Kol Nidre 5785-2024

The world has gone crazy. What about us?

How many times have we uttered the phrase, "The world has gone crazy," in the past year? Who among us does not feel that reality is distorted? Who does not recognize the rise of fanaticism and intolerance? It often seems as if we live in a world turned upside down.

As children in Argentina, many of us grew up singing a song by María Elena Walsh titled "El Reino del Revés" (The Kingdom of the Upside Down). Part of the lyrics goes:

They told me that in the Kingdom of the Upside Down, the bird swims and the fish flies, that cats don't meow but say yes, because they study a lot of English. They told me that in the Kingdom of the Upside Down nobody dances with their feet, that a thief is a watchman and another is a judge, and that two and two are three. Let's see what the Kingdom of the Upside Down is like. Let's see what the Kingdom of the Upside Down is like.

We sang this in laughter, imagining a crazy world with the innocence of childhood. Yet, as we grow older, we often lose that innocence and confront the realization that the song may not describe a mere dystopia but rather our current reality. We inhabit a world where fundamental values seem to have vanished, where "observable truths" are dismissed as lies, and where blatant falsehoods are accepted by many. We are adrift in a world that appears devoid of a moral compass, a ship without direction.

Have you ever found yourself bewildered by how another person–someone who looks a lot like you–can think so differently? Diametrically opposed! Do you ever wonder if the "vast majority" holds views you don't share, leading you to question your own sanity? Are we sure we are still the sane ones?

One major error some people make is thinking in absolute, catastrophic terms. Each time a storm approaches, like the one we faced recently, many use words like "unprecedented," "devastating," and "the most catastrophic in a hundred years." Such language only amplifies pain, anxiety, and despair in an already troubling reality. It is crucial to de-dramatize, contextualize, and study history: "Binu Shnot Dor VaDor–Understand the history of each generation," the Torah advises.

At the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th, the world was undergoing rapid transformations. The French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, and the upheaval in Russia marked the decline of medieval foundations. The modern age was dawning. In this context, Rabbi Nachman of Braslav, one of the most insightful Hasidic thinkers of his time, offers a poignant story that can help us reflect on our own situation over 200 years later:

Once, a king dreamed that the next wheat harvest in his kingdom would be cursed; whoever ate that wheat would go mad. Alarmed, the king sought advice from his faithful advisor. The advisor suggested they store enough wheat from the previous harvest to save themselves from

madness. However, the king replied that while they could escape, they would be unable to assist the rest of the people, who would all go mad, leaving him and his advisor as the only sane individuals, yet perceived as mad by others. How could they live like that? Ultimately, the king decided that both he and his advisor would consume the cursed wheat along with everyone else. However, they would mark their foreheads as a reminder that they were mad.

The world has once again consumed the wheat of madness. Who is the king? We all see ourselves as that king. The madman, the intolerant, the fanatic–these are always "the others." What does the king do when he knows he cannot evade the currents of his time? He marks his forehead–a sign, like Harry Potter's, or perhaps Cain's. Even amid the collective madness from which we cannot fully escape, he is reminded that something is amiss. If we are mad, let us at least be aware, says Rabbi Nachman. Or does he wish to convey something more?

Elie Wiesel, in "Souls on Fire: Portraits and Legends of Hasidic Masters," views this tale as a cautionary warning about society's potential descent into collective madness, and how even the wise can be swept away if they do not find a way to remember their own sanity. For Wiesel, the "mark" on the foreheads of the king and his advisor serves as a reminder that one may be immersed in madness yet must always retain some awareness.

Albert J. Friedlander, in "The Language of Truth," interprets the tale as a reflection on spiritual loneliness. He suggests that the truly wise individual, who retains sanity in a mad world, must grapple with isolation. Friedlander proposes that Rabbi Nachman invites his followers to remain vigilant, even when the entire world seems to stray from the truth.

This is my invitation to you this Kol Nidre night: to contemplate what that mark on our foreheads should be–a reminder that we are immersed in madness and to help us avoid being consumed by the quicksands surrounding us. How can we embrace passion without veering into fanaticism? How can we live life with intensity while maintaining balance? How can we navigate a world that has gone mad without losing our sanity?

Talmudic Judaism–not Biblical Judaism, the Judaism we inherit and uphold–offers insights to help us avoid extremes and madness: continuous study, reflection, acceptance of diverse ideas and interpretations, and daily (self)criticism. This, I believe, is the mark Rabbi Nachman spoke of. How can we ensure that, even while consuming the same wheat, drinking the same news, and living in the same reality as those around us, we do not succumb to madness?

1. Be fully aware that we are always one step away from madness.
2. Reflect daily on our own truths.
3. Study from a variety of voices and authors, never from a single narrative.
4. Practice humility.
5. Embrace silence when we lack knowledge.

We live in a crazy world, often forgetting that we ourselves can be the irrational ones. Let us consider the tragic events of October 7th. While there are many instances we could highlight to illustrate how the world has gone mad, let's focus on this paradigmatic example that resonates with us all today. We awoke to the harrowing images of barbarism captured by the perpetrators themselves (even the Nazis sought to erase their atrocities). We found ourselves

in a world turned upside down, where young people–both the young and the not-so-young–chose to side with the oppressors rather than the victims.

We live in a world where a terrorist organization is hailed as a resistance group, where "intelligent," "wise," and "enlightened" people have consumed the wheat of madness and now support Hamas. Agnostics and atheists ally with a theocratic regime like Iran, while LGBTQ groups support Hezbollah, whose leader, Nasrallah, has called for the death penalty for homosexuals in Lebanon. Feminist organizations remain silent about the rape of women on October 7, aligning themselves with fanatical Islamists who silence and repress women. Human rights organizations have yet to visit even a single Israeli hostage… Even the hollywood movie style "operation pagers" specially targeting, only targeting, terrorists of Hezbollah was perceived by many as a "terrorist maneuver of the State of Israel".

At another time, we could analyze the causes of this global decline–the madness many seem to have embraced. We might attribute it to capitalism or communism, the left or the right, intersectionality, wokeism, or postcolonialism–concepts that often emerge from good intentions but ultimately lead to dangerous fundamentalisms and extremisms.

Religion is undeniably one of the institutions that has done immense good for humanity, yet it can also be one of the most perilous, causing great harm. There is no greater source of madness than a religion that fosters collective insanity. Wheat, the basis of challah and a fundamental sustenance, has historically been the root of widespread madness, leading to genocide, racism, discrimination, and expulsion. By being overly certain of our identities, by clinging too fiercely to our truths, by only interacting with our own communities, and by viewing the world in stark black-and-white terms–good and evil, light and darkness–we risk slipping into madness. We have witnessed this in Christianity during the Middle Ages and now see it in Islam.

And what of Judaism? Judaism is certainly not immune to radicalization. Extremist and fanatic Jews have existed in every generation, and they exist today in the State of Israel too. Let us not deceive ourselves.

Let me share a story from the Talmud (Yoma 23a) about fanaticism to illustrate this point:

An incident occurred involving two priests who raced to ascend the ramp. One reached the four cubits before his colleague, who, out of anger, stabbed him in the heart. Rabbi Tzadok stood up on the steps of the Entrance Hall of the Sanctuary and proclaimed: "Listen, my brothers of the house of Israel. The verse states: 'If one be found slain in the land… and it be not known who smote him; then your Elders and your judges shall come forth and they shall measure…and it shall be that the city which is nearest to the slain man…shall take a heifer' (Deuteronomy 21:1-3). The Elders of that city took the heifer and broke its neck in a ritual of atonement. But what of us, in our situation? Who bears the obligation to bring the heifer whose neck is broken? Does the obligation rest with the city, Jerusalem, so that its sages must bring the calf, or does it rest upon the Temple courtyards, so that the priests must bring it?" At that moment, the entire assembly burst into tears. The father of the stabbed priest approached

and found his son still convulsing. He said: "May my son's death be an atonement for you. But my son is still convulsing and has not yet died; therefore, the knife in his body has not become ritually impure through contact with a corpse. If you remove it promptly, it will still be pure for future use." This incident teaches that the ritual purity of utensils was of greater concern to them than the shedding of blood.

The Talmud, Judaism's most sacred text after the Torah, which in every page emphasizes the importance of loving God and fulfilling His commandments, recognizes the mortal danger that even the noblest ideas can pose. Radicalization, fanaticism, and obsession appear to be part of human nature, capable of transforming the most virtuous concepts into deadly weapons. The Talmud cautions its readers that this is not the way forward; we must reflect, and we must learn to pause when we witness madness taking root in our youth–in this case, young priests. Today, it may be the youth in our universities.

Rabbi Eliezer in Pirkei Avot (2:10) warns of the danger posed by leaders' ideas, stating: *"Swarm yourself before the fire of the wise, but beware of being singed by their glowing coals, for their bite is the bite of a fox, and their sting is the sting of a scorpion, and their hiss is the hiss of a serpent, and all their words are like coals of fire."* The rabbis recognize that the primary instigators of fanaticism and extremism–often born from noble ideas–are the leaders themselves: presidents, intellectuals, professors, journalists, rabbis, priests, and imams. That is why we are cautioned in Pirkei Avot (1:11): "Sages, be careful with your words!" We must always moderate our speech and weigh our words. This responsibility must begin at the highest levels. The Talmud comes with its own anti-virus against fanaticism.

How can we be passionate without becoming fanatical? How can we live life with intensity without losing balance? How can we maintain our principles without succumbing to indifference? How can we avoid both nihilism and fanaticism? It is no coincidence that politics and religion are two arenas where we find both disillusioned nihilists and dogmatic fanatics. If there is a place where these worlds converge, it is Israel–between the secular and the ultra-Orthodox, between doves and hawks, and among those who leave Israel disenchanted, believing there is no possible solution. Within all these groups, one voice resonates deeply with me: the voice and pen of Amos Oz.

In his essay "Against Fanaticism," the renowned Israeli writer addresses the issue of fanaticism and offers several strategies to combat it, based on his observations of Israeli society and the world at large. Here are some of his main recommendations:

1. Dialogue and Compromise: Oz emphasizes the importance of seeking compromises and engaging in dialogue with those who hold different views. It's not about conceding all points, but about finding common ground and respecting differences.
2. Empathy and Understanding: One root of fanaticism is the inability to see the world from another's perspective. Oz suggests that we must consciously strive to understand the stories, emotions, and motivations of those with opposing opinions.
3. Accepting Complexity: Oz argues that the world is inherently complex and that simplistic solutions to complex problems, typical of fanaticism, are dangerous. The ability to accept ambiguity and uncertainty is key to combating fanaticism.

4. Avoiding "Absolute Love" for Ideas: Oz warns against becoming so enamored with ideas or causes that one justifies extreme actions. For him, fanaticism arises from the belief in holding absolute truth and the justification of imposing it on others.
5. Education for Plurality: He highlights the need for educating individuals to embrace a diversity of thoughts and lifestyles. Societies must foster a culture of plurality and tolerance from an early age.
6. A Sense of Humor: Oz believes that humor serves as one of the most effective antidotes to fanaticism. Fanatics often lack the ability to laugh at themselves, which renders them rigid in their beliefs. Humor allows for a more flexible and less dogmatic perspective on life.

These are the marks on Amos Oz's forehead–the signs he attempts to convey to his readers as a secret code in a society that has gone mad, to avoid losing ourselves completely to that madness. To this list, I would like to add my own ideas–my own marks on my forehead:

1. If we love what is ours, that is good; if that love turns into hatred for the other, it is bad. Sane people love, insane people hate.
2. Always practice humility, be humble; dare to be wrong, as the Talmud advises: "Teach your tongue to say, 'I do not know.'" Sane people doubt, insane people are always sure.
3. Learn to remain silent; understand that we do not need to have a formed opinion on every subject. Sane people listen more than what they talk, insane people talk more than what they hear.
4. Study. Read extensively and diversely. Learn to differentiate between facts and interpretations. Sane people always learn, insane people think they can always teach.
5. Pay attention with the language we use, ensuring our passion does not transform into aggression. Sane people don't have to shout, insane people only scream.
6. Reflect occasionally on whether we ourselves might be the irrational ones.

If we are still questioning our sanity, we can be assured that we remain grounded. If we can empathize with the pain of others, we know we have not succumbed to madness. Let's defend our cause, always with passion but with integrity. With commitment but not with fanaticism. What is your mark on your forehand to remind you that the world went crazy?

G'mar Chatimah Tovah

Rabbi Uri