

## Whispering from the Wall

### I.

There was once a famous song about “writing the words to a sermon which no one will hear.” It is a strange feeling indeed.

These last few weeks, but especially the last few days, have been extremely difficult for our community. And the events have been moving at lightning speed.

At the macro level, our country has seen the markets plummet, and just a few moments ago the President declared a National State of Emergency.

Closer to home, however, each and every one of us is filled with concern for our families, our dear friends, our neighbors, our community at large. Is there any one of us who has not coughed over the last few days, or heard our child cough, without our hearts skipping a beat? Is there any one of us who are not concerned for our parents or grandparents at this time?

The steps we took this week as a community are a reflection of the degree of seriousness with which the medical community is taking a global pandemic.

I know, and personally experience, the terrible burden being placed on families at this time. It is not easy to be in such close quarters. Make sure to get fresh air, but no play dates. Above all, as I wrote in my previous communication, let us all be patient and loving with each other.

My heart aches for those who will be home over Shabbat by themselves, the one day a week when we cannot at least call to check in on these most precious members of our community. Please know we are all thinking of you, and will check in right after Shabbat.

**As goes without saying, should anyone feel unwell over Shabbat, in terms of coughing, fever, or shortness of breath, call your doctor right away for a consultation. This is not a leniency in Shabbat, but a stringency in saving lives.**

## II.

I am so deeply grateful that each and every one of you has not only respected the guidelines we have adopted on the basis of the most senior leadership of our local hospitals, and with the support of the Board of Health, but that you have risen to the occasion, as I knew you would.

To our President, Uri Horowitz, who has given so much time in meeting after meeting with me these last number of weeks, we are all in your debt. And to our tireless medical committee, Dr. Ben Cooper, Dr. Steve Myers, and Dr. Jonathan Resnick, for your sage counsel and deep concern for every member of the shul, if I am privileged to serve in the rabbinate another forty years, I will never forget your support during these trying weeks.

For all those who spent the day active on JCOT Chessed reaching out to all of our veteran members, I cannot thank you enough. Thank you so much to Debbie Cohen Mlotek for leading this effort.

To Ellie Mermelstein, who suffered such a terrible personal loss just months ago, but who is in a part of a country where minyan is possible, who is saying kaddish on behalf of all of us, I do not have any sufficient words of thanks. I cannot imagine a greater aliyah for your father's neshamah.

To our office manager, Elanna Reiss, who has helped me communicate with all of you as events were rapidly changing, despite the challenges of having to manage her own children being home, I cannot thank you enough for your partnership.

And to each and every one of you, for all of your thoughts, suggestions, offers, and support, I can only say how humbled I am to be part of such an exceptional community.

### III.

The sin of the Golden Calf is, in so many ways, the primordial sin of the Jewish people. The Torah tells us that each time that we are punished for sinning, we are given a small dose of the punishment which we deserved for creating a graven image right after revelation itself. What was the sin at its core?

The answer is simple. The Jewish people were afraid, and they panicked. It is easy to understand how a group of just liberated slaves would panic so quickly, and yet, the consequences are devastating.

The same maintains for us. It would be easy to understand with the events swirling around us why someone might panic. But, this is precisely the time during which we must hold fast. We have taken bold steps, and we must adhere to them rigorously, but panic will only endanger our personal and collective health.

Let us all explain, calmly and clearly, to ourselves and to our children, that we are doing these things to be safe, so that the doctors will be able to take care of everyone properly, and that because we are doing these things, we will all, God willing, be safer.

### IV.

We would have read Parshat Parah tomorrow, the ultimate *chok* of the Torah. It is important to remind ourselves that there are *chukim* in life, things we simply do not understand. Let us all be modest and not rush, as some unfortunately have, to judgments about why these things are happening.

For everyone who has that the reason we are all in a form of quarantine or distancing, like the metzora, is because we have spoken *lashon hara*, I humbly remind them that the very same Talmudic passage tells us that a person can be stricken with tzara'at because of gasut ha-ruach, arrogance and presumptuousness. Let us all not claim to have insight into those areas which are accessible to the Master of the Universe alone.

And yet, let us also remember the teaching of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, in his celebrated essay Kol Dodi Dofek. We may never fully understand why we suffer, but it is critical to grow from challenging experiences. This must be our attitude.

Let us all use this time together with family to try and become more patient and loving and caring fathers and mothers and sons and daughters, long after this scourge has passed. I know I will try very hard.

Let us all use this time of caring for those who are homebound and without family to recommit ourselves to being there for them, long after social distancing is itself a distant memory.

Let us all use this time of creating a sense of Shabbat for our children, by teaching parshah to them, by modeling Kavod Shabbat to them, to commit ourselves to enhancing the sanctity of Shabbat on a weekly basis.

## V.

When I was locking the shul on Thursday night, I looked around at the empty pews, but I did not feel alone. I looked to my left and to my right, and I saw the plaques on the walls, and the lights next to some of their names.

Calling off the longest running minyan in Teaneck, perhaps in all of Bergen County, had weighed so heavily on me. How does one separate a Jew from his or her shul?

There was a remarkable feeling that came over me. I felt the hundreds of plaques on the wall, cumulatively representing tens of thousands of minyanim in attendance, countless centuries of membership, whispering to me from the walls.

They said to me, “Rabbi, it is time for you to leave us for a while. We know you will return to us.”

May the True and Compassionate Healer allow each and everyone of us to do so, in His own good time, in complete and full health.

With Love and Affection,  
Your Rabbi,  
Daniel Fridman