

Regaining Perspective After a Year of Crisis

Rosh HaShana 5770 - Day 1

Rabbi Neal Gold

Temple Shir Tikva

How many in the room have been to the Boston Museum of Science this year?

I love the Museum of Science, and my favorite part of the museum is its scale model of the Solar System. If you don't recall it, let me describe it to you. The point of the model is to try to give a sense of proportions which are so enormous that our brains have to "fake it" in order to grasp them. Here's author Bill Bryson on trying to get his head around the vastness of the solar system – he writes:

Our solar system may be the liveliest thing for trillions of miles, but all the visible stuff in it – the Sun, the planets and their moons, the billion or so tumbling rocks of the asteroid belt, comets, and other miscellaneous drifting detritus – fills less than a trillionth of the available space. You quickly realize that none of the maps you have ever seen of the solar system were remotely drawn to scale. Most schoolroom charts show the planets coming one after the other at neighborly intervals... but this is a necessary deceit to get them all on the same piece of paper. Neptune in reality isn't just a little bit beyond Jupiter, it's way beyond Jupiter – five times farther from Jupiter than Jupiter is from us.¹

Here's how the Museum of Science tries to teach perspective and proportion: In the lobby of the planetarium, there is a model of the sun. It has been shrunk to fit the space: it is about 11 ½ feet tall, stretching over the head of every visitor. For perspective, that's about 400 million times smaller than the real thing. If the whole solar system were shrunk by the same amount – how big would the planets be and where would you find them?

Mercury, the closest planet to the sun, is in a different room – in the main entrance to the museum. Our Earth isn't even on the grounds of the Museum! It is found in the Sonesta hotel in Cambridge on the other side of the Charles. And Pluto – planet or not – is located, tiny, smaller than a chickpea – in the Riverside T station in Newton, 20 miles away from the museum.

It's such a great experiment, because it teaches us about perspective. We think our perspective on space is an accurate picture of reality – until we get a sense of what this model is teaching us! Blow everything up again by 400 million times, and you can start to get a sense of the sheer enormity of the solar system – a tiny speck within our galaxy, which is microscopic in the grand scheme of the cluster of galaxies in our part of this unfathomably enormous universe.

That is the problem with perspective: It is the nature of the human mind to create easy models, with everything equidistant, just so we can begin to understand. We can easily forget the real nature of things, hidden behind the narrow reality we've constructed.

Turn the question of perspective on its head. The universe isn't just so incredibly enormous. It is also infinitesimally small. Consider that every high school science textbook has a diagram of an atom in it. A key part of the atom is the proton. How small is a proton? Almost inconceivably small: Hundreds of thousands of them could fit in the width of a hair. And yet

¹ Bill Bryson, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, New York: Broadway Books, 2003, p.24

our students speak of them regularly in the classroom, and 21st-Century science would be inconceivable without talk of protons.

When you think about it, life is like a fractal, infinitely repeating its patterns in an infinite direction of scale, both large and small. **Our bandwidth of reality is very narrow.**

Now, one of the goals of religious living is to give us back a sense of perspective, by doing what the Museum of Science's model does: Widening that bandwidth to some degree. At times in our lives when we feel that we can't see beyond ourselves, faith and tradition encourage us to change our perspective.

Consider, for example, what happens to a person in mourning who recites the Kaddish prayer.

A mourner, by definition, has no perspective. A world has crashed, a loved one has died. When we mourn, we see our world narrowed; sometimes we say, "How can anyone else in the world be happy at a time like this, when I am so sad?" Maybe you've known that feeling before. And that's when Jewish tradition prescribes the Kaddish.

If you've ever looked closely at the translation of the Kaddish, you might have been surprised to realize it never mentions death. In fact, the prayer doesn't mention much of *anything*. It is a long list of adjectives about G-d: *Yitbarach v'yishtabach v'yitpa'ar v'yitromam v'yitnasei v'yithadar v'yitaleh v'yithalal...* They are all adjectives that say, essentially, *Allahu akbar* – G-d is great. And glorified. And exalted. And honored. Etc.

So look what saying the Kaddish does: At a time in our life when our world seems so small and our perspective so narrow, the tradition calls upon us to stand up and say: "G-d is." Saying it, the mourner asserts, "I may not be able to see now that there is order and sense in the world – that there even is a G-d – but someday I pray that I will, again." The mourner is being given hope for the future by being given a new perspective.

Today is Rosh HaShana. This is a day for regaining perspective on our lives, when we have lost our sense of proportion.



In the past year, I believe a lot of people have lost perspective. After all, consider how our world has changed in a year's time. When we gathered in this sanctuary one year ago, there was a fresh crisis on the horizon. The world economic meltdown was brand new, and none of us knew what to expect. The first murmurings were the subprime mortgage scandal. Then came the collapse of Lehman Brothers and other corporate behemoths, and suddenly our government was speaking of trillion-dollar bailouts.

We have seen corporate executives who have enriched themselves at the public's expense. Bernard Madoff has become the most nefarious name in Jewish life. Talk about loss of perspective: As our economic foundations have crumbled, many executive criminals are noteworthy for their lack of contrition at anything except, perhaps, for getting caught. Have you heard many examples of them offering to return millions in their salaries and bonuses to their victims, the investors? Me neither.

Consider how much has taken place in the past twelve months. Everybody here has been affected by the ripple-effect of these events. Here in the Temple, the economic collapse has flavored everything we've touched this past year. We have a community of people who worry about their jobs, or who worry about finding jobs. We worry about our retirement funds, and

money we had invested or put away. We worry about paying for our homes. G-d knows we worry about whether or not we will be able to pay for health care – for ourselves or our children or our aging parents. Being good Jews, we worry about what the effect will be of all this worrying!

Even if the optimists are correct, and the economy has begun to swing back, it will take a long time for many to rebuild what has been lost this past year. These are fearful times. What is needed is a little perspective.

Perhaps we should look to history for some context. After the Great Depression, how did the Jewish community respond? The answer is: It wasn't pretty. According to Jonathan Sarna, the preeminent historian of American Judaism,

Following the 1929 stock market crash, American Jewry turned inward, paying little heed to what was going on abroad... We were, as a result, less prepared than we should have been to help the Jews of Europe after Hitler rose to power in 1933. In addition, Jewish education was widely abandoned in the late 1920s and 1930s... We paid a big price for these declines: Those young Jews never made up for what they lost. We need to be careful [always] to avoid sacrificing Jewish education to economic expediency.²

That is the danger. It is very possible that, if the recession continues, those choices could be repeated in this generation. And that would be a tragedy.

We've already seen some of the symptoms. The Madoff scandal, of course, is part of this: he was personally responsible for hundreds of millions of dollars lost to a multitude of Jewish organizations. In its immediate wake, several major Jewish foundations were put out of business; others teetered on the brink. So many Jewish organizations, including synagogues, social welfare and social justice groups, and schools of Torah education have been hit.

And close to home, we've had members of Temple Shir Tikva who have said, "Perhaps Temple membership is a luxury that I can't afford this year. Perhaps in this economic climate, the connection to my shul – and even the Jewish education of my children (*chas v'shalom*) – is something we just can't afford right now.

G-d preserve us if we do not heed Dr. Sarna's warnings. At a time of crisis, what is most desperately needed is *perspective*.



But the historian's words are not a prophecy, inevitably unfolding. Indeed, there is inspiration to be found after this year of crisis. We can do better than our forebears of the 1930s. Indeed, there are those who have found much needed perspective.

I think there are many lessons from what we've been through as a community this past year, and I'd like to share with you three of them.

One lesson that many of us learned was this: **Don't miss the spiritual potential that exists when faced with a crisis.** Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not saying, as some other faith

² Jonathan Sarna, "Reinventing American Judaism," *Reform Judaism*, Fall 2009, p.60.

traditions do, “Thank G-d for suffering.” Far from it. But I do think that when we are confronted with challenges – even life and death challenges, even the challenges of illness and tragedy – that there are lessons to be learned about the meaning of life.

This community – for all of its obvious blessings – has not been spared the economic meltdown. We have members who lost jobs, lost homes, and more. But you know what? I also got phone calls from members who said, “My firm has some openings. Encourage people to send their resumes.” And from members who said, “Do you know about this housing that’s available in Wayland?” And from others who said, “If there’s a family in crisis, you can call me and let me know how I can help.”

The biggest misconception is that at times such as these, people think that they are experiencing their problems alone. Today our community affirms that no one here need be alone. A crisis is a time for reaching out to one another, and not succumbing to despair or to cynicism. It is a challenge, and every challenge is an opportunity for growth. This crisis can be a catalyst for growth in our selves, in our families, in our community – and in our nation as well.

Because a second lesson from the crisis is this: **Our self-worth is not measured by our net worth.** It is so tempting to define ourselves, and our value, by our success at work. My experience tells me that this is particularly endemic among American men, although women are hardly immune. (For that matter, it might be a deeper problem here in the Northeast. I was at a wedding of a college friend some time back. Standing around the bar, a few friends from out west were introduced to some people from back east. A guy from New York casually said to a guy from Colorado, “So, what do you do?” How would you answer that question? He expected, of course, for the Coloradan to answer with his occupation – because many of us are trained to think of “what we do” in life as our job. My friend from Colorado thought for a minute and said, “Well, I like to bike around outside a lot...”)

How would you answer the question, “So, what do you *do*?”

This has been an old Jewish lesson. There’s a lesson that’s told in the Talmud³, an incident from 2,000 years ago, but it could have been written today. It seems that in those days, the cost of a funeral had spiraled out of control. The community had lost all its perspective. The death of a loved one could push a family into bankruptcy. (I told you this could have been written today.) It had gotten so bad, says the Talmud, that something horrible began to take place: some Jews, in a panic, were abandoning the bodies of the dead in the forests, or on the outskirts of town. Can you imagine how desperate things had become?

Clearly something had to be done, and it had to come from the top. So Rabban Gamliel, who was the leader of the generation, took action. He decreed: When I die, bury me in a simple linen garment and in a plain wooden casket. After all, he reasoned, all the money one accrues and the power one attains really mean nothing after we die. What remains? What remains are the things that are our real occupations in life: The Mitzvahs and kindnesses we shared; the love we gave and received; and the transmission of tradition from one generation to the next.

So Rabban Gamliel put this into practice; not with an edict, but by becoming the living exemplar of these values. And the rest of the people followed his example, and we still observe these customs today.

³. Talmud, *Ketubot* 8b

And that leads me to the third lesson of this past year: **At the root of this economic crisis is a moral crisis.** We have, of course little respect for the moral bankruptcy of the culture of Ponzi schemes and corporate greed that has no accountability or social responsibility. I simultaneously shudder when I think about the government bailouts which, even though they may be necessary, don't seem to demand more accountability to the public. I'm no economist, but it certainly seems that we are on the road to rebuilding a system that is the same one that got us to this place.

But that the moral roots of this crisis go deeper than that. They are found in the malls and shopping centers of America. They are found in our schools. They are found in our neighborhoods and homes. They are found in the fact that, in these days of recession, the average American watches *five hours of television per day*. And they are found in a culture whose primary value is competition instead of cooperation. We have to ask ourselves: Are our children being raised with values fundamentally different from those of the greed-merchants who created this mess? I'm not so sure that they are. At the roots is the philosophy that **“more is more.”** That is the philosophy that encouraged people to borrow more than they could afford, to spend more than was realistic. As opposed to leaving within our means; being grateful – profoundly grateful – for the blessings all around us; and being able to say what I have come to think is the holiest word in the Hebrew language: *Dayenu*, what I have is enough for me.

The crisis is one that permeates American society, and it is fundamentally a crisis of perspective. I believe that Judaism's message is at odds with the values that are often all around us. We are part of a tradition that insists that:

“education” is more than simply “getting good grades”;
that **“culture” is more than this month's fashion;**
and that **“success” means more than a prestigious degree.**

Our challenge in this New Year, as ever, is to live those values, countercultural as they may seem.

Those are three lessons we've learned from the recession: Truly, this crisis stems from the basic moral values of our culture. And, as spiritual creatures, we should be continually reminded that we are not defined by our net worth. And, like every challenge in life, an opportunity for growth has been handed to us.



The year that we have now officially left behind was unlike any that we have experienced in our lifetimes. It was a year where many things got distorted out of proportion, and this is the season of returning and correcting those distortions. Today is Rosh HaShana, the birthday of all creation. It recalls a time when the world was young, and full of potential and possibility. It recalls that time in our lives.

When you gaze up at the heavens, and consider the starlight that has travelled millions of years to reach us, it is easy to feel so very small. And yet we are part of a tradition that has the audacity to say to say that each of us has at our fingertips a dose of extraordinary power and in our souls a touch of eternity.

The Psalmist wrote:

ה' אֲדֹנָינוּ מִה־אֲדִיר שְׁמֶךָ בְּכָל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־תָּנָה הַיּוֹדֶךָ עַל־הַשָּׁמַיִם:

**Ad-nai our G-d, How majestic is Your name through the earth,
You who have blanketed the heavens with your splendor!...
When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,
The moon and stars that You set in place,
What are we, that you are mindful of us?
We mortals, that you should take note of us.
Yet you have made us little less than angels,
And adorned us with glory and majesty...⁴**

Now that's perspective.

Ad-nai Eloheinu, Ad-nai our G-d, may the New Year 5770 be a year for much glory and majesty; a year for sharing and for growing; for peacemaking, and for raising our eyes to see the miracles out there and the miracles in here as well.

Amen.

⁴. Psalm 8:2-6