



# Celebrating Vulnerability

There is no more intense feeling of vulnerability than over the *Yamim Noraim* – The Days of Awe. The very name conjures up trepidation for the Great Days of Judgement, when the world in general, and our lives in particular, hang in the balance. The image is powerfully captured in the Mishna that says every creature passes before G-d to be judged, one at a time, and humanity's fate is determined over these days.<sup>1</sup>

This sense of vulnerability is particularly acute this year, as we embark on 5781. Each of us continues to experience the unthinkable reality of how a tiny microscopic virus has wreaked such havoc in almost every single corner of the earth. Over the last 10 months, this invisible foe has infected 30 million

people and caused almost one million deaths, with over 1,000 in Israel, particularly affecting the elderly and infirm. Waves of widespread sickness continue and the situation seems far from under control. COVID has profoundly altered our religious, social, financial and communal lives and an inescapable feeling of vulnerability hangs over us almost every day.

Vulnerability is linked to a lack of control. When we think we are in control of our lives, we feel things are stable, predictable and permanent. The moment we lose control, we begin to feel the uneasy sense of instability, unpredictability and transience. We are now vulnerable. Things can change for the worse in a moment and life, G-d forbid, can cease in an instant.

The author of the haunting *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer captures this sense of human transience and vulnerability with some powerful imagery: “like a broken shard, like dried grass, like a faded flower, like a fleeting shadow, like a passing cloud, like a breath of wind, like whirling dust, like a dream that slips away.”

All these images describe the tenuous fabric of the human condition. Grass, flowers, shadows, clouds, dust... all are susceptible to external elements that can dry them up, blow them away or make them disappear in the blink of an eye. Their predicament is volatile and unstable and their similarity to our own fragility is strikingly all too close.

Because the stark truth is that the vicissitudes of life guarantee we will

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profoundly encounter this existential reality at different times in our lives.

Somber? Most definitely. Depressing? Not at all.

The festivals of the month of Tishrei offer a strong spiritual response to this unavoidable vulnerability. Yes, we do have an inevitable fear and concern, awe and trepidation over the *Yamim Noraim* – we are being judged and our fate is being decided.

But this is only part of the story.

When we fully accept our vulnerability and life's fleetingness – and embrace them – an amazing transformation occurs. We are able to celebrate them. This is precisely the point of the immediate transition from the Days of Awe to the days of unbridled celebration on Sukkot.

No, our vulnerable state has not miraculously vanished within the space of four days. What has changed is our attitude. Having accepted vulnerability as an unavoidable reality, we are now ready to embrace and even celebrate it.

Our sense of vulnerability is certainly no less on Sukkot than it is on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur – perhaps even more so. We leave our safe and permanent homes and live for an entire week in flimsy huts and temporary booths – totally exposed to the elements, both natural and manmade. For seven days, we shake the Four Species, all of which have to be severed from the ground and detached from their permanent source of life. As each day of Sukkot passes, they all slowly wilt away in our hands. Pertinently to our

theme, the species which degenerates the quickest, the willow, forms the centerpiece of our prayers on the final day of Sukkot, Hoshanah Rabbah. And the *megillah* we read on Sukkot is Kohelet, which focuses on this very same theme of life being vulnerable and transient while celebrating its inherent joy.

What happened here? How did the very feeling which provoked such concern, anxiety and trepidation suddenly morph into joyous national celebration?

The answer is two-fold: the power of acceptance and the power of Faith.

Regarding the former, M. Scott Peck brilliantly summarized it in the opening of his bestselling book: “Life is difficult. This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult – once we truly understand and accept it – then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters.”<sup>2</sup>

In our context, after experiencing the intensity of the Days of Awe and internalizing and accepting this reality – that our vulnerable state is an inescapable component of life – we are now ready to celebrate it.

Acceptance and submission are the gateways to transformation. We are now open to the power of Faith.

In our unpredictable and transient world, there is one immutable constant – G-d. It is our unshakeable faith that everything is somehow ultimately for the good. There is Providence in

unpredictability and purpose in seeming chaos. This allows us to transform our perspective and trust that the Almighty knows what He is doing.

Such is the transcendent power of faith and belief. It is for this very reason the Zohar calls the *sukkah* “*tzila demehimenuta*,” the shadow (or shade) of faith. Nothing is more temporary and transient than a shadow. It has no existence of its own and can disappear in a moment. Nevertheless, our temporary *sukkah* is the shadow cast by the most permanent reality of life – G-d, the Creator and Sustainer of all Life. When we understand we live in His shadow and all that happens is somehow a reflection of the purposeful plan of Providence – whether we understand it or not – we are ready to transform.

So as we begin the new year, still very much in the throes of the old, we can change. With our belief that everything is ultimately for the good, we can begin to celebrate the gift of life. We can cultivate peace of mind and faith-based serenity in our unpredictable, vulnerable world.

Wishing everyone a *Chag Sameach* and a healthy, happy and joyous 5781.

<sup>1</sup> Rosh Hashanah, Chapter 1, Mishna 2.

<sup>2</sup> The Road Less Travelled, page 1.

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