Shanah tovah.

I'm not sure if you would've heard this, but I recently got married.

Three weeks ago, I stood almost exactly where I am right now under a chuppah with my now-husband Elon. And it was incredible. After seven years of officiating at almost 200 weddings, it was finally *my* turn to smash a glass, or two glasses, with Elon, and to hear the room shout out mazel tov. That night, I commented to a friend who is also a rabbi that when I heard the cheers of "mazel tov," I imagined an unbroken chain of thousands of years of my ancestors hearing those same words at *their* weddings. To which my friend replied, in an annoyingly rabbinic way, that actually "mazel tov" is a relatively modern Jewish phrase, and only maybe the last seven or eight generations would've said it at weddings.

I think he missed the point. But to settle the score, we googled it. And it turns out he was right.[1] Most scholars believe that "mazel tov" came into common Jewish parlance in the 19th or maybe 18th century. Prior to that, the phrase by itself doesn't appear in any Jewish texts. Mazal did not mean "luck" in the same way, for earlier generations. But we do find an antecedent in Talmudic Hebrew where the word "mazalot" refers to constellations of stars. Ergo, the meaning of "luck," in an astrological sense, which is to say what's written in the stars.

They might not've shouted mazel tov at wedding couples, but the Talmudic sages were well acquainted with mazalot, in the form of astrology. The Zodiac emerged as a concept in Babylonia five centuries before the earliest rabbis hit the scene, during which time many Jews began to believe in astrological predestination. But that didn't mean the rabbis approved.

In tractate Brachot[2], we read Rabbi Yochanan's terse but scathing critique of astrology: *ain* mazal l'Yisrael, he announces: There is no constellation that influences the Jewish People. Another sage, Rabbi Yehuda, comes in to bolster this point. "How do we know for sure," he asks, "that there is no astrology determining the fate of the Jewish People?" He goes on to tell a story about the moment in Genesis when God promises Abraham that his offspring will be as numerous as the stars. According to the midrash, Abraham turns to God and says, "that's impossible; that's not what I read in my horoscope." And God replies, Mah dat'cha: what, are you of your mind? In literally that tone, "you really think you can't have children because Jupiter is positioned a certain way?" And just then, God repositioned Jupiter to prove the point.

The rabbis go on like this for a while, repeating the phrase, ain mazal l'Yisrael. There is no constellation, no astrology, no fate…for the Jewish people. They tell other stories, too, about the ability of prayer to change a person's outcome, and the role of tzedakah, charity, to reorient the constellations as well. Presaging the much later text that we'll come back to repeatedly over these holidays, "that repentance, prayer and charity temper the decree [of one's judgment]." And the argument they're trying to make is clear: some people might be ovdei kochavim u'mazalot, worshippers of the stars and constellations, who believe that the course of one's life is

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[1] https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/mazel-tov/ among others.
[2] BT Brachot 156a

predetermined. But *Jews* resist that belief; insisting instead that there's always something you can do, however small, to change the outcome of your life. True as it was in Talmudic times, that belief remains at the core of Judaism today. Even if we *do* like to say mazel tov after something awesome, we don't actually believe that a person's fate is determined by the *mazalot*, or the stars.

For much of our tradition, across centuries of debate, the dominant voice has been clear: Jews resist the idea of predetermination or predestiny. Even if our natural abilities and our lifespans are beyond our control, say the rabbis, in tractate Niddah, *how* we live is up to us.[3] God might see everything, Pirkei Avot teaches, but free will is given to us nonetheless.[4] "I have set before you life and death," says God, this time earlier in Deuteronomy, "so that you may *choose* life and live."[5] Again and again, our tradition takes pains to point out that even within the confines of so much that is beyond our power, we can always make a choice, however small, towards blessing in our lives.

Now, we may on some rational level know that our lives are ours to craft. Our decisions, our commitments, our paths. But sometimes it's hard to really feel like that's true. We live *lives* that feel, at times, totally beyond our control, in a world that feels even more so. How many times have we lamented that such and such outcome is inevitable; that the worst is going to happen, and that there's simply nothing we can do about it. Sometimes that's true. And in my wise old age, I'm here to tell you that many times, it's not.

I hope it is not too saccharine or shmaltzy to share that at a different Rosh Hashanah, not so long ago, I felt absolutely certain that that chuppah under which I stood was never going to happen. I had an idea, a deeply felt sense, of precisely what I wanted, but after the end of an earlier relationship, that joyous vision felt impossibly far away. Now, I know you're out there thinking: a rabbi so charming, so handsome…give me a break. But you're my shul so of course you're gonna say that.

In truth, during the chagim of 2020, when all of us were feeling bereft in the darkest days of COVID, I did genuinely believe that there was just no way that I would experience that joy. That it was inevitable that I would remain in some state of yearning and sadness forever. And from that place, I spoke to you, and I addressed Brooklyn Jews thereafter, hiding from you my sense of certainty about my inevitable solitude.

That same human impulse – to declare something "inevitable" when we are really speaking from fear or exhaustion or shame – shows up not only in our personal lives, but also in the way we've grown accustomed to speaking about politics and the trajectory of our world. Convinced that the worst will happen, and utterly confident, of course, that we are right.

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[3] BT Niddah 16b
[4] Pirkei Avot 3:15
[5] Deuteronomy 30:19

The late psychologist and behavioral economist Daniel Kahneman described confidence as “a feeling, which reflects the coherence of the information and the cognitive ease of processing it.” Though we might think that confidence or certainty is an expression of intellect or wisdom, in his words, “declarations of high confidence mainly tell you that an individual has constructed a coherent story in his mind, not necessarily that the story is true.”[6]

And yet confidence – even about the worst possible outcome – can feel strangely comforting, and protective. If we are convinced that disaster is coming, at least that conviction can feel steadier than the instability of not knowing. And it’s for this reason, I think, that so many of the loudest voices today carry with them an aura of certainty, even about despair.

We live, now, in a cultural moment that insists that the best days are behind us, and that the future is a hellscape of fascism, inequity and climate change. This is, of course, possible, I’m sad to say. More possible than we might’ve thought a decade ago. But it isn’t as *inevitable* as our political discourse might make it seem.

Perhaps because so many norms have been broken, and people of all political perspectives have been battered by a barrage of failures over the last quarter century, narratives about inevitability have become a core part of our collective psyche. They plague us, but they also give us a protective sheen. Allowing us to feel strong in our otherwise impotent state.

We hear things like, “No matter how we vote, any hope of change is just an illusion.” Or, “who cares if we recycle? The climate has already changed beyond repair.” From a different side of the aisle, we hear that “family values have eroded so deeply that American civilization is doomed to collapse.” And from people of all political stripes, we hear, vis-a-vis Israel, that “the peace process is dead, so why should we believe that peace is ever possible between Israelis and Palestinians?”

Whether or not these views are prevalent in this synagogue, they *are* the dominant opinions in our culture right now. And none of them, not one, is *inherently* true.

These views persist because they’re easier to accept than it might be to engage in a cheshbon hanefesh, a soulful accounting…of what we can actually do to change the outcome of the many crises we now face.

The political theorist Isaiah Berlin emphasized the personal responsibility that we abdicate when we indulge the illusion of what he called, “historical inevitability.” In a 1953 lecture at the London School of Economics, before an audience with first-hand experience of the ravages of the second world war, he argued that when people understand a historical event to be inevitable, especially in hindsight, they are expressing an emotional need, independent of any fact. A need for chaos to be ordered into boxes and a need to feel somehow separate from the horrors of the world. In his words, “if the history of the world is due to the operation of identifiable forces other

[6] *Thinking Fast And Slow*, pg 147

than, and little affected by, free human wills and free choices…then there is a tendency to say that not individuals, but [larger entities], are ultimately responsible."[7]

A tendency to blame *systems* as opposed to individuals, for any number of historical events. Berlin admits that there are so many things an individual cannot change – about their circumstances, about their health, or even about their political reality. But he argues that when a person announces that any historical event is inevitable, what they are really saying is that they are anxious or scared. And instead of tending to that anxiety or fear, they deepen narratives of their own impotence, absolving themselves of any responsibility.

The cycle continues and the prophecy is self-fulfilled.

The irony of inevitability narratives is that when we think something is unavoidable, sometimes we're engaging in a different kind of avoidance. It isn't exactly fun to say that the worst possible outcome is unavoidable. But it's a lot easier to have an answer, or an explanation, in a world that is otherwise random or chaotic than it is to grapple instead with our own responsibilities or limitations.

When we find ourselves slipping into fatalism, what we're actually expressing is an emotion, or set of emotions. And I get it. Friends, the era in which we are living is brutal. It's so much scarier than anything we've faced before in our lifetimes. But before we allow ourselves to believe that all is already lost, following Berlin's analysis, we might instead tend to whatever emotions we're feeling. Nurture them. Soothe ourselves. And consider then, genuinely, what's actually possible amidst the creeping confines of political life.

Over the coming days, we will return to a refrain about all the many things we cannot control. Who shall live and shall die, who shall be at peace and who disturbed. And we will also insist that no matter how long we have *to* live, we will fill our *lives* with the best possible choices.

Though these words are the most iconic of high holiday words, right now they are especially countercultural. In a world where we feel powerless to fix the many ills before us, it is easy, even valorized, to descend into that fatalistic view that everything is preordained and so, what does it even matter what we, as individuals, do?

And it's true that by ourselves, we don't have much power to fix the myriad societal ills before us. We can't always change the conditions of our lives, and that is a bitter truth. But notwithstanding all that bitterness, we still do have a choice about how we want to live. Because how we choose to live may make all the difference, and, following the rabbis: our *choices* are not written in the stars.

Maimonides put it this way: "A person should not entertain the thesis held by total fools…that at the time of a person's creation, the Holy One of blessing decrees whether they will be righteous

[7] https://archive.org/details/historicalinevit0000unse_n1/page/26/mode/2up

or wicked. This is a lie. Each person is fit to be righteous like Moses or wicked like Jeroboam…and a person on their own initiative and decision tends to the path they choose."[8]

Lest we think Rambam is *only* speaking about the choices we make in our personal lives, remember that Moses led an entire people through the wilderness toward a Promised Land. And Jeroboam waged a civil war among our people, destroying the united Israel of David and Solomon. The implication, per Rambam, is that our choices actually *can* reverberate beyond ourselves, impacting the future of our people, as Jews and as Americans.

And those choices in our lives are what we are meant to consider as we enter the Ten Days of Awe. The premise of these days is to wake us up from the fantasy that our story is already written: to insist that repentance, prayer, and charity, actually matter, and can shape whatever comes next. Rosh Hashanah *will* inevitably come again, next year, but there's nothing inevitable about our choices between now and then. Choices to live lives of blessing and goodness despite how terrifying everything feels. And God willing, we'll have many opportunities in this next year to say mazel tov.

When we do…let us also remember the words of our rabbis. That ain mazal l'Yisrael. There is no constellation determining our fate. Our stories, collectively and individually, are actually not yet written. And just as every one of us deserves to hear the shout of mazel tov, every one of us has the choice to live a life of goodness no matter what the government, or the universe throws at us in the year to come. It is a choice. And that choice is ours. Mazel tov to that. And Shanah tovah.

[8] MT Hilchot Teshuvah 5:2