

“FAITH & INSECURITY”

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur During the Coronavirus Pandemic

Elul 5780 Lecture Series / Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks / Part 1/3 (Transcript)

This series of drashot has been generously sponsored by Lundy and Fred Reynold.

May I begin by wishing you, your family and *klal Yisrael*, the Jewish people everywhere, a *shana tova*. May it be a good year for you and for them, a healthy year, a safe year, and hopefully a sweet year as well, for you, for us and for all Israel. Amen.

When I was Chief Rabbi, I used to have to go everywhere with protection officers because, after all, I was considered to be a target and a risk. And although it was difficult, actually, never to be able to go out on your own, it was also very reassuring and very comforting. Sometimes it was also actually very amusing. When I arrived at a venue, for instance, where I was going to be speaking, let's say it was a big office block, my protection officer would go ahead and tell the receptionist that I was arriving. And I remember on one occasion, he went ahead to the receptionist and said, "Chief Rabbi." And the receptionist looked up at my protection officer and said, "Good to meet you Chief Rabbi. But tell me who was the bloke with the beard behind you?" So, once in a while we had a little laugh.

But I used to say to them, there is a Hebrew word, which means two quite different things. And it's usually pronounced in two quite different ways. The word *bitachon*, sometimes pronounced *bitochon*. *Bitachon* means security and *bitochon* means faith or trust. And the connection between those two meanings and that one word is, I think, very significant.

The reason I say this is that the various questionnaires and research exercises that have been done recently on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on people's lives, came up with an unusual finding. Yes, of course, people missed the company. They felt cut off. They felt isolated. They felt deprived sometimes of work and sometimes of travel. All of that made an impact.

But the single most significant impact of the pandemic and its consequences, has been insecurity. People have felt that they don't really know what is going to happen: to their health, to their work, to their business, to society, to everyone and everything around them. They don't know how long a lockdown will last or when new quarantine restrictions will be put in place or when masks will be required and when not required, and what is going to happen with testing regimes. People can't plan for the future. They can't know what tomorrow is going to bring. And that is undermining their sense of security.

So, the question I simply want to ask these *Yamim Noraim*, on these Days of Awe is: how do we deal with insecurity? And the answer is contained, or at least the Jewish answer is contained, in

that one word: *bitachon*, the word that means security on the one hand and faith on the other. How do you cope with insecurity? By faith.

That has been the Jewish experience for almost 4,000 years. Judaism is about insecurity in a way perhaps that no other religion is, and Jews have experienced insecurity in a way no other people has. The Jewish story begins with Abraham and Sarah just hearing a voice, calling them away from their family and their birthplace to a land that they did not know, *el ha'aretz asher areka*, God doesn't even tell them where they are going to. They are travelling to an unknown destination, they are travelling blind.

The second great journey of Jewish identity when Moses leads the Israelites across the wilderness, that too is a journey into the unknown. And even that most searing critic of the Jewish people, the prophet Jeremiah, says in one of the loveliest lines in the whole of Tanakh, a line we say in musaf on Rosh Hashanah, *zachartilach chessed neuraich ahavat kelulutaich lech tech acharei bamidbar lo zeruah* says, "God, I remember the kindness of your youth, the love of your betrothal, how you were willing to follow me across an unknown, unsown land."

That willingness to journey to an unknown future is of the very essence. Throughout the entire Biblical era, Israel, indeed divided of course, between Yehuda and the Northern tribes, was a small country or two small countries surrounded by vast empires. On the Nile Delta, Egypt on the one hand and the Tigris-Euphrates Valley on the other. And it was always insecure. Then that insecurity deepened with the destruction, especially the Second Temple when Jews were scattered across the world, certainly across the Roman empire and everywhere in a situation of hazard without rights.

Following the First Crusade in 1096, Jews knew almost a thousand years of persecution in Europe. There were massacres, there were pogroms, and there were expulsions, from virtually every single country in Europe, beginning in England in 1290 and culminating in Spain in 1492 and Portugal in 1497. Jews had been so secure in Spain. They'd risen to prominence in a way that they had not done in any other Diaspora. And yet that came crashing down in 1391 and for 101 years, Jews faced persecution and eventual expulsion.

I remember once in the British library, seeing a copy of the Lisbon Bible, the Lisbon Tanakh, [from] 1485, most magnificent thing you've ever seen, obviously commissioned by very, very wealthy Jewish merchant. And he is there in Lisbon enjoying this incredible wealth because of the calligraphy and the illuminations and illustrations. And I thought to myself, did he have some inkling that in a mere 12 years, there'd be no Jews left in Portugal? Jews lived with that insecurity.

Perhaps the worst insecurity of all was the one they faced in Europe in the 19th and early 20th century because after this great movement of enlightenment and emancipation that was promising Jews open access to everything in society, out of that great moment came the worst mutation of antisemitism in all of history, and eventually of course, culminating in the Shoah.

And that's in Europe, but what about Jews in Arab lands? There used to be flourishing Jewish communities that have been there centuries in some cases thousands of years, in Iran, in Iraq, in

Syria, in Lebanon. And now they're almost *Judenrein* almost Jew-free. Jews had to give up countries they had known for so very long. They lived with insecurity as a dimension of their existence.

The State of Israel since its birth 72 years ago, has lived with the almost constant threat of terror, of war and of goodness knows what, of missiles, who knows what. Never, ever been able to be relaxed. And yet Jews never, ever, ever lost faith. And that *bitochon* was their *bitachon*. That faith was their security.

To my mind, one of the most moving broadcast I have ever heard was the one done in May 1941 when a BBC journalist, Patrick Gordon Walker, who eventually became Foreign Secretary twenty-five years later, did a recording at the just-liberated extermination camp of Bergen-Belsen. And in that recording, you hear the survivors of Bergen-Belsen singing. And what are they singing? *Hatikvah*. Jews never lost hope, even at the gates of Hell. And that is how Jews coped with insecurity in a way that no people has ever been forced to do before, and I hope never will be forced to do again.

How did they carry on? Because they knew in their bones *gan ki eilech bagatzah mavet lo irara ki atah imadi*, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. *Min hameitza karati yeh anani barmehevaya*, from my confinement, from my prison, I called out to God and God answered me with spaciousness. *Esah einei el heharim meayin yavo ezri*, they lifted their eyes up to the hills, from where their help would come. That is tremendous power. Jews are the worlds experts at dealing with insecurity.

I remember my father, *alev ha-shalom*, in his eighties, had to go through five, very difficult operations. Two hip replacement operations. Then when they did not take properly a further two hip replacement operations, and then a fifth. Each one sapped his strength somehow. But my dad, *alev ha-shalom*, never had much of a Jewish education, but my goodness me, he had faith. All he would take with him into hospital was a *tallis*, his *tefillin* and a *siddur*, and a little *sefer tehillim*, a little book of Psalms, that I'd given him many years before. And he would read that book of Psalms and I would see him getting stronger. And you know, he never told me what he really felt, but I could work it out. My father, *alev ha-shalom*, was saying to God, "*Ribona shel olam, beyadach afkid ruchi*". Into your hand, I entrust my spirit. If you want me up there in heaven, I'm ready. If you want me down here on earth, I'm ready for that too. You know, I don't. And I just trust you." And placing his faith in *HaKodesh Baruchu* was a source of indomitable strength.

A day before the lockdown began, I think it was a day before the lockdown began in Britain, I was doing a BBC programme with Mervyn King, who had been Governor of the Bank of England during the crash of 2008. We were both talking about our books. I was talking about my book *Morality*, which is just about to appear in the States, and he was talking about his book called *Radical Uncertainty*. He and an economist journalist, John Kay, had written a book about what you do to make good business decisions under conditions of uncertainty. And Mervyn's book argues two things. He says, number one, most uncertainty is being dealt with in business and banking on the basis of mathematical models of risk. He said, they are not terribly helpful, because reality seldom fits the parameters of mathematical models. He said therefore, I suggest

number two, which is narrative. Understand what is going on. Of what story is this happening a part?

Now, I found that interesting. But actually I think that he missed out the most important thing. Because what you need in decision-making under conditions of radical uncertainty, is a steady hand, a steady eye and a steady mind. And those are difficult to do in the eye of the storm. And the way to do them, is to have *bitochon*, to have faith that you are going to come through this. As I've argued many times, in Judaism, faith is not certainty. Faith is the courage to live with uncertainty.

And therefore, I would say that *bitochon* is the single most important thing that we need in the coming year, given the current circumstances at every level, economic, political, and medical. The verse Isaiah says *dishru Hashem behimatzo kera'uhu behiyoto karov*, seek God where He is to be found and call on Him when He's close. Well, the truth is God is always to be found and God is always close. So Chazal understood that Isaiah wasn't saying, see God when God is close to us. He was really saying, see God when we are close to God. And Chazal therefore said that this line refers to the ten days, beginning with Rosh Hashanah and ending on Yom Kippur.

Those are the days when we should try to absorb faith, inhale faith, take within us as much faith as we can, because no other days in the year are so intense. On no other days of the year is God and faith so close. And that faith will give you, and us the strength to handle all the insecurities that still lie around us.

So, to repeat, a *shana tova* to you all. May be a good year for all of us. May Hashem be with us in the year ahead. And may we find our security in Him.