

Update: 4/30/2020

Dear Friends,

The 11th century Spanish poet Solomon ibn Gabirol once wrote, “At the heart of all understanding is the realization of what is and what cannot be, and the consolation of what is not in our power to change.” These days, it seems, less and less is within our power. So many issues that had been under our control are now outside of our control. Our calendars and our daily routines have been overturned. Our social, professional and religious lives have been thrown into a state of unending uncertainty.

The question is: How do we respond?

One impulse is to consume massive quantities of news in the hope that knowing more about the virus and our battle against it will somehow restore a portion of the control we’ve lost. But I’ve not seen many experts endorse going down that rabbit hole. Their best advice, it seems, is for us to search out areas that do give us a sense of control. And so we’ve seen no shortage of thoughtful tips about establishing routines, keeping up with friends, dressing as if we were going out, exercising, and so on.

So it should not be lost on us that – particularly in the realms of Torah and Tefillah – our mesorah all but compels us to remain tied to a routine. Tefillah orients us and forces us to organize ourselves around regular times for davening. As Rav Soloveitchik famously put it, “When halakhic man... sees the fading rays of the setting sun... he knows that this sunset... imposes upon him anew obligations and commandments.” Even when it’s not possible to daven with a minyan, the halacha tells us that we should daven at the time the minyan would have been.

Torah study, too, is meant to be regular. Daf Yomi is just the most routinized manifestation of the principle that we are meant to set aside fixed hours for Torah every day of our lives.

But perhaps less obvious is the notion of performing chesed on a daily basis. There is no set time and there is no canonical text. But as the Chafetz Chaim writes, no day should go by without the performance of an act of chesed. Starting with the mitzvah of checking in on neighbors and the elderly, opportunities for chesed abound. Let’s bake one into our daily routine. Lots of things these days are beyond our control. How much chesed we do isn’t one of them.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 4/29/2020

Dear Friends,

One of the watchwords of the moment is waiting. We’re waiting for scientists to develop a vaccine. We’re waiting for our government to ramp up testing. We’re waiting for schools and shuls and businesses to reopen so that we can reclaim a semblance of our pre-covid lives.

Jewish tradition has nothing against waiting. The very first Mishnah in Avot cautions us to be deliberate in judgment – to wait rather than to rush headlong into an impulsive decision. After the Exodus, we waited 40 long years before we could taste the fruit of the Promised Land. For two millennia, we waited to come home to an Israel we could call our own. We wait daily for the arrival of the messiah.

It’s when we make the mistake of confusing waiting for deferral that we betray our tradition. Waiting can never become an excuse not to act. The same Mishnah that counsel’s deliberation insists that we become teachers and raise up many students. Our time in the Wilderness was taken up with the study and mastery of the newly-received Torah. And while we waited to return to Israel, we learned its laws, we davened, and – in modern history – we organized a

movement that actively fought to transform dream into reality. It's quite amazing to think of all that we've accomplished while we were waiting.

They say Isaac Newton developed calculus during an outbreak of the Plague in 1665. Our contribution needn't be so grand. But neither are we free to simply pass the time. We have lives to lead and milestones to mark. We have books to read and children to teach. As Robert Frost might say, we have promises to keep and miles to go before we sleep. There will be plenty to celebrate when the day of return arrives. But there's also plenty to do until it does.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 4/28/2020

Dear Friends,

Many wonderful stories have begun to emerge from the shadows cast by this pandemic. One of my favorites was the story of IDF soldiers in Bnei Brak. Of all the issues that divide the citizens of Israel, few are as contentious as army service. It goes without saying that we in the Religious Zionist camp are possessed of a deep and abiding support for Israel's armed forces and its soldiers. Military service is a great source of pride for our community. Many of our members are parents and grandparents of chyalim. Most residents of Bnei Brak, however, live by a philosophy that does not encourage army service. When soldiers and Haredim have come together in the past, they haven't always seen eye to eye.

Over the past few weeks, however, it seems a new chapter in this relationship has begun. When soldiers were deployed to Bnei Brak to help alleviate the strains caused by the coronavirus, they were welcomed and embraced (metaphorically, of course). Together with volunteers, the soldiers took up the task of delivering toys, medical supplies, prepared meals, and groceries to those who were quarantined. In an uncharacteristically generous piece by The New York Times, it was reported that the residents of Bnei Brak were enthusiastically singing the praises of the soldiers and showering them with candy. One resident said, "Suddenly, one day, there are all these military vehicles, they're going to the elderly and people with special needs. Seeing this will be engraved on my heart. It's not just that they're watching the borders, they're also coming to help us in this crisis."

Tonight we begin Yom Haatzmaut. We'll put our pandemic lives on pause, we'll sing Hallel and we'll reflect on the miracle of Israel. We'll celebrate the miraculous birth of a nation that represents two thousand years of longing and two thousand years of wandering. As we do, let's celebrate, too, the smaller miracles – the moments when acrimony can melt into affection. And then let's find ways to create more of them.

Chag Atzmaut Sameach,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 4/27/2020

Dear Friends,

Tonight is Yom Hazikaron. We will remember and pay tribute to our fallen soldiers. But sometimes we fall into the trap of believing that for someone to be considered a hero, he or she needs to have lived in some earlier time. To dispel that myth, all one need do is learn the story of Roi Klein. Every Jewish child should know his name. And they should know that his name is synonymous with Jewish heroism.

Born in 1975 to parents who were survivors of the Holocaust, Roi was a deputy commander in Golani. In 2006, during the second Lebanon War, he gave his life so that others could live. Tonight we'll remember Roi. We'll remember his sacrifice. And we'll remember that Jewish heroism is very much alive. The video below says all there is to say.

With warmest regards,
Yosie Levine
Rabbi

Update: 4/26/2020

Dear Friends,

When rabbinic authorities are confronted by a the challenge of something they've not seen before, their first impulse is to find a precedent. If the issue has come up in the past, well then it's not in fact new and we can simply fall back on the well-reasoned arguments of yesteryear. Think of the rationale that says: cooking with a microwave is simply cooking.

When there are no precedents, the next path usually involves analogy. We haven't seen this specific issue before, but we've seen issues that are analogous. Turning off an electric light is like removing the fuel from an oil lamp. Comparisons can guide us.

The way we've approached covid-19 isn't all that different. It became abundantly clear early on that there simply was no precedent in our living memory – or maybe ever – for this kind of global pandemic. So the analogies began. It's our Pearl Harbor moment or 9/11. It's the AIDS epidemic or a polio outbreak. It's the Blitz or pre-war Germany. All the analogies fell flat because the coronavirus is not any of those things.

We use metaphors to make sense of the world. When the problem is so intractable, of course we're drawn to ways that can help us conceptualize it more easily. Consciously or otherwise, we're trying to build an internal scaffold that will support us as we grapple with the new challenges of the moment. In this case, I'm afraid, our usual tricks fail us.

If it's not possible to build internal support, then we need to build external support. Groups of old friends getting together on Zoom are springing up everywhere and with good reason. In the long run, I'm not sure it's going to be possible to get through this alone. Particularly in the absence of our communities and venues for assembling, we need smaller groups to help support and sustain us. Whether they're former roommates or classmates, cousins or co-workers, now is the time to reconnect. I guess the message is this: When metaphors refuse to be our friends, we need real ones.

With warmest regards,
Yosie Levine
Rabbi

Update: 4/24/2020

Dear Friends,

I want to share with you a Jewish Center trade secret. When we sit down at the beginning of the year to map out the annual calendar, I always flag Tazria-Metzora and say something like, "That's probably a good weekend for a scholar-in-residence.... Or maybe a public lecture on 18th century Jewish history." How much can we say about a Biblical disease that we cannot even meaningfully translate?

But every parshah in the Torah has its moment. I feel as though these parshiot have been waiting for 2020. Other than epidemiologists and students of the Black Death, who talks about quarantines and self-isolation? Suddenly the

chapters in the Torah trafficking in the diagnosis of an implacable disease and its victims look as contemporary as ever. Who would have thought the notion of a 14-day quarantine (along with a proscription against haircuts!) would be something we read about publicly on an annual basis?

This Shabbat, I invite you to explore these chapters more deeply. With eyes newly opened to the effects of disease and hearts newly sensitized do the challenges of isolation, what resonances can we find? Can we discern from the Torah and its commentaries messages that may inform how we see ourselves and our community as we endure this pandemic?

I, for one, am moved by an observation from the author of the 13th century Provençal commentary, Hizkuni. As part of his purification process, the metzora releases a little bird into the wild. And the question is why? It's neither a sacrifice nor a gift. What's its meaning?

Hizkuni suggests that the procedure captures the feelings of the metzora: a creature cooped up who longs to be free. And yet it signals to him, too, what his aspirations ought to be. Once permitted to return to nature, the bird immediately seeks out its companions. She returns to her flock. Likewise, the person afflicted with tzaraat should be dreaming of returning to the warm embrace of his/her community.

And yet there is no picture in the Torah of the scenario wherein every member of the community is consigned to isolation. When the day comes on which we're all free to return to shul, we will have a celebration like no other. May that day come quickly.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 4/23/2020

Dear Friends,

Imagine if this global pandemic were taking place in 1990. No Zoom; no smartphones; no email. We would all be struggling with our call-waiting and stocking up on postage stamps. If covid-19 had to strike, it's surely better that it struck now – in an age when the technological tools at our disposal can contribute meaningfully to easing the burden of our isolation by connecting us to one another and the larger world. Our devices and our gadgets have never been so valuable.

At the same time, however, it's important for us to pause every now and again and assess the extent to which we are attached to those devices and gadgets. We know all-too-well that their overuse can be problematic at best and dangerous at worst. It's not just that we need to do a better job limiting our screen time. It's that we need to replace some of the hours we're spending online with hours spent in ways that will nurture our cognitive and spiritual development.

In an excellent piece in National Affairs called, "The Erosion of Deep Literacy," Adam Garfinkle makes the provocative argument that our online habits can turn us into shallower people. Without deep reading, we lose our capacity for abstract thinking. If ever there were a time to return to books, this is it.

In a certain sense, our history has trained us for this moment. How many Jewish communities were confined to ghettos or otherwise restricted? When the world outside was off limits to us, we turned inward – to our texts and to our books. We've always placed an enormous emphasis on the study of the written word. And for good reason. Of course the goal is to master our mesorah and connect with our canon. But the process matters, too. To be a Jew is to be a student. And to be a student is to be a reader. As Maimonides wrote, Do not say, "When I have free time, I will study," for perhaps you will never have free time. If we turn ourselves into deeper readers now, we'll be deeper people when this pandemic is all over.

With warmest regards,
Yosie Levine
Rabbi

Update: 4/22/2020

Dear Friends,

“It looks like I picked the wrong week to quit smoking.” So said the immortal character portrayed by Lloyd Bridges in the movie, Airplane. For most of us who made plans in 2020, it seems like we picked the wrong year.

Covid-19 has wiped clean our calendars for this week and next week and the week after that. How can one make plans of any kind during a global pandemic? Across virtually all sectors, deferrals and suspensions are now the norm, to say nothing of professional milestones or family celebrations. It’s important to recognize that these assaults on our calendar lives are doubly harmful. We haven’t just lost the events themselves; we’ve lost the joy of anticipating them.

There’s something psychologically healthy and even necessary about having horizons. They ground us and orient us. Great Jewish leaders have always had specific destinations in mind. Think of Avraham or Moshe or Herzl. Having something to look forward to is basic to the human condition. And the more concrete the vision, the higher its value. A vague idea of time away is not nearly as meaningful as a specific plan to be at your favorite restaurant in Herzliya on August 11th.

These are real losses and we need to compensate for them. So we need to amplify the moments that are on the calendar already and we need to create new ones. We might think of days like Yom Haatzmaut, Lab Ba-Omer or Yom Yerushalayim. Or what about birthdays, anniversaries or graduations? Rather than just letting them pass because we can’t be together with lots of people – or bemoaning our inability to adequately celebrate them – are there ways we can turn these into moments to which we can look forward? Can we find an opportunity to learn something new, remember something old, or connect virtually with people whom we never would otherwise have seen?

Hype about the country reopening notwithstanding, this is going to be a long haul. To stay sane and to stay positive, we need to reclaim our calendars. Let’s populate them with events that will lift our spirits and people who will stir our souls.

With warmest regards,
Yosie Levine
Rabbi

Update: 4/21/2020

Dear Friends,

When covid-19 pulled us out of shul and into our homes, it struck a blow to one of the pillars of our identity. Membership in a shul isn’t transactional; it’s foundational. It’s core to who we are. As this virus has kept us away from our fellow shul-goers, we’ve been actively searching for alternative ways to keep up and keep connected. We’ve studied together online; we’ve celebrated together; we’ve even mourned together.

But our community plays many other important roles in less overt ways. One of those roles involves helping our members professionally by connecting them to contacts in their respective fields. In the face of so much economic distress and uncertainty, the opportunity to contribute in this area has never been greater.

I am pleased to share with you the launch of the JC Business Networking Committee, chaired by Elana Kaminetzky and Grant Silverstein. You will soon receive a short survey which will help us improve our database. I encourage you to take a moment to complete it so that we can best leverage the exceptional talent of our membership. And if you or

someone you know is actively looking for a job, please feel free to reach out to me or to the committee directly. We would love nothing more than to help.

As Rabbi Meir Twersky once wrote, the notion of areivut doesn't just mean that every Jew is responsible for one another. The root ערב also means to mix or to blend. The idea is that "all Jews are bound up with each other." The bonds that bind us together have always been our greatest source of strength. Let's be sure we keep it that way.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 4/20/2020

Dear Friends,

Tonight we will commemorate Yom Hashoah. Though the task of testifying about the Holocaust falls exclusively to survivors, the task of remembering the Holocaust falls to every one of us. In fact, remembering the atrocities of the Holocaust is itself a declaration over Nazism – even if only in a small way.



In the opening pages of *The Drowned and the Saved*, Primo Levi explains that erasing the memory of the Jew was among the Nazis' goals. "Many survivors recall that the SS soldiers used to enjoy taunting the prisoners with a cynical warning: No matter how this war ends, we have won the war against you. No one will be left to testify. But even if one of you does survive, the world will not believe you. There might be suspicions, discussions, historical research, but there will be no certainty, because we will destroy both you and the evidence. And even if some evidence should remain and some of you do manage to survive, people will say the events you describe are too monstrous to be believed."

It wasn't just genocide. It was genocide compounded by a cover-up so sweeping that it was intended to whitewash all the blood-soaked annals of history. Bernard Henri Levy argues that this was *sui generis*. There is, nor ever was, a parallel in history: "Crimes in which the victims are stricken not only from the rolls of the living but also from those of the dead."

Of course we are possessed of a sacred duty to remember. But perhaps even more importantly, each of us has a responsibility to learn as much as we can about the Holocaust and teach everything we know to the next generation. When memory becomes history, we will be left to testify about what we heard from those who survived. We would do well to listen carefully.

With special thanks to our Yom Hashoah sponsors, Harriet and George Blank, I encourage you to join us this evening, April 20th via Zoom at 8pm. We are honored to hear from Holocaust survivor, Jacob Kaminetzky, father of Jewish Center member, Elana Kaminetzky. And if your children are old enough, they should join as well. At 9pm, we will participate in the community-wide Reading of the Names.

That we struggle now with a crisis of our own does not absolve us from the duties of history. Honoring the past may be even endow us with more clarity about the present.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 4/19/2020

Dear Friends,

While waiting passively has been the prevailing culture of these times, we have never been very good at standing still. And so, while observing the guidelines set forth by our government, we have quietly been finding ways to contribute to those who have been affected: collecting and distributing tzedakah, organizing a team of volunteers to help those who are homebound and procuring tens of thousands of surgical and N95 masks and delivering them to those on the frontlines.

Today I want to encourage you to make a direct contribution to the cure.

Our community was among the earliest to be struck by covid-19. And we now sit squarely at the epicenter of this pandemic. Because each of us knows someone who has been affected by this virus, we are in a unique position to contribute.

Mount Sinai Hospital is one of 34 institutions participating in the National COVID-19 Convalescent Plasma Project. The idea is to gather the antibody-rich plasma of people who have recovered from coronavirus. When that plasma is transfused into patients suffering from the virus, it can be life-saving. If you have had a documented case of covid-19 or experienced the symptoms of covid-19 and are now fully recovered, you may be eligible to participate.

If you know someone who has recovered from coronavirus, encourage them to register. Their antibodies can save a life.

We will soon read the Torah's imperative to never stand idly by when one's neighbor is in mortal danger. I'm not sure the verse has ever held more literal poignancy. **לֹא תֵעָמֵד עַל דַּם רֵעֲךָ**. Do not stand idly by the blood of your brother.

When our brother needs blood – or the antibodies contained in our blood – we have a duty to act.

Imagine if our community responded to this call with all the vigor of which we are capable. Of course we will each do everything within our power to prevent this disease from spreading. But prevention is only half the answer. Here is our chance to be part of the cure.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 4/17/2020

Dear Friends,

I have been pleasantly surprised to hear from so many Jewish Center members that their Yom Tov was “better than expected.” I've heard notes of relief, satisfaction and even joy. And yet, those feelings are tinged by the sadness of the profound losses our community has recently suffered.

Aharon occupied a not dissimilar position in our Parsha. The joy of participating in the Temple service was overshadowed by tragedy. Va-yidom Aharon. The Torah tells us, not that Aharon was silent, but that he was actively silent. In contemporary parlance, we might see that he compartmentalized his emotions. In the face of celebration and grief, he identified a middle path.

I'm afraid that the coming days and weeks will call on us to summon quantities of equanimity and fortitude that may at times appear superhuman. Our forebears remind us that we are equal to the task. Let us pray for the time when we won't have to be.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 4/14/2020

Dear Friends,

What awaits us on the other side of Covid-19? Is there any sector we can confidently predict will soon return to normal? The path before us appears awash with uncertainty.

When the Israelites stood at Yam Suf, they, too, faced a fate unknown. And they, too, knew that no rose garden awaited them on the opposite bank of the sea. Having survived one trauma, they were destined to weather not a few difficult days in their future. How did they manage?

A Midrashic tradition gives us at least a piece of the answer. Following the Song at the Sea, Miriam took hold of her drum and led the women in celebration. But from where, the Midrash wonders, had the women produced these instruments?

The instruments, the Midrash writes, were a product of the faith kept by Miriam and her contemporaries. So confident were they in God's salvation that they packed drums for the journey ahead.

It is hard to know what awaits us on the other side. And so it's awfully hard to prepare. But there is one commodity that we can be certain will be as valuable tomorrow as it is today: Faith. Imperceptible as it may be, salvation is never far away. Neither is the confidence to believe as much.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 4/13/2020

Dear Friends,

The weeks between Pesach and Shavuot, the Talmud tells us, were marred by a plague. Tens of thousands of R. Akiva's students perished because they failed to accord one another the kavod they deserved. What so many centuries ago was a cause, today appears to be a symptom. Where is the kavod? Victims of Covid-19 are dying alone. People who cared about them can't attend their funerals. Burials are delayed. The recitation of Kaddish has been suspended. What then are we to do?

Jewish tradition offers a radical solution. It might be called vicarious kavod. In the absence of those rites to which we would normally turn, the halacha proffers an alternative. When the forces governing the world are beyond our control, we turn instead to that which is in our control. We eschew public ceremony for private reflection. The response to tragedy, Maimonides writes, is introspection. To the extent we can elevate our own conduct, it cannot help but reflect well on the deceased. If their passing has inspired us to improve – even in a small way – then we have transformed their loss into meaning. If we cannot honor the dead by gathering together, we can still honor the dead by gathering strength from what they stood for.

We know that R. Akiva promoted the value of *ואהבת לרעך כמוך*. Perhaps it was in the aftermath of the plague that he became the champion of this ethic. Perhaps it was his way of honoring the students he had lost and according them the kavod they had been denied.

With God's help, our plague will soon come to an end. When it does, let's continue to honor those who have died by honoring them vicariously in the way that we live.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 4/12/20

Dear Friends,

I've been spending a lot of time in the Ramble lately. I haven't seen any data yet, but my impression is that the park's wildlife activity is inversely proportional to human activity. As people recede into the background, animals and plants advance to the foreground. I've never seen so many squirrels or so many species of birds. I even saw a fish jump out of the lake.

Pesach is the only holiday in the Torah that has to be celebrated in the springtime. We're called on to notice the rhythms of nature and the transformation of our environment. It's during the month of Nissan that we recite a special brachah upon seeing fruit trees in blossom.

If nothing else, the notion of quarantine should give us a renewed appreciation for the grandeur of God's created world – the blessing of a walk in the woods or the sight of a songbird. To the extent we urbanites have been too distant from nature, these difficult days remind us that we ought not to be. As Rainer Maria Rilke once put it, "We alone fly past all things, as fugitive as the wind." To the extent we can help preserve our magnificent planet, we'll be preserving, too, a divine imperative.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 4/8/20

Dear Friends,

The Pesach Seder always seems to trigger nostalgia. Because its primary locus is the home, Pesach cannot help but conjure up memories and images of families gathered together. I think if we were asked to observe Yom Kippur alone, our feelings would be very different from the ones we experience today.

So perhaps it's worth remembering that the first Jew was also plagued by loneliness. Throughout his life, Avraham was constantly faced with the prospect of separating from the people closest to him. When they came to a figurative fork in the road, his nephew, Lot, chose one path while Avraham chose the other. Sarah was twice abducted. Yishmael and Hagar were banished. And Avraham was asked to sacrifice Yitzchak.

Is it a coincidence, then, that one of the loneliest men in the Torah was also the paragon of hospitality? Maybe it's the lonely person who develops the keener sense of togetherness. Maybe it's the person most in need of company who leaves his/her door open the widest.

Arami oved avi, the snapshot of Jewish history uttered by the farmer in Temple times, is the centerpiece of the Haggadah. At length, we explicate virtually every line of the passage. But just who was the Aramean referenced in the verse? Some suggest it was Yaakov; others suggest it was Lavan. The Rashbam insists it's a reference to Avraham. After all, he was the wanderer par excellence, leaving his home and homeland behind in the pursuit of ethical monotheism. But Avraham doesn't just appear at the center of the Haggadah. It's with Avraham's ethic that we begin the Seder when we say the words: Whoever is hungry, let him come and eat.

The Jew clamors for company and community. Particularly during these times of isolation, we long to be together. And so I invite you to join me this afternoon at 5:30pm for some pre-Pesach Seder highlights. (Please find the Zoom link below.) Provided they can be cajoled, I even hope some of our kids will join us, too. I wish I could share a more literal invitation. For now, a virtual one will have to do. As we think of Avraham – the lonely knight of faith – I hope we'll capture a little of his spirit on our night of faith.

Rachel joins me in wishing you a chag kasher v'sameach. To paraphrase the Haggadah: This year we are alone; next year we will be together.

With warmest regards,
Yosie Levine
Rabbi

Update: 4/7/2020

Dear Friends,

Why do we count the dead? Does doing so confer more significance on those who have perished? I am not sure. But with so much death in the headlines – and so many bereavement notices in our email's subject lines – it's hard to escape thinking of the pasuk describing the night of the exodus: There was no house in which someone had not died (Ex. 12:30). It seems we all know someone who has been afflicted by this terrible disease. And because of the guidelines currently in place, neither are we able to properly mourn those who have been lost. As a result, we are at risk of becoming inured to daily tragedy as it becomes routine. Our zoom shivah calls are beginning to feel a little like taking drops of wine from our own cups at the Seder table. It is surely better to make a gesture than not make one. But it also seems woefully insufficient.

Of course we have tried to compensate for the loss of human interaction – not only in mourning – but in times of joy, too. It's wonderful to be able to participate in a Zoom bar/bat mitzvah or bris, but something is surely lost when friends and family cannot come together. And so we are also at risk of becoming less invested in our communal celebrations.

So here's my radical suggestion: Let's make a value of conserving positive energy. Let's imagine the time we would have devoted to attending a bris or paying a shivah call and preserve it. That time should be considered hekdesch, designated specifically for a holy purpose. In lieu of the mitzvah we've been forced to shortchange, let's repurpose our time and contribute it to other sacred acts that we are able to perform: calling those who are alone, davening for those who are unwell, or studying Torah online.

Rather than allowing these difficult circumstances to dull our sensitivity to that which is sacred, we can turn the tables. We can make sure that when we emerge from this pandemic, we'll do so with heightened sensitivity to what is most precious. And we'll be able to contribute to higher purposes the positive energy we've conserved – positivity energy the world will surely need.

With warmest regards,
Yosie Levine
Rabbi

Update: 5/6/2020

Dear Friends,

In many ways, it seems that time has been standing still these past few weeks. We have been busy waiting. But at the same time, it seems that The Jewish Center has been in perpetual motion.

Toward the end of the Seder, we'll say many times, Hodu la-Hashem ki tov. We usually take this to mean that we give praise to Hashem for He is good. But Rabbi Lamm once rendered it, Give praise to Hashem because it's good [to give praise]. And in fact, in the course of the Seder, we pause many times to stop and give praise. Just think of all the segments of the Haggadah devoted to this theme: Baruch ha-Makom baruch Hu; Dayeinu; Lefikach; and Hallel. Just to name a few.

So amidst all this chaos, I wanted to take a moment to acknowledge and thank both our professionals and volunteers whose efforts these past few weeks can only be described as extraordinary.

We have:

- Collected and distributed tens of thousands of dollars so that Jews can celebrate Pesach with dignity;
- Run errands and done grocery shopping for those who are now homebound;
- Arranged for one-stop shopping for those spending Pesach in the city;
- Procured thousands of masks and other supplies and distributed them to local hospitals;
- Made hundreds of phone calls to JC members;
- Created a JC Youth Department Haggadah;
- Held zoom classes that engaged thousands of viewers both locally and from around the world;
- Created a means by which those spending Pesach alone can join a virtual Seder;
- Begun a pen-pal project to connect junior and senior members of our shul;
- Delivered Haggadot to members of the community unable to procure them;
- Circulated worldwide a special Tefillah for those battling coronavirus;
- Created voluminous content to help our members prepare for and celebrate Pesach more meaningful
- Provided resources to those struggling with anxiety.

I share these accomplishments with you for three reasons. First, at a time when people need an uplift, we can never say thank you too often. Second, every member of our community has a share in these achievements and should take great pride in them. And finally, I hope that what we've managed to do thus far will serve as a reminder of all that we can accomplish together. The coming months will be filled with uncertainty. Ahead of us will be challenges like none that we have faced in recent memory. But these past few weeks should give us all the confidence that – when the time comes – our community will step up once again with the energy, generosity and wisdom to overcome them.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 4/5/2020

Dear Friends,

We have been hard at work recently developing creative ideas to help the members of our community feel less lonely this Pesach. I'm pleased to share with you one such idea that we hope will be helpful to those celebrating Pesach alone.

In consultation with poskim at Yeshiva University, my friend, Rabbi Mark Wildes and I have arranged a virtual Seder on the first night of Pesach. The Seder will be run by our colleague, Rabbi Yonah Bookstein in Los Angeles. By conducting the Seder before the onset of Yom Tov on the West Coast, we are able to sidestep the halakhic challenges that attach to a live Zoom seder. Participants will tune in before Yom Tov begins and will use one-way audio and video. They will be able to see and hear the Seder leader live and in real-time. Of course it won't be the same as being a guest in someone's home, but we hope it will be the next best thing.

This remedy will not help connect family members to one another. But it will allow individuals who are alone to participate in a larger Seder and feel a sense of community at a time when such a feeling is not easy to achieve. And if this makes staying home more viable for even one more person, we will have contributed, too, to slowing the spread of the virus.

It should be understood that this dispensation applies uniquely to the circumstances created by the current pandemic. It is my fervent hope that, come next year, discussions of a virtual Seder will be a distant memory as we will be celebrating Pesach together with our families and friends.

Below, please find the information you will need to join by Zoom or by phone. Please be sure to join early to guarantee your participation.

With warmest regards,
Yosie Levine
Rabbi

Update: 4/3/2020

Dear Friends:

This Shabbat is Shabbat ha-Gadol. I wish we could be together at The Jewish Center. It was wonderful to see so many of you and learn with so many of you on Thursday evening. Links to a recording of the drashah and a transcript can be found below.

I hope very much that you will join us for Kabbalat Shabbat this afternoon and Havdallah tomorrow night.

With warmest regards for a Shabbat Shalom,
Yosie Levine
Rabbi

[Click here to watch the video](#)

[Click here for the transcript](#)

Update: 4/2/2020

Dear Friends,

I have been thinking a lot recently of Ben Bag Bag's statement in Pirkei Avot about the expansiveness of Torah: Turn it over and over again, for one can find everything within it.

As the world changes daily, the halakhic system has had to keep up. Questions have arisen in every precinct. It seems virtually every aspect of Jewish life is being put to the test. So many of these issues are simply unprecedented. Who could have dreamed up a scenario in which every shul around the world would be closed? Who could have imagined a shivah in which no visits are permitted?

And yet across this country and in Israel rabbis have been working round the clock to find ways to apply timeless halakhic values to these new circumstances. Mining sources both known and obscure, they have reified Ben Bag Bag's proposition. They've found accommodations for people unable to immerse new utensils in a mikvah; creative alternatives to disposing of chametz rather than burning it; and remedies for people unable to take haircuts before the Omer. (Together with our poskim, Rabbi Wildes and I are now working on a potential solution for people who will be alone for the Seder. Stay tuned!)

Of course we wish our circumstances were different. But there is also comfort in the knowledge that our mesorah is so rich and so vast that we can keep pace with a life-altering pandemic. In the process, we'll be writing new chapters in the annals of halakha. Let's hope those chapters will soon become academic.

With warmest regards,
Yosie Levine
Rabbi

Update 4/1/2020

Dear Friends,

Seeing the construction of a field hospital in Central Park this week was almost other-worldly. Perhaps not less upsetting was seeing a sign outside a Central Park playground that read, "Play at Your Own Risk." Needless to say, the playground was empty. So many aspects of our lives have been thrown off kilter. That children have to be told that playing might put them at risk is particularly poignant.

So I just wanted to pause for a moment to acknowledge the extraordinary and even heroic efforts of our schools in these past few weeks. For the children who have seen their lives overturned, our teachers have provided a sense of stability, constancy and inspiration. So many of their tools have been taken from them and yet they have found endless forms of creativity. They have been asked to do so much with so little and yet our children continue to learn and grow and thrive.

The very word Haggadah is built around the notion of telling the Jewish story to the children. But the Targum traces the roots of the word to the notion of thanksgiving. The farmer thanks Hashem (ve-hegadeta) for his bounty (Deut. 26:3). So it's particularly apt during this Pesach season to appreciate the contribution our teachers make in the lives of our children. For those of us who see their impact on a daily basis, let's be sure to let them know how much we appreciate them.

The Talmud (Shabbat 119b) teaches that the breath of schoolchildren sustains the world. Imagine the reward for those who sustain the schoolchildren.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi