

“Numbers and nightmares have news value.
A crime has occurred, accusing [us] all.
The world needs a wash and a week’s rest.
History tells more often than not of wickedness with will,
wisdom [being] but an interjection without a verb.”¹

While scholars and friends alike panned W.H. Auden’s last effort at long form poetry, and even paid literary critics struggle to make it through his allusive, allegorical, and surreal work, the title of this poem lives well beyond its characters. You might not relate to Malin or Quant, Rosetta or Emble — their lives, their hopes, their monologues on the human condition — but it certainly feels like we, too, are living in an Age of Anxiety:

Who by fire and who by water: these traditional words of the Yamim Nora’im seem to be written for our times as our countrymen must figure out how to rebuild and recover from increasingly devastating wildfires and floods that our actions exacerbate.

Social security numbers, driver’s licenses, birthdays, and other personal information were stolen from some 143 million Americans who will have to guard against identity theft for the remainder of their lives;

Ongoing nuclear and missile tests by an isolated, impoverished, and increasingly desperate North Korea have everyone feeling on edge.

All this from the month of September. To step back further, to identify a forest instead of its trees, is to realize that our Age of Anxiety is marked not by **individuals** experiencing anxiety but rather an entire **society** collectively experiencing anxiety. “Anxiety is not so much a fear of a specific thing but a fear of everything, an unnamable dread about the future,”² David Brooks wrote for the New York Times.

In our Age of Anxiety, too many people worry every day about whether they are one major medical event without comprehensive health insurance, one lost manufacturing job, one mental health crisis with nowhere to turn away from living on the streets.

In our Age of Anxiety, minority groups — Jews and Blacks, Muslims and Latinos — fear the radical formerly-fringe groups now empowered to take to American cities and streets.

In our Age of Anxiety, “our country is being transformed by complex forces like changing demographics and technological disruption.” It feels to most everyone — right, left, and center — that the moral fabric of our society is crumbling and that American Dream itself is faltering. Some of us may be more prosperous and successful than the generation before us, but we feel collectively pessimistic that the same will be true for our children. And this is before we take into account the condition of physical world we will bequeath to them. We are living, as Auden writes, in an Age of Anxiety.

Yet Auden wrote this epic poem in 1947.

“Ein chadash tachat hashemesh,” we read in the Book of Ecclesiastes: “there is nothing new under the sun.” Living in an age of anxiety, while it feels particularly acute to us this Rosh

¹ Auden, W.H. The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue. Page 15.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/15/opinion/fanaticism-white-nationalists-charlottesville.html?mcubz=0>

Hashanah, is actually an age old problem. Tonight I would like to rely on a trusted commentator to suggest an ancient solution to our contemporary twist on this age old problem. And by commentator I don't mean David Brooks, or Wolf Blitzer, or Chuck Todd — though God knows I would struggle to process each week without these Members Of The Tribe — but rather the last commentator still universally respected throughout the Jewish world.

He wrote in 1198. In a treatise on health in response to the feelings of melancholy, evil thoughts, desire for solitude, foreboding of death — that is to say: anxiety — of Egyptian sultan Afdal Nur al-Din Ali, Rabbi Moses ben Maimon offers a prescription we need to hear even now. Perhaps especially now: “Here is a very good thing to reflect upon,” Maimonides writes.³ “By it, bad thoughts, worries, and griefs are diminished....Namely, whenever a man [person] thinks about something distressing, and worry, grief, or sadness crop up, it can be due only to one of two things: either he is [they are] thinking about a matter that has already taken place....[or] about something that is expected to come to pass in the future.”

There is no use crying over spilt milk, Maimonides suggests. Somewhat insensitively, he suggests that our feelings of grief over losing money or other events that don't go our way and feelings of grief about being a person rather than a planet are equally worthless: our **feelings** are unlikely to change these situations. A similar logic holds about the future. Events of the future may occur or they may not occur; our feelings of grief and sadness should expected events come to pass should be tempered by our potential elation and joy should they not. You don't know the future, Maimonides seems to tell us, and you can't change the past. Our anxiety, then, cannot be overcome while bemoaning a past that can never be reclaimed nor fretting over an uncertain future but by making strategic, life-enriching choices in the here and now.

Choice number one, I would propose, to fight against our age of anxiety is to lean sideways. To lean in, to watch even more of the news that is giving you an ulcer or to continue screaming past individuals who infuriate you will only exacerbate the problem. Our minds have a habit of disproportionately tuning into negative information — and our subconsciouses have a habit of assuming the worst — so when heightened anxiety makes us fear disaster around every corner, leaning further in will only make it worse. Yet I beg you not to disengage. To lean out, to say “I just can't pay attention anymore,” is to claim that you are unmoved by and removed from the crushing anxiety faced by your neighbors. I promise you that children, teens, and young adults who know no other country and are now hanging by a thread with the removal of DACA protections aren't averting their eyes from the Twitter feed that determines their fate; nor are the out-and-proud transgender soldiers putting their lives on the line for the American values which they are now told exclude them. They're not turning away, and neither should you.

To over-engage is to lose perspective; to under-engage is to *tifrosh min hatzibur*, to separate yourself from your community. So lean sideways. Invest your time, your resources, your cognitive energies in the parts of your identity and your community that can benefit from your efforts. Realizing you can make a difference somewhere, and you **can**, is to regain a feeling of control, to force the waves around you rather than letting them pull you under. Lean sideways, engage differently, and begin to conquer the anxiety of our age.

Choice number two as we seek to better navigate our Age of Anxiety must be to engage social media differently. No single factor of 21st century life exacerbates our anxiety like social media. Let me highlight just two examples:

³ Maimon, Moses ben. Regimen of Health. 1198.

First, scanning Facebook or Instagram during every free moment offers us but glimpses into the so-carefully-curated as to seem imaginary lives of people whom we then mistakenly idolize. We don't think about what people aren't posting: pictures of their college rejection letters, their sensible lunch salad, or the pants that no longer fit; and so we feel isolated, lonely, and inferior when we have these experiences in the real world.

Second, and perhaps more pressing this Rosh Hashanah, is the politicization of our social media. Interwoven among cat videos and everyone's vacation pictures are scores of opinion pieces designed to stoke our anxiety. At their best, these articles have turned our social media feeds into self-reinforcing echo chambers that have removed constructive disagreement from our lives. At their worst, these articles contain click-bait headlines that perpetuate falsehoods and drivel. Fake news **is** a real thing; I'm not talking about CNN or MSNBC or FOXNews or ABC/CBS/NBC or any actual journalists that are doing vital work for our democracy and who simply highlight inconvenient truths you don't like but rather internet sites set up by foreign governments for the purpose of swaying our opinions or those run by unscrupulous individuals looking to make a buck off of our fears.

We must engage differently. Strive to be content creators, or at least curators, rather than bot-like reactionaries. And when you do share an article you found meaningful, whether electronically or in person, cite your source. The opinions you share become your opinions; the stories you post become a reflection of you. While we haven't figured out how to appropriately remunerate journalists in the digital age, we can at least grant them the recognition that comes with quoting them by name. By using those names, by ensuring a journalistic professional rather than a hacker is providing you with the information you are perpetuating, we also have an additional tool for determining veracity. And please, keep posting pictures of the joyous occasions in your life. We need to celebrate everything we can in this age of anxiety.

Finally, let me offer one last strategic choice you might make to alleviate feelings of anxiety in this age of anxiety. The grind of every day life wears us down to the point we succumb to our basest fears more often than we embrace our highest hopes. To reconnect with the Jewish vision of what this world could be — through study, through prayer, through standing shoulder to shoulder with individuals who share your core values — is to reclaim deep roots that will anchor you during any storm. We reaffirm words of prayer each Shabbat not because God is so vain as to need our constant affirmation but because we need God's constancy. We need to continually hear that all of humanity, regardless of race, color, or creed is created in the image of God and thus little less than divine. We need constant reminders that we have an obligation to the widow, the orphan, and the uprooted because we **have** walked a mile in their shoes; We need to know that the ideal of peace is ultimately possible.

From our Shabbat prayerbook:

“May the door of this synagogue be wide enough to receive all who hunger for love, all who are lonely for friendship.

May it welcome all who have cares to unburden, thanks to express, hopes to nurture.

May the door of this synagogue be narrow enough to shut out pettiness and pride, envy and enmity.

May its threshold be no stumbling block to young or straying feet.

May it be too high to admit complacency, selfishness and harshness.

May this synagogue be, for all who enter, the doorway to a richer and more meaningful life.”⁴

“Ein chadash tachat hashemesh,” we read in the Book of Ecclesiastes: “there is nothing new under the sun.” We are living in an age of anxiety, and while it feels particularly acute to us this Rosh Hashanah, it is actually an age old problem. Maimonides’ prescription when the Sultan of Egypt was facing just such anxiety in 1198 remains poignant today. Our anxiety cannot be overcome while bemoaning a past that can never be reclaimed nor fretting over an uncertain future but only by making strategic, life-enriching choices in the here and now. Lean sideways, investing in the parts of your identity and your community that **will** benefit from your efforts. Engage differently with social media. Rely on your sacred community to reaffirm your core values in this tempest.

Despite our fears, we will stand here together next year. May we be standing proud, able to answer with clear conscience that we responded to life’s challenges in moral ways despite our fear. With words of Auden’s poem I began, and with them I shall conclude:

Wonder warm you with its wisdom now,
Genial joy rejuvenate your days,
A light of self-translation,
A blessed interior brightness,
Animate also your object world
Till its pure profiles appear again.⁵

Ken Yehi Ratzon — May this be God’s will.

⁴ Mishkan Tefilah, Page 6.

⁵ Auden, Page 97.