

# Hey Rabbi!

## Special Coronavirus Edition

### Five Questions and Answers with Rabbi Michael Shields of Temple Israel

March 2020 – “After the fire – a gentle whisper; taking extra steps to reach out.”

Rabbi Michael Shields took over the bimah (pulpit) of Tallahassee’s Temple Israel in July 2019. As we ponder how to deal with the intensifying worldwide threat of the illness known as COVID-19, here is the latest in a continuing series of chats with Rabbi Shields. Some responses may have been edited for brevity or continuity.

Q: I know that most cases of COVID-19 are mild and resolve without great damage, but...not all of them. I’m frightened for myself, for my parents, for my kids, for my grandkids. If we were in Temple Israel right now, what would you say to the congregation?

A: “Judaism is most definitely a communal religion, so this idea of isolating oneself is counter to the soulful yearning of people in the Jewish community. The idea of a Jewish monk of sorts meditating in solitude is strange. If we were together at temple, I would say that we are part of a covenant, a Temple Israel Covenant, a Jewish Tallahassee Covenant. Just because we are not physically in our worship space doesn’t mean the covenant is revoked. Quite the opposite – we must take extra steps to reach out soul-to-soul.

“Mitzvah Action: To that end, I am calling on all those in the Temple Israel Covenant to create and respond to a ‘check-in phone chain.’ When someone from your Temple Israel family calls you to check-in and say hello, answer the call. When it’s done, consider yourself ‘it’ and call two other people – at least one of them should be someone you don’t know. Stay tuned and be ready for your call.”

Q. I need my faith to comfort me at times like these, but I can’t help wondering: If God is good and true, why are we sent these challenges?

A: “We are God’s angels. We make God manifest on this Earth. If we are good and true, God smiles because God is good and true.

“1 Kings 19:11: Go out and stand before me on the mountain,’ the Lord told him. And as Elijah stood there, the Lord passed by, and a mighty windstorm hit the mountain. It was such a terrible blast that the rocks were torn loose, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind, there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. 12: And after the earthquake, there was a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire, there was the sound of a gentle whisper. (A still small voice).’

“Holiness is all around us. God is with us. I believe this to be true.”

Q: In ways still to be determined, regular services certainly will be curtailed, maybe completely suspended for some time. What do you suggest we do in lieu of regular services?

A: “As proud members of the progressive Jewish congregation of Tallahassee, we have an opportunity to deepen our study of Judaism and our own prayer practice. We will be live-broadcasting meaningful worship opportunities. We still are figuring out exactly what those will be, but I know they will be special, from the heart and readily available (Facebook Live likely will be the platform.) These will be opportunities to connect and share sacred Shabbat time with one another. Perhaps if we all commit to attend from our own fortresses of solitude, we will spiritually overcome this Kryptonite called coronavirus.

Q: Historically, times of social and economic upheaval often have turbocharged anti-Semitism. Should we be concerned about this?

A: “I share with you this link to a Pew research study that reveals that Jewish people are the most admired and popular groups in the United States. <https://time.com/2992611/study-jews-most-popular-religious-group-in-the-u-s/?amp=true>

“I don’t share this to minimize the threat of antisemitism or argue the challenging truth that neo-Nazis and white supremacists exist in our country. It is to provide some perspective. The overwhelming majority of our neighbors love and appreciate us as fellow human beings created in the image of God. Even as we take necessary security precautions and as we combat anti-Semitism and anti-Israel hatred, we must seek to approach each day and the people we encounter with optimism and hope.”

Q: In summary, what special thoughts would you like to share with the congregation under these circumstances?

A: “It says in Deuteronomy 13:5: ‘You should walk after the Eternal your God.’ The rabbis ask: Can this possibly be taken literally? Rabbi Hama ben Hanina, a third-century rabbi, wondered: How can a person ‘walk after’ God if, as we read earlier in the same book, ‘The Eternal your God is a devouring fire’ (Deuteronomy 4:24)? Rabbi Hama teaches that the mitzvah of our verse is not to literally attempt to ‘walk after God’ — who has no physical form! — but instead to follow ‘after the attributes of God.’ What, then, we might ask, are “God’s attributes?

“Rabbi Hama was a meticulous student of the biblical text; he identified the verses that he thought best illustrated the attributes of God that humans can aspire to emulate – the ways we should ‘follow after’ God’s example:

“ ‘The Eternal made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and dressed them’ (Genesis 18:1) – so you should clothe the naked. The Holy One, blessed be, visited the sick, as it is written: The Eternal appeared to [Abraham] at the Oaks of Mamre’ (Genesis 18:1) – so you should visit the sick. The Holy One, blessed be, comforted the mourners, as it is written: Then after the death of Abraham, God blessed Isaac his son (Genesis 25:11) – so you should comfort the mourners. The Holy One, blessed be, buried the dead, as it is written: [God] buried him [i.e. Moses] in the valley (Deuteronomy 34:5) — so you should bury the dead.’

“In the very first chapter of the Torah, we find the Torah’s famous teaching that humanity is made ‘in the divine image.’ According to this talmudic text, to be ‘in God’s image’ means to act in the ways that God acts; and all the examples here are acts of caring and compassion.

“Rabbi Hama offers us a model of Jewish spiritual practice. It is not a coincidence that visiting the sick and comforting mourners are among those mitzvot that are without limit in the amount we are called to do them. We fulfill these and other acts of caring to the fullest extent we are able. We are ‘following after God’s ways,’ becoming like God and drawing closer to a God.

“Rabbi Rami Shapiro writes about how we, made in God’s image, are the manifestation of God’s ahavat olam, unending love:

We are loved by an unending love.

We are embraced by arms that find us

even when we are hidden from ourselves ...

We are counseled by voices that guide us

even when we are too embittered to hear ...

Embraced, touched, soothed, and counseled,

Ours are the arms,

the fingers, the voices; ...

We are loved by an unending love.”

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*Now 41 years old, a native of Chappaqua, N.Y., Rabbi Shields holds degrees from the University of Albany-State University of New York and from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. He, his wife Jacquie and their two young children now live in northeast*

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We welcome your participation in Hey Rabbi! If you have a question to be considered for the next installment, please send it to Martin Merzer at [marty@martinmerzer.com](mailto:marty@martinmerzer.com)