

**Kol Nidre Sermon: Terrible, Thanks for Asking
Rabbi Deborah Zuker, 2021, large tent 6:30pm**

Those who know me well will tell you I'm a podcast junky. I like podcasts because they're kind of retro – it's a radio program after all – but you can listen whenever you want, and there are so many on so many topics. And, unlike tv, they leave your hands and eyes free to do other things like sauté onions or fold laundry.

I recently started listening to a podcast called "Terrible, Thanks for Asking". The concept is a simple one: when someone asks "how are you?", we are conditioned to answer "fine" even when we are not. Even when the real answer is "Terrible, Thanks for Asking."

Yom Kippur is a time to stop and reflect, on big things, our life trajectory, our role in our family, our responsibilities to community and culture. A time to take our internal temperature, and set our internal compass: where do we want to go in the year to come? What issues are on our minds? How are things going?

If there is ever a day for honest self-scrutiny, for radical truth, and for recognizing painful realities, it's today.

Today we ask hard questions. Even if they have hard answers. Hard questions like "How are you?"

How am I, right now you ask? I'm terrible, thanks for asking.

Terrible. Honestly. Things are terrible right now. Between the environmental crisis, partisan politics, patriarchy, white supremacy, economic inequality, endemic hatred, not to mention the global pandemic.... it's yeah, pretty terrible.

I honestly rarely remember feeling as hopeless as I have lately.

The world is a disaster. Everything is on fire, or submerged under water. And we're just going about our days, vaguely aware of it, glad it's not us under water this week. It feels like we are blissfully fiddling on this Titanic of a planet that is about to be destroyed beyond repair.

Just to be clear, "the planet" is not at risk. The "environment" will not be destroyed. The environment, the earth, has been through worse and will go through worse, and will still be here long beyond this short human blip in primordial time.

What is at risk is OUR ability to LIVE on this planet. I don't think the billionaires will be able to colonize Mars in time...What is at risk is humanity. It's not some misguided love for sea turtles and baby seals, it's our species' survival.

One podcast I listened to recently, drove home the reality that it's already too late – we missed the window to avert real damage. We had an opportunity, had we done what we knew we should have, 30 or 40 years ago. Right around when I was learning about acid rain in middle school.

There has been a lot of different “branding” of the environmental catastrophe we continue to create. In my lifetime I can remember “acid rain” and “the hole in the ozone layer.” We had “the greenhouse effect,” and we calculated our “carbon footprint,” it was “global warming,” now it's “climate change”...

None of that worked. We have remained more than complacent but COMPLICIT in all this destruction.

And now come the consequences. Had we hopped to in the 80's, we could have perhaps executed an orderly transition away from fossil fuels. But now the transition will not be orderly. We will suffer, we will lose many human lives because of our collective folly.

And it is not happening later, it is happening now. The future is now, folks.

I fear for my children – because we just keep destroying the planet on their credit card, and expecting them to deal with it. Well, I'm sorry, but that's what my parents did, and it was a terrible idea.

So what advice do I have for us to fix the environment? I have noblessed idea. But whatever it is, it's going to be BOLD, big, huge. A Change we can't even imagine right now. That is what it will take. I think we need to gird ourselves for that, I think we need to welcome that.

We need to listen to the young people – they're passionate, they have skin in the game, they have ideas, they have been leading on this issue for years. Their wisdom is ignored, because they can't vote.

But you can vote – and you should. That's probably also a good thing to do.

That's the best I can do...

In addition to the planet being a mess, our society is also a mess. We have so many self-inflicted wounds as a culture, so much damage we do to ourselves.

There are deeply stupid things that make us crazy. Things that we bring on ourselves – like the way we think ‘being busy’ is what we have to be all the time – and talk about it like it's a contest.

And other deeply stupid things that we live with, and sometimes even fail to question, that when I think about it make me not only feel terrible but also furious...just one small example

I was on a video call the other day with two girlfriends, because the future is now, and we were talking about how we are going to get our kids to school and back....the times of the different drop-offs didn't line up, and the aftercare locations were in question, 'can I get there in time from work'...and I shouted "WAIT!!! Why on earth is it like this? Why does school end two hours before work? Look how much work this is making for us! What a waste of our energy..."

Why are we still organizing our kids' lives on a farming calendar – it is absurd, and ask any working parent and they'll tell you it sucks the life out of them.

And that's just one example. So many other systems we've created that add extra struggle to our lives, bureaucracy, so many things that frustrate us every day...

This bucket of self-inflicted societal wounds includes other terrible things: partisanship, fake news, conspiracy theories, anti-vaxxers, you name it.

What will it take to fix all this? Search me. But again – I am thinking BIG. HUGE. Let's fix all this. It is within our power.

The pandemic, though, is next level. This is the kind of challenge we never expected – except to the extent that it's connected to how we destroy the environment.

The pandemic is another big "terrible thanks for asking"

Our community, our Jewish way of living, has centered around gathering for 2000 years. We are a "Beit kKnesset" - a House of Gathering

After the destruction of the Temple, the brilliant rabbis of Yavneh re-organized our entire religious system...and prayer, **communal prayer**, festive family celebrations, welcoming guests to your table - this was the path forward they created! The table, in fact, is the new stand-in for the altar!! That is the centrality of communal celebration for Shabbats and holidays. The Rabbis taught Torah through circles of discipleship...literal gatherings of students at the feet of teachers.

Now, don't get me wrong, our community – both KBI specifically and the Jewish world more broadly – has been incredibly creative, responsive, and resilient in the face of these challenges. Gut...will the way we 'used to do things' ever come back? When will we be able to kiss the Torah as it parades around the shul again? When will we be able to test the capacity of our dining rooms with huge Seders again?

Will it ever come back? How long? 2 years? 5 years? A generation?

How Bold will we need to be on this front? How much will the Judaism we love change? How much change is good? How much change strips away what we love?

So yeah, things are terrible
We are giving a ruined earth, with corrupt values and systems, to our children.

And we are not doing enough to make it better. We are so stuck in our ways, when what we really need is huge, bold, change on a massive scale.

But.

“Thanks for Asking” – “I’m Terrible, but Thanks for Asking.”

The other half of the sentence when you ask me how I am and I answer you honestly.

Thank you for asking. Thank you for hearing me. Thank you for being there.
Talking about it helps. Recognizing that other people are feeling the same things helps.

Next week during Sukkot we read the book of Kohelet – Ecclesiastes – who could definitely be accused of answering “terrible, thanks for asking” about most things...

He writes with a deep melancholy about the pointlessness of life, everything is empty, substanceless, vanity of vanities. The sadness itself is predictable, not even a surprise anymore for him.

The consolation that Kohelet finds, though, is having someone to go through it all with. Having companionship, someone to ask him how he’s doing.

In my preparations for Yom Kippur I came across a prayer written by Rabbi Emily Cohen. It recasts the most iconic prayer of Yom Kippur morning– the Unetana Tokef prayer that is recited as part of Mussaf tomorrow – “who shall live and who shall die.”

Her rendition is a contemporary, and provocative, meditation on how to engage with our overwhelmingly broken world. How not to drown in the misery as we seek to create justice:

On Rosh Hashanah we write our intentions and on Yom Kippur we seal our hopes. Who shall live and who shall die? These are the questions we ask ourselves during these holiest of days. We know the answer.

*All of us live, and all of us shall die. And while we live?
Who will cherish their time, and who will idly watch it tick by?
Who will weep with hopelessness and who will ignite the fires of justice?
Who will choose their battles wisely and who will cease to treat the other as fully human?
Who will feed their creative soul and who will thirst for inspiration?
Whose foundations will shake into a new paradigm and whose dreams will waste away?
Who will be stifled by systemic oppression and who will pelt others with microaggressions?
Who will find calm and who will be restless
Who will be at peace and who in misery
Who will breathe easy and who will gasp for every sip of air
Who will hide themselves from the world and who will show their truest face?
Who will be shamed and who will find power?
This year, may we return to self. May we raise our voices when it matters. May our offerings be in pursuit of justice. May we meet the bad with all of the good we can muster.*

We...We go through this together...This is maybe the only good news I have for you: we can be there for each other. We can help each other.

When I'm feeling low, you can lift me up, and vice versa. We can partner together in facing all of these challenges.

But we can't do it unless we are honest.
That is my, honest, "terrible, thanks for asking" for today.
I'd love to know how you're doing....