

# Believing We Can Do Better

August 31, 2021 (High Holidays)

With feelings of both hope and sadness, I share this message in anticipation of the Days of Awe. My sadness stems from the recognition of how the pandemic has tested each of us in unimagined ways. So many sustained losses of life and livelihood, as well as a diminution of social connections and sense of security. Now, after a brief moment of unbridled optimism, the path forward is clouded by a hovering uncertainty.

Yet, I am hopeful, in large part because of the many displays of strength and resilience we have witnessed this past year. It is this inner resolve, which we have channeled both as individuals and in community, that we can continue to draw upon in the year ahead. My hope is amplified further by my understanding of the *teshuvah* that we embark on at this time of year, for *teshuvah* calls upon us to direct our resolve toward doing better in the year ahead. While this process can easily lead to feelings of despair for the many things over which we have little control, and a sense of inadequacy about our inability to meet the manifold challenges of our times, embedded in the process of *teshuvah* is also the belief that we can improve.

The disciples of Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav (1772-1810) ascribed to him the following exhortation to *teshuvah* (literally, “return”), which sounds so simple that we can miss the deep and encouraging truth that it expresses: “If you believe that you have the power to spoil things, then you must *also* believe that you can repair them.” (In Hebrew, it is just eight words!) This teaching not only prods us, but also, and especially, gives us hope, and a path not just to return but to growth and progress.

During the *Yamim Noraim*, as we confront our shortcomings, we do so with humility, but also out of a hope that we have the capacity to mitigate damages and even to mend them. When have we carelessly caused others pain by not imagining ourselves in their shoes? When might we have expressed criticism of our nation’s, or Israel’s, policies, in ways that failed to reflect our abiding love for those countries? How frequently do we exacerbate the planetary climate crisis by wastefulness and neglect of responsible practices? We ask these hard questions not to berate ourselves but to approach the self-awareness that will fuel true *teshuvah*, a substantive improvement in ourselves and in the world around us.

Standing on the cusp of the new year, we expectantly hope to return to Jewish worship in physical community, to Jewish study face to face with one another, and to the acts of kindness and generosity that physical presence makes more powerful. We pray that this return will be possible, and that we will exercise patience with the health and safety measures that resonate with our prayers for life, livelihood, good health, and more.

This is also the year in which JTS's beautiful new campus officially opens. My chancellorship—the eighth in JTS history—will be formally inaugurated at the end of March. And during the spring semester, JTS looks forward to hosting events of many kinds to draw people to our campus, its beautiful spaces and library, and most importantly, to the intellectual, religious, artistic, and cultural riches that will be highlighted in the programming now planned. May we see each other at such festive gatherings in joy and good health, and may 5782 usher in a period of renewal for each of us and for our world at large.

The traditional prayer that I leave you with almost seems to have been written with this year in mind: “May the curses of the old year be at an end and may the blessings of the new year begin.” May that be God’s will and ours.

*Shanah tovah umtukah,*