

Rosh Hashanah 5781

Life in a Pandemic

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L'Shana Tova!

Our Temple group, cruising along a highway, began to face a new reality. The world, our world, was changing by the minute. As we passed farms and flocks, small towns and bigger cities, making our way on the road to Marrakesh, listening to the words of Crosby Stills Nash and Young in the background, a wave of fear rolled through the bus.

Across from me sat our Israeli guide, frantically messaging with friends and family back in Israel. Others on the bus were checking American news on their devices. We were hearing about a virus, about possible lockdowns, about real risks. We understood that things were changing rapidly. But that might have been the only thing we understood in those moments cruising down the highway.

The date was March 4, 2020. Around us that day, we saw actual shepherds with their flocks, an image that could easily have been 2500 years old. And we traveled in a sleek modern bus, the contrast between old and new so clear to all of us that day. Before that day, the notion of a pandemic seemed as old as an image of a shepherd and his flock. That day changed every one of us on the bus, challenging us in ways none of us could have ever conjured.

As we explored Morocco, we visited synagogues and cemeteries, cities once home to large Jewish communities. We learned the rich and beautiful history, of a place where Jews and Muslims thrived together. We saw an extraordinary society in which religious and secular, African, Arab, and European, Jew and Christian and Muslim all coexisted in harmony. We saw and learned how our cousins survived and thrived, building for their families and their communities, enduring challenges. Again and again, we saw with our own eyes the power of the Jewish value of hope.

A few years ago, another temple group traveled the back roads of Alabama and Mississippi, learning the rich history of the Jewish communities of the South. That trip too had many strands braided together, for we explored the path to civil rights in America, and the movement of Jews from small towns to medium-sized cities and then to large cities. And in that trip too, we saw again and again the Jewish value of hope, the Jewish urge for justice.

And in Temple trips to Israel and Central Europe and Cuba, we have learned the power of history, the effects of hate and fear, and even more, the persistent power of hope. In many of the Jewish cemeteries we visited, we saw rows of graves for the victims of pandemics. In too many places we learned of the sadness and destruction which befell our people. Too many chapters of our history as Jews are filled with pain and fear and devastation. We have endured more than our share of tyrants and terror. And yet, through it all, Lamrot HaKol, in spite of it all, we Jews still live with hope in our thoughts and hearts.

This year, as Temple Concord gathers virtually for the first time ever to celebrate Rosh Hashanah, we find ourselves living in the shadow of a pandemic. We are gripped by fear, surrounded by brokenness, consumed with sorrow. The news just yesterday of the passing of Ruth Bader Ginsberg only adds to the despair so many of us are feeling. But living in a pandemic also provides fertile ground for developing a stronger sense of care and concern. And if we are lucky, living in a pandemic will help us pursue a better congregation, a better community, a better society.

- I. Pandemic produces fear
 - A. How do we comprehend?
 1. We need to be honest with ourselves and each other
 2. We need to accept the fear and acknowledge it
 - B. What have we done?
 1. Is this God? Are we like Babel, or Noah's generation?
 2. Are we Isaac about to be sacrificed? Where is the ram?!
 3. What can we do?
- II. Pandemic promotes health and concern for the other
 - A. Learning to be safer—hands, masks, space
 - B. Learning to help each other—needs, connectivity
 - C. Learning to do for each other—wearing mask for each other!

III. Pandemic portends a better society---respect, connection, equality—RBG’s Legacy

- A. Coincidence that racial reckoning comes during pandemic?
 - 1. Hearing the other
 - 2. Feeling the other
 - 3. Equality’s pull!
- B. The Pandemic doesn’t discriminate—only people can do that.
 - 1. What are we willing to tolerate?
 - 2. Are we ready to do the work of reconciliation?
 - 3. Can we ever see all people as equal? Male and female, native born and immigrant, people of all faiths, all races, all backgrounds, all genders! We don’t have to agree, but can we exist on an even plane?

Lots of fear and awe and trembling in our prayers these Holy Days.

Prayers—Unetaneh Tokef

struggling with how we will live or die,

praying in the singular or plural

Taking a Heshbon HaNefesh, an accounting of our souls.

Torah—a dreadful section to study

We can see ourselves in so many ways. Are we God, asking people to do the unthinkable? Are we Abraham, willing to blindly follow orders? Are we Sarah, silently weeping? Are we Isaac, confused and afraid? Are we the ram, innocent and stuck, but present to save the day?

Or are we the Jewish people, history’s most resilient people, the ones who know how to persevere and endure and be strong and strengthen others?

Pandemics feel permanent. But they are temporary. Like that Moroccan highway or Southern byway, pandemics take us from one place to the next. We decide how many stops to make, we decide what souvenirs to carry, we learn from our journey. We are learning much. I pray that our learning leads us to doing, and that with each other and with God, we can build a more perfect world.