Coming Out of the Cave – Rosh Hashanah Day One – 5782

Some months ago I was on the phone with a friend of mine from grad school who had gone on to a successful career as an academic. Just prior to the pandemic, she had decided to make a jump from her academic position to join the Justice Department's Citizenship and Immigration Service as an asylum officer, one of those individuals who hears the cases of person's seeking legal refuge in the United States after fleeing persecution at home.

Everything was on track for my friend to assume her new post. She severed her ties to her former employer, relocated to a new city and completed the paperwork needed to be "onboarded". Then COVID hit and the government shut down the training course that she needed to complete in order to begin work in her new capacity. Now just to be clear, she had completed the employment requirements. So, it was not that she was without a job. But she *was* without gainful employment, in the sense that there was essentially nothing they could have her do.

For the first few months of her circumstantial furlough my friend applied the skills honed in her previous career to creating a curriculum for self-study in the areas of immigrant rights and immigration law. She read extensively on the parameters of refugee status and asylum, and schooled herself on conflicts the world over that were sending persons seeking sanctuary to America's shores. But as the pandemic dragged on and the formal training did not resume, she found herself at an impasse. She had read almost everything that she could find on her topic but was unable to begin the supervised apprenticeship that she would need to actually assume her new responsibilities.

So what did she do? I asked, imagining my own frustration in that position. "Well," she responded, she had begun to indulge herself by reading fiction and pursuing some of the myriad of hobbies that she had long dabbled in with greater focus. "It was kind of nice," she admitted, adding that she would miss having time to do these things when the pandemic lifted.

I am guessing that many of you hearing my friend's story can identify strongly with her experiences. At the start of the pandemic, when the disruptions appeared short-lived and relatively contained, you attempted to maintain many of your old routines and habits, admittedly in adapted form: visiting the grocery store less, working a standard day – but from home, participating in leisure activities and civic engagements by Zoom, as these things shifted to a virtual medium.

Indeed, as a society, we became remarkably adept in conducting activities ranging from classes to board meetings to yoga sessions and concerts using remote technologies. It turned out not to be so bad to attend your spin class via Zoom. Heck, you could even turn off the camera or pause the recording if you got a call or wanted to slip into the kitchen for a drink. And office meetings felt far more tolerable when you could attend them in your sweatpants and fuzzy slippers!

It can be defensibly argued that the ability to adapt to unexpected and sometimes exceptionally adverse circumstances is what has allowed the human species to survive and even thrive. If the New Zealand tuatara, a lizard-like creature that requires cool temperatures to produce female offspring, may be facing extinction because of a few degree rise in average temperatures, homo sapiens have managed to survive at least two Ice Ages(!). In doing so, we developed new technologies, new habits, new ways of socializing that came to be part of the fabric of our "normal lives" forever more. Indeed, there are human groups that remain adapted to living under permafrost conditions. Indeed, of late some Inuit

groups are finding it disruptive to cope with the arrival of the first "spring thaw" that their people has experience in hundreds of generations.

I believe that we, too, have undergone some fairly profound and transformative shifts, as individuals and as a society in response to the disruptions caused by COVID. Although its span can be measured in months and not centuries, the pandemic has shifted our habits of thought and behavior, our expectations of ourselves, our peers and our world. And many of these changes, it can be argued, were liberating and long overdue.

As a society, for example, we are spending far less money on frivolous expenditures, carrying less personal debt and saving more for the future. We are spending more time with our families and close friends, less time commuting – none in many cases. We have developed new technologies and new habits of interacting with technology, remote communication platforms, in particular, that are making it easier for those with disabilities, conflicting obligations or other circumstantial constraints to participate in the classroom, workplace or social/cultural world more fully than was ever an option in the past. These are all changes worth holding onto.

But what has been lost along the way? Our tradition insists that there must be such losses and calls upon us, particularly in this season of accounting, to keep track of them and weigh their absence from our lives.

One of the most profound losses, I would argue, is signaled by this morning's Torah portion. It speaks to the loss of community, the loss of meaningful human companionship.

The story we read just now is referred to in Hebrew as *Geirush Hagar* (or sometimes, *Geirush Hagar v'Ishmael*), "The Expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael". In some ways this description seems to miss the point, right? The real poignancy of the episode, the climax of the story as we experience it, lies not at the point that Hagar and Ishmael set out from Abraham's camp, their water flask still full, a cake of flour packed safely for the road. The crisis comes, according to our conventional reading, when these provisions run out, when Hagar has nothing to give her starving boy and decides to abandon him to his fate to avoid having to witness his death!

But that is not the way our Sages read this story. It is not the way that our tradition conditions us to read it. As the appellation "*Geirush Hagar*" suggests, from a Jewish perspective, the most injurious blow inflicted on Hagar and Ishmael came when they were expelled from Abraham's camp. From that point, all that transpired was commentary. For what could be worse than to be cut off from the company of one's fellows? It is not for nothing that Mark Zborowski's seminal account of Jewish life in pre-war Europe is titled *Life is With People*!

So, my question to you is, is that still the perspective that we carry today, some eighteen months after having been forcibly cut off from much of the embodied contact with our fellow human beings that we once took for granted? Is it true that we still find the need to distance from one another is this requirement still heinous to us? Or have we, perhaps, like the Inuit become accustomed to our own version of permafrost?

I ask this question wearing both the hat of the sociologist that I once was and of the rabbi that I now am. As a sociologist, I read with interest the reports appearing in both the scholarly and popular media describing people's responses to the lifting of COVID restrictions, particularly during the brief interval

when it appeared that the pandemic was really being beaten back. To my amazement and that of many observers, the very individuals who for months had avowed that they wanted nothing more than to rush back out into public spaces, to be able to embrace their friends and family, to return to a "normal" seeming world, when posed with the opportunity to do so reacted, well, cautiously.

I shouldn't be surprised, in retrospect. After all, I myself experienced extreme reluctance to step into a grocery store without a mask (I think I only managed to do so once or twice). And I almost had a panic attack walking through O'Hare airport with my family, including my three unvaccinated children, in July en route to visit my in-laws in California. The numbers of people in the airport, their proximity seemed overwhelming – even though I knew that the airlines and airports were taking a myriad of precautions to keep travelers safe (and, indeed, we went out and back without incident). So, why should others not also be hesitant about stepping back into an indoor restaurant or concert space, an office, classroom or service, after having eschewed these venues for months?

There are, of course, a myriad of reasons for people to be cautious in their conduct, and these have only gotten more intense with the proliferation of the Delta variant, which has set us back significantly in our perception of the protection conveyed by vaccination and other protective efforts. So, let me just assert unambiguously my deep appreciation for and support of every individual taking the steps that they feel are appropriate to their own circumstances and those of their family in terms of their physical welfare during this new phase of the pandemic. *Pikuach nefesh*, the preservation of life is – as I have argued in numerous venues – an absolutely central Jewish value.

But wearing my rabbi's hat, I carry a concern that is longer term and more pervasive than the concerns related to COVID precautions, per se. For while the COVID virus may well be on track to become endemic (that is to say, a permanent feature of our epidemiological landscape), the extreme defenses needed to guard against COVID infection will not be a forever thing.

So, what I worry about as your rabbi is a threat to us and to our community that is less physical than psychological, spiritual, and emotional. I worry that during this period of isolation, we are losing both the ability and even the desire to come together as a community – both for spiritual purposes and more generally, as social beings. This runs contrary to an equally central Jewish doctrine that I will allude to using the short-hand term "minyan".

A minyan is, of course, a gathering of ten individuals, a requirement for the performance of certain liturgical rites, including prayers related to mourning. But the concept of minyan is much broader than this. It refers to the mitzvah, the commandment, as the Rambam understood it, that Jews situate themselves amidst of community.

The mitzvah of minyan is thus far broader in scope than just an obligation to pray in community on a regular basis – though this <u>is</u> an important dimension of its enactment in a Jewish context. More fundamentally, though, the mitzvah of minyan asserts that it is only possible for community to exist when the members of that community are in regular contact with one another. And this ultimately means, true, embodied contact.

Remote technology is great, but it is, what my husband would describe as "thin gruel". It gives us the ability to see each other and hear one another's voices. But as we have all learned while drinking from this well over the past year, it lacks the richness, the multi-sensory, immersive quality of in-person

gathering. While we will continue, indefinitely, to offer virtual avenues of access and to celebrate the wider audience that this allows us to include, we cannot build a rich multi-stranded communal existence based purely on digital connections.

I would also like to suggest that the longer we reside in our caves – or Zoom frames – the harder is becomes for us to participate in the give-and-take that in-person social interactions demand. And this is a problem. It is a problem for us socially and psychologically, and it is a problem for us Jewishly.

As Jews we are taught: *Al titrahek min ha-tzibur* ("Don't distance yourself from the community"). It is a saying most commonly invoked in situations in which an individual feels drawn by their social status or personal piety to step away from a community or its practices which they perceive as "beneath them."

In such a situation, the Torah tells us essentially: Get over it! Stop thinking so highly of yourself! This 'public' from which you seek to distance yourself is no more than a collection of people like yourself and your views or opinions, your personal preferences or needs ultimately need to bend to accommodate the needs of the community.

Compromise is, of course, central to all communal life. Communities are composed of diverse individuals drawn together – despite their very real disparities – because of a commonality of identity, goal or experience. This means that every community, every communal interaction is going to require that participants "give" a bit – but in giving, our tradition stresses – you get so much more than you lose.

Indeed, our Sages frame the benefits of community in fairly dramatic terms. In Masekhet Brachot (6a), a section of the Talmud discusses the phenomenon of communal prayer, Abba Binyamin is quoted as saying that a single individual – no matter his or her spiritual gifts – can only really aspire to having their prayers heard on high if they pray in a synagogue. His colleague Ravin bar Rav Adda goes on to explain this statement by saying that in a communal prayer context, the shortfalls of each individuals petitions are corrected and compensated for by the contributions of others, creating the "perfect" message that is able to reach God's ear.

Even if you don't buy into these Sage's theology, I would like to suggest that there are more proximate and tangible benefits to coming together as a community. Benefits that you know well, having experienced them in the pre-COVID era. I want to invite you to conjure up in your mind's eye the excitement of sitting in the sanctuary and watching, participating as a bar or bat mitzvah recites the verses they've worked so hard to learn from the bimah. I want to remind you of the joy that permeates a Chanukah gathering as old friends joke over their plates of latkes and children run off in giggling mobs to enjoy their chocolate gelt. I want you to think back on the palpable lifting of a weight from your heart when a friend embraced you at a shiva gathering. And I want you to believe that these things can be real for us again – though I can't say exactly when all of them will be possible.

What is important, though, is that we don't give up on the vision. We cannot allow ourselves to simply embrace the comfort of attending Shabbat morning services in pajamas (or skipping them entirely and sleeping in) to such an extent that as it becomes possible to leave our "igloos" we instead hold back, out of, well, habit. Or, perhaps, out of a discomfiture with resuming the habits of our old more socially engaged lives.

As a corrective to this, I want to share with you an aggadah (a Talmudic narrative) found in Masechet Shabbat (33b) that speaks to the dangers of isolation – and the challenges of moving beyond it. The

story concerns one of the most illustrious of our sages, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (the "Rashbi") who defied a Roman prohibition on teaching Torah. When the Rashbi was discovered and a death sentence pronounced over him, he and his son took refuge in a cave, where they lived for years in complete seclusion.

At last the then-emperor died and with his passing the sentence on the Rashbi was lifted, allowing him and his son to emerge from the cave, which they did – but with quite terrible results. Having lived so long in isolation from his fellow human beings, the Rashbi had come to see his life and views as definitive of the acceptable bounds of behavior. He had lost the ability to participate in the normal give-and-take of social life and so wrought havoc on those around him (and presumably, experiencing great trauma himself).

In response, the Rashbi retreated back into his cave. But this time, he used the opportunity of his self-imposed seclusion to reskill himself in the art of social engagement. He relearned how to live with others, how to accommodate differences in others and feel comfortable with his own differences in outlook or self-presentation. And he came to appreciate that the accommodations that he made on society's behalf were, in fact, an investment in something larger than himself, something he could only be part of by enduring some of the *tsuris* ("headaches" or "grief") that comes with shared spaces.

I would like to suggest that like the Rashbi, we use the coda that this Delta resurgence has decreed to similarly prepare ourselves to re-enter a world that will be richer for our participation. In particular, I advise we to use the days, weeks, God-forbid months(!) of additional precautions to do the following:

1) Think about what we miss most from our pre-pandemic life, cultivating a hunger for its possibilities – much as we are taught to whet our appetite before the Pesach seder.

2) Think about what each of us has to give and where we would like to focus our energy once we can unleash it. It had been our plan before the Delta-inspired setback to hold a "job fair" of sorts, advertising opportunities for TBE members (and others) to involve themselves in worthwhile community causes. While many of these opportunities (at least the in-person opportunities) are again on hold, it is not too early for each of us to be thinking about how we want to contribute to building our community – and with it, our world – back better and stronger than it was before the pandemic.

3) Finally, I would encourage you, as you feel able, to begin to make strategic forays into a broader world. Go to an open house gathering at your child's school. Join your colleagues for a walk. Come to a synagogue picnic or outdoor service. Use some of your "risk exposure budget" to expand your comfort zone, to reacquaint yourself with what it means to be part of a larger world.

Before I conclude, I want to take you back to the story of my grad school friend, the one who was stranded in a professional "no-man's-land". Some weeks ago she finally got the summons to return to her office to begin her in-person training. It was a bumpy start, she told me, especially navigating terrain that was new to her and meeting colleagues she had only seen via internet. But venture she did. Following a six-week intensive apprenticeship program, she received her certification to work as an asylum claim processor, and now, as the United States prepares to welcome an unprecedented number

of refugees fleeing the chaos in Afghanistan, she will be on the front lines, creating a path for them to call this country home.

Meheira Yishama Be-Arei Yehuda U'vechutzos Yerushalayim, Kol Sasson v'Kol Simkha -- May we all be blessed to be able to emerge soon and safely from our respective "caves" and to rejoice in our shared spaces as a community!