

A few months ago, I took a quick trip to see my oldest child, Gabriella, who lives in Washington, D.C. about a 10-minute walk from the White House. On my last day there, Gabi was working from home, and we decided to do a DoorDash brunch before I had to leave for the airport. No sooner had I placed the order than Gabi said, 'WAIT!' 'Cancel the order—we can't do DoorDash, they will arrest our delivery driver!'

“What?” I ask, “Are you talking about?” I never heard of such a thing.

What I now know, but didn't then, is that the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which is in full force, profiles and follows the delivery drivers, most of whom were not born in this country, and then arrests them before they can make their deliveries. I was still in disbelief that this was happening when that evening, Gabi sent me a video clip of an Uber driver arrested by ICE a few blocks away from her apartment. Also, she told me, on that very same day, a housekeeper working in her building and then a resident who lives in her building, were arrested by ICE. This is not normal.

Masked ICE agents coming into our neighborhoods, the National Guard coming into our cities. These are not normal times. It is also not normal anymore for us to have Covid vaccines unavailable unless you have an underlying condition, which is what happened to me last week. It's not normal for law firms and universities to be afraid of the President of the United States.

It's a shock to the nation's system that we are now seeing wide-scale hostility and demonization of law enforcement, something we have not seen since Vietnam.

It's not normal for the FCC to bully television networks and corporations. We are not living in normal times.

The columnist David Brooks writes, “What is happening now is not normal politics. We're seeing an assault on the fundamental institutions of our civic life, things we should all swear loyalty to — Democrat, independent or Republican.”<sup>1</sup>

The times we are living in are not normal, and there should be no expectation that we should be okay. How can we feel okay when the

political divide is wreaking havoc on our relationships, including those with our own family members, as well as in our institutions and organizations?

How can we be okay as a Jewish People, when we are two years post the October 7<sup>th</sup> massacre, the layers of grief still heavy: all the while we wait, plead, and pray for the release of all the hostages, dead and alive. How can we be okay when Palestinian civilians are grieving unbearable loss and are starving in Gaza? And here at home, Jews in our own neighborhoods are targeted with slurs, threats, and acts of violence. We are experiencing this Jew-hatred not in theory, but in local time, real time.

*How can we be okay?* In short, many of us, if not most, are not okay. How do we choose to respond when the abnormal has become normalized?

Last year at this time, I spoke about joy, that those who sow in tears, might reap in joy, that having joy is an act of resistance against those who wish us harm. Seeking out joy and joyful moments is what our people have done since the days of the Gan Eden, the Garden of Eden. And even *Yom Kippur* is traditionally a time of joy. The rabbis of the Talmud teach, “Yom Kippur is a day of joy, because it is a day of pardon and forgiveness.”<sup>2</sup>

While we are to seek out joy, we are also called on to understand and see that Yom Kippur is, as our liturgy teaches, “a day of awe and a day of dread.” On Yom Kippur, it is tradition to dress in white and to step back from the appetites that sustain daily life. Our tradition calls this day a rehearsal for our death—not to frighten us—but that we awaken to the fact that life will pass us by if we do not pay attention to it. This day, the holiest of days, benevolently calls to us-- life is fragile, each moment counts. Choose to live it to the best of your ability.

In a central prayer of our high holiday liturgy, the *Un'taneh Tokef* we read: On Rosh Hashanah this is written; on the Fast of Yom Kippur this is sealed: How many will pass away from this world, how many will be born into it; who will live and who will die; who will reach the ripeness

of age....You, God, count and consider every life. You set bounds; You decide destiny.<sup>3</sup>

These are difficult words to read. I have always bristled at the theology of a cosmic arbitrator doling out decrees. I do not believe that God literally does or doesn't write us into the Book of Life. I do not believe in the theology of a cause and effect, a providential God.

Yet, there is a message in this poem that I do subscribe to, and think is critical. This poem is less about God choosing whether we will live or die than it is about us choosing how we will live, even in the midst of suffering, even in these not-normal times. The central character of the *Unetana tokef* prayer is not God; it is us. For at the end of this poem, we proclaim: Repentance, prayer, and tzedakah can soften the harshness of life's decree. The prayer begins as if destiny is imposed, but ends with the call for us to intentionally choose how we live.

Friends, I understand that each one of us has a unique story to offer when we speak about the harshness of life's decree. The one thing we have in common is that our lives will one day come to an end and that end will more often than not, arrive too soon. So between now and then—how will we choose to live?!

In our Torah portion this morning we read: "I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse—*uvechartah ba-chayim*—choose life." This is a call to show up to and for the world as it is—achingly bittersweet—both broken and whole and, not normal. We choose life, so that we might benefit and receive real value for the real effort we put into this limited and blessed existence.

These times are not normal. And it is in my experience, particularly difficult to show up to this life right now. It is hard to live with the harshness of the decrees around us, in the news, and in what is going on in this country, and also in Israel and in Gaza, all the while tending to our own life's ups and downs.

When the abnormal has been normalized, and a sense of powerlessness is so strong, what might choosing life look like as we move forward?

To start, choosing life means taking care of ourselves. It's that flight attendant message-- put your oxygen mask on first, only then can you help others. It's a message we might hear over and over again but rarely pay attention to. Self-care isn't selfish; it's preparation for service. What wholesome practice—sleep, a stroll, a golf game, a cup of coffee with a long-lost friend, might we need to attend to? Acknowledging that self-care takes time, which we often don't have enough of-- Have we made the doctor's appointment we've put off for too long? Have we left something unsaid that still stirs within? Can we finally set down the guilt and shame we carry, which this Holy Day invites us to release?

As we tend to the self, we can also lean into that line from the Serenity Prayer—"the courage to change the things we can." We may wish to mend every fracture and end all suffering, to bring about justice right now. But that goal seems unattainable and overwhelming at the moment. Where can we begin, here and now, to create the world we long to see? Of the three paths at the end of the *Unetana tokef*,-- which path--"prayer or service, repentance, and tzedakah, that soften the harness of the decree, might we begin with?

Perhaps setting aside five quiet minutes each day for gratitude will allow us to feel the preciousness of life and then motivate us to help others choose life? Can we choose life by seizing the opportunity to return to our best selves and explore what truly gives us a sense of purpose in life? Can we then find a way to pursue it, if we haven't already? Can we engage in the kind of teshuva that emphasizes repentance and the mending of relationships? When we practice kindness, generosity, and basic human decency, we are choosing life and choosing not to live in the harshness of the decree.

These are just a few examples of how to live in stressful, not normal times. I am sure you each have your own ideas of how to cope with the distress

around us. I urge us to have conversations together about what we might need in order to make these days bearable, all while helping to make them better for others. Self-care and having the courage to change the things we can are an acknowledgment that it's not that the suffering disappears or the injustices go away; it's that we might avail ourselves to witnessing the wholeness alongside the brokenness, and instead of counting days, we make each day count.

And still, I understand there is no easy answer to living in the normalized abnormality which we find ourselves in.

Our people have always carried both the broken and the whole. A rabbinic midrash teaches that when Moses shattered the first tablets of the Ten Commandments in anger, the Israelites did not leave the fragments behind. They carried those broken tablets together with the second, whole set that Moses received upon returning to the mountain top. Across the desert and into the Promised Land, they bore both—the broken and the whole—as a lasting reminder of what we hold within us.

You've gathered by now: this is not a sermon about mending every fracture in the world—though God knows the world cries out for repair. It is not about curing every “not normal” in our country, or in Israel—though we dare not stop trying.

No.

In these days that are anything but normal, this is a call to tend the soul, to steady the heart, to summon courage enough to care for one another.  
For without care, nothing heals.  
Without courage, nothing holds.  
Without one another, nothing good can grow.

I don't know what the answers are for each of us. However, I do know this: we cannot let ourselves be consumed by the chaos around us. If we do, we lose our sense of normalcy—we forget what it means to be human.

Our task now is to rise up and choose life. To discover, together, what gives our days value and what makes us feel genuine, even in the face of dread.

“Choose life, that we may live.”  
What will that mean for you?

On Sunday mornings, I have the privilege of leading our K–3<sup>rd</sup>–grade prayer service. The first prayer I teach them is *Modeh/Modah Ani*—“Grateful am I”—the words we say before our feet touch the floor in the morning. It begins, “Thank You, God, for returning my soul to me, and giving me this new day!” And ends with my two favorite words: *rabbah emunatecha*—“great is Your faith.” Not how great is *my* faith in God, but how great is God’s faith in me! I can do this day! Each morning is a holy vote of confidence: I am trusted with this day. Trusted to choose life—one day at a time.

May we have the courage to rise, and to choose life.  
May we rise to care for ourselves and for one another—so the world may be blessed by our refusal to normalize what is happening around us.  
And may all our efforts be a blessing: for us, for Israel, and for all the world.

Ken Yhi Ratzon. May this be True.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/17/opinion/trump-harvard-law-firms.html>

<sup>2</sup> Bava Batra 121a

<sup>3</sup> Mishkan HaNefesh 176 & 178