

What we're doing: instigated questions and provoked answers.

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A newsletter.



**And who by fire, who by water,
Who in the sunshine, who in the night time,
Who by high ordeal, who by common trial,
Who in your merry merry month of May,
Who by very slow decay,
And who shall I say is calling?
~["Who By Fire?"](#) Leonard Cohen (z"l)**

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

A week from now, Jews around the world will gather for Rosh Hashanah. On *Yom Ha-Din*—the Day of Judgment—we'll recite [Unetannah Tokef](#) and envision God “passing, counting, and recording the souls of all the living, decreeing a limit to each person’s days, and inscribing their final judgment ... *mi yihyeh u'mi yamut* / who shall live and who shall die, who in good time, and who by an untimely death, who by water and who by fire.” It’s an awesome and terrible image, particularly in the wake of this past month’s litany of catastrophes: Houston’s [third 500-year flood](#) since 2015, the [strongest Atlantic hurricane](#) on record, [epic wildfires in the Pacific Northwest](#), and the [most intense earthquake to strike Mexico](#) in a century. As a *New York Times* headline read last week, [“Apocalyptic Thoughts Amid Nature’s Chaos? You Could Be Forgiven.”](#)

Insurance contracts reify the themes of *Yom Ha-Din* by designating events like these “acts of God,” incidents outside human control for which no person can be held responsible. And even when we reject that theological language, we still categorize them as *natural* disasters in order to assert our lack of culpability

for their consequences. But this is really just an exercise in moral artifice. Even in “natural” disasters, human choices—both in preparation and in the breach—determine who lives and who dies.

As the *Times*' article linked above indicates, the intensity of a hurricane is only one factor in the destruction it wreaks. “Natural disasters do not happen in a vacuum”: Aging infrastructure, decrepit buildings, and poorly maintained factories trap people to die by fire. Poverty prevents people from evacuating and leaves them to die by water. And the sophistication of our meteorological models means that we have unprecedented abilities to predict and plan for these disasters. As Dr. Zenner Peppard of Fordham says, “To pretend that it’s such a tragedy is to pretend that there’s no social or collective responsibility for the outcome.”

We do not cause—nor can we prevent—the earthquakes or the hurricanes (though our carbon emissions pretty clearly exacerbate the latter). Yet there’s so much more we could do to prepare for and reinforce our communities against disaster and mitigate those disasters when they occur. And it’s disingenuous—and disastrous—to claim that all of their effects are acts of God or Nature.

The role of human agency in shaping the effects of natural disasters gets thrown into high relief in a profound 2016 [RadioLab episode entitled “Playing God.”](#) Journalist Sheri Fink reports on her research into the events at Memorial Medical Center in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina. The hospital’s medical personnel—abandoned, trapped, and without power—implemented a triage system to determine who would receive critical-but-limited medical care and ultimately decided to euthanize patients they believed could not be saved. It’s a dramatic and troubling example of the human factor in these extreme circumstances, but only a microcosm of much broader phenomena.

As the people of Texas and Florida and St. Martin and Oregon and Barbuda mourn and recover and begin to rebuild, I wonder if we ought to consider a different formulation for this year’s *unetanaħ tokef*:

Whom do we shield from the fire, and whom do we consign to it?

Whom do we protect from the rising water, and whom do we relinquish to it?

Whom do we evacuate, and whom do we abandon?

Whose lives will we write in the Sefer ha-Hayyim, and whose will be erased?

Gmar chatima tova,

Aaron



What do we fear as we approach the high holidays?

[Sh'ma Now](#) looks at Pachad Yitzhak - FEAR.

GIVING

As part of our core grants portfolio to advance the application of Jewish wisdom, we have three new grants.

The Foundation is granting \$80,640 over two years to [William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education at Jewish Theological Seminary](#) for a fellowship on educating for applied Jewish Wisdom. This grant will assist the Davidson school as it pilots a yearlong fellowship program for eight researcher-practitioners who will explore and develop innovative models of educating for practical wisdom. The fellowship aims to support fellows to be teachers and advocates for this approach to Jewish education.

The foundation also granted \$50,000 to [Mayyim Hayyim](#) to help launch Rising Tide, a national network that will enhance, leverage, and build upon the members' shared achievements to maximize the vibrancy of Jewish life through welcoming mikva'ot.

This network will support existing *mikva'ot* as well as make it easier for new communities to create a community mikveh and explore the ways that the wisdom of ritual enhances and brings meaning to people's lives.

Finally, as part of the Foundation's commitment to ensuring that all Jews and fellow travelers can access Jewish wisdom, the board approved a \$10,000 General Operating Support grant to [Keshet](#) to continue its work creating a community where LGBTQ Jews can live fully integrated lives.

In addition to the grants above which fall into our core portfolio, the foundation is engaged in a short-term initiative to advance projects that speak to the current political crisis in America, especially projects that use Jewish wisdom and/or focus on narrative change. As part of this timely commitment, the foundation is granting \$30,000 to [Asylum Arts](#) for its Artists as Change Agents program. Asylum Arts will create a cohort of approximately 30 Jewish artists who are educated about and sensitive to the needs of creating socially-engaged art. These artists will then deploy their knowledge in projects in diverse US communities, making meaningful contributions to addressing justice and inequality, and collaborating with the Social Justice sector to make all our efforts more impactful.



Learn, Study, Connect in memory of Jon Woocher

Click here to sign up to learn a page of Talmud in honor of our beloved teacher and friend

If you were a student of Jon's, a friend, a family member, a community member, a colleague, or someone who appreciated his teachings and perspectives from afar – if he touched your life in any way, we invite you to join us in [this virtual, collective learning experience](#), to be completed by *erev* Rosh Hashanah, the evening of September 20th. We are pleased to say that we have at least one learner for every *daf*, page of Talmud, but more are welcomed - and there's still plenty of time to be part of this communal endeavor.

LEARNING

From Rabbi Lee Moore, Director of Jewish and Organizational Learning

The month of [Elul](#) is upon us. For many, during this time of reflection before we hit Rosh Hashana each day is a new opportunity for self-awareness. Some communities, like GatherDC, use [Elul writing prompts](#) for this purpose. Some may wait until Rosh Hashana and participate in [Reboot's 10 days of reflective questions, 10Q](#). I always take some time to page back through my hand-written day-planner to let the year's images and projects wash over me, with a mind toward who I may need to forgive or ask forgiveness from (if that happens to be you, please get in touch with

me!).

Here at LKFLT, this Elul we are also collectively learning Masechet Berachot in honor of our [recently departed colleague Jonathan Woocher](#). I chose to learn *Daf 19*, in part because I noticed that a friend had also chosen that page. Perhaps I could learn some of it with her? After weeks of schedule-dancing, we finally found a time and dove into the text together using [Sefaria](#) and FaceTime.

In the course of a longer discussion that wonders to what extent the deceased might be able to communicate with each other (or might understand what is said about them by the living), one particular teaching stood out to us from the school of Rabbi Yishmael. 'If you saw a scholar transgress a prohibition at night, do not think badly of him during the day; perhaps he has repented.' When we came upon this teaching, my friend immediately shifted her tone and exclaimed, 'I LOVE this!'

There is a Jewish sensibility referred to as [dan l'khaf zechut](#), which essentially means 'try to always give the benefit of the doubt.' Upon seeing a person 'do something wrong' – how easy it can be to judge them negatively. What if we decided we would always err on the side of judging favorably? Radical! How might that make a difference in our mental state? How much of our energy we waste carrying around judgements of others, and yet it can be so hard to break that habit.

We loved the conversation more when we saw that the Talmud text takes the idea even farther. It critiques the phrase 'perhaps he has repented' by asking, why say 'perhaps'? *Surely* that person understood that they made a mistake and did something about it (although in a case where that person damaged someone else's property, it warns, don't be so quick to assume the best, as they may still owe damages).

The truth is, we never know what it is like to walk in another person's shoes until we try very hard to do so. And even still, we all make mistakes. This attitude of being accepting to other's foibles – and our own- assuming that we all have the best of intentions ... that is the essence of Elul's work.

May we be able to forgive each other for the wrongs we have seen transpire this past year, and may we continue the hard work of training ourselves to carry this attitude with us always and transform our habits of reactivity into a softer acceptance of others' foibles and our own.

If you would still like to participate in our virtual siyyum for Jon by reading a page of Talmud before Rosh Hashana, [click here](#).

SHARING

[TODAY IS CHARACTER DAY!!!](#) Check out [the premiere of 30,000 Days](#), a new film from Tiffany Shlain and Sawyer Steele - and all their other resources.

Even in a hyperactive news cycle, the impact of Charlottesville is hard to overstate - the Jewish Social Justice Roundtable has an important [roundup of responses](#) from the Jewish Social Justice community. We particularly appreciated [the blessing T'ruah offered](#), for our country in these times.

After Labor Day, summer is officially over, but [this playlist](#) of Jewish songs is still delightful.

Early bird pricing is over, but [this course](#) in organizing within the Jewish community - [Don't Kvetch, Organize!](#) - is still a great opportunity! Judaism is a radical tradition, and the ability to draw on that wisdom can make you a greater force for justice!

ICYMI - our President, Aaron Dorfman, was featured as a moderator on [episode 5](#) of OLAM's [Global Torah Podcast](#). Add both available seasons to your playlist!

What else should we be sharing?

[*Click here to send us your recommendations!*](#)



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