The song with which I closed the Amidah is one that we sing throughout the season of repentance: *"Hashiveinu hashem elecha v'nashuva, chadesh yameinu k'kedem."* "Return us, to You, Hashem, and we will return. Renew our days as before." It feels like a very appropriate song for this season, not only the minor key tune, cycling back on itself, full of longing, but the words themselves, and their play on the verb "lashuv," "to return,", which is the same root as the word, *teshuvah*, which we more often translate as "repentance." We ask Hashem to return us, whatever that means, so that we may return ourselves, hoping for a time when we will return to how things were, "k'kedem", "as before."

The verse does not define what "before" is. Taken out of context, it could mean anything from, "before our current troubles," to "Before humanity was banished from the garden of Eden," as Eden itself is referred to in some places as "kedem." Certainly, the wish to return to a better time, now gone but still longed for, is one that many of us can relate to in these days of pandemic. It's one that many of us implicitly express whenever we say something like, "when things return to normal…"

How many of us have yearned in some way, especially in these past six months, to return to "before"? We long, perhaps, not only for a time before we had to maintain physical distance from each other and hold services on the most sacred days of our year in front of a screen, but also for an imagined time when each individual household didn't have to scramble to meet all of its own logistical needs, when our politics were less polarized, a time when many of us might have felt more faith in public institutions - even if that time never existed for so many in our society..

Such a yearning for before, on the part of those who were comfortable and are now forced into discomfort, is completely normal. Personally, as someone who was pretty comfortable with my meaningful, full-time job, my house, my health insurance and my children in a decent day-care, part of me so longs to return to "before" – the immediate "before," of January or February 2020, even with is vast and cruel inequalities. I'd settle for late August! I know I am not the only one.

And I get – *we* get – to acknowledge that longing, to express our yearning to go back to a time that was, if not better, one in which we were more innocent and less aware of immanent destruction. Because the world as we know has become more physically isolated and many of us are living in a fog of disorientation. And when the world as we knew it becomes utterly bewildering, the ambiguous grief over lost certainties, lost routines, lost connections, is *real.*

In fact, the origins of this line, *"Hashiveinu hashem elecha v'nashuva, chadesh yameinu k'kedem,'* come from a context in which our own ancestors were utterly grieving and disoriented.

Though we rightly associate these words with the Days of Awe, and their themes of repentance and renewal, the text is from *Eicha,* the book of Lamentations, which we read every year on *Tisha b'Av*, the Ninth of Av, the most mournful day of the Jewish calendar, commemorating the destruction of two sacred Temples in Jerusalem, one is 586 b.c.e; one in 70 ce, and all of the related calamities of our people: defeat, subjugation, death, exile and displacement. After 5 chapters expressing the agony, rage, guilt and grief of that defeat and exile, *Eicha* closes with that plea: *Hashiveinu Hashem elecha v'nashuva, chadesh yameinu k'kedem. Return us to You, Hashem, and we will return. Renew our days as before.*

In that context, it is clear that "before" means "before the temple was destroyed and we were exiled." Utterly devastated and ruined, in a moment when the center of their civilization had quite literally been obliterated, our ancestors articulated this plea.

But that longing is complicated by the acknowledgment, within the text of *Eicha* itself, that even before the destruction, society had become corrupt to the point that destruction was all but inevitable: As verse 2:14 says, "Your seers prophesied to you Delusion and folly. They did not expose your iniquity so as to restore your fortunes, but prophesied to you oracles of delusion and deception." Or Chapter 5, verse 7: "Our fathers sinned and are no more; And we must bear their guilt."

The rabbis of the Talmud lived in the early generations after the second destruction, and they elaborated further on how this had come about. Famously, in Masechet Yoma, page 9b, they teach: **Due to what** reason **was** the **First Temple destroyed? due to three matters** there: **Idol worship, forbidden sexual relations, and bloodshed.**...

However, during **the Second Temple**, people **engaged in Torah**, **mitzvot, and acts of kindness,** so **why was** it **destroyed? Due to** the fact **that there was wanton hatred**. This comes **to teach you that wanton hatred is equivalent to the three** severe **transgressions: Idol worship, forbidden sexual relations and bloodshed.**

And on page 119b of Masechet Shabbat, 9 different rabbis offer proofs for their various reasons that the Temple was destroyed. I will not articulate any of them now. The important thing to note is that *not one* of the rabbis explained the destruction in military terms. None of them said: "The Babylonian and Roman armies were just stronger than ours, and we never could have prevailed."

Call it cruel, perhaps, but the rabbis, in their generations of exile, facing what *they could not have known would be 2000 years of exile*, were committed to telling a story that cast themselves and the Jewish people as agents of their own history. They told these stories to assert that *our behavior matters*, and to offer guidance as to how we could live better going forward, how to create a more unified and, in their minds *moral* community than what had been lost.

The Talmud includes beautiful stories of the celebrations in the Temple, but the rabbis also told how the people had gone astray. And in so doing, they hinted at how to learn from those mistakes in order to build a future, even in exile, even with civilization as their ancestors had known it irrevocably gone.

This is what we ultimately must do with our current mourning. Tell the story about whence we have come, in a way that points the direction forward.

So many of us mourn a time of lost ease. *And* there is much we must acknowledge about that time: We know that as this pandemic has devastated the world and our country to even greater extent – and the poor and people of color to the greatest extent of all – it has exposed the iniquity of our society much as destruction and exile exposed the iniquity of ancient Jerusalem. I know that even if we could go back to before things shut down in March, it would be a meaningless, even cruel aspiration – go back to a time when vast numbers of people were exhausted by multiple low-wage jobs without health insurance, but it wasn't actually killing them at a pace we could notice? Go back to hundreds of thousands suffering educational inequity, but at least in their brick-and-mortar school buildings? Or go back to a time when police murdered black men without

video documentation, and therefore without so much outrage… a time when only those who lived in poor areas had to breathe toxic air. . .

As natural as it is for those who were comfortable to yearn for such a "before," this moment demands a greater moral imagination from all of us.

We do not stay in *Lamentations.* It is a phase that we can and must embrace, and move through – the season of mourning passes. And we come to the season of *teshuvah.*

Here we are.

In this season of *teshuvah*, this is our task: to renew our days not as *before,* but with *forward movement*. My colleague, David Basior, the rabbi of Kadima in Seattle, pointed out to me a few weeks ago that "kedem," of "before" shares the same root as the name of his synagogue, Kadima – "forward," "onward, "adelante!"

Our task is to seek a renewal *Kadima:* To move forward, understanding that the past is gone but the future is not yet written: on this day nothing is inevitable.

We may be living in a season of renewal. Judith Hankin shared last year a quote by Cynthia Occelli, which I love: "For a seed to achieve its greatest expression, it must come completely undone. The shell cracks, its insides come out and everything changes. To someone who doesn't understand growth, it would look like complete destruction."

We may be living in a moment when the seeds of a better, more just society are germinating. All of these structures collapsing around us may in fact be the building ground for something better.

And we may be living at a time of collapse. The fires and ash of last week might be a wake up call, but they might just be the beginning of an ever-scarier normal. The world my children grow up in may be a world in which clean air and clean water are distant historical memories, and disease, flood and fire part of day-to-day year-to-year reality. It may be that we are witnessing the last days of democracy, the end of a common sense of humanity. It may be a long time before anything is built out of the rubble.

More likely, of course, is the continuation of our current disorienting reality, with its sometimes apocalyptic seeming moments of trauma, side-by-side with stunning displays of humanity and interspersed with the sweetness of normal human interaction, even as more and more of us struggle to meet our basic needs, even as more and more land burns.

I share these catastrophic fantasies not to cause us to spin but because I am sure I am not the only one with catastrophic fantasies. The point is that we are not alone. We are not alone in space or in time. And whether we witness renewal, collapse, or the far more likely unpredictable combination of the two, our task, like our rabbinic ancestors, is to understand ourselves as agents in history, with an agency that is not dependent on the outcomes. The rabbis were determined to build a better society *even in exile*. They understood that even with the entire structure collapsed, it was their sacred duty to envision the society that they could and should be. They knew that doing better was no guarantee that things would become better for them – but that the only thing we absolutely have the power to make better is *us*. And we have that power no matter what structures are collapsing around us.

That was the rabbis' genius. And we are their spiritual inheritors.

We do not know! In many ways this entire holiday is about not knowing – we do not know who shall live and who shall die. We do not know what rewards and what punishments await.

We are called to balance on the razor edge between oblivious optimism and the easy, cynicism of despair, both of which absolve from any moral agency. How we live in this world has an impact, our rabbis taught. And we do not know what it will be.

But we are equipped to face the acute discomfort of our not-knowing together.

Recently, Rabbi Solomon, our new rabbi educator, shared with me a book by S. Y Agnon, that included this story, attributed to Rabbi Hayyim of Zans. I've made it slightly more egalitarian in my retelling:

"A man had been wandering about in a forest for several days, not knowing which was the right way out. Suddenly, he saw a woman approaching him. His heart was filled with joy. 'Now I shall certainly find out which is the right way,' he thought to himself. When they neared one another, he asked the woman, 'Sister, tell me which is the right way. I have been wandering about in this forest for several days.'

Said she to him, "Brother, I do not know the way out either. For I too have been wandering about here for many, many days. But *this* I can tell you: do not take the way I have been taking, for that will lead you astray. And now let us look for a new way out together."

We are all figuring this out together. We are stumbling through this. We know we have been walking well-worn trails that have not led us to a good place. Let's not strive to go back.

As author Sonya Renee Taylor recently wrote, "We will not go back to normal. Normal never was. Our pre-corona existence was not normal other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate and lack. We should not long to return, my friends. We are being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment. One that fits all of humanity and nature."

We are given an opportunity, with a new year, a new imagination. Of course, we are tired. We realize that we are in the wilderness, we are disoriented, and it is not even clear what the destination should be. We may find a way out soon, or perhaps our task is to learn to inhabit this wilderness indefinitely. But look to each other. Look to God. Look to the earth that precedes us and will outlast us. Look to our ancestors and our children. We bring all of our mistakes and all of our learning. We bring all of our inherited and earned wisdom, and all of our visions of what might yet be. It is a formidable set of tools. Let us step forward into the unknown, together.

Shana tova.