

“It's not as Bad as it Seems”

Yom Kippur Sermon

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A student rabbi is at his very first High Holiday pulpit. Conscious of the great responsibility he had to lead the congregation in solemn and dignified prayer on Yom Kippur, he reached the *Unetaneh Tokef*, a pinnacle of the service enumerating who shall live and who shall die. In the most rabbinic voice he could muster he intones, “*Who shall perish by water and who by fire, who by sword and who by wild beast...*” He hears a 13-year-old sarcastically whisper to his brother, “Oh, that’s *totally* how I’m going to die.”

If any of you read along in the English as the Hebrew is chanted, you might have the same reaction. The list of tragedies that could befall us--stoning, plague, famine, wild beast--are by and large dangers that few Americans have to worry about anymore. Rabbi Geoffrey Mitelman, the aforementioned student rabbi, writes that these ills were very common, very real dangers when this prayer was originally written more than 1000 years ago. But in the last 100 years, those who die by fire or water, for example, has dropped 90%. We now have lifeguards, fences around pools, life jackets, fire alarms, sprinkler systems, and fire drills. These modern inventions, brought about by hard work and ingenuity, have made a huge difference in our chances of avoiding or surviving what once were tragic and common ways to die.¹

Last night I talked about how bad news can overwhelm us and shared what Jewish tradition can teach us about how to mourn those events and move on. This morning, I want to make a related argument, that our world is better, much better, than it has ever been, and certainly much better than we often give it credit for. That is the argument that Gregg Easterbrook makes in his new book, *It's Better than it Looks: Reasons for Optimism in an Age of Fear*. Contrary to what the fear-inducing headlines and hyperventilating bloggers would have us believe, Easterbrook points out that by almost every meaningful measure we are doing better than we ever have. Across the globe disease, discrimination, crime, and pollution are on the decline and education is rising. Poverty and malnutrition, as well as the risk of dying from war or violence, are at all-time lows.

And yet, we remain fearful. Part of our fear stems from our 24/7 access to media outlets because stories of death and disaster get more clicks than stories about slow and steady progress. But our fear also grows out of our discomfort with change itself, even positive change. Easterbrook posits that all of the progress we have seen entails a lot of change, much of it at a very rapid pace. Change, “even universally desirable change, is greeted with trepidation,” he writes.² Our world is indeed changing, but I agree with Easterbrook. By and large, it is changing for the better. To see how much better our lives are today, let us take a moment to travel back in time, not 1000 years or 100 years, but a mere 30 years to that ancient year of 1988.

When I was growing up in San Diego, I was exposed to 186 days of unhealthy air a year. Those of you who have traveled to places with smog problems know the telltale signs--a brownish haze on the horizon, a burning feeling in your lungs when you breath in deeply. In 1988 the EPA added San Diego to its list of 44 cities across the nation that did not meet federal standards for carbon monoxide emission. San Diego was not nearly as bad as Los Angeles which had an ozone level three times the

1 Rabbi Mitelman writes extensively about the intersection of Science and Religion at his website Sinai and Synapses; <http://sinaiaandsynapses.org/multimedia-archive/unetaneh-tokef-is-now-almost-obsolete-thank-god/>

2 Easterbrook, p. xiv; Thank you to Sarah Shed for pointing out the Steven Pinker has also written extensively on this topic.

acceptable level set by the EPA.³ As the old joke went, “What happens when the smog lifts? UCLA.” But today, a child growing up in San Diego is exposed to only 29 days of unhealthy air a year, a huge 83% drop. Smog emissions from cars are down 99% compared to the 1970s. While it is true that the air quality in China, South Korea, and elsewhere, remains poor the huge turnaround in the United States and the technologies we have developed, provide a path forward for other countries.

It is not just our air that is better, our waterways are also healthier. If you travelled back in time 20 years and about 2 miles from here and you would reach the site of the Edwards Dam in the Kennebec River. As many of you know, the dam was built in 1837 to provide power for a bustling region. But the dam had severe environmental consequences as well. It prevented the free flow of the Kennebec, and the water became so polluted that fish died off. Raw sewage flowed into the river, and the stench was unbearable. Buildings in downtown Augusta turned their backs to the river and children were warned to stay away from it. In the 1990s, local environmentalists, including many people in this congregation, led a movement to demolish the dam. They succeeded. In 1999, the dam was removed marking the first time in U.S. history that the federal government refused to renew a dam license due to environmental concerns.⁴ Since then, more than 430 outdated dams have been removed nationwide. The Kennebec River has seen a resurgence of native fish species including alewives, bass, and sturgeon, as well as bald eagles and other birds. People now boat and fish on the thriving river.⁵ Yes, as we know from the news, plenty of environmental challenges remain. But we also have much to celebrate. Thanks to the environmental movement of the past generation, smog days are almost non-existent, rivers no longer catch on fire, acid rain has diminished, forests are regenerating, and animals are returning to their natural habitats. Jews have been at the forefront of this movement, both locally and nationally. Respect for nature and reverence for wild places are essential to who we are. From the commandment in Genesis to serve and preserve nature (Genesis 2:15), to the Psalms that praise the beauty of the natural world (Psalms 19, 96, 98, 148), to the Jewish value of *bal tashchit*, prohibiting waste and destruction, Judaism exhorts us to preserve the and protect the natural world. Our environmental gains are a reason for optimism.

The environment is only one reason for optimism. We also have enjoyed tremendous progress in public health. A child growing up in 1988 was vaccinated against many childhood diseases, but not chickenpox. Each year 4 million people got chickenpox, 10,000 were hospitalized with serious complications, and 100 to 150 died, many young children.⁶ That 80s kid who got chickenpox likely would have not worn a seatbelt or a bike helmet, and her parents’ cars did not have car seats or airbags.⁷ When that child went to a restaurant, got on an airplane, attended a baseball game, or even went to the hospital, she would have been exposed to secondhand smoke, which increased her likelihood lung cancer, respiratory infections, and asthma.

Today’s children live in a much healthier, safer world. Not only are today’s children vaccinated against chickenpox, leading to a 97% decrease in deaths from the disease, they also benefit from being vaccinated for rotavirus, hepatitis A, influenza, and hpv. The latter is a vaccine which protects against cancer—that’s right, cancer—caused by the human papillomavirus.⁸ Since 1999, airbags have been required in all cars, as are car seats for young children. An estimated 45,000 lives have been saved by airbags since 1987 and more than 400 children a year are alive because of car seats.⁹ And all of us

3 http://articles.latimes.com/1989-07-28/news/mn-30_1_san-diego

4 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uVBzVhukcts>.

5 <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/freshwater/lessons-from-the-field-edwards-dam-removal-maine/>;
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edwards_Dam

6 <https://www.cdc.gov/chickenpox/surveillance/monitoring-varicella.html>

7 <https://saferide4kids.com/blog/the-general-history-of-car-seats/>

8 <https://www.chop.edu/centers-programs/vaccine-education-center/vaccine-history/developments-by-year>

9 <https://www.nhtsa.gov/equipment/air-bags>; <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/809778>

appreciate being able to walk into a restaurant today without without breathing in cigarette smoke. California was the first state to ban smoking in indoor spaces, including restaurants, in 1995. It was a controversial move at the time, but today such bans are common. In Maine, a statewide smoking ban is in effect in all workplaces and public places.¹⁰ Most states in the country now have bans on smoking indoors, which has coincided with sharp declines in the numbers of heart attacks and sudden cardiac deaths.¹¹

These and other advances in public health did not simply happen naturally or come about by accident. Rather, they are the result of curiosity, persistence, and a dedication to sound science. Those same characteristics are foundational to who we are as Jews. While we might not have invented car seats or the airbag, Jews have contributed greatly to the public health of our nation and our world. From Jonas Salk, who refused to patent his polio vaccine so that it could be made available to as many people as quickly as possible to Ruth Arnon, who invented a drug used to treat multiple sclerosis, we have made contributions in numerous scientific fields far out of proportion to our population. Jews are 0.2% of the world's population, yet we have won 22.5% of the Nobel Prizes, as well as more than half of all nonfiction Pulitzer Prizes!¹²

Our Jewish tradition of learning is tied to that success. Our Judaism teaches us to read texts not once, not twice, but over and over again. Each time we find something new. We study the Torah year after year. As Ben Bag Bag says (Pirkei Avot 5:22), "Turn it and turn it again, for all is in it." We have a tradition of arguing, sometimes politely, with the text and with one another. The Talmud records the ideas of both the winning and losing side, preserving the minority opinion and their reasoning for future generations to learn from. And we value science and intellectual rigor. The ancient rabbis were a part of the intellectual world around them, studying medicine, astronomy, and philosophy. We are a curious, questioning people. Isidor I Rabi, a 1944 Nobel Prize winner in physics said he became a scientist because his mother always asked not what he learned in school, but if he had asked a good question.¹³ Given our tradition of questioning and inquiry, perhaps it should be no surprise that Jews are 11,000 times more likely to win a Nobel Prize than anyone else. Another reason for optimism!

We can be optimistic too about how much progress we have made on issues of equality, particularly for gay and transgender people. Back in the 1980s, gay people were not allowed to serve in the military, get married, or adopt children, and they were rarely portrayed in popular culture except in the most stereotypical ways. Few kids knew an openly gay student or teacher because the culture of homophobia and stigma was so strong. And slowly, through persistent work and determination, things have begun to change. Many members of this congregation worked on the campaigns to make Maine one of the early states to support gay marriage, which is now protected by the Supreme Court's 2015 decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges*. More than 3,500 schools nationwide are part of the Gay Straight Alliance Network, founded in 1988 with just 40 participating schools.¹⁴ And there are now seven openly gay members of Congress today; thirty years ago, there was just one, Rep. Barney Frank of Massachusetts.

We have indeed come a long way in terms of how open and accepting we are of differences. This is true not only for the gay community but also for people with disabilities. All across America, in blue states and red, in cities and small towns, you'll see ramps cut into sidewalks, elevator buttons at a lower height, and buses with wheelchair lifts. That was not true in the 1980s. Thanks to the Americans

10 <http://www.mainelegislature.org/legis/statutes/22/title22sec1542.html>

11 <https://www.cnn.com/2012/10/30/health/time-smoke-free-laws/index.html>

12 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Jewish_Nobel_laureates;
<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/12/opinion/12brooks.html>

13 <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/01/19/opinion/l-izzy-did-you-ask-a-good-question-today-712388.html>

14 <https://www.ashoka.org/en/fellow/carolyn-laub>; <https://gsanetwork.org/build-the-gsa-movement/>

with Disabilities Act, which was signed into law in 1990, businesses are prohibited from discriminating against or firing people based on a disability, and schools must educate all children. The ADA has helped to raise the visibility of people with disabilities and afforded them more protections and accommodations.

Jewish tradition emphasizes supporting those who might be on the margins of society. The commandment to treat the stranger well is repeated 36 times — 36! — more than any other commandment. We also are commanded to look out for the poor, the widow, and the orphan, those who were most likely to be the most vulnerable in ancient times (and today!). Leviticus 19, the holiness code that we will read this afternoon, details laws designed to protect minorities--leave the edges of your field for the poor; pay your workers promptly; do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; judge fairly. Given our history of oppression and our biblical commandments to protect the vulnerable, it should be no surprise that Jews have been vocal leaders in the labor movement, the civil rights movement, and the women's movement. In 2017, the Union for Reform Judaism adopted a policy on transgender rights, the most comprehensive policy adopted by any religious organization to date. Jews have been on the front line of social movements that have made our world more fair and just. The world is not perfect, but we have come a long way. That is a cause for optimism!

Optimism might not come naturally to us as Jews or as people. We tend to see the state of our world as dire. When a Jewish pessimist says, "Oy, things can't get any worse," the Jewish optimist says, "Sure they can!" Yes, things can always get worse, and many of us feel that way when watching the news these days. But things also *have* gotten better, and that progress is worth celebrating. We as a people are moving closer to fulfilling our biblical mandate to protect God's creation, this beautiful world we inhabit. Our Jewish values of curiosity, persistence, and intellectual inquiry have helped us as a people to make important contributions to public health and safety. The world is becoming more safe and welcoming to minorities, and our Jewish values have helped to put us at the forefront of those social changes. These drastic improvements apply not only to life in America or the developed world, but for those living all over the globe.

We know we some distance to go. The world is not perfect. But on this day when we focus on our faults and failings, let us also revel in how far we as a people and a society have come. The Hebrew name for this time of year is the *yamim no'ra'im*, often translated as the Day of Awe. The Hebrew word *yirah*, actually means fear, but can also be translated as reverence, wonder, or awe. Rabbi Alan Lew describes this type of fear as "the fear that overcomes us when we suddenly find ourselves in possession of considerably more energy than we are used to, inhabiting a larger space than we are used to inhabiting. It is also the feeling we feel when we are on sacred ground." In other words, it is the little sense of trepidation we get when we contemplate following a dream or taking a risk. The energy that we get from this type of fear, this *yirah*, is what has led to the many advances we have seen in our lifetimes. Through hard work, and perseverance; through scientific inquiry and ingenuity we have made our world a safer, more secure place. With those same values and that same grit, and a sense of reverence, wonder, awe, and even fear, thirty years from now, or ten years from now or even one year from now we will be even better off than we are today.