

Shanah Tovah!

Like millions of other Americans, I think that Marvel and superhero movies have really taken a nose-dive in recent years. Ever since *Avengers: Endgame*, which was brilliant, they have missed the magic, with a few exceptions. But I'm still holding a candle for the next Spiderman movie – *Spiderman: Brand New Day*, coming to a theater near you July 31, 2026. Spiderman's motto, if you recall, is this: "with great power comes great responsibility." If you've got web shooters, a spidey sense, and Tom Holland's perfect hair, you better use them for good.

The thing is, as much as I like Spiderman, this isn't always the problem in our lives. For most of us, the problem is: we have a lot of responsibility, but not a lot of power.

Yesterday I spoke about a tragedy of our condition today: that our responsibility to the world actually exceeds our power to do something about it. That is, there is a tremendous amount in the world that I feel responsible to fix, and yet, I am unable to do so.

Let me phrase this differently, in a way that avoids the language of responsibility and power, much as I love Spiderman.

The world is happening around us, and we have limited input into what is happening. History is transpiring, and yet we have little ability to change its course.

Today, I want to talk about how we can face this problem, which involves naming it, and respond in a manner that I think is actually hopeful.

But let's go back to the problem.

For much of the 20th century, we absorbed an optimistic view of America and of modernity, in which problems could be fixed with the right amount of energy, care, and attention. We could enact a Marshall Plan in Germany, we could put a man on the moon, we could enact principles of national self-determination for countries from Israel to India to Ireland. We could address civil rights failures in our own country, bring down the Berlin Wall across the world, and allow more Americans to live lives of freedom and dignity. We did things, as President Kennedy said, not because they were easy, but because they were hard.

We had reason for optimism, and American Judaism expressed this optimism. We built large buildings for our communities. We decided that we would not simply try to enact *tzedek*, justice, in our communities, but justice in public policy in the federal government in Washington, D.C., and even around the world.

This optimism provided us with a model for how to understand history and our world. It gave us a model not only of hope, but of historical inevitability, of forward momentum – coupled with a sense that some things in the world were backwards. It gave us, as well, the idea that if enough people voiced and associated themselves with a concern, the movement of history would cause that concern to play out. The individual's moral and political self-expression was the first step in changing the world.

And it has been a hard fall, for many of us, over the past 24 years, since Sept. 11, I think, when it has become clear that the world was not changing as we expected. That history was

not on track. Contra President Kennedy, now it seems not only as if we can't do things that are hard, but that we can't even do things that are easy.

I don't want to get in this sermon overly involved in the question of history and progress. Between Hegel and Vico and so many others, there is a lot to unpack about topics like history, progress, and society, and there is something yet to be written about how a certain conception of history and society has led to much of humanity's current broken-heartedness and perhaps created the problem itself. That's not my sermon today.

What I want to suggest, today, instead, is that by looking at the pre-modern world – that is, by taking a view of the world in which it is not so clear that we can affect “history” – we actually can find some beautiful and hopeful resources.

It has been our tendency to look forward, or only within the modern period, for solutions to our malaise. We ask: Who are the contemporary writers or rabbis or leaders who can point our way out? What are new ways of thinking?

But what if we look backward instead?

When I began thinking about this problem, the problem that history seems not to respond to our moral calls the way we think it should, I asked myself: have Jews ever faced this problem before?

And the answer was yes – this is in fact the core problem of Jewish history. Throughout our entire history, until modernity, we did not think of ourselves as the protagonists of history, standing at the helm of the most powerful country in the world, but rather, as a group of people trying to live their values in a world that did not resonate with them. And there is wisdom to be found in our ancestors' approaches.

I want to start with a text from the Talmud that asks a core question about the Torah. The Torah, in Deuteronomy 13, tells us to “walk after the Lord your God.” And Rabbi Hama in the name of Rabbi Hanina, responds to this, saying: how can you possibly walk like God? For wasn't it written, he says, “the Lord your God is a consuming fire.”

That is: the Torah gives us a moral and spiritual task that we cannot do. We lack the power. But Rabbi Hanina says: Rather, this means to walk after the characteristics of the Holy Blessed One.

Just as God clothed the naked, as it is written, “And God made for Adam and his wife garments of skin and dressed them” (Gen. 3), so too you should clothe the naked.

The Holy Blessed One visited the sick, as it is said, “And the Lord appeared to Abraham at the forest of Mamre” (Gen. 18), so too you should visit the sick.

The Holy Blessed One comforts mourners, as it is said, “After the death of Abraham, God blessed Isaac, his son” (Gen. 25), so too you should comfort mourners.

The Holy Blessed One buried the dead, as it is written “And God buried him in the valley” (Deut. 34), so too you should bury the dead.

That is: we might not have the power to do everything, but there are things within our power.

One of them is imitating God's attributes.

Yesterday I spoke about how, even though our ability to fully protect the stranger is hampered by our limited power, we still can express the virtues of loving the stranger. That includes showing mercy to those over whom we have power; showing kindness to those who might think they don't belong; or helping to show that even very different people from us are created in the image of God.

It's not only on this topic, though. This applies to all sorts of other mitzvot.

We have a mitzvah in Judaism to create peace between people who are fighting. We describe God as the Oseh Shalom, the Creator of Peace, and we, too, can attempt to make peace. I pray for peace between Israelis and Palestinians, but I know that I do not have the power to make that peace between them. But what I can do is to help make peace in my own world. Between people who are in conflict around me; between myself and people I am in conflict with; within my family; and within my own heart.

Or another area – civil discourse. We see that our country is intensely divided, and that conversation is rarely civil. We are waiting in fear for another outburst of political violence. Our tradition, especially in the Talmudic and rabbinic traditions, deeply values machloket, argument, the idea that we can tolerate disagreements without destroying each other. That we can hear opposing views without trying to silence them. I cannot force humanity to embrace this, but I can do this in my own life. I can respect people I disagree with; I can avoid canceling or negating; I can listen with resilience, and I can express myself with respect. Come back on Yom Kippur for the rest of that sermon.

I am citing three examples here, but every mitzvah, we are told in Bereshit Rabbah, was given to us to refine our character, to teach us virtues.

I am not making here the modern move, which would be to say: and if we all do this, perhaps it will spark change in the world. No.

I am saying: we must all do this, because we – Judaism – will outlast all of this, and that means we must be people of virtue now. People of principle and Torah now. We must persevere in our middot, in our practices, even in a chaotic world. We have always done so. This is not a small view. This is not shrinking our purview. This is taking a large view. This is saying, we can fit God, we can fit eternity, in these seemingly smaller spaces.

The Talmud in Berakhot 8a tells us:

ברכות ח' א"י"ח וְהֵינּוּ דְאָמַר רַבִּי חֵיְיָא בַּר אֲמִי מִשְׁמִיָּה דְּעוּלָא: מִיּוֹם שְׁחָרַב בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ אֵין לֹו לְהַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא בְּעוּלְמוֹ אֱלֹא אַרְבַּע אַמּוֹת שֶׁל הַלְכָה בַּלְבָּד.
Berakhot 8a:18 Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Ami said in the name of Ulla: Since the day the Temple was destroyed, the Holy Blessed One has only in this world the four cubits of <i>halakha</i>.

That is – my four cubits, my “personal space” in which my behavior always takes place – since God is no longer in the Temple, and as an unsaid corollary to that, since God is no longer acting in history, all God has in this world is our own behavior. “The four cubits of halakhah” – that is, our “personal space” is really the stage where we can decide to behave in a way that is Godly or not.

This is the text for our day. It is a text in which Ulla mourns the destruction of the Temple, in which Ulla mourns that the world is not how it should be, and says: but we have our domain. And everything is in that. We eat in that domain; we think in it; we feel in it. It might seem small, but it is actually, with God, infinite:

It’s like William Blake wrote:

To see a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour.

It’s not just about performance of the mitzvot, either.

The Talmud continues after this famous passage, and says the following:

ברכות ח' א"י"ט וְאָמַר אֲבִי: מִיֵּשׁ הָיָה גְּרִיסָנָא בְּגוּ בֵּיתָא וּמְצַלִּינָא בְּבֵי כְּנִישְׁתָּא. כִּיּוֹן דְּשִׁמְעָנָא לְהָא דְאָמַר רַבִּי חֲזִינָא בְּרַ אֲמִי מִשְׁמִיָּה דְּעוּלָא — מִיּוֹם שְׁחָרַב בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ אֵין לוֹ לְהַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא בְּעוֹלָמוֹ אֲלֵא אַרְבַּע אַמּוֹת שֶׁל הִלְכָה בְּלִבָּד — לֹא הָיָה מְצַלִּינָא אֲלֵא הֵיכָא דְּגְרִיסָנָא.
Berakhot 8a:19 Abaye said: At first I studied in the house and prayed in the synagogue. Once I heard what Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Ami said in the name of Ulla: Since the day the Temple was destroyed, the Holy One, Blessed be He, has only in His world, the four cubits of <i>halakha</i> alone, I pray only where I study.

This is complicated, and I want to explain.

Halakhah for the rabbis is not just the system that guides our behavior, but it is also, and perhaps more importantly, the study of that system. The study of Torah, the creation of new insights, the uncovering of wisdom, this, Abaye says, is really where we find our freedom.

I pray only where I study.

This is why I like to take a sefer, a book, with me when I go to davven. Because this is not just a room for hope, but it’s a room for Torah.

Every time we read an aliyah of Torah, a blessing is chanted at the end of it: asher natan lanu Torat emet, v'chayei olam nata betocheinu. Who has given us a Torah of truth, and planted eternal life among us.

One of the beautiful claims that Judaism makes about the Torah is that it is eternal. It is called *chayei olam*, eternal life, with ephemeral existence, *chayei shaata*, being its opposite. All of the worst things in history turned out to be *chayei shaata*. Even Hitler's thousand-year-Reich? 12 years. Twelve terrible years, but nothing compared to the *chayei olam* that we have here.

Torah study puts us in touch with eternity. It puts "history" in perspective, and reminds us that there is more than the moment.

This year, I want you to engage in more Torah study – Talmud class on Sundays at 11 – but also, to help to facilitate the life of Torah, by observing mitzvot, by teaching children, by helping to continue to make this a community that prays and also studies.

When you take the view of Torah – of the four amot where we have both responsibility and power – the problems of the world do not go away, but your perspective shifts. We can control ourselves and build something of beauty.

And the only reason, the only reason we are here today doing any of this, is because in the past, our forebears did not give up the work of Torah, did not give up the work of studying Torah and teaching Torah and the four amot – even at the hardest times.

May this year be one where we truly renew ourselves, going inside our tradition to find, as the Zohar calls them, milin atidin haditin, old-new words, the bringing to our present something old, and wise, and beautiful, that breaks down the simple moments of time and helps us appreciate the true eternity that we can touch, if we so try.

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