



# WEXNER LEADERSHIP SKILLS SUMMIT MID-YEAR LEARNING

## Rabbi Jay Henry Moses' Opening Remarks

SEPTEMBER 13, 2020 | VIRTUAL

Welcome! it is truly wonderful to see all of your faces together again! I want to begin with a huge thank you to the Summit team, Angie Atkins, Ra'anán Avital, Elisha Gechter, and Rachel Sosin. These wonderful colleagues have continued to work diligently to keep the momentum of our Summit going strong—thank you Summit team! And special thanks to our president Rabbi Elka Abrahamson who is joining us today and whose support allows all of our work to flourish.

When we met in March, the frightening reality of COVID-19 was still a novelty. Our kids still thought board games and jigsaw puzzles were fun. Zoom was confusing and new for many. The full scale, scope, and duration of COVID-19 was even more mysterious to us than it is now. Our Summit was the first Wexner event to transition to a remote format. Six months on, our surreal Purim is a distant memory as we prepare for unprecedented isolation during the Yamim Nora'im, the Days of Awe, when we normally gather in our greatest numbers.

We meet today because as daunting as COVID-19 is, our commitment to learning and exercising leadership remains steadfast. In fact, the entire focus of our Summit has shifted. We designed it to be an opportunity to strengthen and deepen leadership skills that would apply to the widest variety of situations or contexts where you exercise leadership. Now, the great equalizer of a global pandemic means that we are all operating in a Covid context. The skills we sharpen must address this reality. And that is why we are learning about Crisis Management today with Professor Dutch Leonard.

The article you read on crisis communications lays out a set of principles that flow from what Jim Collins termed "The Stockdale Paradox." To paraphrase Dutch and his colleagues, leaders in a crisis must be brutally honest about the situation, no matter how dire; yet still offer a realistic sense of hope; and finally, show empathy for the suffering of those whom they lead. Or in the words of Admiral Stockdale himself, "You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end — which you can never afford to lose — with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality."

To the best of my knowledge, there was no yeshiva at the Naval Academy where Stockdale studied. But what a Jewish insight he captured! Reality, hope, and empathy.



This communications strategy is also embedded in our spiritual tradition, baked in at the outset of our emergence as a covenanted people. The Torah in Exodus depicts God as acknowledging the reality of our ancestors' suffering under Egyptian slavery; giving hope by foretelling their eventual redemption; and showing empathy by reminding them that God is with them in their struggle for liberation.

This same pattern of messages reveals itself even more profoundly in the arc of the Yamim Nora'im, the High Holidays. Here, the scope is not so much national, but more personal. The "crisis" of the days of awe is the *eternal drama of the human condition*: we are flawed, we fall prey to myriad weaknesses and shortcomings, we hurt each other. And we are also capable of profound forgiveness, inspiring growth, and magnificent healing.

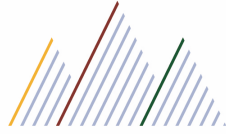
As Alan Lew lays out in his masterpiece of High Holiday preparation, *This is Real and you are Totally Unprepared*, the Jewish calendar takes us on a ten-week spiritual journey. And this journey mirrors the crisis communications narrative beautifully. Beginning at Tisha B'Av, we confront our *brutal reality*. We relive the trauma of brokenness, dislocation, and loss endured by our people throughout history, reminding us of all that is still broken in our lives and in the world.

The subsequent month of Elul, and especially Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur which follow thereafter, are the centerpiece of this journey and are designed to give us *hope*. The gates of forgiveness are always open, our tradition teaches, if only we can do the hard work of real teshuva--honest self-assessment, atonement, and behavioral change. The hope we are clinging to is that redemption and personal transformation are possible and that God will accept our pleas for mercy. That we can in fact put together the broken pieces of our lives and our relationships. By the end of Yom Kippur, we feel cleansed, uplifted, and even reborn after our confrontation with mortality and our ultimate destiny.

Finally, we experience *empathy* on Sukkot. We celebrate the harvest and bounty that God has blessed us with. And we remember that despite our vulnerability, despite our grasp on the world being as flimsy as a temporary hut, God dwells with us in our uncertainty just as God dwelt with our ancestors in their wanderings through the wilderness.

So our learning about crisis management comes at the perfect time as we prepare for Rosh Hashana. The Hebrew word for "crisis" is *Mashber*. In ancient Jewish texts, this word carried connotations related to birth; in the Bible in Isaiah (37:3), *mashber* denotes the opening of the birth canal right before a baby is born. In the Talmud the *mashber* was the special chair on which the woman in labor sat until she delivered (Mishna, *Arachin* 1:4).

In modern Hebrew, though, the root of the word *mashber*, shin, bet resh, is more commonly understood to relate to *brokenness*. The concept of Tikun Olam, repairing the world, has roots in a



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medieval image of sh'virat hakelim, the breaking of the vessels which contained divine light at the time of the world's creation. Our acts of tikkun are putting together the broken pieces of our world, releasing that divine light to return to its source.

Perhaps these two meanings, birth and brokenness, are not as disparate as they seem. For out of brokenness, entirely new possibilities are birthed. Just as the rupture of Tisha B'Av leads inexorably to the rebirth of the world on Rosh Hashana, so too the crises facing our communities right now may hold the seeds of redemption, hope, and new ways of living out our sacred values. All it takes is for those of us exercising leadership to have the vision, courage, faith, and grit to make it so.