness of humanity. It may seem odd to hear about searching for the meaning of life from a person who experienced the death camps, a circumstance in which human life was trivialized, treated with disdain and indignity. His fellow prisoners, in the face of their hopeless situation, became jaded, bitter, and often lost all motivation to carry on in such degraded circumstances.

And yet, it was precisely in this hellscape that Viktor Frankl affirmed his fundamental beliefs and philosophies. That not only was life worth living in the midst of challenge, but that

meaning could be found in any moment and any circumstance. He writes: “Most men in the concentration camps believed that the real opportunities of life had passed. Yet, in reality, there was an opportunity and a challenge. One could make a victory of those experiences, turning life into an inner triumph, or one could ignore the challenge and simply vegetate, as did a majority of the prisoners... The way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, gives him ample opportunity – even under the most difficult circumstances – to add a deeper meaning to his life. It may remain brave, dignified and unselfish. Or in the bitter fight for self-preservation he may forget his human dignity and become no more than an animal. Here lies the chance for a man either to make use of or to forgo the opportunities of attaining the moral values that a difficult situation may afford him.”

In the midst of our challenges, in the midst of our suffering, we have the opportunity to make meaning of our trials and tribulations. Because, even when life dictates what circumstances we find ourselves in, we always have the choice of how we respond to them. And that choice gives us the opportunity to find spiritual triumph, or despair. The choice is ours. Deuteronomy teaches “I place before you, life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life.”

This was such a real and foundational maxim for Viktor Frankl that he even asserted that it fundamentally does not matter if life is so hard that we cannot expect anything from it. He writes: “What was really needed in the camps was a fundamental change in our attitude toward life. We had to learn ourselves and, furthermore, we had to teach the despairing men, that *it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us*. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think

of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life – daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfil the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual.”

Viktor Frankl inspires us to change the way that we think about life and approach life. Life is hard right now and our challenges are daunting. But instead of asking the question of “how can I live with these challenges? How can I make my life bearable and comfortable?” we should ask ourselves a different question. We must ask “what are the challenges of the world asking of me?” “How can I make a difference?” “How can I be of service?” “If I was meant to be born to this day and age, what role do I have to play in this world?”

Rabbi Ed Feinstein of Valley Beth Shalom points out that if we look at the story and history of our people, we quickly come to realize that moments of crisis, moments of discontinuity have actually been our greatest sources of inspiration and genius. It was, after all, out of the Babylonian exile, a horrible trauma in which our Temple was destroyed and our people displaced from their land, that our people completed and codified a little document we call the Torah. The destruction of the Second Temple and the persecution of the Romans inspired our rabbis to create the Mishnah and the Talmud, the texts that not only invented Judaism as we know it, but ensured our people’s survival to this day. The marginalization and indignity of the Jews in the Middle Ages produced the genius of Saadya Gaon, Rashi, and Maimonides. The failure and disappointment of the Sabbatian messianic

movement paved the way for the spiritual revival of Hassidism. And the failures of modernity and the continued existence of anti-Semitism inspired Zionism.

Every single time our people has experienced discontinuity, the challenge of the times has inspired us to new levels of genius. Each time we thought that we had bumped into a brick wall, that there was no way we could fight on and continue as a people, we managed to evolve, to grow, to change and become better and stronger. Whenever our people have faced the darkness, there has come someone, whether it was Moses, Esther, Judah Maccabee, Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Akiva, Yehuda HaLevi, Theodore Hertzl, or David Ben Gurion, who rose to the occasion to meet the challenges of the day and change the world in the process. Our people have known hardship. And we never stopped asking the question of when things get hard, what can I do with the time that I am given on this earth?

One of the most important parts of changing our view of life is asking the question of how can I view myself not as the victim of my circumstances but rather as the author of my story. When I think of the power of this transformation, I think of Chanel Miller. Until August of 2019, Miller was only known to the public as Emily Doe. She was an anonymous Stanford student who was assaulted by Brock Turner, who was found on top of her unconscious body by two graduate students. The entire ordeal of the trial, prosecution, and sentencing was a dehumanizing and humiliating experience for her. She watched as the press labeled her as an irresponsible drunk, and the judge of the case gave her assailant a disgustingly short sentence, clearly caring far more about his future than on the impact of his actions on her.

In 2019, Chanel Miller decided to reclaim the narrative of the whole event and went public with her name. She released the victim statement that she submitted to the court during Brock Turner's sentencing, which has been read over 11 million times. She also wrote a memoir of her experience entitled *Know My Name*, which instantly became a best-seller.

When asked in an interview why she decided to go public, Chanel Miller responded that this was all about her empowering herself to change her narrative. She did not want to live her life and have the totality of her story be that she was person who was assaulted by Brock Turner. She wanted to transform her story from that of a victim to that of an empowered person who could use her story to change the world. Her words have inspired many and contributed in important ways to the national conversation about rape and assault on college campuses and the way we treat victims. She has also become an activist and artist. In 2020, Chanel Miller created a stunning 70-foot mural that was showcased in the Asian Art Museum. The mural displays three side-by-side vignettes entitled "I Was," "I Am," and "I Will Be." Chanel Miller demonstrates to us that even when we suffer unspeakable indignities and dehumanization, we do not have to get stuck in a cycle of victimization. We can change our narrative and use our challenges to inspire us to ask what life is expecting of me.

As we enter this new year, I want to leave us with a piece of wisdom I garnered from Rabbi Ed Feinstein. He hearkens back to the year 200 CE, and we are about a century after the destruction of the Second Temple. Now, the Jewish people could have chosen to give up with the center of their religious life and existence destroyed. But they chose a different

path. They chose to adapt, to make their Judaism portable outside the Temple, outside the Promised Land. They created the Mishnah, an instruction book for how to do Judaism. And at the heart of the book, we find Pirkei Avot, a collection of maxims and sayings the rabbis used to say, which in many ways provides us with a code of ethics and conduct for how to be a Jewish person in a world that is filled with discontinuity, a world full of challenge.

In the second Mishnah of Pirkei Avot, we get a very famous line, "*Al Sh'loshah d'varim ha'olam omed, al hatorah, v'al ha'avodah, v'al gimilut chasadim.*" On three things does the world stand—on Torah, on worship, and on acts of kindness. We've heard this saying many, many times before and chanted it to music many, many times. But I think there's one piece of this statement that is often overlooked. The rabbis compiled the Mishnah in a time of brokenness—their temple was destroyed, they were experiencing horrific persecution at the hands of the Romans, they were dispersed from their homeland, and the very future of the Jewish people was in question. And yet, the rabbis say at this moment of discontinuity *ha'olam omed*, the world stands. The world stands. You lost a temple, you lost a building; you didn't lose the world.

And I will repeat that for all of us. We've gone through a lot of loss. We've suffered a pandemic. Our nation still has to grapple with the continued presence of systemic racism. Global warming is still a daunting challenge. Anti-Semitism still plagues us. But in spite of all this, the world still stands. We still have the obligation and the opportunity to be the authors of our stories. To use our lives to shape our world with our values and with acts of kindness and to make a difference.

None of us chooses the problems we have to face. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us. In 5782, let us be inspired to use it well.

