Living in the World of Safek

Kol Nidre - Broward Central Synagogue - 5786

There is a line we sang just ten days ago on Rosh Hashanah: **Hayom Harat Olam**—Today the world is born. Tradition adds a startling footnote: on Rosh Hashanah it isn't the galaxies or oceans that are born; it's us—humanity (b. Rosh Hashanah 27a). And the Talmud preserves a debate so raw that it still stings: for two and a half years the schools of Hillel and Shammai argued whether it would have been better for a person to be created or not to have been created. The vote lands—shockingly—on "better not." And then comes the sober instruction: but now that we have been created, let us examine our deeds (b. Eruvin 13b).

According to the Talmud, from the human perspective it would have been better not to be created. Why?

That verdict touches something primal. Why does existence sometimes feel so heavy? The 19th-century Hasidic master, the *Mei HaShiloach*, suggests the problem is not creation itself but the world we inhabit: after eating from the Tree of Knowledge, humanity fell into *Olam HaSafek*—a world of ambiguity, hiddenness, and doubt. "It would have been more comfortable not to descend," he says, "because the soul fears the realm of uncertainty" (*Mei HaShiloach* to Eruvin 13b; cf. Genesis 3).

If there is one thing we can be certain of this year, it is that life will bring uncertainty.

Yom Kippur gives language to that pain. In *Unetaneh Tokef* we ask the questions that keep us awake at night: Who will live and who will die? Who will be serene and who will be tormented? Who by fire and who by water? Who will become rich and who will become poor?

But our own hearts add even more: Will my biopsy be benign? Will our family hold together this year? Will I keep my job—can I pay tuition, rent, the mortgage? Will our democracy withstand another shock? Will our children be safe at school? Will the hostages be returned? Will Israel know a season without sirens? Will another world war begin?

This is the liturgy of not-knowing. And tonight, on the holiest day, I want to speak honestly about how to live with *safek*—not to erase it, but to walk with it. As human beings we want to be created, we want to live. But sometimes uncertainty crushes us until we wonder whether it was worth being created at all.

My Year of Uncertainty

I would like to begin in the first person. As a rabbi, many times you count on me to carry your uncertainties, and I will always be here for each of you. But as much as I am a rabbi, I am also a human being—and uncertainty is part of my life as it is of yours.

I am sure that all of us this year have faced doubts and uncertainties. I don't mean the trivial ones, but the kind that steal our sleep, that twist our stomachs, that take away our breath, that bring tears, that leave us flat on the bed with no strength.

So I want to make a *Vidui*, a confession, on this day of confessions. This year I walked through perhaps two of the greatest uncertainties of my life.

The first was Israel. In June we took a group of more than 40 members of our community to help with reconstruction efforts after the war that began on October 7. Suddenly, we found ourselves in the middle of another war. The tribal uncertainties—whether our luggage would arrive (¼ of the bags didn't!), or how we would manage in kibbutz bathrooms not quite like what we were used to—faded into the background, and the true questions emerged: How do you smile in the middle of tragedy? How do you enjoy the sun and a drink during the day when rockets fall at night? Do we stay in Tel Aviv or go to Jerusalem? Do we try to evacuate by armored car through Jordan, or on small yachts sailing thirty hours to Cyprus? Will a missile land near us tonight? How do I comfort my family thousands of miles away while also holding my group—and myself—together? How long will Israeli airspace be closed?

In the end, all those uncertainties cleared. We came home safe, though only after nearly seventy hours of travel. But in the moment the doubts multiplied endlessly.

The second great uncertainty also ended with joy—just last Thursday, after Rosh Hashanah, our daughter Sarah was born. As everyone here who has been a parent knows, every pregnancy carries

both excitement and fear. To bring a child into the world is to bring new uncertainties: Will they be well? Will they be healthy? Will they be happy? This pregnancy was even more fraught because, in the past year, we lost two pregnancies. Every doctor's visit, every ultrasound, every blood test made our hearts race with anxiety. And again, thank God, this uncertainty ended in blessing. But that does not erase the fear, the doubt, the months of fragile hope that we lived through.

Those were my main uncertainties. I cannot be inside your hearts, but I know you carry your own: Will the test results come back clean? Can I hold my marriage together through this season? Will my father survive his surgery? Will my children thrive in college? Will AI replace my job? Will America still be the country I grew up in ten years from now?

Safek—doubt, uncertainty—is a covenant we never signed, but one we cannot escape. So how do we live with it?

Four Guides at the Edge of Certainty

Philosophers and scientists across the centuries have tried to give us ways to live with uncertainty.

Socrates 2,500 years ago said famously: *"I know that I do not know."* For him, this was not ignorance but the beginning of wisdom. The Talmud echoes: *"Accustom your tongue to say: 'I do not know'"* (b. Berakhot 4a). This may be the first lesson in living with uncertainty: humility. We want to have the answers, or others expect them from us. But sometimes the holiest thing to say is: *"I don't know—but I am with you. I don't know—but we will seek together. I don't know—but I believe we will be okay."*

Centuries later, **Søren Kierkegaard** (1813–1855), the Danish father of existentialism, insisted that life demands decision in the face of uncertainty. Truth is not handed to us. We live without guarantees. And therefore, he said, we must sometimes take a *leap of faith*. Often we don't have all the data, all the knowledge, all the clarity to make the best decision. That can lead to despair—or to faith. We can root ourselves in trust, and from there build courage in the face of doubt. *"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me,"* sang the psalmist. And the Talmud insists: even when the sword rests upon our neck, we still pray. Certainty is the death of faith; faith is born of doubt—but the doubt that moves us to choose, to believe, to act.

Even science teaches uncertainty. **Werner Heisenberg** (1901–1976), Nobel physicist, showed that at the most basic level of reality, uncertainty is built in. Position and momentum cannot both be fixed: the act of measuring changes what is measured. This is not a flaw of our tools—it is the structure of the world. This is the *Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle*. In other words, *Olam HaSafek* is not only psychological; it is cosmic. The Torah already taught us: after Eden, after the fruit, human knowledge is always partial. Science confirms it: the world is probabilistic. The most we can do is approach; we will never have complete certainty.

Daniel Kahneman (1934–2024), Israeli psychologist and Nobel laureate in economics, extended this. Human beings crave certainty, he said, but life is probabilistic. In *Thinking, Fast and Slow* he taught that our brains trick us into seeking false confidence. The wiser path is to think in probabilities, not absolutes; to resist the temptation of easy certainties and instead live with approximations.

The Jewish Craft of Living with Safek

In Jewish tradition, thousands of years ago our sages also gave us tools for how to live with doubt and uncertainty. Perhaps the most paradigmatic example comes from the Proverbs of King Solomon: *"If there is worry in a person's heart, let him quash it"* (Proverbs 12:25). But the Talmud immediately interprets this verse in two different ways: *"Rabbi Ami said: He should forcefully push it out of his mind. Rabbi Assi said: He should tell it to others"* (b. Yoma 75a).

Rabbi Ami teaches something we know but must be reminded of constantly: we cannot allow the uncertainties of life—of which every day will bring new ones—to occupy all our time and energy. In some way, we must "push them out of our mind." When we were in Israel, many asked us (and some even criticized us): how could we be smiling, dancing, listening to music, even enjoying a drink while there was a war, while missiles might fall? We were living exactly as Rabbi Ami suggested 1,800 years ago: setting aside, even for a few moments, what otherwise would drown us in grief and despair. **You do not owe your entire life to your uncertainties. You are allowed to keep living and even enjoying moments of joy, even with those doubts still in your heart. There is a time and space for both.**

On the other hand, Rabbi Assi points us to another practice: the way to live with uncertainty is also to share it with others. To verbalize it is already half the solution. To name it places boundaries around it. It not only relieves us of the weight of carrying an invisible burden alone, but it also helps us realize that others are living through their own uncertainties—or that they once endured similar ones. In community, naming our *safek* connects us and begins to heal us.

Some time ago I discovered a marvelous book: *The Birth of Doubt* by Moshe Halbertal. He explains how the rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud—nearly two thousand years ago—constructed a legal system within halakhah precisely to deal with uncertainty. In most religious systems, the instinctive answer to doubt is caution: *when in doubt, abstain*. That path leads to paralysis, to inaction, to refusing risk. But halakhah, which is far more than a legal system—it is a philosophical framework for navigating life—offers us principles to live with uncertainty. Let me share just a few examples, because they can shape our lives as much as they shaped Jewish law.

Chazakah – Presumption. Literally meaning "strength," this principle establishes that a person or object is presumed to remain in the same state until there is clear evidence otherwise. *What has been is presumed to continue.* If the last time we saw someone they were healthy, we cannot assume—out of fear or anxiety—that they are sick now unless there are clear signs. Too many of us live with what I call "preventive uncertainty," worrying ahead of time, fearing "what if" without cause. The Talmud says this is not the way. Do not assume change until you see evidence. A practical example: if your teenager is out late and does not immediately respond to a text, do not panic. You have the *chazakah* of their past behavior: every time before, they came home responsibly. Do not let fear dictate your life without evidence.

Rov – Majority. Another principle is to follow the majority. The Talmud gives a classic example: if there are ten butcher shops in a city, six of which sell kosher meat and four that do not, and you forget from which one you purchased, you may eat the meat. Why? Because you follow the majority. **In life, our minds are wired to obsess over exceptions.** We anchor our fears to the one shocking news story, the rare catastrophe, and connect it to our own anxieties. But *rov* teaches: if in most cases things turn out well, if most of our own experiences ended positively, then we should lean on that. Follow the majority. Let the evidence calm you.

Ein LaDavar Sof – There is no end. Perhaps the principle I love most. Often uncertainty spirals into endless "what ifs." What if this goes wrong, and then that happens, and then this triggers something else, until we are lost in a vicious cycle with no exit. The Mishnah drew mental boundaries to prevent such spirals. A classic case: if you have already cleaned your home for Passover and then you see a mouse, you cannot assume it was carrying bread in its mouth, and that it dropped crumbs in some corner, and therefore you must clean again, because otherwise *ein la-davar sof*—there would be no end. Halakhah says: stop the chain. Draw the line. Do not let your life be consumed by limitless speculation.

Teiku – Unresolved. Throughout the Talmud, some debates end without resolution, marked by the word *teiku*. Tradition adds: *Tishbi yetaretz kushyot u'va'ayot*—"Elijah the prophet will resolve the questions and problems" (Eduyot 8:7). Judaism acknowledges that some uncertainties will not be resolved today or tomorrow. Not every wound will be healed now. Some answers will only come in messianic times. There is comfort in this: you do not need to solve everything right now. Leave some knots for Elijah.

Beyond Law: Anchoring the Heart

Law gives us tools, but the heart also needs anchors. *Unetaneh Tokef* teaches that Teshuvah, Tefilah, and Tzedakah can ease the harshness of God's decree. Drawing from that image, I believe there are four practices that can *ease the harshness of uncertainty—maavirin et ro'a ha-safekah*:

Kehillah – Community. *Do not separate yourself from the community* (Avot 2:4). Only those of us who live in community understand how necessary it is not to be alone in moments of doubt. Uncertainty and pain can push us into isolation, turn us into hermits consumed by anxiety. But the Jewish answer, for millennia, has been the opposite: to lean into community, to embrace and be embraced, to know we are not alone. In an America plagued by epidemic loneliness, Judaism offers an ancient remedy: be, and build, community.

Machshavot Tovot – Positive thoughts. In the face of uncertainty, our minds often wander into darkness. We imagine the worst when we might also imagine the best. Hasidic teachers said: *If you believe something can be broken, believe also that it can be repaired.* In our language tonight: if you can imagine the worst, you can also train your mind to imagine the best. Shimon Peres used to teach:

pessimists and optimists die in the same way, but they live their lives differently. *Gam zeh ya'avor—this too shall pass*, King Solomon taught. *Gam zu l'tovah—this too is for good,* said Nachum Ish Gam Zu in the face of adversity.

Zman – Time. We live in an age of immediacy. Every text, every test result, every unanswered phone call can devour us with anxiety. Judaism asks us to take refuge in a broader sense of time. What feels like tragedy today may, in a week, a month, or a year, become just a bitter memory—or even a lesson that strengthens us. If we live trapped in the constant present of uncertainty, we will sink in it. Judaism teaches us to look backward—for wisdom, for stories, for resilience—and forward—with trust that the future will hold better days. We are not in a sprint; life is a marathon.

Bitachon – Trust. And finally: never forget God. Psalm 27, our companion through Elul and Tishrei, whispers: *"The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?"* Bitachon is not certainty about outcomes—it is trust in God's presence. Even in the valley of not-knowing, we are not alone. The psalmist says: even as I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will not fear, for You are with me. We walk often through the valley of anguish and doubt. There we must remember God's presence, renew our faith, and trust. Kierkegaard taught the leap of faith; Heschel taught the leap of action. Both together remind us: when uncertainty gnaws at us, we can leap into faith, and from there into action, so that doubt does not paralyze us.

A Yom Kippur Ending: Learning to Live with "Perhaps"

Yom Kippur is the most honest day of the year. We admit: we are dust and breath (Genesis 3:19). We release our grip on perfect control. We stand small, and therefore we stand true.

Let uncertainty not be our jailer but our teacher. Let it soften our certainties and temper our pride.

May we leave this day speaking a little less *"I know"* and a little more *"mi yodea—who knows?"* A little less thunder, and a little more *ulai—perhaps.* Perhaps—*ulai*—this gentler posture will make room for new beginnings, for reconciliations we could not imagine, for a future we cannot yet see. Let us set down the heavy certainties that harden us, and instead learn to live in companionship with doubt and uncertainty.

Central Lessons – In Short

- **Socrates:** Say *"I don't know."* Wisdom begins with humility.
- **Kierkegaard:** In uncertainty, take the leap of faith—and turn it into action.
- **Heisenberg:** Uncertainty is built into the cosmos—knowledge is always partial.
- **Kahneman:** Life is probabilistic—resist false certainty, learn to think in probabilities.
- **Rabbi Ami:** Push doubts aside for moments of joy.
- **Rabbi Assi:** Speak your uncertainty—naming it lightens the load.
- **Halakhic principles:**
    - *Chazakah*—presume stability until proven otherwise.
    - *Rov*—follow the majority, not the exception.
    - *Ein LaDavar Sof*—stop the endless "what if" spiral.
    - *Teiku*—accept unresolved questions; leave some knots for Elijah.
- **Anchors for the soul:**
    - *Kehillah*—community carries us.
    - *Machshavot Tovot*—positive thinking reframes doubt.

- *Zman*—time brings perspective.

- *Bitachon*—trust in God transforms uncertainty into courage.

Gmar chatimah tovah. May you be sealed for life, for courage, and for hope—hope that does not depend on certainty, but on the God who walks with us through the world of *safek* and never lets us go.