**Rabbi's Message for our Shul's First Shabbat Shutdown**

Dear Friends,

        We are living through extraordinary times and there is no precedent for what is transpiring for our congregation nor for humanity as a whole. One of the most severe impacts, is the effect on the spiritual headquarters of a town and the community that surrounds it. We are about to officially go into our first Shabbat without services to anchor our Shabbat experience. Even for those who do not regularly attend, there was comfort in knowing that minyan was still going on.  While yesterday’s email included instructions for Torah reading, I am adding three ideas to share at each of your three Shabbat meals.

[#1 In Honor of Rosh Chodesh Nissan](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/four-beginnings-year)

[#2 Parshas Hachodesh – R. Beinish Ginsburg](https://files.constantcontact.com/bd9dc2dc101/e3bcfc8a-d039-4eb0-afd6-38d227b57d45.doc)

[#3 Rav Meir Goldvicht on the Parsha](https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/714241/rabbi-meir-goldwicht/building-the-mishkan-before-the-keilim/)

While the above is very important, I wanted to take some time now to write to you about the unique opportunity of isolation that is upon us. Over Shabbat, many of us will feel alone or at the very least more alone. This is an auspicious time to help fathom what Torah ideals we can more profoundly relate to given our unique circumstances. Firstly, see this quote below from Rav Yosef Soloveitchik ztl, where he explains how Western man needs to grow in his or her understanding that religion is not in a building, but in all aspects of life.

"Notwithstanding the fact that Western man is in a nostalgic mood, he is determined not to accept the dialectical burden of humanity. He certainly feels spiritually uprooted, emotionally disillusioned, and, like the old king of Ecclesiastes, is aware of his own tragedy. Yet this pensive mood does not arouse him to heroic action. He, of course, comes to a place of worship. He attends lectures on religion and appreciates the ceremonial, yet he is searching not for a faith in all its singularity and otherness, but for religious culture. He seeks not the greatness found in sacrificial action but the convenience one discovers in a comfortable, serene state of mind. He is desirous of an aesthetic experience rather than a covenantal one, of a social ethos rather than a divine imperative. In a word, he wants to find in faith that which he cannot find in his laboratory, or in the privacy of his luxurious home. His efforts are noble, yet he is not ready for a genuine faith experience, which requires the giving of one's self unreservedly to God, who demands unconditional commitment, sacrificial action, and retreat." - Rav Soloveitchik in The Lonely Man of Faith, Pg. 71 (OU Press).

Let us use this last word “retreat,” as a springboard to review the Torah’s great appreciation of what can be accomplished with a *bidud*, a quarantine of sorts. I will be relaying ideas from Maimonides’s son, R’ Avraham ben HaRambam. Without a doubt, proper Torah Judaism cannot be observed in a vacuum without social connection, but I hope by us attuning ourselves studiously to these sources that we will be more able to appreciate today’s circumstances.

Psalm 51.12 describes purity of heart and that a proper spirit resides within, indicating an internal focus. In Psalm 73.26-27, it speaks of the heart and our portion being with G-d forever. These ideas reflect that we are never alone. In fact, when alone, we are better prepared to consider that we are not alone. When we are forced not to interact, we are better able to appreciate avoiding the traps that are often found in human company (Yeshayahu 33.15, Psalms 119.37). Disruption and lack of focus can lead to a distraction that precludes G-dliness, which is why music is often used to infuse harmony and block out impediments (Divrei Hayamim 1.25.1). Prophets required happiness in order to operate and often resorted to music to help create the right environment (Maimonides Y”Hatorah 7:4).

How do we know a pristine and controlled atmosphere helps with spirituality and a Torah focused life? Before Noach, the first man of G-d was Chanoch. It says that Chanoch walked with G-d, seemingly by himself (Breishit 5.24). This was not unusual activity among our leaders because when Avraham departs with Yitzchak for the binding, he tells his entourage that he and Yitzchak would be going for a walk leaving them behind, where they would pray, and then they would return (22.5).  Apparently, this did not raise any red flags, indicating it was their common practice. Yitzchak took this message to heart as right before he met his bride, he had come from a self-imposed quest for solitude (24:63). This was passed on to the next generation in the form of Yaakov attaching himself to a life of shepherding and after the many years of service, he asks Lavan for nothing, but the continuous opportunity to tend to the flocks by himself (30:31). There’s a power to this peaceful living that fosters great levels of physical and mental well-being. Of course, moderation is key, but we hope and expect this virus to subside in the not too distant future.

These practices get transmitted to the next era of leadership as Moshe opts for this shepherding profession as well, which leads him time to work on a self-actualization that results in our emancipation (Shemot 3:1). Yirmiyahu the prophet describes the generation of the wilderness as G-d recalling “the love of your nuptials,” thereby underscoring that it was the Jewish people’s willingness to go with G-d into a barren wasteland that clinched our eternal relationship (2:2). Throughout our time in the desert, it was the exclusive Tent of Meeting that allowed for private conversation between Moshe and the Almighty. Subsequent successors like Eliyahu and Elisha similarly communed with Hashem on Mount Carmel as Moshe too was by his lonesome on top of Sinai along with Yehoshua separated out independently (32.17,33.11). Yaakov had his vision of the ladder also while alone, not to mention the prophecies he had while pasturing (Breishit 28.11,31.10). \*See also Shemuel 1.3.3.

Ultimately, there is no better expression than Dovid Hamelech’s examples of residing in G-d’s “house,” while not referring to an actual house, it is indeed a state of being. With our liturgy of *Ashrei* alighting a path forward, we can all now more readily and realistically aspire to this “house” for the time being while our Beth Israel sanctuary remains off limits (Tehillim 27.4, 64:5, 84.5-11). With a heavy heart yet with an optimistic mind, I wish one and all a safe Shabbat. May the Almighty help inspire us to a better version of ourselves for the moment when we emerge from our respective homes so that we may enter our synagogue soon with a renewed sense of purpose and conviction predicated upon thousands of years of deep relationships with the Almighty!

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Keneseth Beth Israel