



Time to Change

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

We stand here on the verge of a new year, 5781. We each have dreams, desires, and aspirations that we hope to see fulfilled in the months ahead. It is in these final days of one year and the initial days of the new one that we look back and take stock of all that has occurred over the last year. I would venture to say that for most of us, the months before this past March are a blur, a distant memory. For after Purim, our world and our lives changed in such a dramatic way, making us forget all that came before. Our days and nights are filled with talk of coronavirus and its impact on our lives. Work, school, and really all aspects of life have been affected. Many of us have been distanced from family and the social relationships which we took for granted. "Social distance" is a term understood by everyone, and a mask has become an accessory which accompanies us wherever we go. For some of us, these last few months have made us stronger. The need to retreat within has created a greater self-awareness, stronger relationships with nuclear family, and even a rekindled spark of holiness. We have seen incredible acts of *chesed* and selfless dedication to the needs of the other – albeit at a distance. Yet, for others, the last few months have brought the sadness of loss, loss of loved ones, loss of connection, loss of joy. It is incredible to see how one microscopic particle can create opportunity for some and devastation for others. On a personal level, in March, as I watched our world change, I was sure I would change as well. As everything I had known for the last four decades began to evolve, I was sure I would too. But now, 7 months later, I do not feel I have experienced the positive change I thought I would. In fact, some days I feel that I have regressed. I find myself more impatient and agitated, and I am not sure why. Winston Churchill said, "Never let a good crisis go to waste." Crisis presents us with the opportunity to rethink and reshape the way we live and who we are. I find myself fearful that this will pass (which IYH it will, and in just a little while it will be like a distant memory), and I will not have experienced the profound, metamorphic change that I had hoped to tap into.

But now it is Rosh Hashana, and we must reflect on how we lived this past year and make a plan for the year to come. We have two days where our core obligation is to think and ponder. What mistakes have I made, and how can I avoid repeating them? What strengths have I discovered, and how can I build on them? If the world changed as a result of this pandemic, how can I change as well?

Allow me to share with you some thoughts and reflections.

#1 The Importance of the Mask Before this past March, masks were associated with superheroes and healthcare providers (who have actually taught us the true meaning of superheroes), and now they are part of our everyday lives. We do not leave the house without one, and if you are like me, you have a few in every important location.

The mask prevents the droplets which are expelled while we speak from spreading to others. What you say can have a dramatic impact on the other. Words are just words, we often say. Yet, we have come to see that too many unprotected words can cause illness within the other. With masks we measure our words more carefully. It is uncomfortable and at times incomprehensible to speak with a mask. We think before we speak. We have caused ourselves and others pain with our words. Whether negative words said about another, hurtful words said in a moment of anger, or self-deprecating words uttered from a lack of self-esteem or self-worth. The mask has taught the power of the spoken word. As we enter into the new year, let us pledge to use our words more carefully. Do not post something on Facebook or Twitter if it is harmful or hurtful. Do not make a joke that you may find humorous but may cause your fellow pain. When you have to critique or criticize, do so with love and compassion. But proper use of speech does not only manifest itself in holding your tongue. Give compliments and praise



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to those around. Tell your wife you love her and your children you are proud of them. Tell your friends how appreciative you are to have them in your life. Greet total strangers with a smile. We have lost the ability to communicate in an unfettered way. Let us use this as an opportunity to reframe how we speak.

#2 The Need to Distance Everything in life is governed by 6 feet. It is how far we stand when conversing with friends and how much space is needed between our chairs in shul. We distance as we do not want to spread or contract illness. There are things in life which are toxic and unhealthy and often cannot be removed or eradicated. In these circumstances we must learn to distance. The individual in recovery must distance from the triggers which could lead to relapse. We all sin, we all make mistakes, we are human. But we must identify our weaknesses and find a way to distance ourselves from those realities, circumstances, and situations which lead to a dark place. It is not enough to stop sinning. Those who simply focus on the cessation of sin will inevitably relapse. This is because sin is not an isolated, self-contained event. It is the result or culmination of a smaller choices and decisions. The process of Teshuva demands that we look at how we arrived at the threshold of failure and work to plot a different course for the future. If I am not willing to change the exposures or circumstances of my life, I will fall off the wagon of Teshuva. I must find the courage to spiritually distance myself from those very things which lead me to an undesired journey of descent and personal failure.

#3 Search for the Vaccine I have yet to hear someone say, "Let's just leave the virus alone, it will all be ok. No need to spend so much money and time on a vaccine." I think if most of us were to asked right now what we want most – it would a vaccine. We want to return to "normal," we want our world back as we knew it. We are unwilling to leave the problem alone – we must find a solution. We must apply this desire for resolution and healing to our personal lives as well. Too often, when we have a problem, we simply allow it to fester. The problem may be obvious, yet I lack the conviction or drive to fix it. We are in relationships which are troubled, yet I do not want to do the work to fix them (even though I know what has to be done). We engage in behaviors which are detrimental and deleterious and yet, we don't try to curb our appetite. We must create the vaccine for our life issues. Vaccines require trials and testing, and many times the drug fails to produce results. We often try to change, but then we fail. No vaccine is created on the first try. It takes time. *teshuva* takes time. At times, the vaccine progresses through all the different stages of testing but then fails in human clinical trials. There are times when I do *teshuva*, and all is working well, but when I try to implement this *teshuva* in my life – I fail. I must find the strength to start another clinical trial, or sometimes, the vaccine I thought would work, does not, and I must begin to work on something new. Do not resign yourself to your problems, dysfunctional behavior, or detrimental lifestyle. Find the courage to work on your vaccine of *teshuva*.

#4 Do not Live with Anxiety of the Unknown If there is one thing coronavirus has taught us, it would be that we do not know what tomorrow brings. Life is filled with incredible opportunity, but there are no guarantees. I may plan my life but then something can happen which upends all of that planning. We have seen weddings which were planned for months, occur with a minyan in someone's backyard. We have experienced lifecycle events which should have been celebrated or commemorated with throngs of people and yet were shared over zoom. Too often, we only embark on initiatives when we are guaranteed success. Truthfully, we don't know what the next hour will bring. The only thing you control is the moment right in front of you. Seize it, maximize it, and don't spend your time worrying about what will be.

#5 Take Responsibility for Your Children We are truly fortunate that our local schools and yeshivos are open. For the last few months of the past school year, we saw our children engage in



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distance learning. Some schools created an organized plan for learning, and others did not. But one thing rang true in virtually every household (especially those with younger children), we had to roll up our sleeves and devote more attention to our children's education. Whether it was help with devices or schoolwork, many of us received another education. We must remember that we are our children's primary teachers. We send our children to school as we must pursue careers and may lack the pedagogical abilities and knowledge to teach our precious sons and daughters. But at the end of the day, my child's primary *chinuch* (education) comes from me. I am responsible for instilling proper values and ethics within my child. It is I, the parent, who must teach my child proper *middos* and character. I must model for my child what it means to love Hashem, respect my fellow Jew, and live a life of inspiration. I must instill a work ethic and respect for elders and authority within my beautiful, precious child. We must rely on our schools and *yeshivos* to teach our children skills and information, fill them with confidence, and shower them with love and positive reinforcement. But the school is not the surrogate parent – the parent is the parent. We must parent our children with love yet discipline. We must set expectations yet be understanding of failure. We must teach them to be good Jews and citizens by modeling for them the correct behaviors.

#6 – The Power of a Simple Gesture Over the course of the last number of months, we have witnessed incredible acts of *chessed* (kindness) within our Kehilla and greater community. We have learned that *chessed* is not only a large check or a magnanimous self-sacrificing act. A phone call, text message, Erev Shabbos deliveries can be the difference in someone feeling connected, loved, and appreciated vs. feeling alone, marginalized, and forgotten. We must strive to build small acts of kindness into our daily lives. We must teach our children what it means to feel collective responsibility. We must avoid the temptation to be self-absorbed and forgetful of the other. There is nothing more important in the life of a Jew than being part of something bigger. Being part of a *kehilla* not only affords us the privilege of learning and *davening*, it creates the space for kindness and *chessed*. We must do for each other each and every day. Little things make a great difference.

As I go into Rosh Hashana, I am going to change. I will not let this crisis go to waste. I will become better, I will work harder, I will begin to think about what I need to do to make this coming year meaningful, fulfilling, and holy. I am ready to undertake this new journey – I hope you will join me.