

After standing in line to board a late-arriving train in the mid-day summer heat, passengers were finally able to make their way to their seats. An elderly Jewish man harrumphed down into his chair with crumpled hat on his lap. “Oy, it is so hot. Oy, it’s so hot. Ooooyyy, it’s hot. Ooooooyyyyyy.” Fellow passengers up and down the train were sympathetic to his kvetch — at least at first — but soon grew weary of his spirited complaint. “Oy, it is so hot. Oy, it’s so hot. Oy, it’s hot.”

I suspect we have all had experiences like the man on the train. Not just being stuck in physically-uncomfortable situations that distort the magnitude of our suffering, though some may be feeling that way right now, but becoming stuck in the purgatorial loop of our own minds. We human beings excel as catastrophists, frequently indulging our innate sense that the world more commonly moves from bad to worse rather than from bad to better.

The anecdotal evidence before us certainly seems to confirm our suspicions: smoke-filled apocalyptic skies, an increasingly visible population of people experiencing homelessness, ongoing incidents of gun violence, eroding norms of civil society. And “whether or not the world really is getting worse, the nature of the news will interact with the nature of cognition to make us think that it is. News is about things that happen, not things that don’t happen”...and good things tend to take time, “unfold(ing) out of sync with the news cycle.¹” Our worst suspicious about the world are reaffirmed daily.

Psychologists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman refer to this confirmation bias as the Availability Heuristic. “People estimate the probability of an event...by the ease with which instances come to mind,” they say. Sometimes this is a serviceable rule of thumb. “You really are on solid ground in guessing that pigeons are more common in [Seattle] cities than orioles, even though you are drawing on your memory of encountering them rather than on (reading) a bird census.²” But when social media and television intervene, leaving us with recent, vivid, gory, distinctive, upsetting examples of a thing halfway around the world? We overestimate its likelihood in our lives. It’s the information right in front of us...and it makes us feel like we are doomed, that we are existentially incapable of making progress.

“Oy, it is so hot. Oy, it’s hot. Ooooyyy,” griped the old man on the train. Commiserative chuckling had long ago turned to animus from many of his fellow passengers. “Won’t he ever stop,” many began to wonder in their minds and a few even grumbled aloud. “Oy, it’s hot. Oy, it’s so hot.” Finally, a young woman several rows back rose from her seat. Exasperated, she made her way to the galley, grabbed a glass of water, and brought it to the old man.

Things really are getting better. To overcome the Availability Heuristic, all we have to do is count writes Harvard psychology professor Steven Pinker in his 2018 book *Enlightenment Now*. If we can agree that “life is better than death; health is better than sickness; sustenance is better than hunger, abundance is better than poverty, peace is better than war; safety is better than danger; freedom is better than tyranny; equal rights are better than bigotry and discrimination; literacy is better than illiteracy;... (and) happiness is better than misery,³” then all we have to do is count. If these things have increased over time, that’s progress. And “the

¹ Steven Pinker: *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*. Page 41.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, 51.

world has made spectacular progress in every single measure of human well-being,⁴ he writes.

To start, we are alive in the present for much longer than our ancestors throughout history. Sacrifice, bloodletting and homeopathy has mostly given way to chlorination, vaccination, and blood transfusions. Smallpox, polio, and Guinea worms are or should be a thing of the past, and measles and malaria are next. Historian Johan Norberg points out that while we might think “we approach death by one year for every year we age, during the twentieth century, the average person approached death by just seven months per year.⁵” Even better, out of the almost five additional years of live we have gained in the last twenty, almost four are years of health. All we have to do is count. Things are getting better.

In addition to health, the world has seen tremendous gains in well-being. For measures of progress — life expectancy, health, and sustenance — it matters not that people have the same, only that they have enough. The relative deprivation and income inequality many of us feel in 21st century America should still be counted as exorbitant wealth. Don’t get me wrong — that 3% of Americans are undernourished⁶ and 13% of people in the developing world go hungry is morally abhorrent — but it’s still better than 50% of the world’s population going hungry just seventy years ago. No amount of money could have bought my great, great grandparents a refrigerator or a contraceptive pill let alone a synthetic rain jacket, a cell phone, or a fidget spinner, quote unquote luxuries that are commonplace today regardless of income level.

And so it goes with every statistical measure of progress. Murder rate? Down. Quality of life? Up. Terrorism and civil war? Down. Safety? Up. Of course, this progress isn’t linear. “Real historical curves have wiggles, upticks, spikes, and sometimes sickening lurches,⁷” but progress still occurs as these aberrations becomes less frequent, less severe, and sometimes cease all together. Yes, the aberrations may be fresh in our mind from the 24-hour news cycle; yes, we often miss the forest for the trees; but there is no better time to be alive than the present. Things are getting better.

*“Thank you so very much” the old man exclaimed with gratitude written all over his face. He used his crumpled hat to wipe the sweat from his brow and leaned forward to take a refreshing sip of water. “Thank you, thank you. Ah, that is so much better.” With a smile on his face, he slumped back into his seat. “Oy. Oy, it **was** so hot. Oooyyyyy.”*

Our challenge, of course, is to simultaneously accept the win while not taking our foot off of the gas pedal of progress. “The point of calling attention to progress,” Pinker writes, “is not self-congratulation but identifying the causes so we can do more of what works.⁸” When we “see that a pile of laundry has gone down, it does not mean the clothes have washed themselves; it means someone washed the clothes. If a type of violence has gone down, then some change in the social, cultural, or material milieu has caused it to go down...that makes it important to find out what the causes are, so we can try to intensify them and apply them more widely to

⁴ Ibid, 52.

⁵ Ibid, 54.

⁶ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/sn.itk.defc.zs>

⁷ Ibid, 44.

⁸ Ibid, 89.

ensure that the decline of violence continues.⁹” And so it is with every measure of progress. Things didn’t just get better — we made them better, and we must actively pursue the advancement of progress.

That, I would argue — and here, by the way, disagree with Pinker — is what today, is what Yom Kippur, is all about.

“*Al cheit shechatanu l’fanecha: we have done wrong before You.*” On Yom Kippur, we gather as a community to confess to a litany of transgressions, not for purposes of self-flagellation but self-improvement. We’ve come up short of living up to our highest values; we’ve turn aside from acting for the good of humanity in favor of narrow self-interest and greed; we’ve confused our romanticization of the past with guidance for today. We’ve screwed up, we’ve goofed, we’ve sinned. And now that we are cognizant of our mistakes, we must make the conscious choice to turn from them. Taking moral inventory of our faults in order to confront our shortcomings is central to the Jewish conscience and should be listed among our religion’s greatest contributions to the world.¹⁰

We Jews are not content to accept the frailties and vagaries of being human and have thus ritualized self-improvement. Each year we commit to the painful process of retrospective, of *teshuvah*, because morally-guided hindsight is a modern form of prophesy. We can’t predict the future, but we can indeed change it by righting our wrongs and recommitting to progress. Imagine what might happen if we applied this ritual template not annually but monthly. Weekly. Daily. Rather than accept that “*aveirah gorret aveirah*,” that we must move from bad to worse, our investment in personal reflection and recalibration continues to move us from bad to better. We can become better. And we will take the whole world with us.

And the world is getting better. While our nature is to overestimate the occurrence of bad events due to their recency in our minds — “Oy, it’s hot in here” — all we have to do is count. Focus on the math: “an anecdote is not a trend.¹¹” Remember the history: “the fact that something is bad today doesn’t mean it was better in the past.¹²” Keep some perspective: “we live longer, suffer less, learn more...and enjoy more small pleasures” than the generations before us.¹³” And most of all? Don’t let up on the gas. Reflect, right the necessary wrongs, recommit to progress. Things didn’t just get better, we made them better. We have done so many things proven to work — to reduce violence, to increase access to healthcare, to alleviate debilitating poverty — and we must keep doing them.

That laundry pile? It won’t take care of itself.

Shana Tovah.

⁹ Ibid, 45.

¹⁰ See Lawrence A. Hoffman’s *The Liturgy of Confession* in *We Have Sinned: Sin and Confession in Judaism*.

¹¹ Ibid, 452.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid, 453.