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**CORONAVIRUS CHRONICLE**

*A collection of Rabbi Ron Shulman's sermons and reflections*

*at this surreal and challenging time.*

**Contents, below in chronological order:**

Re-Open - Shabbat & Shavuot Sermon, May 30

Compassion - Erev Shabbat Sermon, May 22

Uncertain - Shabbat Sermon, May 16

Looking Forward - Shabbat Sermon, May 9

Masks - Shabbat Sermon, May 2

Shpilkes - Erev Shabbat Sermon, April 24

Israel Independence Day 2020, April 23

This Too Shall Pass - Shabbat Sermon, April 18

Each Life Is Precious - Yizkor Sermon, April 16

Once In A Lifetime - Shabbat Sermon, April 11

Remarkable - First Day Passover Sermon, April 9

Seders In Seclusion Haggadah Supplement - [Click Here](https://images.shulcloud.com/728/uploads/Passover/SedersInSeclusionHaggadahSupplement.pdf)

This - Erev Shabbat Sermon, April 3

Strict and Lenient - Shabbat Sermon, March 28

A Vision of Redemption – Shabbat Sermon, March 21

Letter to Congregation Beth El, March 19

Our Spiritual, Not Only Our Physical, Well-Being II – Sermon, March 14

Our Spiritual, Not Only Our Physical, Well-Being I, March 4

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**RE-OPEN**

*Shabbat & Shavuot* | May 30, 2020

I’m thinking about the Jewish calendar this morning. Our last public gathering at Congregation Beth El was on Purim. When Passover arrived, we celebrated our Seders in seclusion. Since then we’ve completed counting the seven weeks of the Omer, including observing Yom HaShoah and celebrating Yom HaAtzmaut – all online.

Today, as we complete our ritual observance of Shavuot we anticipate phasing in opportunities to gather together on Shabbat in the coming weeks, and a very different hybrid of in person and online experiences for the High Holy Days. For Sukkot, we’re imagining a virtual tour of Sukkot hosted by small groups from different homes. Maybe we’ll be able to gather together casually for Hanukkah, maybe not. Or, hard to believe, it’ll be a full year until we gather as we were once accustomed to next Purim.

I’m thinking about the Jewish calendar this morning. The courage and dedication to Jewish identity we frivolously celebrate on Purim is a set up for Passover. Then we get serious about what it means to believe in God and to represent God in the world. Freedom, human equality and dignity along with social justice are the ethical demands of our monotheistic religious tradition.

Gratitude for all that sustains our lives in God’s world is the reason for our daily counting of the Omer. Tempered by the sadness of mourning the generation of the Shoah and enhanced as we rejoice in the creation of the State of Israel, our Omer season of blessing and history anticipates this holiday, Shavuot – Z’man Matan Torateinu. We receive Torah, the revelation of God’s presence in our lives. The substance of Jewish purpose. The wisdom of Judaism.

Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur celebrate the moral me. You and I measure the character of our lives and the merit of our choices in order to earn the gift of our lives in this world. Sukkot brings us back to Passover and Shavuot. Dwelling in our Sukkot, we celebrate life as a journey from beginning to arrival, from slavery to freedom, from personal constraint to moral responsibility. We strive to care for one another and our natural environment. Hanukkah is a partner holiday to Purim. Courage, dedication to Jewish identity, and devotion to the light of God’s presence in our lives through ritual and learning.

I’m thinking about the Jewish calendar this morning. At no point over the past many, many weeks have we ceased celebrating, stopped demonstrating, or been unable to actualize the ideas and ideals our calendar of Jewish holidays symbolizes. Especially Shabbat, our weekly respite for joy and renewal celebrating God’s creative and redemptive presence in the world.

Today is our eleventh Shabbat livestream service. Not our preferred way to honor Shabbat each week. Not without its occasional technological glitches and inconveniences. Not with each other face to face. Not without meaning and substance, either. Never do we stop engaging in Jewish life, learning, and celebration. You and I did not withdraw from the beauties and enrichments of personal Jewish expression. We did not close Congregation Beth El.

In which case, I have to ask. What will it mean for us to re-open? I don’t mean the technical details and health procedures we’ll put in place to be safe when we again get together here. I mean the spiritual and emotional understandings we seek for what we’ve been through and what still awaits us. We did not close Congregation Beth El though we did have to close our campus.

You and I have never done this before. We have no experience returning to our synagogue buildings after we had to stay away. What will it mean for us to re-open? After all, we didn’t really close. Congregation Beth El is a synagogue family not a synagogue facility.

Still, we’ve shared a sense of loss these past many weeks of staying home and apart. This morning, this is something we do understand.

We’ve lost the chance to be with those whom we miss, our loved ones whose deaths changed our lives. We’ve lost their smiles, their hugs, their cheers, and their support. We cherish about them these simple, personal gestures which we hold onto as memories but no longer as realities. We’ve lost hearing the wisdom in their voices and seeing the love in their eyes. We’ve lost their laughter and tears, their complaints and their compliments. Yes, we hear it all and see it all in our memories of them. No, it’s not the same.

As a synagogue family, we grieve similar losses. We’ve lost our synagogue routines and habits. We’ve lost the chance to sing and talk together. We’ve lost the shared marking of life milestones. We’ve lost the chance to randomly see someone and catch up, or to meet someone new and welcome them to be with us. We’ve lost familiar rituals and comfortable traditions. We’ve lost the chance to voice our complaints and hear each other’s compliments. Yes, we’re doing our best online. No, it’s not the same.

What will it mean for us to re-open, to reclaim and renew these synagogue experiences we have lost temporarily? The same thing it means to recite Yizkor and to remember our loved ones.

We’ll hold on to what’s precious from the past. We’ll build new experiences on the foundation of our memories. We’ll honor yesterday’s hopes and achievements with visions of who we are now and dreams of what we can accomplish tomorrow. Those whom we lovingly remember at this sacred hour did this for themselves aware that, in time, we would, too. That’s what it will mean for us to re-open.

“Open for me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter them to thank the Eternal God. This is the gateway to the Eternal God, through it the righteous shall enter.” We are the righteous, explain our teachers of yore. We who are thankful for the precious people and significant events in our lives.

I’m thinking about the Jewish calendar this morning. It’s cycle and values are constant. Which is why we conclude each of our holidays by connecting the lives of our loved ones to the on-going life of the Jewish people. We recite Yizkor Memorial Prayers to express our people’s shared memories in the most personal way possible. We each remember our parents, spouses, children, siblings, and loved ones because their lives from before inspire ours today.

**COMPASSION**

*Erev Shabbat Bemidbar* | May 22, 2020

I was a bit frustrated this week, I must admit. I function at a pretty even keel, but this week a bit of isolation exhaustion got to me. Things that normally don’t frustrate me did. I’m sure I’m not the only one.

Every one of us wants to get past this ordeal. We all want to get out into society. We all want to be productive and to be together. No, physically we’re not yet sure what is or isn’t safe to do. Yes, emotionally we’re very ready to start doing it.

Remember how not so long ago, after a long day of being out and about we went home to relax, rest, and recharge? These days we ask ourselves, who ever thought staying home could be so physically and mentally exhausting?

Cooped up and anxious, we’re working hard if we’re fortunate to be employed. We’re juggling our children’s educational, recreational, and social needs. Trying to take care of ourselves and our families, we’re also trying to make quality time out of this unplanned quantity time.

It’s no wonder we’re a little tired and on edge. We feel overwhelmed. Our freedom beckons.

One recommendation for overcoming isolation exhaustion is to spend a little time outside. Fresh air and sunshine brighten our moods, help us refresh. I found that helpful this week. As I do on this Shabbat. Our weekly pause revives our souls and calms our minds with joy and goodness.

I have another suggestion, too. We all know the virus is contagious. Scientific research shows compassion is also contagious and spreads rapidly. Examples are all around us. Many of you are helping neighbors, friends, and strangers who need assistance. We’re shopping. We’re serving. We’re donating. We’re supporting. We’re calling, connecting, writing, and Zooming.

I recently read about an elderly couple sitting in their car and crying while parked at the Grocery Store. Afraid to enter, they were nervous about the virus and didn’t have any local family who could shop for them. As a woman passed by on her way into the store, the elderly woman rolled down her car window holding a grocery list and $100 bill in her outstretched arm. The older, upset woman asked if this passerby would be willing to buy them groceries. Which she did, taking the list and money with pleasure, returning with food and change.

I tell this story because it’s uplifting. It teaches us to care for others and to be present to those in need. Those whose livelihoods have seemingly vanished or whose households may be at risk. Those who are business owners struggling to keep their businesses viable and had to furlough employees, or let them go. Those whose needs in every place are for food, health care, and security. All of us must be present to those in need. Please, if you need assistance or support, call on us at Congregation Beth El. We are here to help.

As essential workers sustain our communities and those currently without work struggle to make ends meet, while front line medical personnel treat the sick and researchers actively strive for vaccines and treatments to stop a contagious virus, the rest of us must continue to infect others with the compassion we feel and the caring we can provide.

Each morning our prayer poetry praises God. “Blessed is the One who has compassion for the earth. Blessed is the One who has compassion for all living beings.”

Our tradition describes God as the source of compassion. We praise God by imitation.

We are compassionate toward others. We can also be compassionate toward ourselves.

This week I learned that isolation exhaustion is real. I got over it. You and I can’t let it frustrate us too much. We have to be kind to ourselves because there are people all around us worried and upset with outstretched arms and more pressing needs. They require our response. Infected with compassion, let’s each do what we can to take what’s in their hands and provide our caring help.

Compassion cures isolation exhaustion.

**UNCERTAIN**

*Shabbat Behar-Behukotai* | May 16, 2020

Rarely have we felt as one with the whole world. Right now, in different degrees of difficulty and disruption, around the globe humanity is united by our shared pandemic experience. No one of us is happy about it. Some of us are more agitated than others. A few of us are outright nasty in our public response and behavior.

I say “us” aware that, most likely, you and I aren’t the crude ones out there. Just the same, as I watch the news each day and see the variety of heroic and moronic reactions, I say “us” because we really are all in this together. Individual good decisions and bad choices impact all of us. Rarely have we felt as one with the whole world.

When we think about human harmony and unity in Jewish tradition, it’s a more messianic and idyllic vision than this time we spend enduring a contagion. We sing every day the Prophet Zechariah’s vision, “On that day, the Eternal God shall be one, and the name of God one.” By these words we express our hope to bring the world closer together.

We’re certainly closer together now than I ever remember. Every one of us, every person everywhere, wants to get past this ordeal. We all want to get out into society. We all want to be productive and to be together. We’re just not certain how to do it. We’re not sure whether or not it’s safe to do it.

This uncertainty defines this moment. We’re uncertain how to be around people. How close can we get? How many of us can gather, and for how long? Honest questions, they’re on our minds. We’re nervous about next steps. We’re uncertain about how this ends and anxious for it to be over. We’re of two minds at one time. We have to get back to business and it has to be safe for us to do so.

It’s not really a choice. The economy can’t recover if people aren’t comfortable participating in it. People won’t be comfortable being out and about until managing the virus is more effective.

I want to offer an illustration to help us manage our way through the uncertainty we’re feeling. This Shabbat is the 37th day of the Omer we count. I don’t know when our seclusion will end. I do know the Omer period ends in 13 days. I also know that the Omer isn’t only a daily offering of gratitude once brought by our Biblical ancestors. It is also a measure, an amount of food the Israelites took each day of their 40 year sojourn in the wilderness.

Remember the manna on which the Children of Israel subsisted in the desert? One legend describes it tasting the way each individual Israelite wanted. Another legend reminds us that on the sixth day of the week a double portion appeared on the ground. Those uncertain it wouldn’t spoil only took an *omer*, a measure of manna for one day, and woke up on Shabbat without food. As a result, we’re told, only those who ate manna on Shabbat, only those who honored instructions, could receive the Torah at Mt. Sinai.

Here we find two responses to uncertainty. Two responses to the very uncertainty we are feeling right now. Individual preference. I do what I need to because I’m just not sure how much longer I can wait. Individual deferment. I do what I’m asked to for my sake and the sake of everyone else.

Hear it stated in real terms. This question recently appeared in a newspaper advice column. “My state is reopening certain businesses. I am uncertain about what I should do. How do I support our town and our nation’s economy and ensure that I don’t contribute to an increase in coronavirus infections? Am I selfish if I go or am I selfish if I stay home?”

We all recognize the problem. Uncertainty involves unknown outcomes. That’s why it’s uncomfortable. That’s also why we each have to be responsible for the choices we make. We are our nation. We are our community. We are our economy. We are our care providers. Each employer and employee, every consumer, all of us have to measure our *omer*, our tolerable amount of social isolation or interaction. Our choices, to taste what we want or to collect what we must, to be out and about or home and without, will impact others.

A Talmudic principle offers us a glimpse of direction. “*Ein safek motzi mi-y’dei vadai*. An uncertainty does not override a certainty.” In other words, whatever decisions we make, and they are each of ours to make, we ought to weigh what we know and see more heavily over what we can’t be sure of right now.

I’m certain we will reach the other side of these terrible times. I’m certain we will restore our routines and renew our lives. I’m also certain that the uncertainty of these days can be inspiration for better days ahead because rarely have we felt as one with the whole world.

“On that day, the Eternal God shall be one, and the name of God one.” By these words we express our hope to bring the world closer together.

**LOOKING FORWARD**

*Shabbat Emor* | May 9, 2020

I’m a member of a minority group. I’m fortunate to be among the 37% of Americans who are able to work from home during this stay at home mandate. 63% of Americans work jobs that require being onsite.

On this Shabbat, a day famous for being a chosen break from work and earning, more than 20 million Americans are recently unemployed. Through no choice or fault of their own, at a deeper and faster rate than ever before, individuals have lost jobs in every sector and segment of our nation’s economy.

I’m a member of a minority group. During these difficult and enduring days, I’m inconvenienced. I’m not impacted. I’m disturbed. I’m not in distress. I must admit. This awareness of my relative comfort upsets me.

I’m upset for any of you, or any of your family or circle of friends, or for anyone at all, if your livelihood has seemingly vanished, if your household may be at risk, if your future, at least in the short term, is uncertain. I’m upset for any of you who are business owners struggling to keep your businesses viable and having to furlough your employees, or let them go. Most of all, I’m upset for everyone in every place desperate for food, health care, and security for themselves and their families. Please, if you need assistance or support, call on us at Congregation Beth El. We are here to help.

I’m a member of a minority group. In this case most of you are, too. As Jews, you and I have the opportunity to seek wisdom from our religious and spiritual tradition at this challenging time. We carry a spiritual burden during this time of plague and economic hardship. Some of us may question our personal dignity and merit. We may ask, now that we are not working or earning as we did, were our efforts and work worth it before. Will they be again?

The answer is yes. Jewish tradition teaches that our effort to earn a livelihood is part of our dignity. The Talmudic Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman said that *parnasah*, earning a living, is greater than *geulah*, God’s redemption of the world. Our earning measures more important than God’s redeeming, teaches Rabbi Shmuel, “because we do it.” *Rabbenu* Bahya, a 13th century Spanish scholar, comments. “This active participation of people in the creation of their financial means is a sign of spiritual greatness.”

I’m a member of a minority group. I believe we each imitate God by all that we create and produce. I proclaim, even when it is slow and difficult as it clearly is right now, we are of no less importance. We need to understand this about ourselves, especially if we struggle with personal or financial stress, unemployment, and worries about the world.

We are each more than what we have and more than what we lose. Judaism teaches, first and foremost, at all times we are manifestations of God in the world. Our personal value and worth, to quote Proverbs, are “far beyond rubies.” We are each precious and prized. Our dignity is inherent.

I’m a member of a minority group. In my genuine frustration and personal anger that we find ourselves in this predicament, I can take the long view. I understand transition to rebuilding our lives and society will be a patchwork process. I know, regretfully, that we won’t really engage socially and communally until this novel Coronavirus is better managed.

I don’t yet know anyone personally who lost their life to the horror of COVID-19. I know some of you do. I’m saddened by your personal loss. Anonymously and impersonally, I grieve your loss and the deaths of more than 78,000 individuals in America and 275,000 human beings worldwide. Each person mourned as a beloved parent, child, sibling, grandparent, aunt, uncle, niece, nephew, cousin, loving partner, colleague, or dear friend. Each life is precious. Every death is significant. Let’s all remember this truth during these horrible days of grief and devastation.

I learned a new story from the Talmud this week. It’s about how they cleaned the Holy of Holies in ancient Jerusalem’s Great Temple. The passage deals with a question very few people would even think to ask. If the Holy of Holies was so sacred and protected a place into which no one had permission to enter except the *Kohen Gadol*, the High Priest, how did they keep it clean and in good repair?

Rava said: “There were openings in the ceiling of the Holy of Holies through which they lowered artisans in containers into the Holy of Holies, so their eyes would not gaze upon the Holy of Holies itself when they were cleaning and repairing it.”

In his commentary on this vignette, Rashi explains the reason they placed workmen in boxes as they lowered them down into the Holy of Holies, by rope I assume, was “so they would not be able to turn their heads and look to each side.”

I teach this ancient story for its wisdom today. If you feel lowered down, dropped into an unusual and unfamiliar place, boxed in and confronted with the task of cleaning things up and repairing the damage, the most important thing you can do in order to succeed is look forward.

I’m a member of a minority group these days. Fortunate, inconvenienced, disturbed, upset, seeking, believing, frustrated, and angry, I invite you to join me in looking forward. If we focus on our spiritual selves, on the dignity and value inherent in who we each are and all we care about, with effort, determination, help as necessary, and personal purpose, I believe you and I will greet better days, fashion renewed lifestyles, again earn our livelihoods, and eventually, looking forward, see the fulfillment of our hopes.

**MASKS**

*Shabbat Aharei-Kedoshim* | May 2, 2020

When we plan to wear masks most of us think of Purim. Celebrating Purim we mask our true identities. We use costume and make-believe to hide ourselves as we celebrate Mordecai’s convictions and Esther’s courage. Nowadays, we put on masks to go to the grocery store or to take a walk in public. Seemingly, not much conviction and courage in that.

Except, these long weeks of pandemic living require of us different types of conviction and courage. Our conviction is to be responsible toward others. Our courage is to maintain stay-at-home lives with purpose and patience. Our mood right now is most certainly not frivolous like it is on Purim. Much more important right now is how we care for ourselves and our society.

A real opportunity lies before us. If we don’t hide ourselves from it and from one another. We can wear masks over our mouths and noses, as we’re asked, anxious to take them off and return to our more natural ways of relating. Or, we can wear our masks over our mouths and noses, as we’re asked, thoughtfully and with good intentions. More than being careful around people, we can be mindful about what good we want to result from this truly bad experience.

Sad but true, in the Exodus story, before our people went out from slavery to freedom we read about plagues and death. At our recent Seder celebrations, sensitive to the price of liberty and dignity, we spilled wine from our full cups when we recited the Ten Plagues.

Sad but true, in the story of this Coronavirus plague we will someday tell, before we could restore and rebuild our routines and our communities, we suffered illness and all kinds of difficult losses. When we do ultimately take off our masks, sensitive to the price of liberty and dignity, what do we want to say we changed or improved because we endured all of this?

I hope when we take off our masks we choose to speak and act with more respect and sensitivity. I’ll admit I’m not particularly optimistic. The divides in our society seem too wide at times. Our collective dreams too often feel small and selfish, not big and selfless.

When we put our masks away, fully revealing ourselves to each other, will most of us be who we were before, holding on to what we missed and were used to? Or, will enough of us adapt our lifestyles and choices - even just a bit - toward more equality, justice, and mutual regard?

At home, alone or with others, what are we learning about ourselves and our priorities? So much important to us weeks ago is no longer as pressing, perhaps no longer even relevant to our current needs and interests. When we remove our masks, exposed and open to life, what will be significant again or newly urgent?

In the withdrawal of human activity from the world, nature is healing. When we’re breathing freely again, no masks covering our faces, will we make the memory of this natural plague into our responsibility to take better care of our world? Or, will we rush right back to what used to be usual?

Let’s be thoughtful and intentional. Will we return to our pre-pandemic habits or will we discover a new vision of health not only for ourselves, but also for our society and natural environment?

Learn with me from this Torah verse. “And when Moses finished speaking with them, he put a mask over his face.” When Moses comes down from Mt. Sinai he reveals the content of God’s revelation, his face radiant from being in God’s presence.

Rabbeinu Bahya, a 13th century Spanish Torah scholar, explains this Torah scene. When Moses finished relaying God’s words, Moses put on a mask to protect the people from the rays of Divine light emanating from him.

This is a spiritually compelling image. God is present in light. God is present in the light of caring and compassion. God’s presence shines between us when we speak words of Torah and truth. Moses wore his mask respectfully and responsibly. The example of Moses teaches us. It is beneath no one’s stature to wear a mask when necessary. We wear masks for the sake of others, not ourselves or our sense of pride.

It is still some weeks before we’ll be able to read and learn Torah in person on Shabbat. For now, God’s presence between us continues to shine online. We heard this week religious gatherings are in Phase III of California’s re-opening plan. Whenever that takes place, and whatever the attendance limits may then be, I imagine masks will be required during services as we’ll sit physically spread out, most likely in the Jacobs Family Community Hall.

We’ll share in yet another unusual experience for this very unusual situation. We’ve almost gotten used to working from our homes, livestream Minyan and Shabbat services, Zoom Seders, online classes and meetings, and Zoom lifecycle occasions. I guess this will be okay, too. If Moses can wear a mask, so can you and I.

Now, and for however many or few weeks still to come, you and I can demonstrate the courage of our convictions. When we have an appropriate reason and occasion to be out in public, we can wear our masks mindfully. Let’s be intentional about what good we want to result from this truly bad experience. For now this must be true. We cover our faces in order to receive the light of God’s presence by caring for and protecting each other

**SHPILKES**

*Erev Shabbat Tazria-Metzora* | April 24, 2020

We’ve got *shpilkes*!

*Shpilkes* is a Yiddish word for nervous energy that best sums up this past week. Literally, it means “sitting on pins and needles.” A dictionary defines *shpilkes* as “a state of impatience, agitation, anxiety, or any combination thereof.” The perfect word. We’ve all got *shpilkes* right now. It’s been enough. We want out. We want to see and be with each other. We want to get back to work and life. We’re all feeling antsy.

We’ve got *shpilkes*!

We’re feeling what the author Leah Kaminsky described a few years back. “The demor­al­iz­ing uncer­tain­ty of not know­ing how long I will need to wait has me on *shpilkes*.” Unfortunately, you and I have got some more waiting ahead of us.

It’s going to take more time, and more planning, before we can be safe and healthy gathering together. Now is when we need to counter our *shpilkes* with patience. Now is when we need to remember our responsibility for one another.

It’s hard. These days we don’t often make sacrifices for the sake of a greater good. More commonly, we ask others to give us what we want. This moment isn’t about what you and I may want individually. This moment is about what we all need.

When you’re washing your hands, instead of singing Happy Birthday, sing these familiar lyrics by The Rolling Stones:

No, you can't always get what you want.  
You can't always get what you want.  
You can't always get what you want.  
But if you try sometimes you find  
You get what you need.

What we need is to be able to return to our lives confidently. To the best of our collective abilities, and with continued health and distancing practices, we need to make our way out of this pandemic into an opportunity. An opportunity to care a bit more about all who live among us and around us. An opportunity to speak and act with more respect and sensitivity. An opportunity to tweak our lifestyles just enough to become better citizens in our society. An opportunity to be better caretakers for our world.

But, since we’ve all got *shpilkes* right now, let’s have some fun with it. If you can’t sit still, in addition to all of the many physical and recreational things you can do at home, try to figure out the answer to this Shabbat riddle, and send me your answer to see if you’re correct.

“You measure my life before Shabbat in minutes and I serve you on Shabbat by expiring. I’m quicker if I’m thin and slower if I’m thick. I don’t move on Shabbat, but the wind is my enemy.

The Talmudic Rabbi Avin HaLevi said: “If a person forces the hour, the hour pushes that person aside. If a person yields to the hour, the hour yields to that person.”

It’s a call for patience when we’ve got *shpilkes*.

If the time isn’t right, the results won’t be either. When the time is right, the opportunities will present themselves. It may take more time before we can be safe and healthy gathering together again. Believe this. It’ll be worth the wait!

**ISRAEL INDEPENDENCE DAY LETTER 2020**

I was very much looking forward to my trip to Israel this June. Since moving to San Diego three years ago, Robin and I haven’t had the chance for a return visit. Our June travels were all set - until the Coronavirus pandemic ruined our plans. Yes, the pandemic is causing much greater damage than our cancelled travel. In our community and all over the world people cry out in distress and grief. Even so, I pause to reflect.

During this most unusual time of disruption we celebrate Israel’s 72nd year of Independence. I wonder. For how many years, through how many generations, and due to which difficulties were Jewish desires to visit Israel, to live in Israel and, most of all, to achieve the Zionist dream of establishing the State of Israel no more than unfulfilled hopes?

As the medieval poet Yehudah haLevi famously wrote from Spain, “My heart is in the East, and I am in the far reaches of the West.” From the far reaches of San Diego, on this *Yom HaAtzmaut* our hearts beat with pride. We have the confidence and opportunities most Jews before us never did. Israel is real. We will visit again, or for the first time. We will be there with our families and friends. We will celebrate those who go on Aliyah.

“The face of Israel has two profiles,” wrote the prominent historian Simon Rawidowicz in 1957. “Babylon and Jerusalem. By Jerusalem we mean as a symbol of the Land of Israel in its entirety. By Babylon, we mean…every place that is not Jerusalem.”

This means our bond with Jerusalem, the State of Israel, when we are in Babylon, outside of Israel, is about Jewish consciousness. In this American Diaspora our consciousness of being Jewish is incomplete because, in a land of many peoples and perspectives, Jewish identity is not an expression of the majority culture. In Israel our consciousness of being Jewish is complete because, in a land of many peoples and perspectives, Jewish identity is an expression of the majority culture.

Celebrating Israel at 72, from a distance since we have to, we rejoice in the fulfillment of Jewish history and hope which is the State of Israel today. David Ben Gurion’s words from 1944 represent our current feelings. “The preservation of our political, national, cultural, and moral independence has required heroic efforts, and, during our prolonged struggle to maintain our identity and our values, we have suffered grievous losses…The Jewish people preserved its values and its prophetic hopes, and these, in turn, preserved it.

Robin and I very much look forward to rescheduling our trip to Israel. We join with all of you in hoping the Coronavirus pandemic will abate soon. We pray with all of you for healing and comfort in our community and country, for the people of Israel, and for all of humanity. *Yom HaAtzmaut Sameah*!

**THIS TOO SHALL PASS**

*Shabbat Shemini*| April 18, 2020

There was once a king who had the most magnificent collection of jewels in the entire world. It was the source of his greatest joy. He prided himself on having collected the best and the finest of the world’s gems. Hour after hour he would admire and enjoy his jewels.

One night the king had a dream. He dreamed that somewhere in the world there was a ring, the most precious ring in the world. This ring had special power: When a person was sad, it could make her happy; when a person was giddy with delight, it could sober him; and when a person was joyful, it intensified and heightened his or her joy. The king awoke from his dream convinced that somewhere in the world such a ring existed. Prepared to pay any price, he sent his court officers to locate and purchase the ring.

After years of searching, one of the king’s ministers presented him with the ring, a gift of its owner to honor the king. The king examined the ring which was plain and unadorned. Could this be the precious ring he desired? Then he saw three Hebrew words engraved on the ring: “*Gam zeh ya’avor*.” “This too shall pass.”

Over time the king realized the true beauty of this ring. When he was sad, he looked at it and it reminded him that this too shall pass. He felt consoled. He remembered the dawn always follows darkness at night. When he was giddy with delight, he looked at the ring and knew this too shall pass. He reflected and gained perspective. And, when he experienced true joy, real happiness, the ring reminded him that this too shall pass. The king learned to hold on to and appreciate those precious moments. All of his many jewels and gems paled in comparison with this ring that reminded him to be sensitive to the brevity and meaning of his experiences.

We all confront loss and disappointment in our lives. We all grieve and reflect on how briefly it seems we have and we hold. Rather than despairing this reality of our lives, let’s reframe the way we approach the finite and temporal truths of our existence.

There are feelings of grief among us as a virtual community this morning. Many of us feel on edge in this time of disruption. We aren’t only worried about ourselves. We’re also focused on others and their needs. We want to help them through this rough patch and feel badly if we’re not able to.

I’m also confident there are good and comforting feelings among us as a virtual community this morning. Let’s be mindful. Let’s be honest. In life it is our blessing and our burden to measure and monitor the brevity, variety, and mystery of everything we experience.

Arthur C. Brooks, president of the American Enterprise Institute, describes one aspect of our current predicament sheltered and safe in our homes. “We think about the past and future more than the present. We are mentally in one place and physically in another.”

I understand. The present moment is unsettling. The news is disturbing. The situation is overwhelming. There’s talk of being done. I think we’ve really just begun. Naturally, we look back on the normal we miss and wonder about the new normal yet to come. This present is a strange one to dwell on. Our days seem to blur into one. Our desires strive to overcome the constraints holding us back.

Honest about our feelings and our current circumstance, our real job now is to discover the significance in every single moment of our lives. This is how we become sensitive to the brevity, variety, and mystery of our experiences. We strive to see the significance in each one of them, in all of them.

At a time of personal disruption and upset, God speaks to Moses’ brother Aaron following the death of two of Aaron's sons. “You must distinguish between the sacred and the profane,” between the significant and the trivial. This is wisdom of our Jewish tradition for these days we impatiently endure.

We are living through historically significant times. Let’s make them personally meaningful days, as well. Let’s hear God’s command to “distinguish between the sacred and the profane,” between the significant and the trivial. Let’s not spend these surreal days only in worry, disengagement, and loneliness.

Instead, let’s also remember the ring. When these days of pandemic and fear are gone, let’s be able to say we did something important and productive during our homebound days of isolation. Let’s be able to say we used these days for purpose and growth because, for these days and all days, we know a most precious gem of truth. *Gam zeh ya’avor*. This too will pass.

**EACH LIFE IS PRECIOUS**

Passover *Yizkor* | April 16, 2020

Each life is precious. Every death is significant. Tragically, it’s hard to remember this truth during these sad days of grief and devastation. So far, as of this morning, more than 137,000 human beings infected with COVID-19 have died. Horrific as that number is, and knowing it’s going to get bigger, more upsetting is the loss of each and every one of them as a beloved parent, child, sibling, grandparent, aunt, uncle, niece, nephew, cousin, loving partner, colleague, or dear friend.

We’re also mindful this morning of personal losses. The passing of our loving parents, siblings, relatives and friends in recent days and weeks. Grief we ought to share by embracing and being with one another. Not offering our condolences at a physical distance, no less sincere.

Bound together and caring for one another, we hope for spring to arrive with its promise of redemption on Passover and life’s renewal in this season. Yet, dimming our hope is our awareness of so many deaths near and dear to so many people. Each life is precious. Every death is significant. We cherish and strive to remember each individual in life and the memories of all whom we personally recall with love today.

Over the course of a year, more than 58 million people die. It’s a staggering statistic. Balanced by the birth of almost 150 million new lives each year. Everyday murders and accidents end the lives of 1,300 human beings. Mosquitoes take 2,800 lives daily. More than 50,000 people die from illnesses. I don’t present these numbers to shock or upset. Nor do I diminish the current plague of death in our Coronavirus impacted world.

I want to remind each and every one of us of a risk. We cannot ever become de-sensitized to death. We must always pause. Honor the dead. Care for the bereaved with abiding compassion. Cherish life. Do all we can to live it fully. Do all we can to help others live fully, safely, and in health.

This morning I want you to know. Today anticipates tomorrow. The Talmud calls today, the 8th day of *Pesah*, tomorrow. In describing the Torah and Haftarah texts we just read our sages label yesterday the last day of our festival and then list today’s texts by saying, “*u-l’mahar*” “and for tomorrow.” Today is a tomorrow, a day we’ve not yet met.

Imagine that! Living in this present moment we seek what comes next. Confronting loss and disappointment all around us, we all grieve. How briefly it seems we have and we hold. When we feel sad today we long for consolation tomorrow.

Experiencing the joys of pride and accomplishment, we grow sensitive. How briefly it seems we reflect and rejoice. When we feel happy today we hope for perspective tomorrow. Today anticipates tomorrow.

This week we’ve eaten matzah to honor our ancestor’s redemption from Egypt. For seven days we celebrated our freedom. This sacred week we rejoiced in nature’s spring and felt our spirits reborn.

Surely, each of us with our memories understands. We prevent ourselves from being de-sensitized to death by remembering our loved ones’ purposes in life. We honor their accomplishments. We internalize the lessons of their lives as wisdom for our own.

During these difficult days, personally for some of us and collectively for all of humanity, we declare. Each life is precious. Every death is significant. Ironically, that’s why the future is bright. Those we’ve loved and lost taught us how to live. Our memories of them from the past sustain us today and, collected together, assure our people’s and our world’s future. We hold onto our memories because they inspire us to move forward.

Our loved ones lived their complete seven days, long or short. We are their eighth day. We live their tomorrows. And with this awareness we look at our own children and grandchildren. Today anticipates tomorrow.

“*Hinei El y’shu-ati, ev-tah v’lo ef-had, ki ozi v’zimrat yah Adonai va’ye-hi li li-y’shu-ah*. Behold God who is my redeemer! I am confident, unafraid; for the Eternal God is my strength and might, and God will be my deliverance.”

Believe with me. Just as nature’s renewal and rebirth have come this spring, so too will the compassion, love, and goodness of our loved one’s lives live again in our hearts. Through our sorrow, our bonds, and our renewal God redeems our lives.

Our memories inspire our lives. Our lives inspire our hopes. Our hopes inspire our faith. Our faith inspires our vision. Our vision inspires our goals. Our goals inspire our striving to touch the edge of eternity. Today anticipates tomorrow. Every death is significant because each life is precious.

**ONCE IN A LIFETIME**

*Shabbat Hol HaMoed* | April 11, 2020

In all my years, I have celebrated Passover Seders in Chicago, Los Angeles, Boston, New York, Jerusalem, Baltimore, and San Diego. Never before have I celebrated a Seder in seclusion. Like so many of you, this past week we had to figure out how to conduct our Seder over video-conferencing. I don’t think that’s what Moses had in mind when he said to the Israelites, “you’ll remember this day.”

I know of families and friends who gathered from all corners of the world for their first Seder celebrations together. I suspect a new Passover custom may emerge for future Seder gatherings, even when we are able to be together again. And, if you weren’t able to be present at a Seder in such a virtual way this year, please know you were with those of us who could. You were with us in spirit and the bonds we share as the Jewish people’s storytellers.

During our Seder ritual we declare our freedom. In every generation we are each obligated to see ourselves as if we personally left Egypt. It’s a timeless story imparting eternal values. We celebrate Passover every year in spite of, and because of, whatever troubles us.

This year, however, we learned to appreciate something else about Passover. For all that is seasonal or annual or ongoing in our lives, some experiences are once in a lifetime occurrences. This was the most unusual Seder experience of my lifetime, and possibly yours.

This is also Passover’s purpose. Free to appreciate all that we experience, to cherish every experience and every day, too often we don’t. Sometimes we can’t.

Even though in normal days we go to work, often repeating familiar tasks and routines, each interaction and conversation is distinctive. Even though we recite the same words in prayer, every prayer experience feels different, or should. Eating our favorite foods, no meal tastes quite the same as another. Even though two teams meet every season (except this one so far) each game they play is unique.

During this time of staying at home and apart, our perspective enlarges. Preparing for, or looking back on, each and every day we can remind ourselves. Our lives are truly rich and full because the freedom of our movement introduces us to familiar and new people and places. No Pharaoh rules over us. We are responsible for ourselves, and for each other.

Though it may not feel this way right now. You and I are deeply worried. Worried in a way that could also be a once in a lifetime experience for some of us. Our livelihoods may not be secure right now. Possibly for the first or only time in our lives. The threat of illness is all around. In an unprecedented way, the angel of death hovers over our world.

Worried as we are, we find courage in the lore and traditions of Passover. The ultimate vision of Passover, and of the Haggadah text we used at our Seder tables, is that through God’s blessing in our lives we may overcome death and despair.

“Then came the Holy One, Blessed be God, and slaughtered the angel of death who killed the butcher, who slaughtered the ox that drank the water that quenched the fire that burnt the stick that beat the dog that bit the cat that ate the kid that my father bought for two *zuzim, had gadya, had gadya*.”

It’s a strange Seder song, one we often play with. More than that, it’s a song about overcoming loss and worry. When we’re done singing, there is no more pain and no more death, only goodness and life. If only that were true to our current experience.

Yet, if the Exodus is our people’s once in a lifetime memory, it’s vision is for all time and every circumstance. This week, while worried and physically distant, we still choose to share the wonder and meaning of our ideals and purposes for life in a uniquely surreal circumstance.

This week we hope, more than ever before, to live Passover’s lessons in a future we impatiently await. We pray this Passover truly be a once in a lifetime event. Going forward, we want to live openly and reflectively. Seeing our lives overall as collections of unique experiences inspiring and defining us, rather than limiting our abilities and denying our freedoms.

In the future, may our days be more satisfying and significant because we understand freedom more personally. During these quiet and lonely days, let’s train ourselves to focus freely on each next moment we will encounter as being once in a lifetime – because it probably is.

**REMARKABLE**

Passover First Day | April 9, 2020

For those of us who could, a remarkable thing happened last night. There was a palpable unity of Jewish peoplehood, memory, and destiny as so many responded with creativity and video-conferencing to enjoy our Passover Seder celebrations.

We often speak of the unity of our people. Rarely do we actually feel it. All too often our religious, political, cultural, and personal differences divide and weaken us. Last night, I sensed we truly were one in spirit and dedication to our people’s master story and visions of justice, goodness, and freedom.

I participated in two Zoom Seders last night. (*Hag Zoomeah*!) One was our Congregation Beth El synagogue Seder Starter. One was with my family spread over four households. I’m sure many of you had similar experiences. I know of families and friends gathering from all corners of the world for their first *Sedarim* together. I suspect a new Passover Seder custom may emerge going forward. If you weren’t able to gather in such a virtual way, you were with those of us who could in spirit and the bonds we share as the Jewish people’s storytellers.

At the Seder, the Haggadah text introduces the Second Cup of Wine by praising God for our spiritual liberation, for *p’dut nafsheinu*, redeeming our souls. Freedom is not only physical. It is also spiritual. We give praise for the redemption of our souls and the renewal of our lives, for the redemption of our people’s soul, and the renewal of our people’s life.

At this holy season when the entire world is united by disruption and distress, at a time when many of us feel fortunate while others grieve and suffer, an act of redemptive unity, of wholeness and hope is precisely what we needed to demonstrate and celebrate.

Traditionally, our Seder celebrations end with finding and eating the Afikomen, a last taste of Matzah which we no longer see as the bread of affliction and eat as a taste of freedom. Why is this our last ritual moment? We finish the Seder by finding and eating the Afikomen because telling our story of exodus and redemption is not complete until we repair what we broke, until we affirm our hope in a future of restoration and wholeness.

For those of us who could, a remarkable thing happened last night. Separated from one another, we joined together as one whole and holy people. I believe last night we shared a palpable sense of unity and togetherness as the Jewish people.

I pray our wholeness grow stronger and inspire us during these trying times. I also pray our wholeness grow wider, embracing all people in healing, harmony, and the redemption of humanity’s soul. *Hag Sameah*!

**THIS**

*Erev Shabbat HaGadol* | April 3, 2020

I have suggested that our Passover goal this year is to take physical and emotional care of ourselves and to enjoy a Passover of unusual meaning and blessing.

Passover reminds us to take the long view. This current disruption is temporary. As we recite from the Haggadah, “*V’hi sh’amdah la’Avoteinu v’lanu*.” “This has sustained us and our ancestors. For not just one challenge has stood against us.”

Mussar master, Rabbi Moshe Rosenstein explains what “this” is. This is the story of the Exodus from Egypt that sustains us. “Each and every one, in each and every generation, in each and every situation, can learn from the Exodus.”

What can we learn from our circumstance this Passover? Around the world and close to us too many are ill, too may suffer, too many grieve. Many of us are apprehensive about our health, our employment, and our personal security. Yet, we anticipate Passover. We plan creatively and differently for our Seder and holiday celebrations.

Enduring life’s most challenging moments, we need to hold on to our best visions. What we take for granted when life is good inspires us when life is hard. Reminders of what we believe, how we intend to live, and what we most cherish help us during any exodus toward better days.

These days we’re learning that viruses are effective when they persuade the body’s immune system that they are part of the body itself. Viruses mutate so as to appear to host cells not as enemies but friends. From a pandemic, a Passover plague upsetting us, we learn “this” - the inherent and universal message of the Exodus story.

Biological viruses are one type of threat. The viral spread of injustice and cruelty, the hateful thoughts people hold about others, and the inequality Passover stands against ought to be no less on our minds this year. We must always tell our story of Exodus and human dignity. After all, “this has sustained us and our ancestors.”

Alana Newhouse elaborates. “Most Jews throughout history have not been free, whether from murderous regimes or famines or pandemics. What we have been is devoted to the idea that we deserve to be.”

At our Seder table we display a broken piece of Matzah and recite: “This is the bread of affliction which our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt. Let all who are hungry come and eat. Let all who are needy come and celebrate the Passover. This year we are here; next year may we be in Israel. At present we are slaves; next year may we be free people.”

At this year’s Seder, in addition to reciting that paragraph, display a whole Matzah and recite: “This is the bread of health and wholeness that we used to take for granted. Let all who desire, anticipate and behold. Let all who are waiting, be patient and calm. This year we are separated; next year may we be together. This year we are sheltered at home; next year may we be free people.”

This current disruption is temporary. Like every year, our Passover vision is for a better future, a time of health, peace, and goodness. Let’s do our best to make this the mood we bring to our Seder experiences and holiday week. Ours is the privilege of being the Jewish People’s storytellers. “*V’hi sh’amdah la’Avoteinu v’lanu*.” “This has sustained us and our ancestors. For not just one challenge has stood against us.”

I wish you and yours a Passover of unusual meaning and blessing. *Hag Sameah v’Kasher*!

**STRICT AND LENIENT**

*Shabbat Vayikra* | March 28, 2020

Something I don’t often say. I’m proud of my rabbinic colleagues, especially those we normally associate with strict interpretations of Jewish law and custom.

Like all of you in your professions and vocations, in the rabbinate there are colleagues from all streams of Judaism I admire and respect, from whom I learn, and some, not too many, whose rabbinic work frustrates me. I trust some other rabbis may say all of the above about me, and Rabbi Libman, too.

At this time of disruption upending everything we hold dear and sacred, I derive strength from learning about the guidance and choices of rabbis who are instructing their congregants to be more lenient while still observing the traditional practices of Passover. Before I offer an example, let me add some background.

A general principle in *Halakhah*, Jewish law, is “*Safek D’oraita l’humra, Safek D’rabanan l’kula*.” When there is a doubt regarding how to fulfill a commandment in the Torah, a person must be strict. But, when the doubt is regarding a commandment derived from rabbinic tradition, a person may be lenient.

For example, as Passover approaches, since the Torah instructs us to eat matzah and not hametz, unleavened instead of leavened products, we carefully clean away the hametz and eat matzah during the days of our holiday. We call that a *humra*, a strict practice.

Yet, since the prohibition of eating *kitniyot*, legumes like corn, peas, lentils, and rice, is an Ashkenazi rabbinic rule, and not found literally stated in the Torah, individuals and families may choose to be more lenient in their Kosher for Passover food practices.

Beyond reminding everyone to stay home, and to celebrate more or less alone, I’m receiving bulletins from rabbinic organizations in our country, in London, Israel, and elsewhere recommending purchase of essential Passover foods, not more. Some are “allowing the use of some regular” non-hametz food products, though not necessarily supervised as Kosher for Passover, “during this time of crisis.” Several Sephardic Orthodox rabbis in Israel declared this week that families may conduct their shared Seder over videoconference. Remarkable!

When life returns to normal these adaptations, these *kulo*t – leniencies, will cease, in theory. A larger religious question I wonder about is the transformation, especially regarding technology, awaiting us and our previously normative Jewish observances. We won’t wonder too much about that right now.

What I want us to think about today is our own conduct. We all have things about which we are strict or lenient. Each one of us is more or less rigorous about our diets and exercise routines. We react with compassion or judgment when we learn about someone else’s misdeed or short-coming. Sometimes we decide to bend the rules. Other times we pay careful attention to our responsibilities or obligations. Committed to Jewish life, we make our choices too. Strict about this holiday. Lenient about that ritual.

These days I hope we’re being strict about honoring the physical distance between us, rigorous about washing our hands, strong in setting out daily schedules and routines to keep us alert and productive, and lenient with loved ones and friends as we cope and co-exist in a very different form than before.

Most important of all, I hope we’re not being too hard on ourselves. These are tough times for many of us. Perhaps your employment isn’t secure. I’m sure I’m now speaking to individuals and families whose income may be less than it was a week or two ago. Running errands is difficult for some of us. All of us, no matter who we may be with, feel isolated if not outright lonely.

Sometimes, we respond to burdens like these by blaming ourselves. We feel we’ve let down others or ourselves. Even though this unprecedented experience is beyond any of our control, we internalize the pressures it creates and feel responsible.

Let’s be clear. The categories of *humra*, being strict, and *kula*, being lenient, are personal not just legal, descriptions. Of all times, this is a time for leniency about your feelings and sense of self. If you are facing personal challenges these days, face them honestly. Discuss them with others. Reach out to us at Beth El. Most important of all, don’t be too hard on yourself.

On typical days, which these are not, we tend toward the middle. Sometimes we’re strict. Other times lenient. We lean one way or the other as a reflection of our experiences and temperaments. That’s why I respect those rabbis issuing Passover advice contrary to their preferences and religious values. They remind us that life, and people’s responses to life, are nuanced. No one of us ought to live on auto-pilot. We’re capable of much more. We can think. We can evaluate. We can change. We can hold firm. We can forgive. We can relax.

In the midst of these surreal days, we anticipate Passover. In a “normal” spring, we’d be preparing and cleaning, inviting Seder guests, planning menus and discussions, looking forward to our happy celebration. This year, we seek to strike a balance between precisely celebrating our annual opportunity to tell the Passover story and gently adjusting to our less festive mood and experience of separation.

About this, I have no doubt. This year, with confidence and consideration, by ourselves or somehow connected to others, this year our goal is to take physical and emotional care of ourselves and enjoy a Passover of unusual meaning and blessing. About this, we can also be proud.

**A VISION OF REDEMPTION**

*Shabbat HaHodesh* | March 21, 2020

This is an unprecedented Shabbat. These days are an unprecedented moment in all of our lives. Let’s acknowledge some of what we’re experiencing and going through. We’re nervous, perhaps anxious. We feel lonely, in some of our realities and in all of our separation. Beyond frustrated or afraid, we grieve the loss of routines, our plans, our social networks, and our hopes. We want it all back, soon. We didn’t do anything to create this unprecedented, surreal moment. Remaining calm, always optimistic, the only certainty we know right now is that we’re not in control.

It reminds me of a very different unprecedented moment, our ancestors’ Exodus from Egypt. We can imagine their upset and pain. We understand a slave has no dignity or control over his destiny, let alone his day. That’s why today, this unprecedented Shabbat, is significant. We call it *Shabbat HaHodesh*, the Shabbat on which we announce THE month of redemption is about to arrive.

In a special excerpt from Exodus we read: “This month shall mark for you – plural- the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you.” In simple terms it means this Thursday will be Rosh Hodesh Nisan, the first day of the first Biblical month. I guess we ought say, Happy New Year! It also means Passover is just two weeks away.

One of my favorite Torah Commentators is the 16th century Italian rabbi, Obadiah Seforno. About this verse he explains. “Hence forth the months of the years shall be yours, to do with them as you will. During slavery your days, your time, did not belong to you. Your time and days were used to work for others and to fulfill their will.”

In other words, it is only in freedom that our collective will, not only our individual liberty, can determine how best to behave and use our time, how to serve God and humanity, not a Pharaoh or tyrant. Only in freedom can we decide how to best live out the gift of our lives for dignity and goodness.

That’s what’s troubling us these days. Each and every one of us accepts our responsibility to step back from normal living, to remain home and socially distant, and to do our part to keep our society healthy. We know we will come through this and be back out and about in the course of time.

Unlike the Israelite slaves, we are the ones placing limits on our freedom. Freedom and responsibility go together. We know the Jewish people’s story. No one is free unless everyone is responsible. Yet, like the Israelite slaves, in the short term, we are not in control of our daily destiny.

This day, this Shabbat, we take hold of a vision of redemption.

Instead of feeling sorry for ourselves, at this unusual time, let’s dedicate ourselves to using these days, beyond whatever work and maintenance is required of us, to prepare for a better future.

All over our country, and around the world, people are expending incredible efforts to do what they must and can to sustain and redesign businesses, schools, and organizations, to care for loved ones and friends, and to rebuild the structures of normalcy and routine upon which we and our society depend.

Imagine what all of this human capital could do if we were actually solving the problems confronting us not during a pandemic. This collective determination inspires us. We human beings have remarkable capacities to cope and abilities to care.

What can you accomplish this coming week and beyond that will make a difference when you go out? With whom can you deepen, begin, or re-establish a bond? What can you reflect on about yourself and see these days as an opportunity for growth and renewal? What new learning, what new ritual practice, what new celebration of Jewish life do you now have the time to explore?

“*HaHodesh hazeh lakhem rosh hodashim*,” this month is the first the months. This is a time for new beginnings. This day, this Shabbat, we take hold of a vision of redemption.

**LETTER TO CONGREGATION BETH EL**

March 19, 2020

It’s way too soon to begin to measure the scale of this disruption. Two things, however, are immediately clear.

First, all over our country, and around the world, people are expending incredible efforts to do what they must and can to sustain and redesign businesses, schools, and organizations, to care for loved ones and friends, and to rebuild the structures of normalcy and routine upon which we and our society depend.

Imagine what all of this human capital could do if we were actually solving the problems confronting us not during a pandemic. This collective determination inspires us. We human beings have remarkable capacities to cope and abilities to care.

Second, for better and for worse, this crisis will transform our lives and our society well into the future. Today, we can’t have any real idea about what these changes will be.

Here at Congregation Beth El, we are working intentionally and thoughtfully to move our communal routine online. We are striving to build, piece by piece, a virtual community that can ultimately enhance and enrich our entire synagogue community, for this exigent moment and for the future.

Each week or so we will introduce more layers of resources and opportunities to engage in Jewish life and learning virtually and vitally. We will make use of a variety of tools beyond Livestreaming, including Zoom and other digital platforms. We want to foster new forms of connection to maintain and enrich our warm and caring synagogue family.

Patience is a key virtue, teaches mussar, 19th century Jewish ethical teachings, especially at a stressful time. Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Satanov, an Eastern European mussar master whose writing influenced Benjamin Franklin, instructs, “When something bad happens to you and you do not have the power to avoid it, do not aggravate the situation even more through wasted anxiety and impatience.”

Like you, we’re in this for the duration. While wanting to do a lot quickly, we believe it’s more important to stay calm, to pace ourselves, to be responsive to your desires, and to do it all as well as we possibly can.

We look forward to being with you online. Don’t hesitate to call, text, or email us for any reason. You’ll be hearing from us. We want to hear from you. Please stay well and take good care.

**OUR SPIRITUAL, NOT ONLY OUR PHYSICAL, WELL-BEING II**

*Shabbat Parah* Sermon| March 14, 2020

An article in The New York Times caught my attention earlier this week. Mattia Ferraresi, an Italian journalist, writes from a quarantined Italy. “Where does God self-quarantine during an epidemic? Not in a church, probably. At least not in a church in Italy.”

Like most synagogues and organizations, we sent out a Coronavirus advisory to our congregation. We explained how our campus cleaning protocols include regularly disinfecting public spaces and paying careful attention to strict health guidelines. Which is all fine and necessary. I want the synagogue to communicate something more, however.

We ought turn to our religious heritage for spiritual technologies, not medical ones. Spiritual technologies are insights about and responses to life, methods to express our emotions, joys, and apprehension. These we need more than ever as, alarmed, we take precautions and monitor the Coronavirus outbreak.

I wrote in our advisory: As we monitor this spreading Coronavirus, many of us feel uncertain and uneasy. We rediscover how truly interconnected is all that lives. COVID-19 is an example of a virus with origins in animals in one part of the world that entered the human community and spread around the globe. Not only is all of life interconnected, but so is all that sustains our lives. A physical menace impacts our social routines and economy. We stare at a truth we often ignore. Everything and everyone is bound together, equally vulnerable and responsible. This is a core spiritual message of our Jewish religious values.

Medical authorities tell us how to be careful and which precautions to take. We are mindful of them and responsible toward others and ourselves. But, we wonder. What authority helps us respond to our fears? What insight calms us? How do we each decide what to do, where to travel, where to gather?

Mattia Ferraresi suggests the same in his Op-Ed piece. “No one should dispute the need to strictly limit ritual gatherings and comply with public safety regulations…but for believers, religion is a fundamental source of spiritual healing and hope. It’s a remedy against despair, providing psychological and emotional support that is an integral part of well-being.”

I seek wisdom from Jewish tradition. In addition to genuine nervousness about our health, I sense something more is present in our reactions to this novel Coronavirus. I’m not able to define it yet. Our guts tell us more than a virus is threatening us. Monitoring daily news reports about the virus’ spread and how we ought to behave, we intuit a lot is at risk. Too much about our society, and societies around the globe, seems beyond our personal abilities to secure. We’re living through turbulent times. Hate is resurgent. Leadership is weak. Change or disruption impact our climate, demographics, national identities, and economies.

“If you look at the historical record,” observes Monica Schoch-Spana, a senior scientist at Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, “you’ll find that when outbreaks of novel disease emerge they do trigger high levels of anxiety and uncertainty and dread. You can’t see it; you can’t smell it. As a result average people get a little bit more agitated. Fear is going to be up because it’s unfamiliar, and we don’t have the usual counter-measures like vaccines or medicines.”

Dr. Schoch-Spana warns. “When people are in a fearful state of mind they start sorting the world into safe people, unsafe people, safe places, unsafe places. If you can start to pinpoint the source of the problem that gives you a sense of control and calms you down.”

Striving to remain calm, the only certainty we know these days is that we’re not in control. At a moment like this one, Judaism teaches us responsible choice. Living fully and according to our plans and desires, we try to follow our routines and work to establish a proper balance. We evaluate the daily choices we must make and the necessary precautions we ought to take. Even so, it’s clear in the weeks ahead we’re going to become more and more socially isolated.

The 16th century Jewish law code, the *Shulhan Arukh* instructs. “One should distance oneself from things that may lead to danger, for a danger to life is more serious than a religious prohibition, and one should be more worried about a possible danger to life than a possible transgression of a religious prohibition. Therefore, the Sages prohibited one to walk in a place of danger, such as close to a leaning or shaky wall or alone at night. They also prohibited drinking water from streams at night or placing one's mouth on a flowing pipe of water to drink, for these things may lead to danger.”

Faced with a contagious disease, the Talmudic sage Rabbi Joshua ben Levi reached out to those infected. He asked, “If the Torah bestows grace upon those who learn it, as we are taught in the Book of Proverbs, will it not protect them from danger as well?” It’s a spiritual technology, a tool to lessen isolation. Treat the whole person, their body and their soul. Connect with them to overcome their social isolation. Bring them hope and ease, routine and uplift.

Consider the strange Torah law of the Red Heifer. A person becomes spiritually impure when they come in contact with death. A bizarre ritual rectifies the situation. “The pure person shall sprinkle water mixed with the ashes of the Red Heifer thus purifying him.”

In Jewish spirituality, purity and impurity are not absolute categories like forbidden and permitted. They are states that people and objects can enter into and escape from.

We get that today. Touch something or greet someone, then wash your hands. Touch something or greet someone, then wash your hands. It’s an unending cycle of entering into and escaping from a contemporary, health based, form of purity and impurity.

There is a mysterious brilliance in this ancient Hebrew text. It’s also a spiritual technology, a symbolically relevant reminder of our current moment. In every era, people confront health concerns and social anguish. At all times, people seek safety and renewal. By this ancient rite, our ancestors affirmed the on-going gift of life rather than the inevitability of illness or death.

I don’t propose sprinkling ourselves with the blood and ashes of a cow as an answer to the Coronavirus. I do recommend monitoring our attitudes along with washing our hands. We can each hold good or bad thoughts in our minds. Emotional purity or impurity comes from the choice of mood we make. Within each of our souls is the God-given ability to cope and determine how best to be in whatever circumstance we may come to confront.

Finally, the Medieval scholar Maimonides describes our spiritual purpose when we worry about our health and well-being. “One who regulates life in accordance with the laws of medicine with the sole motive of maintaining a sound and vigorous physique, to work and labor for personal benefit, is not following the right path. A person should aim to maintain physical health and vigor in order to maintain an upright soul, a condition to know God.”

Maimonides reminds us. We seek to be healthy and to live well for the sake of what we hope to achieve and enjoy in life. A healthy life is one of purpose, service, goodness, and love. A life during which we try to regain and reclaim control over whatever upsets or disrupts. Afraid and careful, let’s not forget how to live in public, or if necessary in isolation, by our lives’ ideals.

Maimonides concludes, “Whoever throughout his life follows this course will be continually serving God, as to have a sound body is to serve God.” Hopefully remaining in good health, and being of sound body, we will also serve God by caring for one another.

**OUR SPIRITUAL, NOT OUR ONLY PHYSICAL, WELL-BEING I**

March 4, 2020

As we monitor this spreading Coronavirus, many us feel uncertain and uneasy. We rediscover how truly interconnected is all that lives. COVID-19 is an example of a virus with origins in animals in one part of the world that entered the human community and spread around the globe. Not only is all of life interconnected, but so is all that sustains our lives. A physical menace potentially impacts our social routines and economy. We stare at a truth we often ignore. Everything and everyone is bound together, equally vulnerable and responsible. This is a core spiritual message of our Jewish religious values.

Medical authorities tell us how to be careful and which precautions to take. We are mindful of them and responsible toward others and ourselves. But, we wonder. What authority helps us respond to our fears? What insight calms us? As we each must, how do we decide what to do, where to travel, where to gather?

The Biblical Book of Proverbs observes, “If there is anxiety in people’s minds, let them quash it, and turn it into joy with a good thought.” A 19th century Ukrainian rabbi known as Malbim comments, “A person has the inner strength to elevate which personal vision to focus on. We can each awaken good or bad thoughts in our minds, and the choice we make is what fills our spirit and becomes our mood.”

Within each of our souls is the God-given ability to cope, to choose, and to determine how to be in each circumstance we confront. Judaism teaches us responsible choice. Living fully and according to our plans and desires, we cannot – and we should not - stop following the routines and opportunities of our lives. Instead, let’s establish a proper balance, evaluating the life living and affirming choices we must make and the necessary precautions we ought to take. Let’s turn anxiety into compassion and, careful with our health and well-being, live our days with confidence and joy.