

Kol Nidre 5781: Crying to be Heard

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My name is Rabbi Ronnie Cahana. I am 66 years old. I have lived at the Maimonides Geriatric Centre in Côte Saint-Luc for the last eight years. I am not a statistic.

I am a fully sentient, confident human being, who needs to have my humanity honoured.

Tonight, I have the honour of sharing this *bima* with Rabbi Ronnie Cahana; the beloved and respected rabbi of Beth El, who served there for ten years before a massive stroke at the age of 57. Since then, he has continued to lead in different ways. In this recording, Rabbi Cahana reads a letter he wrote this summer to Premier Legault; the recording is from a podcast, shared with Rabbi Cahana's permission.ⁱ It is a letter, but I hear it as a sermon:

These days, in long-term care, every person is speaking desperately to the Maker Of Us All, to The Holy Creator of Life.

We are pleading for our lives.

Mr. Legault, each of us is crying to be heard.

“Each of us is crying to be heard.” *Shema koleinu*, we just said in this last prayer: “Hear our voice.” *Al tashlicheinu l'eit zikna, kichlot kocheinu al t'azveinu*. “Do not cast us away when we are old; as our strength diminishes, do not abandon us.” *Ateret tiferet seiva* – “gray hair is a crown of glory,” Proverbs says.ⁱⁱ The crown of old age is meant to be a crown of honour. But the crown of the elders in our time is corona, and it is in fear of it that they are pleading for their lives.

We stand, by all accounts, at the beginning of a second wave of the pandemic. I want to share with you my perspective, as your rabbi, on the first. Some of us, I know, were inconvenienced but otherwise unscathed; others suffered devastating losses of people you loved; and still others hold their breaths every day, with a family member – like Rabbi Cahana – in long-term care.

Here is what I can tell you:

There were so many funerals.

Suddenly, funerals were only at graveside. Only ten people. Immediate mourners, unable to travel. We went very quickly from being incredulous at the thought of wearing masks, to gravediggers dressed in full PPE. And in a world in which everyone was staying home – an entire world that, as Rabbi David Wolpe describes it, was sitting shivaⁱⁱⁱ – we could not use our traditional forms of comfort. Shiva over zoom is one thing; but there is no substitute for a hug.

Every funeral was shaped by this pandemic – but some, more so than others. We buried people who died of Covid-19, people who had lived 80 or 90 or 100 years, Holocaust survivors, great-grandparents, whose lives had been ended abruptly. And then there were the deaths which were not due to the pandemic, but related to it nonetheless: seniors, devastated by the isolation that they now faced, the sudden end of activities and visits, the disappearance of routine. Despite the dedication of workers on the front lines, too many people died without a hand to hold, without a familiar voice to accompany them.

At certain times in our people's story, cries of injustice and suffering have gone up to God. From the cruelty of Sodom; from the oppression of Egypt. Rabbi Tamar Elad-Applebaum calls this "the soundtrack of a yell"^{iv} – and God's response to this sound is meant to reject the apathy of indifference; to teach *us* to respond. The cry of this pandemic, of this moment in humanity's story, has come up from our elders. They are crying to be heard.

Before this started, I had no idea what a CHSLD even was.^v I didn't know that it stood for *centres d'hébergement de soins de longue durée*, roughly translated as "long-term care centres." I didn't know that CHSLDs were once the pride of the province, built in the 1960s and 70s – the era of Expo 67 and the 1976 Olympics – as the government was replacing the role of the church in society. I didn't know that they began to be underfunded and understaffed during a policy shift towards home care – which in turn wasn't adequately funded. I didn't know that a study in the 1990s showed over 400 seniors had died over a decade of neglect, that some residents spent two years without a bath. I didn't know that frontline workers were overworked and underpaid and moving between homes. I didn't know how much the residences counted on the volunteer labour of family. I didn't know that bureaucratization left the whole system vulnerable – a system with the most vulnerable people in its hands. And now here we are, with 51 seniors dead in a single residence just outside of Montreal, and over 4600 dead in residences across our province; with over 80% of Canada's deaths in long-term care. Our member, Aaron Derfel, has reported with heartbreak and heroism to bring all of this to light.

Those of us who are not in those homes, or without loved ones in these homes, might privately find reassurance in these numbers – at least it's them, and not us. But as your rabbi, I see these numbers as nothing less than a sin.

Al chet shechatanu: For the sin of not knowing, not seeing, not hearing.

Rabbi Cahana:

We say, "More life! Please! We are not afraid of the future."

We are afraid that society is forgetting us.

Our life force, our dignity, our ownership of the love of life that we can teach others.

"We are afraid that society is forgetting us." Who among us would want to be forgotten?

In an article entitled, "In the Time of Covid, Is 70 the New 90?" Gary Rosenblatt writes:

In early March, when the coronavirus suddenly struck New York with a vengeance, my wife and I signed up on our synagogue's list seeking volunteers to bring groceries to the homebound in our neighborhood.

That evening our rabbi called to thank us — and gently explained that the best way people over 60 could be helpful was to stay home.

So much for volunteering...

That phone call was the first sign of a new and shocking reality for us. Like so many fellow Boomers... who think of themselves as engaged, active older men and women, we recognized that we are now perceived, in the time of the pandemic, as The Elderly.^{vi}

There are huge differences, of course, between active seniors in their 70s; people living independently into their 80s and 90s; and those unable to care for themselves, with significant physical or mental challenges. Show me a recently-retired empty nester, and I'll show you our next superstar volunteer, or Torah study enthusiast, or synagogue president. I'll be racing to recruit you before another

organization gets you first. Show me someone in their 80s or 90s who can tell their story, and I'll have a bar mitzvah student or a young adult asking to record their oral history. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a prophetic voice on aging, writes: "Reverence for the old, dialogue between generations, is as important to the dignity of the young as it is for the well-being of the old."^{vii}

Months ago, planning for the High Holy Days, a possibility was raised: maybe we should have services in person, but tell members over 70 to stay home. We quickly rejected this. Moses, working to free our people from Egypt, turned down Pharaoh's offer to let only one demographic group leave. *Bena'areinu bezikneinu neilech*, he insisted. With our youths and our elders we will go.^{viii} Without them, our community is not a community. Without you, we are not whole.

But it is the other kind of being elderly that we fear; the kind that comes with vulnerability and dependence, the kind that, on our society, does cause us to be left behind; even, to disappear.

Lynn Casteel Harper is a minister and chaplain, and author of the book, *On Vanishing: Mortality, Dementia, and What It Means to Disappear*. She challenges the language of "vanishing" that we use to refer to those with dementia, to suggest that it's not them who disappears – it's us:

Persons with dementia and their care partners often find themselves forgotten at the exact time when they need the most care. I have seen it happen again and again. Friends and family stop calling; faith communities quietly withdraw; physicians offer little support outside prescriptions; public policy often neglects care needs, opting for sexier spending on research for ever-elusive cures... the problem is not so much that people forget, it is that they are forgotten. The problem isn't simply their deficits—it is our distance.^{ix}

Al chet shechatanu: For the sin of fearing and forgetting.

Rabbi Cahana:

I have always celebrated every gift of breath, and now it is being challenged.

A civilized society is defined by how we treat our elders, how we honour our parents, and now we are defining ourselves either for goodness or for neglect.

Thank you.

Jewish teachings about honouring our elders abound. But we know it's far from easy. Someone told me this summer that, back when there were coin-operated parking meters in Westmount, she would always see extra time left on the meters in front of the nursing homes in the neighbourhood. "People always thought they would visit longer than they could." Ever since the Torah commanded us to honour our parents, we have struggled with what this requires. Support them financially? Be attentive to their dignity? What about parents who are abusive? What about when parents and their adult children disagree? What if a parent asks to die? These are not new questions. The very word – *kavod*, honour, denotes weightiness. These are truly heavy questions. We talk about the sandwich generation, those caring simultaneously for both parents and children. With all the stress involved, "the sandwich has become a panini"^x – and that's in pre-pandemic times.

For all that our system has gotten wrong, the basic insight is right: caring for our elders is a societal responsibility; it ought not rest solely on the shoulders of the family. "Caring for elders in our families," Rabbi Dayle Friedman, author of a Jewish book on aging, writes, "demands more resources than any caregiver can muster alone. Just as we have learned that it takes a village to raise a child, so, too, may we come to realize that it takes an entire community to care for frail elders and their caregivers."^{xi}

So how can we be that village? I can offer only the beginnings of an answer. I hope that you will keep teaching me; I hope you will join me in learning more.

For our elders, we can make sure they are not cut off from community; we have taken a small first step by making this Kol Nidre service available to residences this year. We can advocate for better policies and better care. We can visit, even if the visit will be forgotten. We can recognize the people we care about, even if they can't recognize us.

For caregivers? We can support fair pay and good conditions for workers, many of whom are vulnerable themselves. We can learn from family members what they need. "Don't ask me whether my mother still recognizes me," one of our members told me. "It doesn't make me feel supported; it makes me feel pitied... Tell me what you remember about my mother, what you see of her in me. Be there for my son, her grandson, who never knew her when she was ok. Don't stop checking in on family, even if they don't always want to talk, even if listening is hard."

Not only do these acts take an entire community – they are the measure of an entire community. “The test of a people is how it behaves toward the old,” Heschel writes. “It is easy to love children. Even tyrants and dictators make a point of being fond of children. But the affection and care for the old, the incurable, the helpless are the true gold mines of a culture.”^{xii}

Our worth is not determined by our productivity. Our worth is not determined by our health. Our worth is determined by our humanity. Our society is defined by how we treat the most vulnerable.

Al chet shechatanu: For the sin of having failed them.

It takes courage to make a promise, when we have broken that promise in the past. But repentance, Heschel teaches, “is more than contrition and remorse for sins, for harms done. Repentance means a new insight, a new spirit. It also means a course of action.”^{xiii} The past does not determine the future. We have the choice to change.

“A civilized society is defined by how we treat our elders,” Rabba Cahana insists, “and now we are defining ourselves either for goodness or for neglect.”

In this New Year, may we define ourselves for goodness. May this be God’s will – but first, may it be our own.

ⁱ Commons, Arshy Mann, June 24, 2020. <https://www.canadalandshow.com/podcast/pandemic-9-mend-the-world/>. With thanks to Annetta Black, Lisa Bornstein, Kitra Cahana, and Jordanna Vamos for their conversations which helped shape this sermon, and of course to Rabbi Cahana for his willingness to share his words.

ⁱⁱ Proverbs 16:31.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rabbi David Wolpe, “The Whole World is Sitting Shiva,” *The Atlantic*, May 20, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/whole-world-sitting-shiva/611872/>.

^{iv} Rabbi Tamar Elad-Applebaum, “Intervention in Times of Crisis: On Moral and Spiritual Leadership.” HartmanSummer@Home, July 13, 2020. Rabbi Elad-Applebaum’s session and sources can be found at <https://summer.hartman.org.il/agenda/session/275530>.

^v This section draws on the Commons podcast; Les Perraux, “Once a Retirement Plum for Quebec Elders, Nursing Homes are Now Symbols of Neglect,” *The Globe and Mail*, May 7, 2020 <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-once-a-retirement-plum-for-quebec-elders-nursing-homes-are-now/>; and the reporting of Aaron Derfel for the *Montreal Gazette*.

^{vi} Gary Rosenblatt, “In the Time of Covid, is 70 the new 90?” *The New York Jewish Week*, June 30, 2020. <https://jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/in-the-time-of-covid-is-70-the-new-90/>.

^{vii} Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, “To Grow in Wisdom,” *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (New York, 1955), p.84.

^{viii} Exodus 10:9.

^{ix} Lynn Casteel Harper, *On Vanishing: Mortality, Dementia, and What It Means to Disappear* (New York, 2020), pp.196-97.

^x Rabbi Laura Geller, “Honoring Your Father and Mother,” in Rabbi Oren J. Hayon, ed., *Inscribed: Encounters with the Ten Commandments* (New York, 2020), p.87.

^{xi} Rabbi Dayle Friedman, *Jewish Visions for Aging* (Woodstock, VT: 2008).

^{xii} Heschel, *ibid.*, pp.72-73.

^{xiii} Heschel, "Religion and Race" in *The Insecurity of Freedom*, p.96. Heschel showed great prescience in his focus on both ageism and racism.