

Finding Meaning and Holiness during a Pandemic
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Ohef Sholom Temple
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We are living through an unprecedented time in our history. Our lives have been upended in so many ways: from businesses, schools, and synagogues being closed; to being asked to distance ourselves from one another by six feet or not to come in contact with friends and neighbors, let alone strangers, at all.

All of these things are so alien to us -- we who are accustomed to the warmth and closeness of human contact. We derive so much comfort from handshaking, and hugging and kissing; so the irony is, at a time when we need each other more than ever, we are forced to be physically isolated and can feel so alone. For those of us prone to loneliness and depression, this is devastating.

Add to those feelings, fear and anxiety: about the unknown; about our health and that of those we love; about how the virus is impacting on our livelihoods, our jobs, and our financial security; about plans for the foreseeable future from B'nai Mitzvah and weddings to graduations. There are disappointments about cancelled lifecycles, travel to see loved ones, and added stress about the safety and quarantine of those who are trying to make it home. And then there is the personal risk of first responders: doctors, nurses, and hospital personnel; EMT's, fire fighters, and police officers; even those who work in our groceries, drugstores and pharmacies. We thank each of you and ask God's blessing upon you all.

What I most want to remind you tonight, is that you are not alone. If this virus has taught us anything, it is that we are one human family - interconnected in every way, from the molecules of our bodies to the communities, countries and world in which we live. We are all in this together. We are all here for each other. We are each a phone call, or Facetime call, away from one another.

Here at Temple, we have already told you the many ways in which we are continuing to show you how, at this time especially, Judaism can bring meaning, solace and joy to your life. Our Caring Committee, Board, volunteers and clergy are reaching out to every congregant of Ohef Sholom, beginning with the most vulnerable, to check in on you. And if you need groceries or medicine, several members have volunteered to help you with these as well.

In terms of our Jewish practices, we are livestreaming services, zooming Torah study and will even share an interactive Seder. These ancient rituals, even in new forms, are grounding. They remind us that the tradition we hold dear is steadfast and true, that no matter how the world spins around us, God, Torah and the Jewish people, indeed all of humanity, are eternal.

Now we want to offer you opportunities to reach out and connect with us and are looking to set up time for interaction and not just one way communication. We're considering a "hangout" online where we can talk to one another. And, as always, but now more than ever, we welcome your calls, texts, e-mails and private messaging on social media as well. Our priority is to be here for you -- to assure you that truly you matter. We may not be able to touch each other hand to hand; but, as I wrote in the last congregational

letter, we can connect to each other heart to heart and soul to soul. I know each of you by name, who your loved ones are, how you are related, your stories, your struggles, and I, and Cantor Jen and our remarkable staff and leadership all care deeply about you.

It may seem obvious to affirm these things, but I don't think it is. The tendency during stressful times is to isolate ourselves even more and not to reach out; to let ourselves go, to give up on taking care of ourselves; to make poor food choices and forgo exercise; not to structure our time and make productive and meaningful choices about how to spend it; to skip out on opportunities to "see" others, even virtually; to dismiss the things that stimulate our minds and heighten our spirits. These only add to our frustration, anger, sadness, and grief over so many losses.

Judaism teaches us that we need to do just the opposite -- that now more than ever we need to step outside of ourselves, to live mindfully, to be fully present in our lives, and to help others, to meditate and pray and have words with God. All of these shift our consciousness.

Another way to combat fear and loneliness and to shift our perspective comes right out of our tradition as well - and that is to live with gratitude. Count your blessings! If you have food and shelter, be grateful. If you and those you love are safe and healthy, be thankful. If you can read, sing, garden, walk, paint, knit, anything that you love that brings you joy, praise God. If you can talk to those you love on the phone or via Facetime, do it. Your friends and loved ones will be uplifted and so will you.

Last Shabbat, Cantor Jen and I welcomed baby Lana Marie Barnes-Pollack into the covenant of our people and this past Wednesday I joined two people, very much in love, in marriage. Both were over the internet. And you know what? The emotions, the joy, the meaning and the fulfillment were all present in every way. Yesterday a dozen of us studied Torah via zoom and it was wonderful learning together; you can do the same tomorrow morning at 9 a.m. if you e-mail David Metzger for the link. And tonight, I hope you are feeling the spirit of Shabbat and this sacred, caring community bringing peace into your hearts and homes.

One of the finest teachings at Torah Study yesterday was offered by our member Jay Lazier about the very end of this week's double Torah portion -- Vayakel/Pekudei, with which we conclude the book of Exodus. The final verse reads: "For over the Tabernacle a cloud of the Lord rested by day, and fire would appear in it by night, in the view of all of the house of Israel throughout their journeys - *mas-ei-hem*."

In researching the root of the Hebrew word, *mas-ei-hem*, Rabbi Daniel Gropper quoted the 11th century biblical commenator Rashi. Rashi notes that *Mas-ei*, can also mean "rest stop" - even when we are at a stand still, as we are right now, we are on a journey.

Thus, if we can view this time as a significant inward quest, perhaps we can turn our fear and uncertainty into fulfillment and growth. Maybe in these new forms of connection and community, we can find meaning and holiness.

So let us pray in the words of Rabbi Naomi Levy:
We are frightened, God,
Worried for our loved ones,
Worried for our world.
Helpless and confused,

We turn to You
Seeking comfort, faith and hope.

Teach us God, to turn our panic into patience,
And our fear into acts of kindness and support.
Our strong must watch out for our weak,
Our young must take care of our old.
Help each one of us to do our part to halt the spread of this virus

Send strength and courage to the doctors and nurses
In the frontlines of this battle,
Fortify them with the full force of their healing powers.

Send wisdom and insight to the scientists
Working day and night across the world to discover healing treatments.
Bless their efforts, God.
Fill our leaders with the wisdom and the courage
To choose wisely and act quickly.
Help us, God, to see that we are one world,
One people
Who will rise above this pandemic together.

Send us health God,
Watch over us,
Grace us with Your love,
Bless us with Your healing light.
Hear us God,
Heal us God,
Amen.