

A classic Jewish joke takes place in a deli. Several people are seated around a table. Menus in hand, there is heated discussion about what was good last time. Their orders arrive, and each in turn dissects it with a glance and a bite or two, then they mutter to one another about the diminutive size of the sandwich, the soggy pickle, the flat seltzer, the cold soup. The waitress comes back to the table and asks, “Is Anything Okay?”

Is Anything Okay?

We’re all sitting around our world. The menus arrive, and there are so many things in them — issues, conflicts, shortages, surfeits, profits, losses, amity, enmity — it’s overwhelming! Finally, we order what interests us, they’re brought to the table. We dissect them, sometimes with a glance, maybe take a nibble in some way, perhaps by learning more about a particular issue or cause. Then we mutter to one another about the lack of progress, tepid response, absence of personal responsibility; to some items, we just turn a cold shoulder.

Is anything okay?

Let’s look around: Increasingly polarized politics; power-seeking without problem-solving; porous borders with no evident plan; a humming economy that isn’t being recognized; a moral / political / military commitment abroad; educators and legislators turning a blind eye toward anything that isn’t “them;” a deep ecological hole we’re still digging; public money for religious schools; an astonishing percentage of Americans think we Jews make up 30% of the population — go us!

But wait!

There’s more: Escalating vocal hate against Jews; Palestinian supporters intimidating any and all Jews on college campuses; townships resenting burgeoning Orthodox communities; synagogues — like ours — spending gobs of money on security.

Is anything okay?

It would be easy to default to a sense of complacency: Well, **I’m** okay, so that’s fine.

It would be easy to continue assuming that someone else will take of it, whatever it is.

It would be easy to take things for granted; to brush off the problems as “well, it is what it is.”

You may recall that, a couple of years ago, I spoke about the fatalism of “It is what it is.”

I cited an article by U.S. Army Major Andrew Steadman. The title, “Why The Phrase ‘It Is What It Is’ Damages The Military Mindset.”

*“It is what it is” abdicates responsibility, shuts down creative problem solving, and concedes defeat. ...*

*“It is what it is” is an admission that [a] problem is too hard, and suppresses the attitude that leads to creative, unseen solutions... It says “We can’t,” when success demands that [we] ask, “How can we?”*

We might have an “it is what it is” attitude toward being inscribed — and sealed! — in the book of life. How can we affect that? (The answer is in the machzor.) What if we come to realize that we’ve been registered in one — or several — of the many other books on God’s shelf, for example:

The Book of Minor Inconveniences

The Book of Major Dilemmas

The Book of Myriad Possibilities

The Book of Inexplicable Serendipity

The Book of Sadness

The Book of Joy

The Book of Regret

The Book of Achievement

The Book of Generosity

It could be quite a year, for better, for worse!

Now, I could keep reminding all of us of the unfortunate things happening around us (and that could happen **to** us!), the calamities humanity is bringing upon itself, the vast needs that need solutions, the idea that we might not be destined for the best year EVER!

However, it’s Yom Kippur. We will spend enough time with our machzor, our traditional liturgy that focuses on what we shouldn’t have done, on the

need for us to heal our hearts, to end our counterproductive or destructive behaviors, and to heed the divine call for curative action.

So, instead of dwelling on what went wrong last year, and how we're going to make it better, let's focus on **HAKARAT HATOV** — recognition of the **GOOD** in our lives.

What have we done RIGHT this past year?

### **What are we proud of?**

Who did we surprise by showing up? By sending flowers? By extending an invitation to dinner at your home? By remembering to ask after their ailing loved one?

What causes have we served, as financial supporters or as hands-on volunteers?

During the lockdown, I participated in an online rabbinic forum about practical stuff, i.e., real issues for rabbis. One discussion was about something we do regularly here at Shirat Hayam: collection drives: Winter coat drive, food drives, special products drive. Fill a bag, drive to shul, drop it off in the lobby ... and you're done, drive away.

REMINDER: please bring your filled shopping bag for the JFS food pantry to the lobby by the end of September (no glass containers, please). Thank you!

These drives **are** important, particularly to the people receiving a warm coat, a few days' worth of food, needed personal hygiene products.

A couple of years ago, stuck in the mask-everywhere-all-the-time era, Ellie and I felt the need to do more than only contribute to drives. We began volunteering at the Community Food Bank in Egg Harbor. Nearly every week, we spend the morning of my day off sorting donations.

Though we rarely see the ultimate beneficiaries of our efforts, we work alongside many other volunteers who are stocking the food pantry, arranging distributions, and the like. And we meet the people whose full-time work is getting the

individual donations or the truckloads of grocery items — many tons of food each week — into the hands of those in need.

At that rabbinic discussion group, I mentioned that sorting donations was more hands-on for sure, but was it enough? Another participant responded, "If the donations don't get sorted, they won't go anywhere." And I realized that, DAYYEINU, it can be enough.

I must admit that as much as I feel good about what we're doing, it pains me, as I mentioned last week, that there is so much food insecurity in our country.

We give! Our community is generally generous with donations. Even so, we can understand that we might hit a point of "enough with the drives!" Or, in our case, at every major Jewish festival or season, we have a moment of "enough of the innumerable requests for 'your Rosh Hashana donation ...'" (and, soon enough, it will be your Hanukka donation). It's one thing to be kept up to date on the Jewish year, but is the need greater on Rosh Hashana than on any other day of the calendar?

It's not just Jewish causes, as you know. If you still get snail mail, your recycling bin is clogged with request after request even through you already made your annual donation. As for email, ouch! The political ads, the pleas for money, proliferate faster than the rabbits in Margate!

With all this demand, there's an ever-present possibility of compassion overload.

Rabbi David Wolpe, as ADL Rabbinic Fellow, posted this the other day:

*Who can maintain a constant outpouring of compassion? We know others are suffering ... yet day after day we grow ever more tired from the parade of need....*

*Perhaps we [feel that] for everything we have given, there is just too little return in goodness and peace in the world....*

*Yom Kippur is a chance to break the cycle of empathy-exhaustion. We beat our hearts that have grown sluggish from the [onslaught. We should view] Al Chet, the confessional, as a Jewish defibrillator: A few good, sharp knocks to the chest [can sensitize our hearts] anew.*

*[And] we remind ourselves that each act of kindness, each improvement in our own character and aspiration, makes a difference in the world.*

Rabbi Avi Weiss is a luminary leader in what has been called Open Orthodoxy, or Modern Orthodoxy. Some years ago, crafted a way to acknowledge the good we have done using the alphabetic structure of ASHAMNU, the confessional we will have recited several times in the course of Yom Kippur.

We have loved,	אהבנו,
We have blessed,	ברכנו,
We have grown,	גדלנו,
We have spoken positively.	דברנו יפה

We have raised up,	העלינו,
We have shown compassion,	והסוּנו,
We have acted enthusiastically,	זרזנו,
We have been empathetic,	חמלנו,
We have cultivated truth.	טפחנו אמת

We have given good advice,	יעצנו טוב,
We have respected,	כבדנו,
We have learned,	למדנו,
We have forgiven,	מחלנו,
We have comforted,	נחמונו,
We have been creative,	סללנו,
We have stirred,	עוררנו,
We have been spiritual activists,	פעלנו,
We have been just,	צדקנו,
We have longed for Israel.	קוינו לארץ

We have been merciful,	רחמנו,
We have given full effort,	שקדנו,
We have supported,	תמכנו,
We have contributed,	תרמנו,
We have repaired.	תקנו

**- Rabbi Avi Weiss, Elul 5776**

Really, we've done a LOT of good! Still, at the end of 5784, wouldn't it be wonderful to look back on the year and feel feel even better that you've:

- Taken a drink from the well of Jewish knowledge. (And I don't mean schnapps at kiddush!)
- Listened to someone who needed an ear.
- Made the phone call.
- Treated an essential worker with respect.
- Spoke with rather than down to.
- Reached out to an old friend.
- Paused to say thank-you.
- Sponsored something that made a difference.
- Accepted that there are other points of view.

You can start heading in that direction by acknowledging the good in your life — that's HAKARAT HATOV. And if you're not finding enough good, determine to look harder for it, to work harder at making it.

In this new year, may we get ourselves to the point that we can answer the question "Is Anything Okay?" with: "Yes, I've helped make something, someone — maybe a few things, a few people — better than just okay."