

Vayakhel Moshe, Responding to Crisis with Social Solidarity

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Standing in this empty sanctuary, I'm reminded of the story of a taxi passenger who tapped his driver on the shoulder to ask a question. The driver screamed, lost control of the car, nearly hit a bus, went up on the footpath, and stopped centimeters in front a shop window. "Whoa!" the driver shouted. "Don't ever do that again. You scared the daylights out of me!" The passenger apologized, and the driver replied, "I'm sorry, it's not really your fault. Today is my first day as a cab driver – I've been driving a funeral van for the last 25 years."

Of course, today is kind of the opposite. I'm just thinking how scared the cantor and I would be if we heard someone laugh at that joke.

It isn't just us. I saw yesterday that Friar Scott Holmes, pastor at St. Edward the Confessor Catholic Church in Bowie, is offering drive-through confessions. "We priests have to be creative about how to bring Christ to people when we can't do it in our church buildings," he said. The Talmud calls it *sh'at had'hak*, a desperate moment when things that are generally prohibited might be permitted. That's what it's been all week, and we may need to get used to *sh'at had'hak* for a while longer.

I've learned at least two things. One is that the technology is amazing. I couldn't have appreciated the power of a virtual *minyán* if I hadn't experienced it myself this week. And the second is that it's not the same thing; I can't wait until we can be together again. I'm already planning in my head the super-sized kiddush we're going to have to have whenever that day comes. And then how we will have to update our livestream capabilities so we can broadcast more services and more classes – not just for public emergencies, but to reach more people who are ill or infirm ... or just too busy to get to shul. And in the meantime, for those who like to sit in the sanctuary and check (look up and count), it appears that all the bulbs are lit. (Cue the laugh track).

We call these unprecedented times, but they aren't really. *L'tza-arenu*, to our great dismay, we've all heard survivors of the Holocaust describe how their lives were upended, schools and businesses were closed not just for a few days or weeks. This is the wildest emergency I or my children have experienced, but it pales in comparison. The Spanish flu in 1918 infected 1/3 of the world's population.

In the 19th century, it was cholera. Rabbi Eliyahu Guttmacher, 35 years old and serving his first community in Pleschen, Poland, wrote to the esteemed Rabbi Akiva Eger for advice. It was based on 200-year-old science, but some of it sounds familiar:

Regarding prayer in the synagogue, in my view it is truly not right to congregate in a tight space. But it *is* possible to pray in small groups of about 15 men, starting from first light. ... Make sure that no more than the aforementioned number squeeze in, perhaps by posting a policeman there.

Protect yourselves from the cold. ... Don't eat bad foods, especially pickles. ... Stay clean; do not leave dirt and grime in the house. Change into clean, freshly laundered clothes several times a week. Don't be anxious. ... Draw water and wash your hands and face in the morning. Several times, drizzle some good, strong vinegar mixed with rosewater in the rooms (now we know, if you can't find Purell, vinegar and rosewater ☺).

There were numerous cholera outbreaks in the 19th century, and Rabbi Guttmacher became an authority on shepherding communities through difficult times. I don't want to overrun Shabbat with grim tales of death and disease; just to make the point that we have emerged from tragic circumstances before. Even in this dark time, a little gratitude is in order.

Parashat Vayakhel began in a similar place. "*Vayakhel Moshe et kol adat b'nai yisrael, Moses congregated (the word *vayakhel* shares the same root as *kehillah*, congregation), Moses congregated the entire Israelite people*" to remind them to observe Shabbat and instruct them with the details for constructing the Mishkan, the travelling sanctuary. Rashi cites a Midrash that this took place on the day after Yom Kippur.

And not just any Yom Kippur. The people received the 10 Commandments on the 6th of Sivan, which is Shavuot. Moses went back up the mountain on the 7th of Sivan and stayed 40 days. He came down to witness the Golden Calf and smash the tablets on the 17th of Tamuz. Moses burned the calf on the 18th, and on the 19th of Tamuz he went up to plead for mercy for 40 days. That brings us to the first of Elul, when Moses went back to receive the second set of tablets. He was there 40 days, which makes the 10th of Tishrei, Yom Kippur, the day he came back with the second Tablets. That was the end of last week's portion which makes Vayakhel the proverbial "day after."

After the sin, after a destructive plague, after a period of reconciliation and restoration, Moses brings the community together again. And not just a few people. It was everyone – men *and* women – and Moses engaged them in a gargantuan project. After months of uncertainty and a break from the normal routine, the people were all too eager to participate. They brought so much stuff – each according to their own talents – that the artisans had to call out to Moses: "*Marbim ha-am l'havi, the people are bringing too much for this sacred effort!*" Moses had to command the entire camp: "Let no man or woman make further effort toward gifts for the sanctuary!" Would that we would have such problems!

As I said earlier, the building of the Mishkan was not just a construction project. It was a reenactment of creation, a recreation. On the other side of the Exodus from Egypt, on the other side of Sinai, on the other side of the Golden Calf and the plague that followed, the people were stronger and the sanctuary more beautiful than ever before.

In his New York Times column yesterday, David Brooks described the difference between social connection and social solidarity. "Social connection means feeling empathetic towards others and being kind to them. That's fine in normal times," he wrote. But social solidarity is more. Social solidarity is an "active commitment," not just a feeling but a willingness to get up and help others, a desire at times even to set aside personal needs in order to serve the common good. The current crisis offers reason to hope:

- When 30 people get up at 7:15 in the morning to join a virtual *minyán*;

- When more than 100 people join a discussion on “Sh’at Had’ehak, the exigencies of the moment,” or log in to ask questions and share ideas for the looming Passover holiday that promises to be very different this year;
- When teachers overcome fears about previously unused technologies to come up with creative ways to teach Hebrew or make connections or remind preschoolers that even in social isolation, there is still Shabbat and people still read books and we still love each other and care for the poorest and most disadvantaged in our midst;

that’s social solidarity. That is what’s going to bring us through this crisis; and that is what is going to sustain us when it is all over and we convene what Brooks calls a “great social festival” to rebuild and restore.

But we aren’t there yet. If last week was defined by mass-cancellations; and this week was defined by developing and mobilizing and opening our virtual-community; next week is going to be about caring. I worry for the people who are really alone – people in senior-living institutions who are denied visitors; older members alone at home who don’t have email and don’t even know that our building is closed, let alone that we have opened up such a robust virtual structure; active, vibrant individuals who are watching their businesses fall apart or laying off employees or being laid-off and wondering how they will continue to feed their families.

Our Caring Committee and Board of Governors are mobilizing to contact members and offer assistance where we can. And you can join them. After Shabbat, send an email to BnaiCares@gmail.com and let the committee know that you want to help. It isn’t easy to mobilize, we don’t know what we will be asked to do, but the first step is clear – we need to volunteer *lhak-hel*, to join together in sacred work.

The long double portion that we didn’t read in its entirety ends on a high note. “The work was completed, the divine cloud hovered over the Tent of meeting and the glory of Adonai filled the Mishkan. Moses could not even enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud had settled upon it and the Divine Presence filled the Tabernacle. ... The cloud of glory would rest upon the Mishkan by day, with a fire by night, throughout their journeys.”

Upon hearing those words, congregations everywhere rise and proclaim together: Hazak, Hazak, V’nithazek. As we experience the metaphorical respite of Shabbat, as we contemplate the challenges of the moment and maintain hope for what will come on “the next day,” those prayerful words are more powerful than ever: Let us be strong. Let us be strong. And let us strengthen one another. Shabbat shalom.