

Update: 3/31/2020

Dear Friends,

Throughout the ages, it seems that epidemics and scapegoats have often gone hand in hand. And Jews made for easy targets. Inkwells have run dry documenting the massacres of Jews that followed the Black Death in the middle of the fourteenth century.

But this story is not just about medieval European history. Much more recently, this phenomenon came to our shores. When passenger ships in 1892 brought cholera with them to New York, fingers began pointing at all-too-predictable targets.

Here is an unedited citation from the New York Times.

With the danger from cholera out of the question, it is plain that the United States would be better off if ignorant Russian Jews and Hungarians were denied a refuge here. What can be expected in the line of citizenship from men and women who cannot even read or write the language of their native country? Statistics show that for the most part these creatures hive together in the big cities and live as nearly as they can according to the plan they have been accustomed to from birth. Every big American city has its colony of Russian Jews or Poles or Hungarians, and every good citizen knows that they make most undesirable residents. With the cholera killing people by the wholesale in the ports whence these creatures assemble to take passage to the United States, there is good ground for the present demand for absolute prohibition. These people are offensive enough at best; under the present circumstances they are a positive menace to the health of the country. Even should they pass the quarantine officials, their mode of life when they settle down makes them always a source of danger. Cholera, it must be remembered, originates in the homes of this human riffraff.

I offer here only two comments.

First, the absence of this sort of language in the mainstream media today should not be taken for granted. If we have to endure the travails of a pandemic, at least we endure them at a time when our country has no tolerance for this sort of rhetoric. Free speech is still free and there are surely fringe elements in our society that spew anti-Semitism at times like this. But by and large, our public discourse has spared us the kind of opprobrium that would have been all-too-familiar to our great grandparents.

Second, our own experience should make us even more sensitive to the repugnance of racism at a time like this. Everyone has their hands full these days. But we can't allow bigotry of any kind to slip through the cracks. Prejudice against Asian Americans is unacceptable. We have to call it out and insist that our citizenry rise above it. Viruses do not discriminate. Neither should we.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 3/30/2020

Dear Friends,

As scientists around the world race to find a vaccine for Covid-19, I would humbly suggest that we should be thinking about preventative measures of our own. Commenting on the pasuk that insists we help our faltering kinsmen (Lev. 25:35), Rashi long ago gave voice to the notion that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

As a new week dawns, more and more Americans are waking up to joblessness or the prospect of underemployment. It is certainly heartening that the government is trying to do its part, but we also need to do ours. The Talmud teaches that among competing priorities the needy of one's own city come first. In a world of limited resources, proximity matters. We need to think first of the people closest to us. I have two groups in mind.

First, let's make a special point of supporting our local establishments. I already miss seeing my friends in the shoe repair shop around the corner and wonder how they are faring. Among the businesses that remain open, maybe our patronage can help keep them afloat a little longer. I don't think I've ever encouraged anyone to splurge on take-out food, but if ever there were a time... this is it.

And second, let's think about how we can help the people in and about our homes: babysitters and tutors; nannies and domestic help; aides and caregivers. If we can find ways to continue supporting them, it could make all the difference.

Who knows? Maybe in the merit of our pursuing a policy of prevention, Hashem will deliver the cure.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update 3/26/2020**Is There a Doctor on Board?**

Dear Friend,

Growing up, it was always a source of pride for me that my father was a doctor. And it still is. I've always had a deep and abiding respect for the medical profession. In its noblest form, medicine provides a platform for empathy, altruism and self-sacrifice.

So it's particularly upsetting to see daily news stories about supply shortages in our local hospitals. The headlines look as though they've been lifted from another time or place. But the stories are all too true. Here in New York City, our local doctors and nurses are desperately low on supplies.

In a time of crisis, our natural impulse is to turn inward. We are preoccupied adjusting to our new realities. We are searching for ways to cope with stress and anxiety. And on top of it all, we are preparing for a Pesach, the likes of which we've not seen in our lifetime.

Pesach itself is celebrated inside the home. But the Torah tells us that before Pesach, we need to venture out – to find and prepare the paschal lamb.

I'm not suggesting that we leave our homes. I'm simply suggesting that – even if only briefly – we turn outward.

Our doctors, our nurses and every one of our health care professionals are putting their lives on the line for our community and our fellow New Yorkers. The least we can do is to make sure that they have the equipment they need. In what I hope will be a project in conjunction with our sister synagogues, The Jewish Center is asking you to donate disposable hospital masks, gloves and gowns. If you have supplies to contribute, just be in touch with us and we will arrange for them to be picked up.

If it's axiomatic that to save a life is to save a world, then to save the life of a doctor is to save a thousand worlds.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 3/25/2020

Celebrating Pesach Together

Dear Friend,

In rabbinic parlance, there are two models of Pesach: Pesach Mitzrayim and Pesach Dorot. In this formulation, the one and only Pesach observed by the Israelites in Egypt was sui generis. Never again, went the thinking, would Jews be forced to sequester themselves in their homes on Seder night so as to avoid the dangers of the plague raging outside.

Sadly, I'm afraid, this Pesach will be like no other that we have experienced. Fundamental to Yom Tov itself and to Pesach in particular is the ethic of hospitality. We invite into our homes family and friends, guests and beginners. The people around our tables are indispensable.

This year, we will once again find ourselves sequestered in our homes as we try to keep this virus at a distance. But unlike our Seders in Egypt, heartbreaking as it may be, no guests will be permitted. In many if not most cases, even grandparents will be separated from their grandchildren. Much as we wish we could, we cannot have it any other way. The risks are simply too great to bear. These times don't call on us to be cavalier; they call on us to be careful.

The Talmudic logic enabling one to violate Shabbat to save a life speaks directly to our moment. We violate one Shabbat so that a person may live to observe many Shabbatot in the future. By keeping guests away from our Seder tables – by insisting that people celebrate Pesach alone – we do indeed violate the spirit of a holiday that begins with the announcement, “Whoever is hungry, let them come and eat.” But we can all take great comfort in the knowledge that by playing our part, we are doing nothing less than saving lives. By surviving Pesach alone this year, we will give everyone the chance to celebrate Pesach together next year.

Our doors will be closed, but our hearts will be open.

There is still much to do. I hope the information below regarding upcoming classes and Pesach preparation will be helpful.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 3/24/2020

Dear Friend,

I was saddened to learn that yesterday 100 Americans lost their lives to coronavirus. In our tradition, that number holds a special significance.

The Talmud (Menachot 43b) teaches that a person should always make a point of reciting 100 blessings on a daily basis. According to the Tur, this tradition dates all the way back to King David. There was in those days, he writes, a plague ravaging the nation. Every day 100 people were lost. In response, King David enacted legislation prescribing that every Jew recite 100 brachot.

As a plague ravages our nation, it is surely appropriate for us to do the same.

In these days of uncertainty, that I was healthy yesterday says nothing about what my status will be today. And so our daily recitation of brachot takes on so much more meaning and so much more urgency. Whatever our anxieties, we would do well to remember the most basic of tenet of all: What a gift it is to be here.

Let's make our blessings count.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update:3/23/2020

One of the best signs I have seen recently read, "We are Essential. We are Open." It was posted on the front door of a liquor store. I was happy to know that the proprietor was able to keep a sense of humor even during these trying times.

This pandemic has highlighted the question of what is essential and what is discretionary. What must we have and what can we live without? In pushing us away from one another, this cruel virus has reminded us that we really cannot live without one another. Friendship; companionship; community. All of these are essential and fundamentally indispensable.

If absence makes the heart grow fonder, then perhaps this pandemic will give all of us a renewed appreciation for all the people we're not seeing these days: the schoolchildren waiting for their bus; our fellow shul-goers; the familiar faces on the subway.

We are all adapting to this new reality. And every crisis brings with it its own opportunity. One of my Zoom classes last week brought back two Jewish Center members who had made aliyah more than ten years ago.

I invite you to adapt along with us and join one or many of the below opportunities to get together virtually: To study, to daven or just to connect. And if you're technologically savvy, I invite you to reach out to someone who is less so and share with them all the ways they can join us.

We will all get through this. Together.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 3/20/20

Dear Friends,

I will miss seeing you at The Jewish Center this Shabbat, but I hope we can see one another both

before Shabbat begins and after it concludes. On Friday afternoon at 630pm, I invite you to join us for a virtual Kabbalat Shabbat led by Cantor Jonathan Green. And on Motzaei Shabbat at 8pm, please join us for a musical Havdalah with our multi-talented Teen Coordinator, Yoni Stokar.

In the interim, I hope you will enjoy three short videos. Please find two short clips from JC kids (Livia, Sienna & Cora Schilowitz and Eli Menchel) that I hope will lift your spirits. The third video features words of Torah for these fraught times.

Below, please find a few important reminders.

With warmest regards for a Shabbat Shalom,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 3/18/2020

Dear Friends,

While I have been missing see you in shul, it has been nice to connect with many of you by phone, email, text, WhatsApp and Zoom. Our older members have been particularly appreciative of all the support that they have been receiving from our shul and our volunteers.

As Pesach approaches, I wanted to share with you a brief update on our preparations and a number of communal issues. Many people are home for Pesach for the first time or for the first time in a long time. Please know that, particularly under these difficult circumstances, we are here to help.

Errands

We have established a committee of volunteers, chaired by Jessica Gross and Chani Segall, to help anyone who may need a hand with errands. To request help or to volunteer, please email jr1445@yahoo.com or chanisegall@aol.com.

Mechirat Chametz

This year, facilitating the sale of chametz will not take place in person. Instead, we will make available to you forms that can be scanned and mailed or emailed as well as an online form that may be submitted directly.

Hospitality/Guests

As a general rule, there is no time of the year at which our community excels more in the area of hospitality. The homes of our members are open wide for guests from within and beyond our community. Heartbreaking as it may be, we may have to drastically limit guests or insist that people not host at all. Because the situation is so fluid, we are just not sure yet what the guidelines will be when Pesach rolls around.

As a community service, we are working on a Pesach-in-a-Box option that will allow our members to order all-inclusive pre-prepared Pesach meals for the Seder, Yom Tov meals, or both. We will share the details just as soon as we have them.

Shopping/Ordering

Both national organizations and local retailers have indicated that they are not anticipating any inventory shortages. By way of example, Kosher Market Place, Fairway and Broadway Farms are already well-stocked with Pesach products. We are also exploring the possibility of working

with some of our vendors to make prepared foods available for order and pickup at The Jewish Center.

Toveling

The Keilim Mikvah will continue to operate daily from 9am-2pm.

Kashering

We are exploring whether it might be possible to arrange for drop-off kashering at The Jewish Center. In the meantime, we will disseminate resources (text and video) to help you at home. You can already find our [Pesach-in-ten-easy-steps guide](#) on our website. And of course you are welcome to call, email or text with any questions. We are here to help.

Maot Chittim

In the weeks leading up to Pesach, we always ask that people contribute Maot Chittim so that those in need can enjoy Pesach with dignity. This year, I worry that the economic impact of coronavirus may leave some individuals and families in particularly dire straits. Please make checks out to the Rabbi Dr. Leo Jung Fund or donate online and earmark your donation with the words: Passover Relief.

Siyum Bechorim

Our siyum this year will take place virtually via Zoom. We will send the details soon.

Yizkor

While it will be difficult not to be in shul for the recitation of Yizkor on the final day of Pesach, please be assured that Yizkor does not require a minyan and may be recited in its entirety at home.

Youth Department Haggadah

The Jewish Center Youth Department is now hard at work on the creation of a Jewish Center Haggadah. Submissions of artwork, divrei torah, poetry, etc. are welcome! If someone in your family would like to get involved or contribute, please email sarah@jewishcenter.org.

Eruv

I am happy to report that the Manhattan Eruv has experienced no disruption.

Mikvah

We are taking a number of important precautions to insure that our Mikvah not only remains open, but conforms to the highest possible standards:

- To facilitate social distancing, the Mikvah has moved to an appointment-only model. Please call 212-579-2011 to schedule an appointment.

- We have asked that all preparations take place at home.

- The Mikvah facility and its preparation rooms are thoroughly cleaned and disinfected between every use.

- The water in the Mikvah is not only kept clean and safe by an advanced filtration system; the water is also treated with bromine, which the CDC advises “inactivates” the virus that causes COVID-19.

- According to its guidelines, the Mikvah requires that anyone who is unwell, under quarantine, or has been exposed to anyone with a positive COVID-19 test may not come to the Mikvah.

Announcements

I have heard from a number of members that they have been missing the announcements I typically make at the end of services on Shabbat morning. While I confess that this has not been

at the top of my priority list, I do want to be responsive. I believe the best solution is this: I will accumulate all of the announcements over the coming weeks and then – on our first Shabbat back in shul – I will read them in their entirety. (Just kidding! I think we all need a little humor to help get through this difficult time....)

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update 3/16/2020

Dear Friends,

We are all searching for hope during these dark times. I confess that I have not been much moved by the bromides that have been circulating. But I was moved by a conversation I had yesterday with a Holocaust survivor. He has oriented his life around a philosophy of optimism and hopefulness. And he reassured me that – even if we can't see it right now – there will be an end to this madness. He was even thinking positive thoughts about how ultimately this pandemic might end up strengthening the Israel-Diaspora relationship. It was so refreshing to gain a little perspective from someone who had actually lived through something far worse. With God's help, we'll make it through this, too.

In a world dominated by fear of a virus, it was his optimism that was contagious. I put down the phone and felt energized about all the opportunities that lay ahead in the coming week. I hope you will join me in seizing them.

On that note, please find below a brief update. The doors to our shul may be closed; but the opportunities before us are wide open.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Torah and Adult Education

All of our classes are migrating to a virtual format. Zoom and google meet will allow our members to join classes either by video conference or phone. Please be on the lookout for an email with further details. Our Daf Yomi is already up and running and meets daily at 7:45am. Login on your computer meet.google.com/feu-rzrb-iyp and click join or dial in by phone: 732-631-4531 and enter pin number: 410 132 748#.

Tefillah

We continue to daven for all those victimized by coronavirus, but particularly those closest to home. Please keep in mind **רחל בן רחל** as well as **שרה איטה**.

In addition, it is appropriate to insert Avinu Malkeinu into our daily Tefillot.

Finally, we invite you to join us on Zoom for Kabbalat Shabbat on Friday afternoon and Havdallah on Saturday night. Stay tuned for details.

Yahrzeit and Kaddish

If you are saying Kaddish or observing a Yahrzeit, the best solution is to find someone who is in a safe area that still has minyanim to say Kaddish on your behalf. It is not appropriate to search

for an existing minyan. As a community service, Congregation Beth Joseph in Greater Phoenix is offering a Kaddish service at http://www.phoenixbethjoseph.org/?page_id=387.

Chesed

We have established a committee of volunteers, chaired by Jessica Gross and Chani Segall, to call and check in on older members. We've already made hundreds of calls and have members standing by to help with errands. To volunteer, please email jr1445@yahoo.com or chanisegall@aol.com.

A Message to Older Members

With forgiveness, I have been advised by the health department that, with respect to the coronavirus, "older" means those over the age of 60. I have been receiving calls, emails and texts from your children and friends. They sound something like this:

"Dear Rabbi,

Can you please help. We've tried to convince mom to stay put, but you know how stubborn she can be. She prides herself on her independence and insists that doing a couple of errands won't put her in harm's way. We're afraid she just doesn't understand the gravity of the situation."

Please: Let someone else do your errands. We have dozens of volunteers who would love nothing more than the opportunity to help. Just reach out to me, Aaron, Jessica Gross (jr1445@yahoo.com) or Chani Segall (chanisegall@aol.com) and everyone will be better off.

Virtual Gatherings

Just because we can't come together at The Jewish Center doesn't mean we can't come together. We will be setting up a series of virtual breakfasts to give people an opportunity to socialize online. Please keep an eye out for an invitation.

Best Practices

We have been inundated with wonderful ideas and suggestions. We have set up a centralized address: suggestions@jewishcenter.org. Among our members are some of the smartest, most thoughtful, most creative minds I know. We would love to harness your energy and channel it into solutions to problems that may not have even occurred to us yet. If you have ideas or have seen best practices at other institutions that could benefit our community, please let us know!

Tzeddakah

In the weeks leading up to Pesach, we always ask that people contribute Maot Chittim so that those in need can enjoy Pesach with dignity. This year, I worry that the economic impact of coronavirus may leave some individuals and families in particularly dire straits. Please make checks out to the Rabbi Dr. Leo Jung Fund or donate online and earmark your donation with the words: Passover Relief.

Youth Department (Please read even if you are a not a parent!)

Our youth director is working on creative materials and ideas that we hope will be helpful to your children and will help supplement the distance learning that they are doing at home through their schools. She has in mind a Mitzvah project, a pen-pal project and lots of other creative ideas. If you have a talent that you would like to share virtually with the youth department (are you an amateur magician, musician, juggler, something else?), please let us know by emailing sarah@jewishcenter.org.

Communication

We are committed to keeping in touch and providing regular communication with our membership. Though most of our staff will be working from home, Aaron and I will be at The Jewish Center and you can reach us at any time.

Pesach

With Pesach just around the corner, we are thinking creatively about ways that we can support our members. Again, if you have ideas, please email suggestions@jewishcenter.org.

Finally, a word of thanks. These difficult times have created enormous strain for all of us. I want to take a moment to acknowledge and thank the special people with whom I work: Andrew Borodach and all of our officers and Aaron Strum and the entirety of our professional staff. Under exigent circumstances, they have been working round-the-clock to make and implement decisions that keep us true to our mission as a community even as they focus with abiding compassion on the needs of every individual.

Update: 3/14/2020

Dear Friend,

I am writing to inform you that we have received word of another confirmed case of coronavirus. The individual attended services at The Jewish Center earlier this week. His condition is serious and he currently is hospitalized. We are davening for his complete and swift recovery.

He attended services at The Jewish Center at the following times:

1. Sunday morning, March 8 Shacharit at 8:30am (First Floor Auditorium) – He was sitting in the back on the left side (facing toward the bima/stage).
2. Tuesday morning (Purim), March 10 Shacharit (Main Sanctuary after 8:30am) – He was standing in the back on the left side (facing toward the bima) near the doors leading to the vestibule.

Steps You Can Take

Please review the information described [here](#) by the New York State Department of Health to better understand the symptoms and preventative measures we can each take during this time.

If you or anyone in your household (i) exhibits symptoms of coronavirus (such as a cough, fever of over 100.4F or trouble breathing) or (ii) were in close proximity for an extended period of time to the individual described above, please contact your healthcare provider or the New York State Department of Health at the Novel Coronavirus Hotline at 1-888-364-3065.

If you or someone in your family has been in contact with an individual who tested positive for coronavirus or tests positive for coronavirus and have been to The Jewish Center during this period, please notify Aaron Strum, Rabbi Levine or me immediately. This will enable us to provide accurate information to the New York State Department of Health and obtain the best advice.

We also urge you to dramatically reduce your social interactions to the bare minimum to help slow the spread of the disease. It is our collective responsibility to work together to contain this virus.

On a personal note let me add that this was an especially challenging Shabbat, shuttering our shul for Shabbat for what may have been the first time in our more than one-hundred year history. My family and I truly missed not engaging and interacting with our many friends who comprise the Jewish Center family. We daven for those who are ill from the coronavirus and for

a speedy resolution to this pandemic; and we look forward to sharing good times together soon. In the meantime, let us together rise to the challenge of these difficult times and ensure that the most vulnerable in our community are well looked after and taken care of.

Sincerely,

Andrew Borodach, President

Update: 3/13/2020

Dear Friend:

I know that we will not see one another at The Jewish Center this Shabbat. So I wanted to bring a little of The Jewish Center to you. Below, you will find three sections. In the first are three videos. On The Jewish Center calendar, this Shabbat was scheduled to be our Youth Shabbat. Please find two short clips from JC kids (Kira Borodach and Ari Levine) that I hope will lift your spirits. The third video is a short thought for these fraught times. In the second section are some practical suggestions that I thought might be helpful. And in the final section are some links to reading material that may be of interest.

With warmest regards for a Shabbat Shalom,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 3/12/2020

Dear Friend:

I am writing to you to provide a further update regarding the coronavirus and its impact on The Jewish Center.

Confirmed Coronavirus Case at The Jewish Center
We have confirmed that an attendee of the Young Leadership minyanim this past Shabbat tested positive for coronavirus. The individual attended the Young Leadership Kabbalat Shabbat on the 5th floor on Friday night, March 5, and was at the March 6th Young Leadership Shabbat morning minyan in the Auditorium on the 1st floor from approximately 11:30am to 1:30pm. We send our wishes for a full and speedy recovery to this individual.

Update: 3/9/2020

Dear Friend:

As Purim approaches, we are all concerned about how to balance our health and well-being on the one hand with our halakhic obligations on the other. Of course The Jewish Center has been following the situation closely and we are adhering to the guidelines set forth by trusted national and state agencies to keep everyone safe and healthy.

In particular, I wanted to take a moment to share our plans for Purim at The Jewish Center. While all of our minyanim and Megillah readings will take place as scheduled, we recognize that some members of our community may not be able to attend services as they normally would.

On Purim, we usually encourage participating in communal Megillah readings in accordance with the principle b'rov am hadrat melekh, more honor is accorded to Hashem when we

congregate in large numbers. For many people this year, it may be optimal to hear the Megillah in a smaller setting.

If a person is unwell or self-quarantined, or has been advised not to attend large gatherings, one should read or hear the Megillah at home. Below, I include guidelines shared by the Orthodox Union.

We want to be especially sensitive to the fact that coronavirus may prevent part of our membership from coming to shul - not only on Purim - but in the weeks to come. We will follow up with specifics, but we will need all of our members to step up and take a more active role reaching out to members at home.

As I said this past Shabbat, we will continue to daven every day for those who have been affected. And we'll continue to daven that this epidemic disappears with the same swiftness with which it appeared. But until that day comes, it's up to us to make sure those suffering the absence of community at least know that we're there for them.

With warmest regards for a Purim Sameach,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 3/5/2020

Dear

Friend:

We are all on edge about the coronavirus. At a time like this, the role of a shul is particularly important. It reminds us that we are not alone; that others share our values and our concerns; that someone will be there to help in a time of crisis; and that the gates of tefillah are always open. I want to let you know that The Jewish Center has been following the situation closely and we are adhering to the guidelines set forth by trusted national and state agencies. Because the situation is so fluid, my rabbinic colleagues and I are in touch regularly just as our executive director and lay leaders are in touch with their respective counterparts. Our goal is to strike a balance between caution on the one hand and our best attempt at normalcy on the other. We share best practices in the hope that we can keep everyone safe and healthy.

Update: 3/2/2020

The Jewish Center has been monitoring the coronavirus (COVID-19) that first emerged in Wuhan, China, late last year, and has now spread to Europe, South America, Israel and even the United States. We hope that the coronavirus transmission is reduced in the coming days ahead, and that all those who have fallen ill have a speedy recovery. However, as the virus spreads and out of an abundance of caution, we are taking proactive steps to ensure the health and safety of our community. We are monitoring the situation and obtain regular updates from the New York City Department of Health and the CDC. In order to plan for a potential appearance of the virus in the New York City area, we are taking certain steps with immediate effect, which are based on the current CDC recommendation of focusing on general illness prevention:

Our maintenance staff is being especially vigilant to disinfect the building each day. We are purchasing Purell dispensers to place throughout the building, which will be regularly refilled. While washing hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds is best, hand sanitizer will be available as well.

We are asking that, if you recently traveled to countries significantly affected by the coronavirus (including China, Hong Kong, South Korea and Italy), you not enter the premises of The Jewish Center for a period of 14 days beginning from the date of your return. In addition, if you have come into close personal contact with someone (for example, a family member residing in your household) who recently returned from any of these areas, this restriction also applies.