

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5782 - Pandemic Sermon

Rabbi Suzanne Singer

I tend to be fairly compulsive about not leaving things to the last minute.

So I had written my sermon for tonight in early July.

I was going to say that: We are post-pandemic. Hallelujah!

Welcome to the year 5782!

Then, as the Talmud says: Man plans and God laughs.

Here we are again. The Delta variant has come at us like a speeding

locomotive. The difference is that most of us are vaccinated

so we are in better shape – at least for now. Because,

breakthrough infections are very disturbing, as are children and

young folks who have gotten very ill. And then there are new variants.

So it's a time of confusion and unease.

Are we going to be OK or not? Will this ever be over?

Is this what the new “normal” looks like? Do we have to learn

to live with the virus? Are masks our new fashion statement?

I don't need to tell you how incredibly challenging the past year and a half has been. So many of us experienced fear:

From one moment to the next, everything in our world changed.

We were all held hostage by a teeny spherical virus,

20 to 500 nanometers in size -- a nanometer is one billionth of a meter.

For a long time, we weren't even sure how the virus was transmitted.

On surfaces? Could we touch our mail or our delivered groceries?

Through the air? Were masks and social distancing necessary?

How could we protect ourselves and our families?

And now we are asking similar questions again.

We also felt great sadness and shed many tears.

Too many of us lost loved ones to this deadly virus.

We were shocked to see that our hospitals and our medical staffs could be overtaxed. A dearth of PPE meant our doctors and nurses

were at great risk, being forced to sometimes wear garbage bags

to stay safe. As the death toll mounted, bodies were being stored

in refrigerated trucks. How could our country, a leader in the world,

have been so unprepared? And how is it possible that we are again seeing hospitals that are overrun?

Then there was the isolation. Way too many people had to go through this experience alone. And those of us who were lucky enough to have a live-in partner, friend, or relative experienced the pain of not being able to embrace children, grandchildren, friends.

And are we now going back to distancing from them again?

Are vaccinations enough to keep us in a safe bubble?

In addition, our children had to cope last year with remote learning – at least those who had Internet access and a device to learn on.

Too many of our children experienced depression.

After all, we are social animals, and trying to learn at home without in-person teachers and peer groups

to support them was a lot to ask of our kids, from pre-K to college.

And how about families or single parents trying to juggle work from home while home schooling their children? Will we need to go back to this model?

There was also economic anxiety. So many lost their jobs or were uncertain as to how they would survive financially. Families faced eviction and food instability. What happens when the eviction moratorium runs its course?

How many more homeless people can our society endure?

We became more painfully aware of the great economic divide in this country.

Health care, tied to employment, was lost for those who suddenly found themselves unemployed. 20 million people were put out of work.

We discovered that low-paid workers – those who deliver our food for example – are actually essential workers. The Los Angeles Times editorialized,

“A major lesson driven home by the pandemic is that our economic system disproportionately rewards wealth while treating workers as disposable parts of a business plan rather than as people with inherent dignity and value.”

There was also a racial reckoning as a result of the murder of George Floyd last summer. Then there was, and still is, the tragic political divide:

a nation polarized more than ever. Anger and hurt on both sides: on the one side, folks asking why others were not willing to get vaccinated and wear a mask?

On the other side, a sense that the government is taking away our freedoms.

We wondered: Is our country fraying at the seams? Are we in decay?

Of course, surviving and rebuilding after a cataclysmic event is nothing new for the Jewish community. Think about our return to the land of Israel

in 1948 to become an independent state for the third time in history!
Or our return from exile in Babylonia in the 5th century BCE
following the destruction of the first Temple!
This return, led by Ezra and Nehemiah, is actually our Haftarah reading
for Rosh Hashana. What can we learn from our ancestors?

As the Israelites assembled before the rebuilt Temple -- rebuilt
to a much diminished scale -- many people shouted with joy.
Others, however, wept as they remembered the more opulent First Temple.
In other words, it was a mixed bag of emotions. I'm sure we can all relate to that.
We feel both frustration and gratitude. We shudder at the realization of
how vulnerable we are, yet we rejoice at the fact that a powerful vaccine
was invented in record time. We feel lucky that we have access to vaccines --
and a bit guilty that so much of the developing world does not.
We are glad to see the economy bounce back,
yet we miss the quiet pace we were able to experience
during the worst part of the pandemic.
We mourn the loss of a way of life we thought would continue forever.
Yet we have discovered new strengths we didn't realize we had.
We recognize that we are not the same nor is life ever going to be the same again.
And maybe that's not a bad thing?

The Israelites return to Judea after the destruction of the Temple and exile
was traumatic. But that 70-year gap was also a gift. Judaism was changed forever
when Ezra brought the Torah with him from Babylonia.
Whereas before, the religion had been the privilege of the Temple priests.
Now, for the first time, we had a written document, accessible to all.
Ezra displayed the Torah on a platform for all to see -- men and women.
He read it to them, and explained it as well. Now knowledge of God's
ways was in the hands of all the people, not just the priests. So, yes,
we are resilient and creative, and that should give us comfort and hope
for the future. Maybe we ought to consider our time in lockdown,
huddled in our homes, as a kind of gift as well. And just as the wisdom
of our ancestors can help guide us, so too, our own congregants
have important insights to offer us as well. A couple of months ago,
I sent some questions out to you about how you were coping with the pandemic, asking
what you have learned. Here are a few of your responses.

Susie Coppel commented: "We survived. How did we do it? We realized that we are stronger and more resilient than we thought." Deanne Edwards echoed: "I learned that I'm capable, smart, adaptable, resilient and I can find ways to survive and thrive, even during a pandemic. I learned that no matter what happens, I can get through hard times...I will never feel like I need another person to be whole and complete. I am completely whole within myself." Sharyn Sherman discovered: "I can learn new things and adapt."

Pamela Manges offered: "To get through the difficulty...I did pray, and I also tried to look ahead to when this would be over and we could get back to seeing each other regularly again... [We need] to be patient, sometimes we have to just hold on until things get better."

Doug Moss mused: "Happiness is a light inside of us and we must not let outside circumstances or changes diminish our 'light.' It is easy for us to let that happen but we have to be strong and brave to rise above it."

Finally Felice Pope reflected: "During the COVID-19 Pandemic, some of my age cohorts fell into boredom, were in depressive states, felt isolated not able to go to the movies, casinos, and senior centers to play bingo. They were 'lost in the shuffle, shuffling with the lost.' By choice, and defying stereotypes of old age, living independently before and through the Pandemic, even I am amazed at what I gained, not lost! What comes foremost to mind are: greater inner strength, self-sufficiency, and humility; deeper love and appreciation for family; and more caring and outreach to neighbors."

So despite the heartbreak of the pandemic, we discovered inner strength. We also developed new skills and interests: reading, puzzles, learning Zoom. Ezra Greenhouse said: "Thank God for Zoom and Temple outreach activities." Aimee Perlstein echoed the benefits of Zoom: "We [now] have a regular game night with our dear friends in Oregon via Zoom every 2-3 weeks.

We never did that before the pandemic started, and it has brought us so much joy and laughter."

Kara Crohn expressed her appreciation for this technology as well: "I drew strength from masked porch visits with neighbors and walks with a friend.

I also drew strength from Zoom cocktail hours with friends.

I had a chance to reconnect with people living far away...

I also drew strength from new professional connections and having forums to discuss pandemic and the BLM movement.”

And Freda Oppenheim shared: “I have kept myself very busy during this last year.

My doctor’s office put on several support groups during the week (all on zoom).

Monday was meditation class, Tuesday was an accountability group,

and Thursday was a mental health group. I joined the sit ‘n fit class

from the Janet Goeske center, which was twice a week.

Our Thursday group decided to start an additional group on our own

where we do an hour of exercising and have guest speakers

on healthy eating and lifestyle. And I now have a different and

wonderful array of friends that I never would have met otherwise.”

One of the benefits of this difficult time is that we came to appreciate

so many things we never paid much attention to before.

Judy Kronenfeld wrote: “Engaging with an actual person is a phenomenal gift. Recently, I

got to talk to an actual real-live friend I hadn’t seen since sometime

in the spring of 2019. We hugged several times. We both burst into tears.”

Freda Oppenheim affirmed: “I think the biggest life lesson I learned

through the pandemic is not to take ANYTHING or ANYONE for granted!

Hold on to what you have and be grateful!”

And Sherry Bockman wrote: “Covid for me was a whole new way of life!

Never before have I had so much ‘free time at home!’ to do what?

Organize things? No! More time to read? Yes! More cooking less shopping?

Yes! Zoom Book groups, Zoom yoga classes? Yes! Kids on Zoom weekly? Yes! Mask

wearing and disinfecting? Yes! But more importantly staying at home

for 14 months gave me a peaceful feeling. I experienced a sense of calm!

Time to reflect—no rushing, no schedule, time to reflect on my Judaism!

Time to inquire about things I’ve been wondering about! My priorities

have changed. I’m used to jamming my days into segments of productivity.

This Covid year compelled me to look at my priorities.

Did I really need to be so busy? For some reason Judaism took

on a whole new significance-lighting Shabbat candles more faithfully,

Torah Study on Zoom, resting! Staying home wasn’t so bad.

Coming out of this year cautiously, I am...welcoming a new way of life - not so packed to the brim every day!"

Indeed, we learned to slow down, to take time for self-care, to appreciate relationships, to value the simple moments.

As Bill Oppenheim shared: "It gave me the opportunity to enjoy the small quiet things in life that we often ignore. I enjoyed sitting on the back porch watching the birds at my 5 bird feeders... a bird singing, the laughter of a child, [I recognized] that life is precious -

you don't know what will happen tomorrow so it is important to tell those close to you how much you love them."

As Marc Feldstein said: "There was time to appreciate differences in the clouds, flowers, wind, etc. I guess there always has been!"

We found that the pandemic sometimes brought out the worst in people.

As Deanne Edwards commented:

"[P]eople I thought were kind and thoughtful didn't participate in what I considered a thoughtful task...wearing a mask. I saw wearing a mask as a gesture I did to protect others. I felt so hurt by the fact that people just defied that request. That they walked around, during the heat of the virus, no mask, no distancing...I don't think people care as much as I thought they did about each other."

But the pandemic also brought out the best.

Pamela Manges reflected: "For all the disappointing things people did (such as stockpiling items or buying essentials and selling them at a high markup price), there were many good things people did (such as sharing supplies, shopping for people who could not go out, and other kind actions). [I also gained] a greater understanding of what it is like in other countries where supplies are not always readily available, since we are so used to always having what we need."

Felice Pope remembered: "At the beginning of the Pandemic, I recall what now is a humorous anecdote. A masked stranger knocked on my door. She introduced herself as a new neighbor, and with rolls of toilet paper in her hands, asked if I needed any. She was sincere and quite serious. I wonder if she looks back and now finds humor in this vignette, as I do. I feel a deeper love for my neighbors, other friends, and family now than

before the Pandemic. I value their love, concern, their caring, and genuinely appreciate them even more. I became less stand-offish, less stubbornly self-reliant. I was humbled by their unselfishness, devotion, sincere love. I believe I became a better person because of them!"

I hope that as we move forward, we will be able to retain the appreciation we have gained for slowing down to smell the roses, for spending more time with loved ones, for the break we gave the environment, for technology enabling us to reach across the continent and the ocean to those we love. Ultimately, we need to hold on to the understanding that life is precious and that we need to value every moment. That we are interconnected and that what we do matters not only to ourselves, but also to the larger world.

I would like to conclude with this prayer by Meir Bargeron.

It's called "The Choice."^[1]

After all of this is done
(if it is ever all done),

after we throw our doors open and
run, run
purposely and joyously into the
embrace of
all our beloveds;

after we cast aside our masks to
breath, breath
in the Divine Essence of
each and every
human Creation we encounter
in the supermarket,
on the sidewalk,
in the small and the large spaces
of our lives;

May we take a moment (or a lifetime)
to consider deeply
a choice that
the Universe,
the Holy Blessed One has
placed before us.

Will we draw more closely to one another,
to heal our collective brokenness,
to seek justice,
to ensure that our collective wellbeing
is built upon the wellbeing of
each and every human Creation?

Or

Will we forget our fear,
the masks,
the field hospitals,
the empty schools,
the nurses wearing garbage bags,
the refrigerated trucks full of bodies
(the sacred, empty vessels of beloveds),
the doors closed tight to
separate us;

And return to the regularly scheduled program
of individual interest and collective failure?

Will we have the courage to learn and
to change,
to accept the responsibility we have to
each and every
human Creation,
made in God's Image?

[1] From When We Turned Within, Vol. 1, edited by Rabbi Menachem Creditor and Sarah Tuttle-Singer