As human beings, we seek to understand, predict and control. Not knowing is a profoundly discomfiting experience. We don't want to live with uncertainty. We want to know. And when we don't, that throws our minds into turmoil.

Countless studies demonstrate the causative relationship between intolerance of uncertainty and severe mental health ailments – anxiety disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, severe depression.

We crave a sense of control over our lives and our wellbeing. And Covid-19 has whisked that away.

This past year, we have all lived through the most life-changing, unforgettable, historic experience. We have seen everything we know and trust turned on its head. Every certainty, prediction, expectation has been upended. The world has been tilted off its axis. The coronavirus pandemic has changed our world in the most dramatic way, leaving no aspect of our lives untouched.

Uncertainty is everywhere. Uncertainty about our health, our jobs, about when the pandemic will end, or whether life will ever return to normal.

It’s an uncertainty that carries great danger. In a recent webinar discussion I held with the renowned Jewish historian, Rabbi Berel Wein, he noted how the society-wide uncertainty that accompanied the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic led to the rise of Fascism. Unfortunately, we’re certainly seeing polarisation and instability on the rise.

Now, as the ravages of Covid-19 continue to be felt, and the world we knew – the world we were all so certain of – becomes less solid and dependable by the day, we’re looking around for something to hold onto. Something that will give us a sense of stability in a world that is rocking. Something that will soothe our existential angst and give us relief and comfort. Is there such a thing?

I believe there is. And I believe we can find it within our tradition. It is a mitzvah – the only mitzvah – described by the Talmud (Shabbat 10b) as a gift from G-d. It is a mitzvah that helps us deal with our deepest existential questions, enables us to devise a more meaningful lifestyle, and offers us hope for a better future.

That mitzvah is, of course, Shabbat.

Shabbat is the ultimate declaration of faith – a faith we proclaim through the Kiddush we recite on Friday night. With the words of Kiddush, we testify that G-d created the world. There is a great comfort in knowing G-d is in control, especially during times like these. At a time when we’ve all felt so vulnerable, we put our faith and trust in our Creator.

Trusting G-d does not mean we believe everything is going to turn out exactly the way we want; rather, it is an understanding that everything that happens in our lives is part of G-d’s plan, and ultimately for the good; that the world, and our lives, are in His loving hands, and that He is carrying us through this. (Chazon Ish, Emunah uVitachon Ch. 2)

This deep-seated trust in G-d is symbolised by the two challot on our Shabbat table. We know that G-d provided for our people in the desert for 40 years with the manna from heaven. The two challot at each Shabbat meal remind us of the double portion of manna that fell on Friday so the Jewish people wouldn’t have to gather it for Shabbat (Shabbat 117b). They remind us that our own sustenance today is just as miraculous – it comes from Heaven even if it doesn’t fall out of the sky. On Shabbat, like our ancestors in the desert, we put down our burdens and our anxieties, and place our trust in G-d.

We may no longer be wandering the wilderness, but our future is equally unknown and unknowable, and our circumstances just as precarious. Especially now. Throughout the coronavirus crisis, we have felt our vulnerabilities acutely, from a health point of view, from a financial point of view. But each week, Shabbat instils in us the faith to meet an uncertain future with tranquility and trust.

On Shabbat, we remind ourselves that G-d created this world; that He is ultimately in control of it and that He is carrying us. When we gather around a table as a family and say the words of the Kiddush, reaffirming our belief in G-d as the Creator and in our holy mission to fulfil His commandments; when we look at the two challot on the table and remind ourselves that we are in His loving embrace and that He is looking after us and that we can trust Him to do what is ultimately for our own good; when we feel that sense of trust and...
clarity, that sense of purpose and peace of mind – we can finally address those deep existential questions.

Shabbat allows us to trust and make peace with our vulnerability, with our not knowing. It soothes our existential fears, helping us find stability amid the uncertainty and coherence in the chaos.

In the final moments of Shabbat, we have a beautiful minhag to sing the words of Psalm 23, composed by King David with a spirit prophecy (Pesachim 117a; Zohar, I 179a), words about trust in G-d: “Even when I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil for You are with me” (Tehillim 23:4).

The frightening and traumatic experiences of his life gave King David the right to compose these words, which have given comfort ever since. His profound words belong to Shabbat and all it teaches us about trusting G-d. On Saturday night, as we venture out from the security of Shabbat into the unknowns of the week, we go fortified with the trust in G-d we have learnt from the day. And so Shabbat culminates with the confident declaration of the words of the prophet Isaiah we proclaim as we introduce Havdalah: “I shall trust and not fear – for G-d is my might and my praise” (Yesha-yahu 12:2).

Let 2021 be the year we integrate trust and faith in Hashem into our very beings, as we learn to do every Shabbat.

Now is our chance to seize the gift that is Shabbat.

1 For example, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7228430/

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