Update: 8/31/2020

Five Minutes of Teshuvah

Dear Friends,

Jewish communities around the country have been busy weighing the pandemic's impact on our communal institutions. Naturally, schools and shuls have received the lion's share of our attention. They form the backbone of any community. The consequences of their being closed are sweeping. But what about the Beit Midrash? What of the study hall? What happens when the locus of our Torah study is closed?

The Torah tells us that the poles carrying the holy ark may never be removed. R. Samson Raphael Hirsch famously writes this is because its contents are inherently mobile. We stand ready at any moment to transport the Torah to any location in which we find ourselves. Torah is always ortable. So perhaps it's no surprise that of all the transitions and adaptations with which we've had to contend, the migration from in-person Torah study to on-line Torah study was among the most seamless. Access, though, is only half the equation. We also have to act.

After leaving this world, among the questions we will be asked by the heavenly tribunal is whether we fixed times for Torah study. There's something about the routinization of Torah that transcends the simple question of how many hours we devoted to decoding it. Particularly in these weeks leading to the Day of Judgment, we could all stand to benefit not only from more Torah in our lives, but more regular Torah in our lives.

In the 19th century yeshiva of Kelm, one period of the weekly curriculum was five minutes long. The idea was to highlight the value of even a few minutes of Torah study. Particularly now, as we are distant from our houses of study, fixing time for daily learning feels particularly urgent.

Beginning this morning at 830am, I invite you to join me for five minutes. We'll study a brief excerpt from the Rambam's work on Repentance and then we'll listen to the sound of the Shofar. The Talmud tells us that some people can acquire a share in the world to come in a minute. Imagine what we can accomplish in five.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 8/28/2020

The Return to Amalek

Dear Friends,

For so many of us, Parshat Zachor was the last time we were in shul on Shabbat morning. The three verses that form the close of our parsha this week were the last pesukim we heard before the pandemic sent us into lockdown. We read about a time in our national history when we were weary and tired and an enemy overcame us. The focus all those months ago was on Amalek – the adversary we would overcome generations later on the holiday that became known as Purim.

As we prepare to read this account again, our hearts and minds are in a very different place. We have a new appreciation for the notion of a people who are weary and tired. We've lived through challenging times before. September 11th set us on edge. Financial crises have left us worried. The specter of a nuclear Iran has left us anxious. But now we feel of all of these things. Everyday. The cumulative effect is enormous. As one woman aptly put it, "Every time I get the sniffles, I don't know whether I have five days to live or I should just take a decongestant." We're not just anxious and stressed; were worn out from constantly being anxious and stressed.

The end of the verse in our parsha is ambiguous. The Torah tells ve-lo yarei Elokim – he did not fear God. Presumably this refers to Amalek who brazenly ambushed a nation of defenseless refugees. But the Midrash suggests it may in fact refer to the Jewish people. Without the Torah to guide them, they were not yet prepared for the demands of their moment. Feeling depleted, they responded with neither prayer nor chesed.

Surely we can empathize. But we can also act. Yes, we are tired of pandemic life. But we have a guidebook – a manual filled with instructions and directives. Dozens of them appear in our parsha – mitzvot that require no audience. Good acts don't just beget other good acts; they energize us. They give us the strength to carry on. If we embrace them, I hope the next time we read about Amalek before Purim, we'll be in a position to celebrate like never before.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 8/27/2020

Back to School?

Dear Friends,

Communities all across our country have been grappling with the question of whether or not schools can safely reopen in the coming academic year. Rather than a single decision, the question of what to do with schools really encompasses a whole constellation of interconnected issues: from public health and education to psychology, economics and family life. With so much riding on these decisions and such woefully inadequate information, is it any wonder that the decibel level of the debate is so high.

Needless to say, every region and every school is subject to its own calculus. I offer here just one observation.

So much of this debate revolves around the axis of what children carry with them. While the coronavirus may not be as dangerous for children as it is for adults, there seems to be mounting evidence that kids can communicate the disease. Every time we think of children as "carriers," we are reminded that they have an extraordinary capacity for retention.

In one Talmudic metaphor, educators are advised to stuff their students with knowledge like an animal might be stuffed with food. It's axiomatic both within our tradition and beyond it that knowledge acquired at young ages remains with a person for decades. We'll all remember our experiences of this pandemic. But no one will have stronger and more vivid memories of these months than our children.

Whether they will be engaged in classroom teaching, virtual teaching, or some combination thereof, our schools will be embarking on a mission the stakes of which are very high. It won't be log before these "kids" transition into adults and into leadership roles of their own. Whether or not we're parents or grandparents of school-aged children, we have to feel invested in the success of our schools – whatever shape the curriculum takes over the course of the coming months.

Administrators and teachers will inevitably be under siege. Parents are accustomed to a kind of education that will simply be impossible during a pandemic. And the stresses of tuition only exacerbate an already difficult situation.

We have to thank our teachers and our schools. We have to support them financially. And we have to daven for their success.

If things go well, a couple decades from now we'll have a generation of resilient Jewish leaders with fond memories of how their families and communities battled through a pandemic. And they'll know a thing or two about how to confront life's unforeseen circumstances with equanimity and positivity. If things don't go well….

Let's make sure things go well.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 8/26/2020

Home Field Advantage

Dear Friends,

The Economist recently hired a consultancy to study the effects of home field advantage on European

soccer teams during the pandemic. Absent cheering fans, does playing on one's home field still matter? The answer is yes, but the advantage is not as great as it used to be. The one variable that changed materially was the umpiring. In front of fans, referees distribute only 46% of foul cards to the home team. In front of an empty stadium, the number suddenly became 50%.

It's no secret that our environment wields a great deal of influence over our capacity for impartial judgment. Even professionals who have surely grown accustomed to cheers and boos are not immune. It's not just teenagers who succumb to peer pressure.

But the sway a crowd may hold over us cuts both ways. If it's made up of the right people, the crowd can elevate us. It's what the Talmud called kinat soferim. Surrounded by sages, we may wish to become a sage. With enough exposure to refined individuals, we may yet be inspired to become more pious.

The crowd-less life created by this pandemic is of course a blessing and a curse. It goes without saying that we will not soon find ourselves among thousands of people at a professional sporting event. But neither we will find ourselves around too many people in shul, at a wedding hall or even at a Shabbat meal. Many of the best role models in our lives will remain at a distance.

As we search for ways to elevate ourselves during this month of introspection, we will have to think more creatively about the sources of our inspiration. If living exemplars are less accessible, perhaps it's during these days that we ought to turn to our past. Jewish history is filled with narratives of triumph. Biographies of Jewish heroes abound. Relying on them now might just be our home field advantage.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 8/24/2020

A Cure for the Covid Blues

Dear Friends,

Though only distantly related to covid-19, another contagion has been making the rounds lately. More and more people are coming down with the covid blues. The ailment is characterized by dreariness, a sense of feeling defeated and pervasive anxiety about the future. In more extreme cases, these symptoms are compounded by despair and a tendency to assign blame to others.

The causes are many: financial strain; the inability to plan; family stress; uncertainty about health; anxiety about contracting an unforgiving virus; the postponement or cancellation of a long-awaited milestone or trips; prolonged separation from loved ones; and the specter of having to lead a diminished life.

The good news is that the scientists have identified a path to a cure. It begins with a change in mindset. Most people suffering from the covid blues busy themselves asking what their elected officials have done wrong. They fixate on the restrictions that have been imposed on them or the failures of others. Why can't people just follow the rules? Why can't my children go to school? Why is the government so (un)restrictive? These questions revolve around decisions outside of one's control.

The healthier approach begins with the proposition that the one behavior we can change is our own. The questions we should be asking are the ones that focus on what we can contribute and to whom. This was Hillel's question: If I am only for myself, who am I? None of us is helpless and none of us is defeated. Giving tends to generate many more positive feelings than finger-pointing. Now is the time to turn outward and ask what it is we can do.

The person in the Torah who perpetually asks why is Yitro. Each time he does, it serves an agenda oriented toward giving. Why have you hurried back, he asks his daughters? Why have you abandoned the man who saved you? The questions are designed to encourage action and inspire generosity. And so it is when he turns to Moshe and asks, Why do you sit alone? Again, the idea is to find his son-in-law the support he needs.

If our questions generate only a sense of resignation and frustration, we probably shouldn't be asking them. If our questions lead us to give, not only should we ask them; we should answer them.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 8/21/2020

Embracing the End of Racism

Dear Friends,

Three years ago, Soniah Shah presciently wrote a book called Pandemic. But it's a provocative observation in her new book, The Next Great Migration, that warrants attention. Speculating about the crude origins of xenophobia, Shah proposes that its basis may be a kind of evolutionary firewall. If outsiders carry and communicate dangerous pathogens, fear of outsiders can be understood as a self-protecting reaction of the human immune system.

As the long-overdue call for racial justice has emerged in the midst of this pandemic, it seems history and science have left our nation at a crossroads. On one path are voices decrying discrimination and protesting against prejudice. Sins of the past beckon us to come together and heal our fractured nation by marching arm-in-arm. At the same moment, a second chorus of voices insists we remain within our own circles. Given regions are flagged and labeled hazardous. People coming from those places are

unwelcome because they are considered dangerous. History demands that we embrace. Science demands that we keep our distance.

The challenge is a difficult one, not least because so many well-intentioned voices have cast it as an either-or decision. What is more, any time we are called upon to undergo isolation, we run the risk of falling into the trap of xenophobia. As our circles contract, we spend more time with people who are known and we become leery of those who are unknown. How do we make good on our responsibility to love and lift up the stranger even as we preserve the boundaries now in place to keep us safe?

A student of R. Yosef Karo, R. Moshe Alshich was one of the great Biblical exegetes of the sixteenth century. A mystical thinker who did not flee from contradiction, he was fond of citing the Talmudic passage (Sotah 47a) insisting on our capacity to achieve closeness and distance at the same time. His commentary to Shir Ha-shirim (2:6) serves as a helpful guide. There are times, he writes, in which Hashem exiles his people. As a result, they are alienated and distant. It's the force of "his weaker hand" pushing them away. But at the same time, with "his stronger hand," God is busy pulling them closer. The two realities can coexist because each comes from a place of love.

The pull of history and the push of science needn't be at odds. In honoring both, we need only communicate the affection animating each of them. If we remain distant today, it is only so that we can preserve our health long enough to embrace tomorrow. Justice delayed may be justice denied. But during a pandemic an embrace delayed is an embrace amplified.

With warmest regards

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 8/20/2020

The Morpho Butterfly's Message for Our Times

Dear Friends,

Tomorrow, on Rosh Chodesh Elul, we begin blowing the shofar. Forty days separate us from Yom Kippur. It's the number that always represents transformation in the Torah: Forty days to recreate the world with a flood; forty days to transform humanity by revealing the Torah at Sinai; forty years to transform servants of Pharaoh into servants of God; and so on. The sound of the shofar reminds us that teshuvah is possible. With a spark of creative energy and a little perseverance, we can change some element of who we are or how we behave between now and the Day of Judgment.

But hearing the shofar every day also ushers us into another kind of transformation. We train our ears to hear one set of sounds to the exclusion of all the other noise in the background. We have to be able to discern the original sounds of the shofar, for instance, from its echo. In the process, we develop our capacity to hear a single, distinct sound from amidst any other with which it competes.

Wendy Williams writes about a parallel phenomenon in the visual world in her new book, The Language of Butterflies. She describes what gives the morpho butterfly its brilliant blue hue. It doesn't synthesize pigment; instead, its scales selectively remove the light of every other wavelength. To any onlooker, only blue remains.

It's a colorful metaphor not only for how we can assimilate information, but for relationships writ large. We can amplify the object of our attention or we can eliminate the other stimuli that are competing with it. Either because we're seeing them from a distance or because they're behind masks, the people in our lives are further away. Literally and figuratively, they are less visible and less audible. The shofar is a wonderful reminder that we need to listen more carefully. We need to be more attentive both to the words we're hearing and to the unsaid words we are not.

Some butterflies can hear with their wings. For most of us humans, just using our ears would be a worthy step toward our own transformation.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 8/19/2020

The Seven Habits of Highly Isolated People

Dear Friends,

Our current pandemic has been responsible both for creating some new habits and disrupting some old ones. We've become more aware of the need for "outdoor time," even as routines at the gym have gone by the wayside. We're in regular touch with friends and family even as our days of healthier eating may be behind us.

One painful casualty has been the tzedakah box. With justifiably good intentions to limit the number of high-touch surfaces to which we come into contact, shuls have kept the pushka under lock and key. Gone is the sound of clinking coins that for generations has been a staple of the daily minyan.

Prior to every tefillah, the poskim write, making a contribution to tzedakah is considered a best practice. As the Psalmist makes plain, charity is a prerequisite for the encounter with the divine. To be in the habit of giving tzedakah every day is to be in the habit of Jewish piety.

None of us needs to be convinced of the virtues of charity. We understand intuitively that tzedakah makes the world go round. But I'm thinking more about the means than the ends. With the disruption of our normal patterns, I worry not only that philanthropic causes may suffer, but that we may be at risk of become less philanthropic people. Giving begets giving and inaction begets inaction. And for those of us with kids at home, we have to proactively model charitable giving for them and involve them in the

process. If our charity muscles begin to atrophy, the work we'll have to do to reactivate them will be immense.

If our old habits have been taken from us, we need to create new ones. Maybe it's as simple as contributing to a home tzedakah box. Maybe it's finally taking ten minutes to set up a donor advised fund. Or maybe it's dusting off the check book and writing a bunch of checks. Support for our Yom Kippur Appeal would be welcome, too.

Pandemics have a way of creating lots of cover. Who could really blame us for giving a little less or a little less frequently these days? Rather than bow to the level of lowered expectations, why not seize the opportunity to exceed them? In our tradition, it's not the gifts that keep on giving; it's the givers.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 8/18/2020

Jewish History Today: Adaptation

Dear Friends,

In 1656, when the plague struck the city of Rome, privileges allowing Jews to travel freely in and out of the ghetto were suspended. Even within the ghetto, residents could only traverse the streets during the day. A curfew prohibited all foot traffic after dark. The doors to the local synagogues were shut. The members of Rome's Jewish community had little choice but to adapt.

This moment calls on us to be similarly adaptive. We've already gone through several stages of closing and reopening. With a view toward the west and south of our country, perhaps we should expect that more ups and downs are in our future. For all our charts and curves, this pandemic is anything but linear. It is elastic. It ebbs and flows; it migrates and mutates. The best remedies and strategies put forth by our scientists and elected officials seem outmoded as fast as they are unrolled. Who knows how many times we'll open and close and reopen and reclose before this is over?

Ina stirring sermon delivered at The Jewish Center in 1973, Rabbi Lamm addressed the challenges of weathering The Ups and Downs of Life. He cited the Baal Shem Tov, who once reinterpreted the words shiviti Hashem le-negdi tamid. We usually take the Psalmist to mean I have placed Hashem before me at all times. But the master of Hasidism saw in the word shiviti the notion of hishtavut, equanimity. Whatever comes my way, the Besht taught, I will treat it as if it were shaveh, equal. The highs and lows will never phase me – because Hashem is always before me.

The capacity to adapt to new circumstances – and the capacity to do so while retaining one's sanity – has long been a hallmark of our people. From the word go, Avraham exhibited an exceptional degree of flexibility. When he arrived in the promised land only to find that he couldn't remain there, he found a

new direction, all the while preserving a plan to return. Throughout our history, Jews have turned to this model, learning to survive and thrive without a Temple or without a state.

One of the survivors of the 1656 plague was a physician and preacher named Rabbi Yaakov Zahalon. In his account of those difficult times, he writes that the community hit on a solution to address one of the lacunae created by the epidemic. In the absence of a weekly sermon in shul, R. Zahalon and his colleagues began preaching from second story windows. Like Juliet on her balcony in Verona a few decades earlier, the Italian rabbis sought to inspire those down below.

We can't know what adaptations we'll be called upon to make. But as long as we remember that Hashem is with us, we'll make it to the other side.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 8/17/2020

Time for a New Paradigm?

Dear Friends,

In a reflection on the recent agreement between Israel and UAE, Michael Oren argued that the deal "represents a fundamental shift in the paradigm of peace-making." The idea that the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians is a prerequisite for regional peace is clearly untrue. Nor is it the case that the "settlements" are the root cause of conflict in the region. "In order to achieve peace with a powerful Arab state, Israel does not have to uproot a single settlement or withdraw from a meter of land."

Whether and to what degree the pandemic had a role in the formation of this agreement is an open question. But to the extent that it required new ways of thinking or the abandonment of long-held assumptions, the pandemic might be conceived of as the perfect backdrop against which such a rapprochement could occur. In the midst of epoch dominated by the overturning of norms, it's almost unsurprising to find old foes coming together.

Which brings us to the upcoming month of Elul. Now is the time of the year when we typically think about change. But we almost always caution against major transformation. One who bites off more than he can chew, the Talmud warns, will come away with nothing. As a matter of course, we encourage minor adjustments or tweaks. We counsel incremental rather than radical change; evolution rather than revolution.

But maybe this is the year to think big. It's no coincidence that so many people over the past few months have uprooted themselves and moved to new locations or made aliyah. People are rethinking their professional lives, how much they need to travel or whether their commutes are justified. We've

made all kinds of decisions about what we used to consider essential but now consider discretionary.

Is it time for a paradigm shift in our Jewish lives? Can we envision a new relationship to Shabbat or tefillah? Can we engage in the kind of rigorous Torah study we've always conceived of as the province of someone else? Can we take ownership over a part of Judaism such that it really becomes our own? In this time of upheaval, can we make a grand gesture that will leave us transformed?

I don't think anyone can gainsay the notion that our post-covid world will look substantially different than it did. The question is: Will we?

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 8/14/2020

The End of Spectacle?

Dear Friends,

In the grand scheme of this pandemic, the absence of professional baseball didn't seem to register very high on the balance sheet of all that we were missing. But I was certainly heartened by its return this past month. Of course it's a welcome distraction from the gloom and doom that so dominates the public square. The sense of ritual that attaches to America's pastime introduces rhythm into a world that has become so dysregulated. And for the initiated, it offers the opportunity to bond and connect with fellow baseball lovers in ways that transcend typical channels of communication.

But presence also highlights absence. Notwithstanding the (intentionally?) comical cardboard cutouts that stand in the stands where actual people once stood, the empty stadiums are almost more conspicuous than the games being played in them. One question cascades into the next: Will we see full sports stadiums again? Will we see any kinds of public spectacles again? And if not, just what it is that we are missing?

Perhaps the institution of egla arufa offers some perspective. When a corpse is found on the road between two cities, the elders rush to the scene and a graphic episode ensues. Much ink has been spilled explicating the layers of meaning beneath the heifer, the ravine and the public pronouncements of the communal leaders. But one school of medieval thought sees in the egla arufasomething much less symbolic and eminently more practical. The idea was to create a public spectacle. That the murdered has been discovered indicates that the murderer has not. Drawing attention to the crime increases the chance that evidence may yet appear and the perpetrator may be brought before a court of law.

Spectacles are double-edged swords. They make a thing larger that it is meant to be. When they become ends unto themselves, they can be dangerous. But as our parsha throws into relief, they can also be put to good use. They can amplify a call for justice or make the drama of a close play even more dramatic.

It will take some getting used to baseball games with no fans; operas with no patrons; and shuls with more empty seats than filled ones. This pandemic isn't about solitude anymore. It's about a less crowded life. What we do with all the extra elbow room is up to us.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 8/13/2020

The Abdicators' Club

Dear Friends,

Edward VIII was the last King of England to abdicate his thrown. He gave up the crown in 1936, the same year he had become king. In the past few months, our own monarch-less republic has become something of a haven for abdicators.

At a time of crisis, the executive branch of our government should rightfully be leading and modeling. Of course some strategies will succeed and some will fail. Mistakes are all but inevitable. But any administration facing a national emergency should feel compelled to develop a strategy, a plan or at least a discernible approach to managing that emergency. In the face of this pandemic, ours has simply abdicated its responsibility.

At the same time, our media has squandered a rare opportunity to take a leadership role. On May 18, 1864, the New York World and the New York Journal of Commerce published a fabricated story about President Lincoln conscripting hundreds of thousands more men into the Union army. Three days later, The New York Times took them to task. "Everywhere responsibility is commensurate with power. The greater the means, the broader the obligation. It is safe to say that apart from the Government itself, there is no agency in this land that has such concentrated power for public benefit and public injury as the press of this City." In this country, the press is a sacred institution of which we have justifiably high expectations. So at a time of national crisis, one would have hoped that this sacred institution might have transcended petty politics and partisanship in favor of advancing an agenda of health and healing. But instead of inspiring greater confidence in science among populations that are skeptical, it has abdicated its responsibility to further the public good. The dreariness of the daily storyline is a matched only by its predictability. There are only so many ways to pin blame on one man.

Most worrisome, though, it the prospect of our citizenry joining the abdicators' club. As R. Meir Simcha of Dvinsk often notes, leaders are simply reflections of the people they lead. In a democracy, to point the finger at our elected officials is simply to put the finger at ourselves. Any condemnation of the elected is equally a condemnation of the electorate. If we want to produce more responsible leaders, we have to be more responsible citizens. Now is the time for each of us to step up and accept responsibility

for those around us. As Avraham's heirs – as Jews – that's what we do.

There are plenty of clubs that would welcome our membership. Instead of joining the abdicators, let's join the activists. I can assure you that their future is much brighter.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 8/12/2020

To Infinity and Beyond

Dear Friends,

We are on our way to Mars. With any luck, NASA's Perseverance will land on the red planet in February, 2021. The rover is headed to a crater called Jezero. Once a lake in the northern hemisphere, it makes for a promising location, scientists said, in which to search for past signs of ancient Martian life.

On one level, the mission is an ambitious one. It bespeaks a kind of fundamental human curiosity; an insatiable quest for knowledge that is not bound by earth's gravitational pull; and a deep longing to settle the question of whether we are alone in the universe. But on another level, it represents a kind of abdication. I'm all for space exploration and the ingenuity it spawns. But to pour so much energy into the investigation of Martian history is also to evade the duty of investigating human history.

As we'll read soon, the Torah tells us, Remember the days of old; consider the generations long past. It's our sacred duty to know our history and to know our story. The Torah constantly reminds us to remember because we ignore the complexities of our past at our own peril.

As Americans and as Jews, we have a moral obligation to study the lives of our forebears; to understand the challenges they confronted; to assess the solutions they devised; to appreciate the sacrifices they made; to build upon the work they began; and to wonder how we might live their unlived dreams. Historic crimes, "original sins," and old grievances have become tropes in our public discourse. Whitewashing them is anathema to the project of historical inquiry. But so is training our focus exclusively on the wrongs of past generations. The annals of history contain sources of wisdom, solace and inspiration; guidebooks and diaries; cautionary tales; and elegies to the heroic and the triumphant. Searching the darkness is a self-fulfilling prophecy. It's the choreography of right and wrong dancing on the same stage that illuminates both past and present.

I hope Perseverance discovers that Martian history is filled with more rights than wrongs. Perhaps it will remind us earthlings that history needn't be reduced to a series of grievances. Knowing a thing or two about our origins might just remind us of everything we're capable of becoming.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 8/11/2020

Black and White and Gray All Over

Dear Friends

If Modern Orthodoxy had to choose a color it would almost certainly be gray. To maintain the center is a blessing and a curse. We don't just make summary pronouncements about given issues; we grapple with them. We embrace complexity, maximizing our opportunities to contribute to the wider world even as we cautiously navigate the tripwires that inevitably pop up.

So perhaps it's particularly difficult for us to watch so much of our world paint itself onto a canvass using only black and white brushstrokes. We've come to expect it, perhaps, in the world of politics. Such is the cost of a two-party democracy. But now it seems the us-vs.-them mentality is the rule rather than the exception.

This point was brought home for me during a recent Zoom call on the issue of homelessness in our neighborhood. Almost before anyone could take a breath, the principals drew lines between those who support helping the vulnerable on the one hand and those who care only about local security on the other. But why are the two add odds? Why wouldn't those invested in helping the homeless also care about the neighborhood in which the homeless are housed? And why wouldn't those with an eye trained on issues of safety care about the homeless?

In western thought, justice and compassion stand opposite one another. When we speak of "strict justice" we mean a kind of adjudication that is decidedly dispassionate. But in in Jewish thought, justice and compassion are inextricably bound up in the same word: tzedek or tzedakah. There may be times when we pursue one to the exclusion of the other, but more often than not we are after both. In the pursuit of justice, compassion can never be far behind. No descendant of Abraham, Maimonides writes, could be anything but compassionate. The moment we lose our ability to hold both values at once is the moment we risk losing our identity.

The specific issues surrounding the decisions to relocate homeless individuals and place them in local hotels may be complicated. But the values that are in jeopardy are particularly uncomplicated. We are grieved by the objectification of the vulnerable for the sake of political exigency. And we are fearful that lawlessness will tip the scales of Lady Justice. Sometimes the failure to achieve
either tzedek or tzedakah is black and white.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 8/10/2020

Won't you Be My Neighbor

Dear Friends,

In the aftermath of last week's explosion in Beirut that left hundreds dead or missing and hundreds of thousands homeless, Israel responded with gestures of kindness. The Prime Minister announced that Israel was ready to provide medical and humanitarian aid. "We have no fight with the Lebanese people," Netanyahu said. "This is the time to transcend conflict," a spokesperson for the Israeli military tweeted. In Tel Aviv, the city's municipal building was illuminated with an image of the Lebanese flag. "Humanity takes precedence over every conflict, and our heart is with the Lebanese people in the aftermath of the terrible disaster that they've suffered," Mayor Ron Huldai said.

In a region filled with conflict and hostility, here was a beautiful show of solidarity and shared humanity. At a time when Israel is struggling with catastrophic economic and health crises of its own, it would have been easy to turn a cold shoulder to a country with which it has been at war for decades. Instead, it took the high road. On a national level, it breathed new life into the ancient words of R. Yossi who taught that the ethical path in life is paved with acts of neighborliness.

What Israel has modelled on the international stage, we have to model on a personal basis. The charge is deceptively simple. We're called on in the Mishnah to be a "good neighbors." It is in the nature of neighbors, R. Yisrael Lifschitz writes, to make small sacrifices and concessions for one another. There's an unwritten code that says simply by virtue of our proximity we will see each other as allies and stand at the ready to extend a hand.

Inasmuch as we are all up against a common foe, this pandemic has highlighted the degree to which we need to see our fellow New Yorkers and our fellow Americans as our neighbors. By heeding the advice of our best scientists, we protect the well-being of everyone around us. By being mindful of our shared goals, we lift the whole lot of us. Virtue can't flourish in isolation. Neither can public health.

With warmest regards,Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 8/7/2020

With Complements

Dear Friends,

Hajj concluded earlier this week. The name comes from the same Hebrew root as chag, which means to make a circle. The chagim that we learn about in our parsha are also called regalim, because we use our feet to observe them. Pilgrimage festivals entail a journey to the Temple in Jerusalem. Travelers would ascend from all over the land for these special celebrations. Even in contemporary times, anyone who has spent a Yom Tov in Israel's capital has surely felt the energy that courses through the city and enlivens residents and visitors alike.

In explaining the rationale behind the institution of these pilgrimage festivals, Abarbanel makes a beautiful observation. In pre-modern times, the world was more siloed. Residents of a particular region might not have access to goods or ideas generated outside their region. Much more than the an economic exchange of goods, convening regularly in a central location gave rise to what Abarbanel calls complementarity. What I lack in my life – socially, religiously, intellectually or emotionally – you may be able to provide. And vice versa. Coming together creates bonds of "affection and recognition... that generate harmony." It's the kind of communal or national spirit that would simply be unthinkable were people to remain within their silos.

When we build shuls and communal organizations, we do so with this notion of complementarity in mind. These days, we associate the absence of shul with the absence of communal prayer or the inability to attend live classes. We think of the friends we don't get to see and the chesed we can't perform. But we're also missing so many other dimensions that broaden us and make us more whole. We're missing images of children interacting with the elderly; turns of phrase; subtle gestures; recipes; questions; greetings; advice; reflections; even kvetching. Consciously or otherwise, all of them are edifying.

And so we need to work even harder. If we can't be with other people in shul, we have to be with other people outside of shul. We're blessed with the technology to reach across geographic boundaries that were once considered impenetrable. We have to put it to its best use. Every person in our lives is a gift and we need to connect to them – even if we can't see them in person. To paraphrase Rav Kook, they are possessed of a portion of the truth to which we otherwise have no access. When we open ourselves to one another, each of us becomes a little more whole.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 8/6/2020

Dear Mayor

Dear Friends,

Last week, it came to our attention that the city had relocated hundreds of homeless men from existing shelters to hotels on the Upper West Side. The decision raised all kinds of thorny questions including

who made these decisions and whose interests they serve. We can all agree that we want what's best for the most vulnerable members of our society. And we can all agree that safety and security are important priorities. How do we balance those values?

I drafted a letter to our mayor which was co-signed by almost a dozen rabbinic colleagues here on the Upper West Side. Copies were sent to all our local elected officials. The text of the letter appears below. One of the issues we highlighted was the complete lack of transparency on the part of the city. On matters that affect the very character of a neighborhood, its residents must be given a hearing. For this failing, the city and its mayor are surely responsible. But part of the responsibility falls to us, too.

One of the recurring themes of Tisha B'Av – a theme that returns on Yom Tov – is the notion that, as much as our enemies caused the exile of the Jewish people, we caused our exile. Our tradition isn't concerned about the sins of people who are animated by their own values and interests. It's concerned about our sins. When something goes badly, the question isn't what did they do wrong; it's what did we do wrong? At a moment like this, it's a question worth thinking about.

In my experience, when issues come up that require help or intervention by the government, our minds always jump to the two or three people we know who are politically active. And even then, those connections tend to be at the national level. The question is: Why isn't each of us involved in local politics?

We all have answers to this question and those answers are real: Our Jewish communal involvements are many and we're already spread thin; bureaucracies are generally unpleasant and we don't need more unpleasantness in our lives; and there's a sense that there are lots of other qualified people so our voices aren't needed. But the recent decisions by our local government lay bare the flimsiness of these arguments. We need to find the time to be civically engaged; we need to endure the challenges of politicking; and we need to make our voices heard. Our failure to do so comes at the peril of our community and our own.

As we head toward Elul, we head, too, toward a season of wake-up calls. A lot can change when we're caught dozing off. When politics replace principles as a city's driving force, we can't afford to be asleep at the wheel.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Letter to Mayor de Blasio

Mayor Bill de Blasio

City Hall

New York, NY 10007

July 28, 2020

Dear Mayor de Blasio:

We are writing to you on behalf of thousands of concerned individuals and families who reside on the Upper West Side. It has come to our attention that hundreds of homeless men, many who are reported to be recovering drug addicts, have been relocated from other city shelters (where some were in conflict with their local neighbors) and are now residing in the Lucerne hotel in our neighborhood. This is now in addition to the relocation of close to 150 homeless men at the Belnord hotel, only 7 blocks north, less than two months ago. Reports about the Belleclaire hotel are equally troubling.

We care deeply about the most vulnerable members of our society. These moves place hundreds of homeless individuals in an unfamiliar community which cannot provide them with the services they need. The scourge of deserted businesses, homelessness on the streets and empty storefronts posed a threat to the well-being of our neighborhood even before the outbreak of this pandemic. The current crisis has only exacerbated these issues. Where will these new residents find the necessary support? How can we be assured that these men won't return to living on the streets?

Moreover, we are deeply concerned about the safety and security of our neighborhood. Particularly as we prepare for the start of the coming school year, we are thinking about the health and safety of our children, many of whom attend schools in the immediate vicinity of these hotels. Our buses and subways were already overcrowded. The introduction of these individuals into our neighborhood will strain resources that are already spread thin and pose public health risks in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic. Community members have been telling us about how, in just a few short months, a diverse neighborhood that has historically felt safe and open day and night has suddenly lost that sense of security.

Preserving the health and safety of its citizens is the sacred duty of our local government. The decision to relocate hundreds of homeless people is a weighty one and carries the risk of changing the very character of a neighborhood. While we strongly support providing a full array of assistance and services to this very vulnerable population, including livable shelter, the process by which this decision was reached lacked any transparency. Where were the announcements and town hall meetings (electronic or otherwise)? Where was the public conversation? Where was the community engagement that forms the backbone of a functioning local government? Where was the dialogue about how the city plans to properly help these individuals without putting members of the surrounding community at health and safety risk, particularly when that community is already suffering from the pandemic and its economic impact?

This is not the time for autocratic decision-making. The voices of local residents need to be heard. With so much riding on these decisions, we hereby request that the community be given a full and open chance to learn about, and properly react to, the city's plan to manage this.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.

Update: 8/5/2020

Planning for the High Holidays

Dear Friends,

As the High Holidays are approaching, I would like to share with you an update on our plans. Our first priority has been and remains keeping everyone safe and healthy. In formulating our plans, we have utilized the most up-to-date guidance provided by the CDC and the New York State Department of Health and have consulted extensively with our reopening committee. It goes without saying that our plans should be considered contingent upon favorable public health indicators. Should the situation in New York change, we will have to be nimble enough to adapt to different circumstances in September.

Encouraged by the success of shuls around our region who have effectively resumed services while maintaining public health and safety, we have been hard at work implementing best practices for cleaning and sanitizing our building. We have improved our ventilation system and members have been compliant when it comes to our rigorous pre-screening protocols and insistence on mask-wearing.

Members who are older or who suffer from underlying conditions are strongly advised to consult with their doctors before making a decision to come to shul. For those who are comfortable attending services on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, we have arranged for minyanim in multiple locations. In addition to our services in the main sanctuary and auditorium, we will add services in the gym and, if we are able to secure approval from the city, an outdoor space near the shul. We anticipate holding two successive services in each location. We will of course insist on social distancing, mask-wearing and the balance of protocols that have been implemented for anyone attending a Jewish Center minyan. Registrants will be asked to fill out a questionnaire prior to each Yom Tov.

While our services will be abbreviated and we will not be able to do much singing, we still intend to be faithful to our nusach, and are pleased to have with us familiar and beloved baalei tefillah and baalei tokeah including Jonathan Rimberg, Amiel Rimberg, Jonathan Green and Akiva Novetsky.

On the reservation form, you will see that we have asked for your preferences. Please let us know your preferred location and time in ranked order. Start times for each minyan have not yet been finalized and will be staggered to avoid a crush of people entering or exiting the building at the same time and allowing for proper sanitization in between minyanim. By way of illustration, start times on Rosh Hashana might be 8:00, 8:15 and 8:30am with late start times at 10:30, 10:45 and 11:00am. Yom Kippur times would follow a similar model. We will do our best to accommodate your preferences.

If you will not be attending services but would like to attend an outdoor shofar blowing at various times and locations that we are exploring with our sister synagogues, please indicate as much on the form. We will follow up with times and locations.

We of course recognize that many of our members will not feel comfortable attending services. Rest assured, we will do everything we can to help make Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur feel as much like the Yamim Noraim as we can.

Among the ideas we are working on are:

- Shabbat Shuvah Drashah on Zoom on Thursday evening, September 24th;
- Daily shofar blowing on Zoom throughout Elul;
- A robust Tochnit Elul on Zoom dedicated to Torah, Tefillah and Chesed;
- Programming for our youth;
- Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur Readers;
- An option to participate in Yizkor services on Zoom prior to Yom Kippur; and
- Yom Tov in a Box options.

If you have other thoughts or suggestions, we would love to hear them. Space has been left on the seating form for this purpose.

Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are gifts. Not being able to enjoy them as we normally would is a bitter pill to swallow. But the need for our Tefillot – wherever we may be when we articulate them – is as urgent as ever. We daven for a year of blessing and good health; a year of sustenance and an end to uncertainty; a year of scientific breakthrough and an end to this plague.

With best wishes for a ketiva v'chatima tova,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 8/4/2020

40 Year Itch

Dear Friends,

Tomorrow is the 15th of Av. In recent times, Tu B'Av has been adopted in some circles as a Jewish Sadie Hawkins Day. According to the Talmud, it was not only a festive day; it was one of two days on the calendar when young women would search for their mates in the vineyards. Notwithstanding the Talmud's catalogue of reasons to celebrate, the origins of the holiday remain something of a mystery.

The oldest origin story goes all the way back to the wilderness. According the Midrash, a portion of the generation made to suffer the punishment of 40 years of wandering would perish every year on Tisha B'Av. The date was fitting inasmuch as it was the anniversary of the sin that precipitated the fate of

those destined to die in the wilderness. At the end of those four long decades, when it was clear that the decree of death had run its course, a day of celebration was declared. Hashem had ceased communicating with Moshe during these intervening years as the divine presence dwells not in the midst of sadness. The return of God's presence was a day of great rejoicing.

If the deaths ceased on Tisha B'Av, though, what accounts for the gap between the 9th of Av and the 15th? According to the Midrash, those destined to die would go to sleep on Tisha B'Av fully expecting never to wake up again. In the final year of wandering, to their great surprise, those expecting to meet their end awoke the next morning. Thinking they had miscalculated, they repeated their goodbyes the next night and went to bed. But again they awoke alive and well in the morning. The scene repeated until the 15th of the month when the full moon demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt that the term of the punishment had in fact ended and there would be no more deaths.

What emerges is a portrait of Tu B'Av as a day of almost indescribable relief. It represented the end of a seemingly interminable plague. Little wonder that it took on not only a festive character, but a social one.

These days, there is something eerily familiar about the idea of waking up each day wondering if the world we find is in fact our own. Tu B'Av reminds us that even predictable plagues can come to an end at the moment we least expect it. When this one does, we'll be able to declare a new day of celebration. Perhaps we'll dance in the vineyards. Or maybe we'll just exchange a few hugs.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 8/3/2020

Is the World Shrinking?

Dear Friends,

One of the dominant themes of our moment is the notion of contraction. But it's not just the economy that's contracted. The geographic space of our lives is smaller. We used to commute and travel and see new places. Now we tend to tread paths that are known and familiar. Our social lives have narrowed. We interact with the same people. Few and far between are the opportunities to meet someone new. And our religious lives have been reduced to distance davening, virtual chesed and remote learning.

Particularly for us denizens of the 21st century, such an orientation is unfamiliar. We are accustomed to the breakneck pace of expansionism. We are used to being able to search every corner of the galaxy and gobble up data from myriad sources. Our natural inclination is to explore and build; to seek out new frontiers and cross them. How do we deal with a world that so drastically limits our impulse to push outward? How do we manage this time of constraint?

There is one character from our national history who can offer guidance for such a time. There is one man who survived a life-altering trauma and understood his life mission as one of consolidation rather than revolution. I have in mind the personage of Yitzchak. He was not a revolutionary like his father. Nor did he build a great clan like his son. He didn't forge new alliances like Avraham and he didn't dwell in many tents like Yaakov. A man of the field, he retread the steps of his father and insured the preservation of the mesorah he had received. His goal was not to innovate, but to renovate.

When we find him in the text three years after the akeidah, the Torah tells us that he gone out la-suach ba-sadeh. Our sages interpret his meditation as a form of tefillah. But writing a generation before Freud, R. Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg went even further. Yitzchak wasn't just davening. "By giving external expression to his thoughts, he was lightening the burden of his inner conscience." To hold and preserve something doesn't require less mental energy than the task of acquiring it or expanding it; it requires more.

These times require more davening and more meditation; more introspection and more retrospection. We need to give a voice to our fears and our anxieties; our hopes and our expectations. Now is not the time for stoicism. Now is a time for openness and communication. It's true. As a rabbi married to a psychologist, I freely confess my bias. But to paraphrase a great thinker: Just because I'm biased doesn't mean I'm wrong.

Periods of great contraction are always followed by periods of great expansion. Our post-pandemic future will be bright and vast. Talking today about where we've been and where we're headed may just help get us there a little sooner.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 7/31/2020

Change is in the Air

Dear Friends,

As a general matter, Shabbat Nachamu is something of an enigma. Yesterday was Tisha B'Av. We condensed thousands of years of Jewish tragedy into a single day. We mourned the destruction of two Temples, the Crusades, pogroms, persecutions, expulsions, book burnings and the horrors of the Holocaust. How can we possibly transition tomorrow to a Shabbat of comfort and consolation?

The problem of Shabbat Nachamu is amplified this year. We are in the throes of a global pandemic. There may be some cause for optimism, but how can we entertain the notion of consolation when death

tolls are continuing to rise?

Rashi provides the answer. Consolation is an imprecise translation of nechama. The word le-nachem really means to change. The first appearance of the root appears in the Torah at the end of Parshat Noach. וינחם ה' כי עשה את האדם בארץ. Clearly, the word in this context is not about comfort; it is about remorse. Perhaps in colloquial terms we would say, God had a change of heart. The idea of nechama is the idea that one's state is not in fact static, but is given to change. It's this realization, of course, that is ultimately the source of the greatest comfort. While I may feel devastated or defeated today, I must also remember that such a feeling is not a life sentence. With the passage of time, I will feel differently.

Shabbat Nachamu is not a cure for the gloom we feel, but it is a respite. In the wake of every tragedy in our past came a nechama. The losses were very real and very painful – just as they are today. There's no magic formula to lessen the sting. The magic is in the way we're constructed. Each of us has been endowed by our Creator with the divine capacity to undergo a change of heart. When we remember that the challenges we face today will one day be a distance memory, tomorrow can seem a little brighter.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Update: 7/29/2020

The Menu is the Message

Dear Friends,

In Jewish tradition, food is full of symbolism. We are always capturing a sentiment or memory with our gastronomic choices. Think of apples with honey or maror or even challah. To the initiated, they all convey layers of meaning.

On Erev Tisha B'Av, our fare is sparse. Before the fast, most of us make do with a bagel and a hard-boiled egg. Round foods are said to evoke the cycle of life. Befitting the moment, they are the foods typically reserved for the mourner.

But as important as what's on the menu may be what's not on the menu. Though we are in the habit of abstaining from meat and wine beginning on Rosh Chodesh Av, these proscriptions apply most seriously on Erev Tisha B'Av. Meat and wine are strictly prohibited. And yet, for all the practices borrowed from the realm of mourning, these defy the pattern. An avel is free to eat meat and drink wine to his heart's content. In fact, the Talmud records that imbibing wine was considered part and parcel of the grieving process. What, then, is the meaning of the halacha that insists on a meatless, wineless pre-fast repast?

There is one person who is also enjoined against eating meat and drinking wine. The onen. The pre-mourner. Before the bereaved has buried his/her relative, he/she occupies a special halachic category.

The onen does not perform positive mitzvot. And the onen refrains from meat and wine.

Rav Soloveitchik used to teach that we reserve the special tefillah known as nachem for Tisha B'Av afternoon because until that time, the wound is too raw to think about consolation. Each of us in some way is an onen for whom thoughts of solace are premature. We are un-comfort-able.

Perhaps this quality of aninut rightfully begins on Erev Tisha B'Av. We signal our aninut by refraining from meat and wine and by eating alone. As Rabbi Daniel Fridman recently mentioned, according to many poskim, forming a zimun is not even possible because our alone-ness prevents us from being able to join together with others. Like Zion in the book of Lamentations, we dwell alone with no one to comfort us.

This year, perhaps more than any year in lived memory, this feeling of aloneness needs no artificial inducement. We feel it intuitively. But the message of aninut should not be lost on us. To offer solace to the onen would be taunt him. To borrow a lurid Talmudic metaphor, he's still standing over the corpse. It's when grieving begins that comfort can follow. This is a description of our current moment. Because we're still staring down into the valley of death, the prospect of consolation is ill-fitting to the occasion.

But we must remember that no one is an onen forever. Because we prioritize speedy burial, the status is inherently short-lived. Like aninut, this time will pass. The day we'll come when we'll be able to grieve because the worst will be behind us. Comfort will be possible; the cycle of life will continue; and with hope on the horizon, we will sit together once again.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 7/28/2020

Oh, the Places You Won't Go

Dear Friends,

As a general rule, the laws of the mourner apply to every person on Tisha B'Av. On the ninth of Av, we don't launder our clothing; we don't study Torah; we don't greet one another; and so on. Though largely academic, the Tur notes that there is a subtle distinction. The Jew observing Tisha B'Av is bound only by the prohibitions that circumscribe the mourner. To the extent the mourner is obligated in any proactive practices, those do not obtain on Tisha B'Av. In Talmudic times, for instance, the mourner would "overturn the beds in his home." But this was never done on Tisha B'Av.

There may be, however, one exception to this rule. When the mourner returns to the synagogue, he is obliged to change his place. And the Tur sites just such a practice on Tisha B'Av. Those observing this minhag would not only sit lower to the ground; they would sit in another seat entirely. This year, then, it can be said that we are fulfilling this ancient custom in its most pristine form. By not going to

shul on Tisha B'Av, we will be as far away from our seats as possible.

Changing one's place, in all seriousness, is a form of a self-imposed exile. In our tradition, galut is always reserved for one who is partially guilty. The nature of the given crime doesn't rise to the level of meting out the prescribed penalty; but neither is the perpetrator fully innocent. Think of Adam. Or Cain. Or the man guilty of manslaughter who flees to the city of refuge. Exile creates the opportunity to reflect on all that one is missing when one is not home.

If ever there were a Tisha B'Av on which we felt like exiles, it would be Tisha B'Av 2020. How distant we are from that time and place we now refer to as pre-covid. We have become alienated from our very own lives. We are not in a position to say whether – on some cosmic level – we bear guilt. But we are able to say that we are now resident-aliens possessed of the rare opportunity to look in on our world as outsiders. It's a view typically reserved for anyone other than us. But because exile is almost never a life sentence, we would do well to glean what we can while the view is clear. We may be home before we know it.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 7/27/2020

The Joy of Shul

Dear Friends,

This year, in thinking about how much we miss the Temple in the days leading to Tisha B'Av, we cannot help but think about how much we miss shul. Even as The Jewish Center has begun to slowly reopen, I have found the return unsatisfying. With ample justification, we've created a long list of protocols to keep everyone as safe as possible. But enforcing them and abiding by them inevitably diminishes the experience of davening.

People davening together form a tzibbur. It's the power of the collective that transforms personal prayer into communal prayer. And when one has the luxury of davening in one's makom kavua, it's the familiar faces of one's friends and neighbors that foster that sense of community. It's the human contact that helps one feel as though one belongs. But what happens when those faces are obscured and physical contact is proscribed? Yes, halakhically the people standing together form a community. But at least in my experience, the feeling of it is not the same.

Among the many halachot governing the sanctity of a shul is a ban on performing calculations in the synagogue. With the exception of something like counting tzedakah, the mundane nature of doing math is considered to be at odds with the sanctity due the sanctuary. So goes the prevailing wisdom. But there may be another dimension to this halacha.

The Midrash tells us that in Temple times, there was a special dome outside of Jerusalem known as the kippah shel cheshbonot, the Dome of Calculations. Anyone working on a balance sheet was obliged to leave the city and do their work under the dome. Finances have a way of getting people down and the City of Gold could countenance no unhappiness.

Like the Temple and city of Jerusalem itself, shul is meant to be a place of joy. In these dark times, its absence is particularly pronounced. We long for the day when the faces of friends will be seen; smiles will be exchanged; and handshakes and embraces will be dispensed freely. Until then, as we pray for the return of the Temple, we would do well to pray, too, for the return of shul.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 7/24/2020

Yankel the Prince

Dear Friends,

It's hard to remember the last time I was in a room in which there was more than one person wearing a tie. Formalwear and even business attire have gone the way of the handshake. The line between pandemic-casual and pandemic-chic appears to be growing thinner.

Where does all of this leave Shabbat? The Talmud teaches that – as a general rule – we honor the holiest day of the week not just by slowing our gait and changing our menu; what we wear matters, too. But there's one exception to the rule. On Shabbat Chazon, the Shabbat that precedes Tisha B'Av, R. Moshe Isserles rules that one is not permitted to wear festive clothes. In keeping with the subdued cadences of mourning, the prevalent practice among sixteenth-century Ashkenazic Jews was to wear weekday garb on this special Shabbat. Subsequent authorities rejected this notion. Outward displays of grief, they argued, are always eschewed on Shabbat. Dressing as one would on any other day would constitute a form of dishonor.

In the twenty-first century, the notion of dressing down one Shabbat a year has been all but forgotten. But its message mustn't be. Just as clipping the eruv every so often would remind us that there is a prohibition against carrying on Shabbat, wearing weekday clothes on Shabbat Chazon would help us remember the high expectations we ought to have the rest of the year.

Rav Soloveitchik once described a scene from his childhood. "Not far from where our family lived in Warsaw there was a Modzitzer shtiebel where I would go occasionally for shalosh seudos…. One of the men who had been singing most enthusiastically, wearing a kapota… approached me and asked if I recognized him. I told him that I did not and he introduced himself as Yankel the Porter. Now, during the week I knew Yankel the Porter as someone very ordinary, wearing shabby clothing, walking around with

a rope. Yet on Shabbos, he wore a kapota and shtreimel. That is because his soul wasn't Yankel the Porter, but Yankel the Prince."

Even during a pandemic – and maybe especially during a pandemic – what we wear on Shabbat can transform us. In today's sea of sartorial indifference, let's make Shabbat an oasis of elegance. A queen deserves no less.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 7/23/2020

Jewish History Today: Venetian Kindness

Dear Friends,

In 1630, the Jewish community of Venice could not help but notice the plague ravaging its surrounding regions. One of its members composed a special liturgy to keep the plague at bay. It was to be recited after the reading of the Torah. It featured excerpts from Psalms and passages from the Torah treating of healing and divine protection. Like many other prayers scripted to combat epidemics, it placed a special emphasis on the pitom ha-ketoret. It was the incense, the Torah tells us, that Aharon used to stop the plague we read about just a short time ago in parshat Korach.

> As a preface to the ketoret passage, the liturgy cited a verse that seems out of place. So Avraham hurried into the tent to Sarah and said, "Quickly: prepare three seah of the finest flour and knead it and bake some bread."What is the connection?
>
> On a kabbalistic level, Avraham's actions in the scene with his three visitors prefigure Temple offerings. And the haste described here corresponds to the haste of Aharon's actions. "Go quickly," Moshe said, "and provide atonement for the people." The Jews of Venice were asking the Almighty to respond to their tefillot the way He would respond were they offering korbanot in the Temple. With the same urgency they asked that He put an end to the plague.

But perhaps there is another reason that the Jews of Venice called up this verse from Genesis. It is, after all, the paradigm for chesed in the life of Avraham and in the value system of his descendants. If they were going to ask Hashem to deal compassionately with them, they had to demonstrate the capacity to

deal compassionately with one another.

The world is in need of more prayer. But it's also in need of more kindness. We need to redouble our efforts to offer companionship to those who are alone. And we need to offer solace and strength to those who are struggling during these times. Like the Jews of seventeenth-century Venice, let's put chesed at the forefront of our consciousness. And like Avraham and Sarah, let's act quickly.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 7/22/2020

Why The New York Times Should Study Talmud

Dear Friends,

In her recent resignation letter, Bari Weiss pulled back the veil on one of the worst-kept secrets in the media industry: playing to its left-leaning readership, the New York Times is not only guilty of hyper-partisanship; it prefers to squelch debate rather than promote it. "Truth isn't a process of collective discovery, but an orthodoxy already known to an enlightened few whose job is to inform everyone else." And what's true of the goose is true of the gander. Right-leaning media outlets are guilty of the same sins. Reporting has been replaced by preaching; the difference between the front page and the editorial page is not readily discernable. With each passing day, the writers and their readers become shallower and less informed and grow more distant from a healthy and moderate center.

The solution I propose is Talmudic training. It goes without saying that Talmud study sharpens a student's capacity for deep and critical thinking. It trains its readers how to build an argument and to how identify and anticipate its weaknesses. It provides entrée into a world of dazzling creativity and stunning intellectual virtuosity. And by developing fluency in its cadences and its idioms, one can actually revivify millennia-old voices and bring Abaye and Rava directly into the contemporary discourse.

But I have much more prosaic goals in mind. For one, journalists and editors would stand to gain from an introduction to the concept of machloket. Perhaps they could come to learn that rigorous debate leads to better outcomes. In the Talmud, outlandish ideas are subjected to scrutiny by other equally invested parties. Proposals are met by counterproposals. Ideas are tested and weighed against if and whether they might be accepted by the general populace. Imagine a journalistic world governed by the ethic of Beit Hillel in which the words of one's opponents were taught first. To paraphrase R. Yochanan: One doesn't need to be told why he's right; one needs to be told why he's wrong. What emerges from the Talmudic crucible is far more likely to be measured and thought-through and advance the public good.

Perhaps even more important that better outcomes, the Talmudic process has a habit of producing

better participants. Active listening and the prospect of admitting scholarly defeat are prerequisites for participation. Engaging in the process with the expectation that one may well be wrong accustoms one to humility and healthy self-doubt. Journalists are supposed to be animated by insatiable inquisitiveness. But the news today has cancelled curiosity. How sad it would be to raise a generation of writers and readers uninterested in contrary points of view. In the Talmud, the losing argument isn't discarded; it's given pride of place and its always a source of interest.

I'm not sure how many subscribers this new proposal will attract. But as long as we keep studying the Talmud, we can shine its light on the dark dross that passes for journalism today. For a timeless text, the Talmud is as timely as ever.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Update: 7/21/2020

The Road from Padawan to Jedi

Dear Friends,

One of the great moral messages of Star Wars is the notion that, given time and training, students can become principals. Sometimes they can even succeed where their teachers had failed. In the early films, borrowing from the Bildungsroman genre of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the journey from protégé to master was lengthy and tortuous. There were obstacles to overcome and ghosts to vanquish. In the more recent films, mirroring the attention deficit of our own times, the process is so accelerated that one is left wondering whether the notion of character development itself is now considered a relic of a bygone era.

It's this notion that one can be transformed almost instantaneously from a student to a teacher that speaks directly to this moment. When we first began confronting the perils of this pandemic in March, we watched in horror as the virus ravaged the northern provinces of Italy. To avoid suffering the same fate, we asked our Italian friends to share with us the lessons they learned. From their experience, they offered advice and comfort as we waited for the impeding storm.

Four months hence, we have undergone a transformation. Ever-cognizant that the virus could resurge in our city at any moment, we have walked through the valley of the shadow of death. With the echoes of blaring sirens still ringing in the back of our heads, we know first-hand about the terror that covid-19 can wreak and the suffering it can cause. But our experience doesn't just leave us wiser; it compels us to act.

The vast majority of our fellow Americans are now facing the very challenges that were once consigned to New York and New Jersey. It's heartbreaking to read about inundated ICUs and impending shortages

of tests and PPE. To anyone who will listen, we can offer empathy and sound advice.

When we speak of Torah study, we use the term talmud Torah – which refers more specifically to the teaching of Torah. It's the transmission of knowledge that constitutes the higher ethic. And there is no wisdom, the Talmud tells us, like lived experience. Whatever we've gained, now is the time to pass it on. We will all be students of this pandemic for a long time. But that shouldn't stand in the way of our teaching all that we've learned.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 7/20/2020

Zoom Cheaters

Dear Friends,

In card games, a tell is a change in a player's behavior that betrays something about his or her hand. With experience, a keen observer can correlate these subtleties to patterns and use them to one's advantage. These days, we're seeing another kind of tell. It's usually a glance or slight turn of the head during a Zoom call. More often than not, it reveals that someone is multi-tasking. They're present, but not entirely. While they're participating in the conversation or meeting, they're also texting or tweeting or checking their email.

It's hard to get too exercised over this scourge. Everyone is stretched thin. We're inundated with messages and notices and there are never enough hours in the day to give them all their due. We don't need another research study on the perils of multi-tasking, but it's worth remembering that it always involves a cost. Putting aside the most extreme cases that actually cause malice such as texting while driving, where do we draw the line? When should we allow ourselves to indulge and when should we resist the temptation?

The halakhic system takes very seriously the notion of fixed attention. In common practice, the most well-known example is our insistence on silence between netilat yadayim and the brachah of ha-motzi. But there are dozens of examples in which falling prey to distraction is not just objectionable; it's disqualifying. In the service of the divine, anything less than our full attention is an affront to the mitzvah we're supposed to be performing. And understandably so. To offer up a piece of ourselves when our whole selves are demanded is to short-change everyone involved.

When it comes to human relationships, the people with whom we interact deserve no less. Perhaps the best rule of thumb is to put the brakes on multi-tasking whenever another party is involved. Victimless multi-tasking may be additive. One can wash the dishes or one can wash the dishes while listening to a podcast. The addition of the task doesn't come at the expense of another human being. But people

deserve our undivided attention. Especially these days. Human contact – even when it occurs from a distance – is precious. There's very little in life that can't wait 20 minutes. Let's give someone the gift of our full selves. The moment we do, they'll be able to tell.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 7/17/2020

The Promise of a Vaccine

Dear Friends,

When will we have a vaccine? The most important question of our moment has become almost too trite to speak about. Skeptics and cynics have hijacked the discourse. They thrive on producing reasons to despair and sowing seeds of doubt in our consciousness. Vaccines, they say, often take 10-15 years. Sometimes there is no vaccine. Even if scientists find one, who is to say they will be able to produce sufficient quantities to immunize our planet?

But for every argument in favor of despair, there is an equally if not more compelling argument in favor of hope. The orientation we choose is up to us. If only to promote better mental health, we would do well to choose the latter.

According to a recent report in The Economist, 180 vaccines are now in development. Some have already entered clinical trials. And once a vaccine is ready, one manufacturer says it will be prepared to produce a billion doses in two months. Has the world ever seen a project to which so many financial and intellectual resources have been devoted? To the skeptics who say the vaccine is a long way off, I say I'm skeptical.

When the tribes of Gad and Reuven approached Moshe and petitioned for the right to settle in Transjordan, Moshe pointed up the inequity of their request. To permit two tribes to sit idle while ten engaged in battle would be wholly unfair. But Moshe went further. Why do you discourage the Israelites from crossing over to the Land? A decision on the part of a minority to remain behind, Moshe argued, would be a blow to the psyche of the nation. The general populace won't be sensitive to the economic preferences of these two tribes. They'll interpret reluctance as faithlessness and despair will become the moment's most dangerous contagion. To deprive others of their faith in the future constitutes a terrible crime.

No one wants to be guilty of providing false hope. And no one can stake a claim to certainty in such uncertain times. But hopefulness is not born of naïveté. It's rooted in a national history that time and again has vindicated hope in the face of its greatest detractors. We're not immune to despair. Hope is the best vaccine.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 7/16/2020

High Scoring Words

I guess it should not come as a surprise that this age of masks has blossomed into an age of hypocrisy. The word itself derives from the Greek, *hypokrisis*. Because the Greek stage actor wore a mask, his voice did not match his appearance. Now it seems there is a widening gap between the value Judaism attaches to consistency on the one hand, and the degree to which consistency is flouted in the current zeitgeist on the other.

When the Torah insists that we be *tamim im Hashem Elokecha,* consistency is precisely what is demanded.Rabbeinu Bachya writes that this is the source for the notion that there can be no daylight between one's feelings and one's actions. To believe one thing and say another is to play fast and loose with one of our most deeply held values. A student whose exterior does not match his interior, the Talmud tells us, is precluded from entry into the study hall.

In contrast, consider three recent examples from the public sphere. "While there is no intention to imply a moral equivalency among the following examples, each one on its own is instructive. The first comes from our federal government. Even as our top national health officials insist that mask-wearing is among our foremost defenses against this pandemic, for months the nation's chief executive refused to wear a mask. Were the president a hermit, perhaps it would not much matter. But in the case of celebrity personalities, virtue signaling matters a great deal. For millions of Americans who pay attention to the president, a small gesture of consistency could yield huge returns.

Second, there is the inconsistency of our mayor. One can well understand a policy banning large public gatherings. What public health expert would argue against the kinds of events that carry the highest risk to the highest number of people? And yet the mayor has gone out of his way to permit protests of one particular nature. Public gatherings are not just unsafe for the participants, they are ultimately harmful to all New Yorkers. To create a carve-out for a specific group is the height of hypocrisy.

And finally we have the recent outbreak of anti-Semitism. A prominent football player explicitly referenced Hitler in the course of an indefensible screed against Jews. Then other prominent athletes rushed to his defense. The same media outlets and national organizations that have been beating the drum of sanctimony over bigotry were suddenly silent. Why does anti-Semitism not warrant the same moral outrage as other forms of prejudice? We need a zero-tolerance policy against discrimination; not one that capriciously dispenses free passes.

The adherence to a moral code deployed on a consistent basis is called principle. Righteous indignation applied selectively is called politics. The moment we confuse the two is the moment we need to be

reminded that life is a not a Greek tragedy.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 7/15/2020

Can't Sleep? Try the Midnight Remedy

Dear Friends,

Sleeplessness is on the rise. The pandemic has brought with it accounts of insomnia, lurid dreams and a general sense of restlessness. If you've found yourself in a dazed state of late, you are not alone. Stress, anxiety and more time indoors have all contributed to the advent of coronasomnia. (A few members have told me that their inability to hear my sermon has further diminished the quantity of sleep they are getting.)

I don't purport to have a solution. But I thought this would be an appropriate moment to bring up a practice seldom addressed in our community.

Based on a teaching in the Zohar, sixteenth-century mystics popularized a practice known as tikkun chatzot. They would wake up at midnight or thereabouts and recite a short liturgical unit to mourn the destruction of the Temple. Either because the practice was reserved for the pious or because it was only intended to be recited in the Land of Israel, it is virtually unknown in our community.

But if ever there were days on which its message is particularly apropos, it is these – the days leading to Tisha B'Av. The prophet Jeremiah lamented that, in her state of destitution, Zion has no one who inquires after her. The Talmud infers from this verse that Zion demands as much from us. We have to lose to sleep over the fate of Israel and her people. Israel's future has to keep us up at night.

Understandably, our attention of late has been trained on local matters. We've been pouring our energies into keeping ourselves, our families and our communities safe. But mourning the Temple reminds us, too, that we have a national identity and that we have national aspirations. I'm not saying that the recitation of tikkun chatzot will help us return to our normal sleep patterns. But it may help us return to a rebuilt Jerusalem.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 7/14/2020

The Age of Hypocrisy

Dear Friends,

I guess it should not come as a surprise that this age of masks has blossomed into an age of hypocrisy. The word itself derives from the Greek, hypokrisis. Because the Greek stage actor wore a mask, his voice did not match his appearance. Now it seems there is a widening gap between the value Judaism attaches to consistency on the one hand, and the degree to which consistency is flouted in the current zeitgeist on the other.

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With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine
Rabbi

Update: 7/13/2020

The Duty to Wear a Mask

Dear Friends,

We Americans take liberty very seriously. It represents the backbone of our national identity. So it should not surprise us that some Americans are constitutionally allergic to laws that they perceive as a threat to their liberty. Rules that curtail our freedoms, the argument goes, are objectionable ab initio. The government can make all the recommendations it likes; but the moment it mandates something that restricts a given freedom is the moment it has gone too far.

Such is the argument – implicitly or explicitly – of the anti-maskers. How can the government legislate the way I walk around?

While the analogy is imperfect, the history of seatbelts is instructive. For decades, automobiles were designed without them. When New York became the first state to make safety belts mandatory in 1984, fully 65% Americans opposed mandatory seat belt laws. Wearing them was considered an imposition.

With time, the evidence became overwhelming. The universal acceptance of a small inconvenience meant that thousands of lives could be saved. It didn't happen overnight, but eventually people came around.

In our own tradition, we have a long history of embracing the notion of obligation. R. Chanina teaches that the performance of a commandment by one who is obligated is considered greater than that the equivalent voluntary performance of the same act by one who is not obligated. Whatever the rationale for this axiom, it highlights the degree to which we are meant to embrace the idea of commandedness. Rather than see mitzvot as obligations, we're meant to think of them as opportunities. To paraphrase the Talmud, commandments don't restrict us; they set us free.

R. Chananyah ben Akashyah made the same argument when he taught that that God piled mitzvot upon us for our own benefit. They don't limit us; they give us entrée into the world of the unlimited.

It's all a question of attitude. No one wants to live in a nanny state. But everyone wants to live. To argue against the wisdom of laws requiring masks during a pandemic is to be penny wise and pound foolish. Conceding a small freedom doesn't make us smaller; it makes us freer.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine
Rabbi

Update: 7/10/2020

Two Hand Touch

Dear Friends,

Very little these days seems carefree. Even minor decisions are piled high with layers of risk calculations and cost-benefit analyses. Crowds provoke anxiety. Errands create unease. Visitors make us nervous.

But the issue I've been thinking recently carries with it stakes that are considerably lower. There is an old debate about how best to bless our children on Friday nights. When dispensing the bracha, is it preferable to use one hand or two? Either practice is fine and well-attested in our sources. When Yaakov blessed his grandchildren, whom we reference, he placed one hand on each of their heads. When the kohanim dispensed the blessing we cite, they used both hands.

One of the best arguments in favor of the two-handed approach comes from our parshah. Though Hashem instructed Moshe to transfer his authority to Yehoshua with one hand, he performed the act of semicha with both hands. As Rav Soloveitchik puts it so beautifully, Moshe was not just demonstrating a generosity of spirit. He was communicating to his disciple the primacy of two traditions: one intellectual and one experiential. It's not sufficient to teach Jewish learning in a classroom. One must also model the mimetic tradition at home. We translate chinuch as education. But it more properly means initiation. We raise up Jewish children not only with books; but with a gentle hand that guides and prods them into the posture of a Torah life.

Doctoral students and researchers will spend years studying the effects of distance learning on children. They'll write treatises on what happens when boys and girls go months without seeing teachers or peers. But we don't need to wait for the conclusion of those studies to know that the responsibility of parents grows in proportion to the length of this pandemic. For so many children nowadays, moms and dads aren't just role models; they are sole models – parents, teachers, friends and camp counselors all rolled into one.

When we place our hands on the head of a child, we place upon him or her all kinds of hopes and expectations. Whether we bless them with one hand or two might seem like a light decision. But the weight of the Jewish future rests on these children. Knowing they will remember these days forever, let's model for them the grandest vision of what that future might look like.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine
Rabbi

Update: 7/9/2020

Day After the Plague

Dear Friends,

Just why is it that we fast on the 17th of Tammuz? The Mishnah furnishes us with no fewer than five answers. It was on that day that Moshe broke the luchot; the tamid offering was suspended; Jerusalem's city walls were breached during the Roman siege; a man called Apostumos burned a Torah scroll; and an idol was erected in the Temple.

Surely, this has to strike us as bizarre. Are we to understand that a single event would not have warranted a fast day? Is it only the cumulative value of these tragedies in their aggregate that call on us to mourn? Jewish holidays celebrate singular events. If something momentous occurred on the 15th of Nissan, would we tack it on to the holiday of Pesach? The purists would insist that more is less; adding to the Seder would diminish its exceptional quality. Why do we need five reasons to commemorate the 17th of Tammuz?

The answer comes from the continuation of the Mishnah. There is one other moed on our calendar that is characterized by the multiple events it is intended to commemorate: Tisha B'Av. And once again, the Mishnah tells us that this date on the Jewish calendar has been blackened on five separate occasions.

Tragedy has a tendency to overwhelm us. A traumatic grip can feel so tight that one may be convinced that one will never be released. By collecting tragedies and stacking them neatly upon one another – by aggregating past events – the rabbis insist that we see those tragedies within a given context. Yes, a particular date on the calendar may be marked for sadness. But we're reminded in the same breath of history's cyclical nature. Traumas don't last forever. They come and they go. For every sad day on our calendar, there is the day after.

Historians that I've read and heard over the course of this pandemic have freely confessed their renewed interest in tracing the stories of plagues and pandemics of the past. It's not just that ghosts make good company. Somehow, the details of those old narratives are a source of solace. Like the collected tragedies we commemorate today, they testify to a simple truth. While the human spirit may be indomitable, plagues are not.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine
Rabbi

Update: 7/8/2020

Kaddish for Herzl

Dear Friends,

What will our Jewish lives look like in the fall? What will our shuls look like? Our schools? Our Shabbat meals? Our chagim? As covid-19 has proven time and again, trying to predict its path is an exercise in futility.

And so this pandemic has called on us to live with uncertainty. It's demanded that we make decisions with dreadfully imperfect information. But even more than this, it's insisted that we live lives predicated on contingency. Of course on occasion we all have to reconcile ourselves to second-best outcomes. Being ready with alternatives is part of responsible planning. But other than spies or secret agents, who lives their life this way all the time?

Reading Derek Penslar's new book, it struck me that we do in fact have a model for someone who lived this way: Theodor Herzl. His was a life of contingency. If he could not secure a meeting with a head of state, he would try his luck with a lieutenant. If the British could not be helpful, maybe the Ottomans. Or the Egyptians. Or the Germans. Or the Russians. There were no failures in the life of Theodor Herzl; only temporary setbacks.

He dreamed of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. But if that wasn't possible, perhaps there could be an ersatz refuge for Jews in the Sinai Peninsula. Or in British East Africa. Progress was progress wherever it could be made. Herzl cut a complex figure. But one of the things he proved is that while the contingent life may be uncomfortable, it need not be without reward.

No direct descendant of Herzl lived to see the modern State of Israel with their own eyes. No direct descendant of his lives today. I don't know who recites Kaddish in his memory. But when his yahrzeit is observed on Sunday, we would do well to remember his message for our times: the contingent life needn't come at the expense of the optimistic life. Sometimes life's greatest gifts are unexpected.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 7/7/2020

To Be a Jew or to Act as a Jew

Dear Friends,

In a landmark decision last week, the Supreme Court ruled against a constitutional provision in the state of Montana that barred taxpayer funds from supporting parochial schools. While proponents of school choice cheered, those who have made the separation of church and state into a religion of its own reacted to the decision with a chorus of opprobrium.

As members of a religious minority, we can certainly appreciate a pronouncement that strikes out against discrimination. As Justice Alito wrote at length, the basis for Blaine Amendments like the one in Montana were rooted in historic anti-Catholic sentiment. According to Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue, "A State need not subsidize private education. But once a State decides to do so, it cannot disqualify some private schools solely because they are religious." The Constitution "condemns discrimination against religious schools and the families whose children attend them."

But beyond the case's political implications, I was struck by something Justice Gorsuch wrote. The Free Exercise Clause "protects not just the right to be a religious person, holding beliefs inwardly and secretly; it also protects the right to act on those beliefs outwardly and publicly… Our cases have long recognized the importance of protecting religious actions, not just religious status."

If he were standing at a pulpit, Justice Gorsuch's words would constitute a sermon – and a poignant and timely one at that. Being Jewish is not sufficient. The Torah demands that we act in a way that makes holiness and Godliness more manifest in the world. Particularly now, as so many of our most cherished institutions are hamstrung, it falls to individuals to be the activists. In our private conversations and simple interactions, it's our job to elevate the language and substance of our discourse. And both in and outside our homes, it's our responsibility to bring the values of Torah to life. Our forebears dreamed of a land in which they could not only be Jews, but practice their Judaism. It would be a pity if we squandered the opportunity.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine
Rabbi

Update: 7/6/2020

No One Writes to the Colonial

Dear Friends,

Summer camps are very different this summer. But one aspect has remain unchanged. Overnight camps are among the last places on earth where the phenomenon of letter-writing persists. But this year, campers and their parents are not the only ones busy revisiting media of the past.

As this pandemic lingers, the present has been rendered uncomfortable and the future unknowable. The only sure bet is the past. So it's little wonder that old books are back in vogue. So are reruns of old shows. Classic sports moments play in place of live ones. And vintage movies are all the rage. I've even noticed new reviews of films that premiered 40 years ago. (Film critics really have nothing better to do?)

We could all benefit from a little more letter writing these days. Of course letter-writing is good for the writer. Writing forces us to unplug and to singly commit our attention to the task at hand. And with the signing of our signature comes a feeling not just that we've done something, but that we've created something. But even more than this, a letter is a gift. And like any gift, it works its magic on both the giver and the recipient.

Gabriel Garcia Márquez once said that he wrote One Hundred Years of Solitude just so that people would read No One Writes to the Colonel. In the lesser known novella, a retired military man, facing penury, has been waiting 15 years for the pension owed to him. The postman delivers the same news every week. The pension has not arrived. "No one writes to the colonel."

To receive a letter is to be in conversation. To receive a letter is to be remembered. As we prepare to remember the Temple and its destruction during the period of the Three Weeks, are memory antennae are up. There's a special joy a child feels when he or she receives a letter from home. But campers aren't the only ones who stand to gain from holding something tangible in their little hands and reading words

written by someone who cares about them. So many people in our lives would share a similar feeling of joy if only they received a letter – if only we remembered to write to them.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine
Rabbi

Update: 7/3/2020

Will We Lose our Best and Brightest?

Dear Friends,

When I was a kid, sometimes I thought my grandmother was being overprotective. I would say something like, "Bubby – don't worry so much." And she would say, "Worrying is what I do for a living."

Even in the best of times, we all worry about the Jewish future. It's what we do. But given the economic tailspin this pandemic has created, now we have more to worry about. In particular, I've been thinking about the kinds of consolidation we're sure to see in the Jewish communal world. On a macro level, a correction like this may be overdue. If multiple organizations are performing the same function, would we not all be better off if they found ways to merge or join forces? Eliminating duplication saves time, energy and money that could be diverted to other priorities.

But on the micro level, this kind of consolidation means that hard-working Jewish communal professionals will be out of jobs. And in a contracting economy, odds are that many will seek and find employment outside the Jewish world. These are individuals committed to working on behalf of our community. But now we may lose them.

Chukat is a sad parsha. We read about the loss of both Miriam and Aharon. On the surface, the stories that follow their respective passings appear quite different. In the aftermath of Miriam's departure, the people lack for water. In the aftermath of Aharon's death, an enemy attacks the Jewish people and takes a captive. But the episodes are linked by a common thread. When a Jewish leader is gone, the community suddenly becomes vulnerable.

So it behooves us to notice just how vulnerable we may be if we stand on the sidelines while talented men and women opt out of careers in Jewish communal service. To the extent we know of people teetering on the fence, we need to encourage them and help them in any way we can. And we need to fund and support our local Jewish institutions so that they can weather this storm. Our community will be able to survive with fewer acronyms. Whether we can survive the loss of talented Jewish leaders is another question.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine
Rabbi

Update: 7/2/2020

Independence Day Depends on Us

Dear Friends,

When Europeans visited the United States in the 19th century, they were struck by the degree to which Americans were obsessed with associations. As Alexis de Tocqueville put it, “Americans of all ages, all conditions, all minds constantly unite. Not only do they have commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but they also have a thousand other kinds: religious, moral, grave, futile, very general and very particular, immense and very small.” For men to “remain civilized or become so,” he concluded, “the art of associating must be developed and perfected among them.” When Henry Robert published his Pocket Manual of Rules of Order for Deliberative Assemblies in 1876, it sold hundreds of thousands of copies. But as Robert Putnam has famously brought to light, participation in civic groups has been declining precipitously in the US for decades.

In our tradition, confraternities have long been a staple of Jewish communal life. In Rome’s ghetto during the early modern period, more than 25 chevrot were established. There were societies set up to dower brides, redeem captives, educate children, visit the sick, bury the dead and on and on. Today, the lone surviving chevra tends to be the chevra kaddisha. We don’t call them chevrot anymore, but we take it for granted that a synagogue community will form groups or committees to organize these very activities. (Thankfully, it seems the need to ransom captives is now largely outmoded.)

We many not articulate it as civic duty, but every time we participate in communal life, we strengthen our commitment to be not only responsible community members, but responsible citizens. Particularly as the bonds of our nation continue to fray, we all need to redouble our efforts to strengthen the ties that bind us together.

National emergencies have a habit of bridging gaps, pushing differences to the periphery or uniting competing factions. So it’s particularly lamentable that this pandemic has not only failed to create more national solidarity; it has highlighted and exacerbated our divisions.

In the face of all of this, we must not lose sight of one of the pandemic’s most powerful teachings: There are no silos. Our compliance with public health guidelines has an effect on countless other people; and their compliance has a direct effect on us. In other words, we have no choice but to remain conscious of our responsibilities toward our community and toward our nation.

As we prepare to celebrate Independence Day, we have a great deal for which to be thankful. The liberties we enjoy in this great country can never be taken for granted. But rights come with responsibilities. To the extent we uphold our end of the bargain, our nation will be much healthier. And so will we.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Update: 7/1/2020

The Monuments Men, Part II

Dear Friends,

The president of Princeton University, Christopher Eisgruber, announced earlier this week that Woodrow Wilson's name would be removed from its School of Public and International Affairs. The university, he wrote, had promoted the former president as a role model to its students. But "however grand some of Wilson's achievements may have been, his racism disqualifies him from that role."

I certainly don't envy those involved in making decisions such as these. Perhaps at the margins the questions are uncomplicated. What really is the justification for the preservation of a monument to someone who devoted himself to a cause that is anathema to us? But in the main, these issues are as complex as they are fraught. Princeton's decision puts front and center a question that we should consider often: Just who is worthy of being considered a role model and what disqualifies one from bearing such a title?

As King Solomon wrote long ago, there is no righteous person on earth who does good and sins not (Ecc. 7:20). We do not subscribe to the notion of infallibility. The great heroes of the Jewish people were all-too human men and women; not demigods. They made mistakes. And we should fully expect that men and women of great achievement will surely be imperfect.

This is not to say we should be blind to the offenses someone has committed. The nature, kind and degree of an offense must be measured and considered within its context. Not every soldier with a rank deserves to be put on a pedestal.

But to argue that a given flaw categorically disqualifies one from serving as a role model is to argue against seeing the world with even a modicum of nuance. To build a moral structure within which to operate, children need stark categories of right and wrong. But adults are capable of appreciating complexity. We can recite the holy words of King David in our daily tefillot even as we recognize that he was not a perfect person. We can speak of Avraham Avinu as a paragon of faith even if there were moments in which he was taken to task for his missteps. After all, do we not subscribe to the notion of teshuvah? Do we not believe in forgiveness?

Rendering sound judgment in the present is hard enough. Doing so retrospectively is especially challenging. But the moment we lose our capacity to behold human complexity is the moment we risk losing our humanity.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi**Update: 6/30/2020**

The Monuments Men , Part I

Dear Friends,

What to do with Mary. That was the question our family bumped into a while back when the vacation home we had rented came complete with a two-foot alabaster Madonna on the back porch.

What to do with monuments more generally is surely one of the most fraught issues of the moment. Because monuments are works of art, how they are interpreted is subjective. Are they to be judged in their historical moment or in the present? Are monuments in parks different from those that belong to museums? And who is the arbiter of these decisions? We can all conjure up in our minds an image of a statue we would find offensive. Where to draw the line and who gets to draw it are open questions. Reasonable people will disagree. I wish to offer only one observation.

It should be remembered that arguably the most important icon in the history of the Jewish people was irreparably shattered by our greatest prophet. And the Talmud writes that God reacted to Moshe's decision to smash the tablets by congratulating him.

R. Meir Simcha of Dvinsk argues that, indignation aside, Moshe was teaching the Jewish people an indispensable lesson. Recognizing that they had made the mistake of ascribing significance to a molten image, Moshe demonstrated in no uncertain terms that holiness cannot inhere in mere objects. An icon is but an icon. Sanctity is not achieved by things; it's achieved by people. It comes from the Almighty and attaches to those who perform his mitzvot.

Inherent in the creation of a symbol is the risk that its beholder will assign it too much significance. But significance in this world is not achieved by the making or unmaking of an image. It is achieved by individuals who enlist in the causes that symbols are meant to advance.

We thought it best to give Mary more privacy. Statues tend to get more attention than they deserve.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine
Rabbi

Update: 6/29/2020

Jewish Center Reopening

Dear Friends,

I am writing to share with you an update on our plans to reopen The Jewish Center. Our Advisory Committee has been hard at work formulating a plan and I am deeply appreciative of the many hours of thoughtful deliberation that our members have devoted to this project. Foremost in our minds has been and continues to be the health and safety of our community.

We have broken down our guidelines into three groups: tenants and their constituents; Jewish Center staff and personnel; and Jewish Center members and guests. Tenant and minyan guidelines are available

by clicking here. We want to keep you apprised of what is happening in the building as well as our current thinking about the resumption of services.

To the extent that there is a halachic directive to daven with a minyan, that directive continues to be suspended at this time of a pandemic. This is why we suspended services on March 12. Even as gatherings are now permitted by governmental authorities in New York City, communal prayer s certainly not mandated. Prayer is mandated; but davening in a minyan falls into the halakhic category of reshut, that which should be considered optional or discretionary.

We take sakanah – risk to human life – very seriously. It is difficult to quantify, but our goal is to minimize risk to whatever extent possible. As such, where there are differing opinions, my inclination is to adopt the more conservative approach.

The declining number of cases in our area - together with New York City entering Phase 3 of re-opening - gives us encouragement and the prevailing wisdom suggests that gathering for a short period of time entails a tolerable level of risk. Provided the numbers remain favorable, we will hold a minyan for Mincha/Maariv on Monday evening July 6th at 8:15pm. This first minyan will be limited to a total of twenty participants and will be open to men and women. Further details, including exact location of the minyan, will be provided to approved minyan registrants. To register or this minyan all participants must complete the screening questionaire ensuring that they are symptom free and have not been recently exposed to COVID-19. It will detail necessary precautions that you will be required to take in order to participate in the minyan, some of which are set forth below. Please let us know if you would like to join by clicking here.

Staging a minyan at this time is an experiment. Following the July 6 minyan, we will reassess all the relevant factors. Should it go smoothly and should the COVID-19 data continue to be encouraging, the experiment will continue, initially with Mincha/Maariv on a more regular basis. We will continue to share updates on a regular basis.

We must also be sober about the possibility that we will have to end the experiment and return to the practice of davening at home. Potential factors that might contribute to such a decision include an uptick in the number of COVID-19 cases locally; a report that a minyan-goer has tested positive for the virus; or non-compliance by a participant. We are all thinking of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. Rest assured, we will have a plan in place that will allow our community to participate in the shul life of Yamim Noraim as fully as possible given the constraints of halakhic and public health considerations. We are working now on contingencies that include both indoor and outdoor spaces. I think we can all appreciate that much will inevitably change between now and September. We will have to steel ourselves with patience for a while longer. We must also remember that there is still a great deal about this virus that is unknown. As we are now seeing in other parts of the country, the virus can resurge at any moment. We cannot let down our guard. Compliance and vigilance will form the backbone of our ongoing effort to beat this pandemic.

I've missed davening with you these past months and look forward to the day when we will all be able to daven together as a community in the fullest sense of the term. Until that time, please stay safe and please stay in touch.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine

Rabbi

Update: 6/26/2020

Transitions to Remember

Dear Friends,

Transitions are hard. And we've had to weather a lot of them lately. From out-and-about to ; from spring to summer; from commuting to sheltering-in-place; from social calls to phone calls; and from locking down to reopening. Particularly when they catch us unawares, transition moments can throw us into a tailspin.

The challenge of transitioning forms the backbone of a compelling theory behind the Korach rebellion. All the parties involved were beset by longstanding grievances. That Aharon had been appointed high priest was old news. That the first-born had been replaced by the Leviim was a months-old story. And the animus Datan and Aviram harbored toward Moshe went back years. If these forces coalesced now, it's because they were unable to come to grips with the new reality foisted upon them by the failure of the spies' mission and the subsequent pronouncement of a forty-year sojourn in the wilderness. Datan and Aviram frame their remarks with the words, lo naaleh. "If we're not going into the land of Israel," they say, "what point is there to our mission?" The transition from the triumphant march to the Promised Land to a sentence of wandering was simply too much to bear. Suffering under the weight of a difficult transition, the characters in our parsha acted out.

More than any other, physical relocation is the transition that stays with us the longest. People not only remember when they move to a new locale; they attach outsize significance to it. Scientists call it the relocation bump. And it's perfectly understandable. Moving one's residence requires a person to reorient themselves entirely.

For some, this pandemic has generated precisely this effect. They've picked up and moved to greener pastures. But even for those who haven't moved, the transition moments have come so quickly and in such high doses, that the cumulative effect might well be the same: a system-wide reorientation.

Imagine if we knew that a given day would be etched in our memories forever. Would we not rush to fill our time with acts of meaning? Would we not conjure up ways to be joyful and hopeful? Would we not banish pettiness from our interactions with family and friends?

For better or for worse, our recollections of this pandemic are bound to stay with us for a long time. Maybe for all time. Let's be sure to leave ourselves memories of which we can be proud.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine
Rabbi
Reminders

Update: 6/25/2020

The Word Doctor

Dear Friends,

One of the images I know I will take with me from this pandemic comes from a video that circulated in the early days of the outbreak. In the clip, a little boy races to hug his father, who is dressed in medical gear from head to toe. Perhaps a doctor or nurse, the man has just returned from the hospital. But as the boy approaches, expecting to be met by the outstretched arms of a waiting embrace, his father waves him off. A simple hug has given way to a complex risk assessment. Recognizing that the fear for his son's safety has prevented him from reciprocating a gesture of healthy affection and has disappointed his little boy, the man breaks down in tears.

If empathy is in short supply, gestures of empathy are in even shorter supply. What does it mean to live in a world in which hugs are not permitted? What does it mean that human touch is proscribed? What does it mean that even sitting in silence next to a lonely friend might be dangerous?

Rabbi Akiva used to say that a human being is considered beloved because he or she is created in the image of the divine. But he or she is considered even more beloved inasmuch as God communicated this sentiment to his creations. All of R. Akiva's successive statements follow the same pattern. It's one thing to be loved or cared for; it's quite another to be told as much.

The same is true of empathy. It's not enough to feel empathetic toward others. We need to communicate those feelings openly and regularly. In a world without gestures, the value of words has never been greater. In the absence of human contact, they are the glue holding us together.

Julia DiGangi, who specializes in anxiety, put this well in a recent piece she wrote for Harvard Business Review. She suggested that managers and leaders need to help those around them by modelling emotional openness and by sharing parts of themselves and their vulnerabilities "Whether we return to our offices with trepidation or remain marooned in our lonely homes, the creation of deep emotional connections with our teams is essential." It's not the location that matters, but the locution.

It will take a lot of words to write the text that heals our fractured world. The ones we utter next might just be the first line.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine
Rabbi
Reminders

The Jewish Center Dinner
Please join us for our virtual dinner on July 1st as we honor Ted Comet and Rabbi Noach and Alexis Goldstein. Make your reservations today!

A Time For Faith
Join us on Sunday, June 28th at 2pm (please note the new time) for a conversation with NYC Public Advocate, Jumaane Williams. He and I will talk about the ways in which religion can sustain us through difficult times on his weekly show, A Time for Faith. Please note the new date. Stay tuned for a Zoom link.

Kabbalat Shabbat
Please join us Friday at 6:50pm for pre-Shabbat ruach followed by Kabbalat Shabbat at 7pm.

Support Our Local Businesses
Many local establishments are struggling and can use our support. Download this handy app to find a kosher restaurant that is open and will happily deliver: https://openduringcovid19.app/
Due to the outbreak of COVID19, West Side Judaica will remain open and in business exclusively for phone orders, storefront pickups and nationwide shipping. They will also be offering free, door to door delivery in Manhattan. All of their sefarim, books and other Judaica items are in stock and they will be making deliveries 6 days a week. To place an order or ask for more information, please email sales@westsidejudaica.com or call (212) 362-7846. The store is open Sunday through Thursday from 11:00am-5:00pm.

Update: 6/24/2020

Without Antecedent

Dear Friends,

Every epoch has a word or two that are overused to such an extent, that they should rightfully be retired. The word of our moment is “unprecedented.” Of course everything about this pandemic is unprecedented. We’ve never done this before. We get it. We got it. It’s time to move on.

So it was helpful to read a more nuanced description of the day’s challenge. As a senior clinician recently put it, a pandemic such as ours is a “a crisis unlike anything which one has ever experienced, which one has no referent for in their own personal life history.” What we’re missing are the kinds of lived moments that might guide us through all this newness.

In the absence of individual experience, we turn instead to collective wisdom. When personal autonomy is compromised, we lean on the collective. For a community like ours, The Jewish Center represents the embodiment of this virtue.

When our daily routines were thrown into chaos, our Center gave structure to our week. When our vulnerable members were trapped at home, our younger members looked out for them. When individuals lost their jobs, our seasoned members helped them network. When our congregants were bereaved, our shul brought them comfort. And when they celebrated a simcha alone, our community thronged to join them virtually and in every way they could imagine. In shul life, what might seem impossible for the individual, suddenly becomes the province of the possible.

But all of this is only happens thanks to the generosity of our supporters. Twice a year we ask for your participation. Our annual dinner is one of those times. Of course it's an opportunity to celebrate our shul and pay tribute to deserving honorees. It's also an opportunity to support an institution that changes lives on a daily basis. Please join us on July 1st and please give generously. And let's hope our virtual dinner is without antecedent.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine
Rabbi

Update: 6:/23/2020

Not in Poland

Dear Friends,

In an alternate reality, today I am in Lublin. I am on a Jewish heritage tour along with dozens of Jewish Center members. In commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the concentration camps, we were slated to spend this week exploring the contours of Jewish history in Poland. Alas, our trip was not to be. But the Holocaust has been on my mind of late nonetheless.

To maintain my sanity, I try to limit my intake of what is widely thought of as "news," but is in fact thinly veiled partisan politics. But lest we become inured to untruth or public sentiment that is unmoored from reality, we do have to react – at the very least – to egregious offenses. Two have recently come to light.

The first was a presidential ad campaign that appropriated a symbol used by the Nazis. Ignorance or thoughtlessness serve as no justification for such an offense. As R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto put it long ago, willful blindness is tantamount to negligence. The failure to know history is as odious as the sin of ignoring it. The ongoing barrage of outrageous statements to which we have now become accustomed must not diminish our own capacity to be outraged.

Second, the use of the word genocide has re-entered the public discourse in connection to race relations in America. The idea is not new. In 1951, a group called the Civil Rights Congress engaged in a campaign

to hold the United States accountable for genocide against African Americans. Racism is categorically wrong. And violence perpetrated in the name of racism constitutes a crime that is particularly abhorrent. But racism is not the same thing as genocide. Conflating the two not only dishonors the memory of those who were the victims of attempted genocide, it weakens the argument of those fighting for a noble cause. Such is always the effect of hyperbole. It alienates the would-be listener. Yes, we must condemn racism in the strongest possible terms. But those terms cannot include a word reserved for the single most horrific crime in the history of humanity.

The righteous gentiles we would have learned about in the Polish countryside would have reminded us that a voice of moral clarity can change history. It is axiomatic that "the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing." Particularly at a time such as this, apathy is not an option.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine
Rabbi
Reminders

Update: 6/22/2020

But Why Would We Go Back

Dear Friends,

During our sabbatical in Israel, I made a number of trips back to New York. On my first, I titled my Shabbat morning talk, "But Why Would We Go Back, Abba?" It was, of course, a quote from one of our kids. Having eased so effortlessly into their new lives in Israel, they wondered why we would return to the diaspora.

I've been hearing a slightly different version of the question these days – not from our kids – but from regular people who have quickly adapted to these irregular circumstances. Putting aside the challenging aspects of this pandemic, some have taken to the idea of the shul-less life. They can daven at their own pace on their own schedule. They quite enjoy the limitless opportunities to learn on Zoom. They've found extra hours in the week that used to get gobbled up hustling to and from minyan. And particularly for those who lean toward introversion, they quite prefer the quiet of Shabbat at home to the buzz of a crowded sanctuary.

So how do we answer their implicit question: When it's safe to return, why would we go back? The answers, to be sure, are many. Maybe we can manage the odd Mincha on our own; but try Neilah. Done right, communal prayer is transformative. Zoom is perfectly adequate for sharing information; but how many times have we laughed and cried? How many handshakes or hugs have we gotten? How many new friends have we made online? It's hard to make emotional connections remotely. And what about the kids? How do we model rich Jewish living when the only Jewish life they see is in the home? The list goes on and on, but I want to highlight one under-appreciated aspect of shul life.

As Yuval Levin argues in his book, A Time to Build, institutions have the capacity to shape our lives. A shul – and particularly a Center like ours – gives each of its members an indispensable role to play; it creates aspirations that are larger than any one person; it helps us channel our ambitions; it gives us structure and belonging; it comforts us when we feel alone; it make demands of us; it creates expectations; it gives a voice to the unheard; and it casts nets to include those who might otherwise be excluded. And in a shul like ours, the people who walk through the door are blessed with the opportunity to meet and build relationships with members who are nothing less than extraordinary.

In the course of Jewish history, there may have been individuals who survived in isolation. But those who thrived, did so under the shelter of Jewish communities and within the embrace of Jewish institutions. Now is an important time to support ours. Please join us at our Virtual Dinner on July 1st and please give generously. In this age of uncertainty, The Jewish Center is a sure bet.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine
Rabbi

Update: 6/19/2020

Thinker, Tailor, Camper, Spy

Dear Friends,

This is the season of camps: Summer camps for children; philosophical camps for adults. At a moment when our country has turned its attention to the egalitarian treatment of all people, we are remarkably segregated. Politics aside, our community has splintered. Some occupy a conservative position and are not yet ready to venture out into a world filled with risk. Others are less apprehensive and believe the time has come to return to normal. And a third group, filled with ambivalence, is unwilling to take sides.

The facts and statistics are the same. But because of our unique perspectives, we see the world differently. As one writer put it recently, “We are all in the same storm; but we’re not all in the same boat.”

These differences were already discernable weeks ago. But with each passing day, we’re going to feel them more acutely. As the world begins to reopen, the philosophical divide between the two camps will become ever more tangible. Something as innocent as an invitation to lunch might pull the veil off differing worldviews. What seems harmless to one person might provoke deep-seated anxiety for another. Without an appreciation for the views that are not our own, who know how many feathers we’ll ruffle.

While they weren't up against a pandemic, this was the story of the spies. Twelve reasonable people investigated a given territory. They met the same locals and breathed the same air. Where ten saw morbidity; two saw futurity. One man's peril was another man's promised land.

In the case of the spies, the Torah makes clear who was in the right and who was in the wrong. Because we're not endowed with clairvoyance, we can't know which of today's camps is "right." I raise the parallel only to point out that we've been here before. We don't need to convince anyone else about the rectitude of our position. But we do need to remember that different people process the same experience in very different ways. Wherever we stand, we have to know that someone is standing in another camp. If we recognize the many ways people see this pandemic, then Kalev's words will ring as true today as they did all those years ago: "We shall surely conquer it."

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine
Rabbi

Update: 6/18/2020

Dear Friends,

Every year around the start of the summer, I have the pleasure of making distributions to our local day schools. Thanks to our day school fund, we've made Jewish education a mainstay of our communal agenda. We've all come to appreciate that day schools constitute a public good and every member of our community is a beneficiary of their success.

So it's important that not only our parents appreciate the precarious position of Jewish day schools in New York City at this time. Needless to say, all of our communal institutions need our support. The mikvah and the eruv are suffering, too. But Manhattan schools face at least two special challenges.

First, unlike suburban campuses that may have ample room to fan out their classes, Manhattan schools operate under tight conditions. The strain of social distancing and smaller class sizes will leave them searching for additional space, creating new financial burdens.

And second, New York City has witnessed a family exodus. Faced with the prospect of quarantining in Manhattan apartments for months on end, parents of young children have headed for the suburbs. Many will delay their return until conditions normalize; and some will not return at all. All of this means that our local schools can expect lower enrollment in the fall. While fewer students will make classrooms less crowded, it will also mean less revenue for the schools.

Rabbi Yose ben Kisma was once approached by someone who was impressed by his scholarship. The stranger asked if he could prevail upon the rabbi to relocate. The move, the man promised, would be a

lucrative one. But R. Yose declined. “I hail from a city filled with sages and scribes,” he said. “Even for all the money in the world, I would never live anywhere other than a makom Torah.”

Our schools radiate Torah. They amplify the voices of Jewish children singing and davening and learning. They reify the values of our mesorah. And they produce the leaders of our Jewish future. A threat to the integrity of vibrant Jewish day school education is a threat to a community’s capacity to identify itself as a makom Torah.

Under impossibly stressful conditions, our educators, administrators and schools stepped up for the children of our community. Now our community needs to step up for them.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine
Rabbi

Update: 6/17/2020

Cheer

Dear Friends

Among mental health experts, it’s become almost clichéd to analogize our pandemic to a marathon. Everyone recognizes that the finish line is a long way off and we’re going to have to pace ourselves. Trying to absorb too much dreary information, psychologists warn, can work against us. We need to develop longer-term strategies.

While the larger metaphor may be hackneyed, one of its component parts is very instructive. Long distance runners know that they will encounter lulls. Their energy will flag or they’ll get tired. It’s for this reason that many marathoners write their names on their clothing. Science and experience have demonstrated that when people hear their name being called – when people hear words of encouragement being directed at them – they get a boost. Something as fleeting as a cheer from a stranger on the sidelines can energize a depleted runner and lift him up.

To extend the analogy to our present circumstance, a lot of people are feeling awfully depleted at the moment, but the bleachers are empty. We’re not getting the snippets of support we normally would from colleagues in the workplace or friends in social gatherings. We’re all wearing lots of hats these days. Whatever else we’re doing, we also need to be cheerleaders.

Three times in the Torah someone’s names is repeated in successive words. The angel calls out at the binding of Isaac, “Avraham, Avraham.” God appears to Jacob on his path toward Egypt with the words, “Yaakov, Yaakov.” And Hashem reveals Himself at the burning bush with the words, “Moshe, Moshe.” In each instance, the Midrash comments that the doubled call is a term of endearment. To say someone’s name is to be in conversation – to say you are standing before them. To say it twice is to say you’re behind them.

These difficult days call for more cheer and more cheering. When it comes to our friends and neighbors, no one will accuse us of calling too often. Let them hear their names. Let them know someone is rooting for them. It could well be the boost they need to make it to the end of the race.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine
Rabbi

Update: 6/16/2020

Dear Friends,

A lot of people have been wondering whether and to what degree New York City will recover from the cataclysm of 2020. What will become of the bustling streets when bustling is proscribed? What does the future hold for crowded subway cars when crowding is banned? Who will populate and patronize the establishments that constitute the very essence of Gotham? With Manhattanites fleeing for the hills, will the city one day renew its claim to being the capital of the 21st century?

History is surely on our side. Fires and wars have ravaged the world's greatest cities in the past. With a little time, they have always managed to bounce back. It stands to reason that New York will, too.

But as this pandemic has transformed the commodities of vertical living into liabilities, it has also shown a spotlight on an important question: In the absence of city life, what is the great advantage of life in the city? Should one privilege the pulse of urban living or the peacefulness of the provinces?

If our tradition has a specific preference, I've not been able to discern it. The patriarchs and Moshe Rabbeinu were nomads. King Solomon was a city dweller. The Jews of medieval and early modern Europe lived both in great metropolises and in far-flung backwaters. Herzl came of age in the storied city of Budapest. David Ben Gurion grew up in Płońsk.

But there is, I believe, one unquestionably Jewish value fostered by city life: The breadth and depth of human contact. It's not enough to know that different kinds of people exist. One has to meet them and interact with them.

Some of the world's most successful companies – Apple, Google and Pixar come to mind – have designed their headquarters to replicate the benefits of city life: they nudge their employees out of their offices and into common areas where chance encounters can occur. Promoting creativity and expanding our horizons, it's the phenomenon we witness when cooped up city dwellers take to parks and public spaces.

I say this is a Jewish value because so many of the Torah's mitzvot require multiple participants or even entire communities. There's a constant pull toward human interaction. At the national level, there are events like hakhel or the pilgrimage festivals. At the communal level there is everything that attaches to

congregational life. And on the most granular level, there are mitzvot like bikkur cholim or hachnasat orchim that simply cannot be performed alone.

Judaism could never be lived in the cellar of a monastery. It's designed to create connections and spur interactions between and among different people. One can't love the stranger or embrace the outsider if everyone is already on the inside. There are plenty of good reasons to be in the suburbs these days. But the city will always be home to multiplicity. And where there are many kinds of people, there are many ways to serve their creator.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine
Rabbi

Update: 6/15/2020

Dear Friends,

In our tradition, we have a blessing to accommodate just about any occasion: Birth, death and everything in between. There's a bracha on seeing a king and a bracha on seeing a synagogue restored to its former glory. We have one for a rainbow and one for fruit trees in bloom. What, then, is the bracha on a pandemic?

A candidate from the seventeenth century crossed my mind. The chronicler Nathan Hanover recorded an account of an incident that occurred during the Khmelnystky Massacres. In the summer of 1649, the Jews in a Ukrainian village called Iziaslav got word that marauders were nearby and that their lives were in imminent danger. Fleeing en masse, they managed to escape. In their flight, however, they found little relief. They were threatened and robbed, molested and mistreated. As one survivor put it, "Every night that we spent in a Ukrainian inn, we were afraid the innkeeper would kill us in the night…. When we woke up alive in the morning, we would recite the blessing, 'Blessed are You, Hashem, who brings the dead back to life.'"

This pandemic is not over. But recognizing how much worse things could have been, maybe this moment calls for the blessing of mechaye ha-metim.

But perhaps there's another text which is even more appropriate. The Talmud recounts a story in which Reish Lakish paid a shivah call to a colleague. He asked his translator to share a series of blessings. One was for the bereaved; another for the comforters; and one was for all is Israel. "Master of the worlds," he began, "Redeem and save, rescue and deliver Your people, Israel, from pestilence and from the sword; from spoil and from the blight; from disease and all types of afflictions that come suddenly upon the world. Even before we call out, You shall respond. Blessed are You, who puts an end to the plague."

When can we get back to shul? is the query that has dominated our recent discourse. But it's the wrong question. Instead, we should be asking, When can we get back to davening? When will we be able to extricate ourselves from everything that creates distance between ourselves and the Almighty? Brachot

place God on our lips so that we can place God on our hearts. They remind us that there are loftier ideals to which we can aspire. They remind us that even in a pandemic, God is not far away.

We spend a lot of time looking to the media and looking to science. Maybe we should be spending more time looking to the heavens.

May the Healer of all Israel hear our prayers. Blessed is Hashem, who puts an end to the plague.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine
Rabbi

Update: 6/12/2020

Dear Friends,

A prominent rabbi in Los Angeles recently analogized our posture in quarantine to the position of the mourner. Inasmuch as the avel is enjoined against leaving his home, "the whole world is sitting shivah." A number of colleagues, in fact, have employed this metaphor of late. We are grieving, they say, over our loss of community and our loss of normalcy.

This is just the way many of our sages interpreted the pivotal episode in our parsha. When the Torah tells us that the Jews had become like mitonenim, they saw the word onen. Not unlike one who has just suffered the loss of a relative, the Israelites were grieving over the loss of Mt. Sinai. Encamped there for a year, they had established a routine and had begun to feel at home. Venturing off toward Canaan, they were pained by the growing distance between their tents and the site of revelation.

I don't think the analogy is all wrong. There is plenty of loss to go around. But it fails because it robs us of our agency. Victimized by circumstance, the mourner is left to grieve over a past that he cannot control. In this pandemic of ours, we may be sad, but powerless we are not.

I prefer a different metaphor. Rabbi Yaakov Zvi Mecklenberg sees in the word mitonenim another concept entirely. The idea here is one of directionlessness. It derives from the word anah as in the expression anah ve-anah, like a ship tossed hin und her. The Israelites weren't just grieving over the past, they were anxiety-ridden about the future. They were headed into a forbidding wilderness destined to arrive in a land unknown. It was the uncertainty that did them in.

And so in the midst of this pandemic, we are not unlike mitonenim. As we sputter through uncharted waters toward an unknown destination, how do we avoid falling into the trap of our biblical forebears?

The answer, I believe, is to create destinations that are known. To not know what the world, or even our city, will look like in the coming months and years is unsettling. But we can know something about what our own lives will look this week or this month. Because even a world governed by restrictions, our capacity for good is unrestricted. If the goal is to call two people feeling lonely or help one girl with her homework, is that destination so unreachable? After all, horizons are all a matter of perspective.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine
Rabbi

Update: 6/10/2020

Dear Friends,

Predicting the future is an old pastime. The Greeks believed in oracles and fate. Ancient Egyptians practiced divination. The Babylonians developed astrology. And fortune telling has been part of Romani culture for centuries.

In our day, the medium has changed, but not the inherent desire to know what the future holds. This pandemic has brought with it its own forecasters. Early on, predictions swirled about how this virus would behave and when it would end. Scientists predicted how many people would be infected by covid-19 and how many would succumb. Now researchers are mining health data to foresee who is mostly likely to be affected and when.

Inevitably, some forecasters turn out to be right. A theory put forth some thirty years ago by William Strauss and Neil Howe holds that crises occur in American history every 80 or 90 years. Having predicted a cataclysm in 2020, they now look like prophets.

But in Judaism, the words proffered by prophets do not constitute a fait accompli; they constitute a warning. Because human beings are possessed of agency, the future cannot be known. The narratives of our lives have not yet been written. People are not predictable. The Talmud holds out Hezekiah as the paradigmatic case. When Isaiah told him that he would die, Hezekiah called out to Hashem. His prayer was answered and he went on to live another 15 years. The words of the prophet didn't foreclose paths not taken; they inspired action.

In its utter defiance of predictability, covid-19 has reminded us of a fundamental tenet of Jewish belief. Our lives are animated by faith, not governed by fate. Prognostications notwithstanding, its we who will decide what happens next. Our choices and decisions will shape the course of this epoch. Let's make good ones.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine
Rabbi

Update: 6/9/2020

Dear Friends,

As New York City enters the embryonic stages of its plan to reopen, I would like to provide an update on where The Jewish Center stands. While we are all dreaming of the day that we are able to return, it has been so heartening to see the extent to which we have come together as a community even as we remain physically distant from our Center and from one another.

As a starting point, New York State will allow houses of worship to reopen when New York City enters phase 2 of the New York Forward Plan. To think about the implications of what reopening may look like, we have formed a task force which will make recommendations to our leadership about these issues. The committee consists of Andrew Borodach, Steve Graber, Aliza Herzberg, Barbara Paris, David Reves, Mark Segall, Zev Williams and Lori Zeltser. In addition to their input, we are guided by public health and governmental authorities, the Orthodox Union, RCA and leading poskim. And, of course, I am in touch regularly with the rabbis of our sister synagogues.

What follows should be understood as the guidance for our community. Other shuls may be animated by other considerations.

Our Calculus

It should go without saying that minyan is an important priority for our community. I confess my fear that we risk devaluing the centrality of minyan every day we remain closed. And it pains me that mourners or those observing yahrzeit will not be able to recite Kaddish. But the halakhic system to which we subscribe does not assign equal value to every observance. Every moment we stay home during a pandemic, we are fulfilling at least two mitzvot aseh d'oraita.[1] Davening with a minyan fulfils no mitzvot aseh d'oraita.

To the extent that there is a halachic directive to daven with a minyan, that directive is unquestionably suspended at a time of a pandemic. This is why we suspended services on March 12. Even as gatherings of ten are now permitted by governmental authorities in New York City, communal prayer is certainly not mandated. And in my view, it is certainly not advisable.

Allow me to propose that the decision as to when and whether to reopen ought to be informed by considering the attendant benefits and costs. Simply put, what do we gain and what do we lose?

First, it is important to point out that the overwhelming majority of positives we think about when we imagine a return to shul would not be relevant were we to consider reopening. There would be no singing and no sermon; no youth groups and no kiddush; no chesed events and no socializing. The upside would be reduced to a bare bones minyan that could be attended only by a limited number of members.

Risk of exposure to covid-19 increases exponentially when groups gather. And the risk increases exponentially when groups gather for extended periods of time. Passing someone momentarily on the street is not the same as sitting among a group of people for 30 or 60 minutes. California's Department of Health put it best: "In particular, activities such as singing and group recitation negate the risk-

reduction achieved through six feet of physical distancing." Sitting six feet apart from one's neighbor in shul is simply not sufficient.

While gathering outdoors is better than davening indoors, this is a non-starter for a shul like ours. And even an outdoor minyan is fraught with risk. Most obviously, there is the problem of compliance. As one prominent virologist put it to me, "there is simply no guarantee against unguarded moments." People make mistakes. They forget their masks; they stand too close together; or they don't wash their hands. We can't eliminate risk altogether. And our community knows first-hand how dangerous this disease can be. Why would we create more opportunities for it to spread?

What is more, even if one could "guarantee" one's own safety, there is a collective matter to consider. There is no doubt that covid cases will emerge among these well-intentioned minyan-goers. Considering the safety of our own members is only one part of the equation. We must consider, too, the collective safety of the broader community.

Predictably, stories have already started to emerge wherein the experiment has failed. Guidelines for minyanim have been disregarded; individuals have lingered and shared food after services; and people have ended up in the hospital with covid-19. Reading about "super-spreader events" in houses of worship and news from other locales where reopening has triggered spikes in new cases should also give us pause.

Further, I worry about those sitting on the fence. We talk in broad generalities of healthy and vulnerable populations. But the world is not organized so neatly, nor does susceptibility to covid-19 fall cleanly along such lines. Plenty of people suffer from mild ailments or think of themselves as healthier than they are. Others with no comorbidities have fallen prey to the virus.
When shuls begin to open, fence-sitters begin to entertain the possibility of attending.

Finally, I worry that a piecemeal opening will indeed create insiders and outsiders; those "qualified" to participate in communal life and those "disqualified" from participation. So many of our members are enduring this pandemic alone. But at least they haven't been made to feel as though they have been excluded from their shul. What is the cost of adding insult to injury by announcing, "Shul is open… but not for you?"

At the present time, the upside of reopening is outweighed by a downside that could be catastrophic. We deem the risks unjustified. We would love nothing more than to be able to gather in some form or fashion for Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. I'm afraid it is too soon to say with any certainty what that might look like.

Advance Planning and Continued Assessment

In good time, we will get back to shul. It is important to note that New York City just entered phase 1 on June 8. Once New York City has entered phase 2 and some time has passed, we will assess our position. Our newly formed task force has begun to plan the logistics of a return. Given all of the above concerns

and our unique facility, we cannot commit to a particular reopening date. But we can commit to frequent and transparent communication regarding our plans as we proceed through this process.

Two further points must be made to answer two important questions. First, if the government permits reopening, why is that not sufficient? We must be conscious of the difference between our objectives, and those of the state government. The state's plan for reopening assumes coexistence with the virus and recognizes that reopening will result in spikes of new infections and additional deaths. While adherence to the dictates of the government is required by halakha, those dictates represent a floor rather than a ceiling. Our goal in reopening will be to keep all of our members and guests out of harm's way. Sakanah – risk to human life – alters the very trajectory of halakhic thought. We take risk very seriously. We closed our shul well before we were mandated to do so by the government. And we will certainly not reopen it until we are confident that doing so will not put our members at risk.

Second, as businesses begin to reopen and restrictions begin to soften, why can't the shul be open? The answer is twofold. Businesses are reopening with their own plans. They are balancing risks and rewards that differ from those associated with a shul. Houses of worship are considered especially risky environments. The combination of being indoors, singing or speaking loudly, concentrating on prayer rather than social distance and the duration of exposure make for a dangerous recipe. Additionally, while each of us may choose our level of risk tolerance, as a religious community comprised of congregants with various vulnerabilities, our calculus differs. We cannot place others in danger, and we must consider the physical and emotional wellbeing of each and every member.

Next Steps

On a personal level, I will share with you that my mother's yahrzeit is on Sunday. It's difficult for me to think that I won't be in shul. But staying home is undoubtedly the better decision. I keep thinking about the quote from David Weiss Halivni that I shared before the first Shabbat we closed. He said he could live without talking but he could not live without prayer. The same is true is for all of us. We can't live without davening, but we can live without shul.

We will continue to reevaluate all the relevant issues on a regular basis and we will continue to dispatch regular updates. In the meantime, our chesed will continue. Our Torah learning will continue. And our Tefillah will continue.

The Talmud teaches that one who is blessed to live in a city with a shul but fails to attend that shul is considered a bad neighbor. Rather than help facilitate the best environment for prayer for the members of his community, he is derelict. In a time of pandemic, the best neighbors are the ones who daven at home. By helping maintain public health, each of us is performing an enormous communal service, while keeping ourselves safe at the same time.

May Hashem answer all of our Tefillot. And may we soon be blessed with the opportunity to return to our hallowed sanctuary, along with all of our good neighbors.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine
Rabbi

Update: 6/5/2020

Another Virus

Dear Friends,

In a time of pandemic, provincial problems can seem very small. The global issue relativizes the local one. Through the wide-angle lens we use to see the proverbial bigger picture, smaller issues are obscured or disappear completely. But sometimes, something else happens: The global informs the local.

When this pandemic broke, how many people were thinking about racism or prejudice? But now that these scourges have risen to the fore once again, it cannot escape our attention that racism is best conceptualized as a virus. It spreads from person to person and cluster to cluster. Prolonged exposure makes the symptoms worse and there is no known vaccine. But unlike covid-19, there is a cure.

Racism is infectious. But so is civility. In ways that cannot be perceived by the naked eye, gestures of kindness can be transformative. And in their aggregate, they can tip the scale.

In 1966, an 11 year old African American boy moved with his family to a white neighborhood in Washington, DC. Sitting with his brothers and sisters on the stoop in front of their new house, he waitedto see how they would be greeted, but no one gave them so much as a passing smile. “I knew we were not welcome here,” he later wrote. “I knew we would not be liked here. I knew we would have no friends here. I know we should not have moved here.”

Just then, a white woman coming home from work passed by on the other side of the street. She turned to the children and with a big smile, said, “Welcome!” She went into her home and returned a moment later with a tray full of drinks and cream cheese and jelly sandwiches for the children. That moment, the young man later wrote, changed his life.

Stephen Carter went on to become a professor at Yale Law School and he wrote a book called, Civility. The name of the woman was Sara Kestenbaum, an observant Jew.

“To this day, I can close my eyes and feel on my tongue the smooth, slick sweetness of the cream cheese and jelly sandwiches that I gobbled on that summer afternoon when I discovered how a single act of genuine and unassuming civility can change a life forever.”

It’s not just racism that is contagious; so is apathy. As Abraham Joshua Heschel once said, indifference is more insidious than evil itself. And more contagious.

We've all been losing sleep over these issues, particularly because the problem can seem so intractable. We all want to contribute to the solution, but this may not be a prudent time to take to the streets. During a pandemic, protests of any kind – peaceable or otherwise – are inherently dangerous. But remaining indoors needn't be synonymous with remaining indifferent. There are letters to write, organizations to support and conversations to be had about how we can change the status quo. Attitudes can shift; people can evolve. One person at a time, we can be the cure.

Wishing you a Shabbat Shalom,

Yosie Levine
Rabbi

Update: 6/5/2020

Shaken, Not Stirred

Dear Friends,

I wonder if the world will have more tolerance for alarmism in the aftermath of this pandemic. After all, hindsight suggests that we would have benefited from a few more early alarmists. So perhaps I will be forgiven for raising the taboo topic of alcoholism and its attendant complications.

Not a few quarantini recipes have been exchanged over the past several weeks. And no one will be surprised to learn that alcohol sales are up. The notion of escaping reality by retreating to the bottle is as old as Noach. And the outcomes are little improved with the passage of time. The Nazir, whom we read about in parshah this week, reminds us that leading a wineless life – even if only for short stints – creates so much sanctity that one's status is akin to that of the high priest.

But if the Torah looks askance on drinking, why didn't it outlaw the practice altogether? Long before the failure of prohibition in this country, R. Avraham ben HaRambam wrote presciently that a blanket ban would be impractical. Certain social behaviors aren't given to strict legislation. Rather than demanding abstinence, the Torah demands that we identify a sober balance between temperance and intoxication.

No one wants to be a killjoy. And everyone wants to trust the judgment of the person holding the drink. But therein lies the rub. It's what happens on a chemical level that impairs our capacity for sound decision-making.

Fifteen million Americans suffer from what researchers call Alcohol Use Disorder. That's five percent of our population. I've never seen any data indicating that the statistics are discernably different in the Jewish community. Every one of us knows someone who has a problem with alcohol. The challenge today is that we're not with them. As if we don't have enough on our plates already, we all need to be extra mindful and extra vigilant. There's usually no quick fix; but a supportive friend can go a very long way. Educating ourselves on the issue is a good place to start. Following up with our at-risk friends and relatives is even better.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine
Rabbi

Update: 6/4/2020

Remembering Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm

Dear Friends,

Earlier this week, the Jewish people lost a legendary leader. Below, I share with you the words I've written to honor the memory of Moreinu v'Rabbeinu Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm. I'm afraid they are woefully inadequate. It would take a lifetime to fully appreciate the complexity of his thought and the depth of his character. In the coming weeks and months, a tapestry will gradually come together that captures all thepects of his extraordinary life. Perhaps what follows will constitute a stitch.

With warmest regards,

Yosie Levine
Rabbi

What is the measure of a man? If, as I heard Mindy say on more than one occasion, life is a journey, how does one know whether and to what extent the traveler has reached his destination?

The Tefillat Ha-Derekh, the traveler's prayer, may provide a clue. When he sets off on a trek fraught with peril, the traveler davens to Hashem and he says:
וְתַגִּיעֵנוּ לִמְחוֹז חֶפְצֵנוּ לְחַיִּים וּלְשִׂמְחָה וּלְשָׁלוֹם.
Let us arrive at our destination in life, in happiness and in peace.

In thinking about Moreinu v'Rabbeinu Rabbi Lamm – and particularly in thinking about the 18 years he served as the Rabbi of The Jewish Center – it's the three qualities captured here that come to the fore.

Allow me to start at the end, with the notion of Shalom, the notion of harmony. Rabbi Lamm was possessed of an extraordinary gift for synthesis. He was a scientist and a poet; a rationalist who read and wrote deeply about Hassidic thought; a scholar and a gentleman, an artist and an architect.

By the time one was done listening to his words, the synthesis was obvious. It all fit together so seamlessly. The question wasn't: How did Rabbi Lamm generate this dazzling insight, but rather: why hadn't anyone else noticed this before?

It's every shul's dream to find a rabbi who excels both as a scholar and a pastor. "You don't have to like every one of your members," Rabbi Lamm once told me. "But you do have to love every one of your members."

To the cadences of The Jewish Center, he brought Shalom, he brought harmony. He synthesized the two great roles of the rabbi such that he became the preeminent scholar of our era at the same time he was dispensing compassion to his beloved flock.

The second aspect of the bracha is simcha.It wasn't just that Rabbi Lamm was warm and filled with joy. His capacity for wit was limitless.

When our eldest son, Akiva, was about two, he was very comfortable in Hebrew thanks to an Israeli nanny. I was once waiting with him for an elevator. When the doors opened, out walked Rabbi Lamm. Akiva looked up and said, "Ish Tzaddik." Without missing a beat, Rabbi Lamm looked down at him and said, "Tell my wife!"

He added so much joy to the lives of his congregants and his students. From the moment I came to The Jewish Center as the rabbinic intern, Rabbi Lamm took a keen interest in my personal growth and development. When I would see him over the years at a simcha or a dinner, he would introduce me to people and say to them, "I want you to meet my rabbi."

He was so generous with his time and his wisdom. Whenever I met with him – whether in his office or his home – I always emerged feeling elevated and inspired, renewed in my conviction that it was indeed possible to contribute meaningfully to the Jewish people. So much of my rabbinate has been shaped by the lessons he taught me.

And finally there is the notion of Chayim. In this case, I would translate the word not as life, but lifetime. Perhaps the real test of a rabbi is what happens to the relationships he has with his members when he's no longer the rabbi and they are no longer his members. Rabbi Lamm saw his rabbinate as a lifetime vocation. So while the presidency of Yeshiva University took Rabbi Lamm out of The Jewish Center, it could never take The Jewish Center out of Rabbi Lamm.

Sitting in the pews, he davened regularly with us on Shabbat. When the walk became too far, he and Mindy would stay across the street to be with us for special occasions or chagim. And in recent years, after the Lamms moved to 88th St., they were a regular presence once again, all the while remaining deeply connected and involved in the life of our shul.

Some years after he became president of YU, a young woman from The Jewish Center became engaged. She called to ask Rabbi Lamm if he would officiate at her wedding. He would love to, he said, but the date presented a conflict. He had already made a commitment to appear at conference at the White House. The bride began to make other arrangements. Rabbi Lamm called back a short time later to say that he had moved the date of the conference and would happily officiate.

I remember visiting an older couple at the shul on a Friday afternoon when I was the assistant rabbi. The phone rang. It was Rabbi Lamm calling to wish them a good Shabbos. And I remember thinking to myself: 1976! It's been 30 years since he's been the rabbi. He's still calling to wish them a good Shabbos!

Rabbi Lamm once said of Rabbi Belkin something that applies now. “He was blessed with great gifts, both intellectual and personal, and few of us indeed can aspire to equal his achievements. But we can learn from him.”

Klal Yisrael thought of Rabbi Lamm as a leader of the Jewish people; we at The Jewish Center thought of him as our rabbi.

By translating the vocabulary and values of our Mesorah into a poetic code of sanctified Jewish living, he blazed an intellectual trail for thousands. He was and remains not just a role model for rabbis the world over, but an icon.

At moment when all was almost lost, Yosef saw the image of his father and it save him. In the same vein, when we face our most pressing challenges – when the endpoint seems unreachable – we’ll conjure up a visage of Rabbi Lamm. In knowing what he would have done, the path before us will be obvious and our destination won’t seem so distant after all.

All of us who were his students, are eternally in his debt: For his warmth and his wisdom, his faith and his friendship, his courage and his charisma; his vision and his vitality, his leadership and his love.

תהא נשמת מורינו ורבינו הרב נחום בן ר' מאיר שמואל צרורה בצרור החיים

May the soul of Rabbi Lamm be bound in the bonds of eternal life; and may his soul reach its ultimate destination לחיים ולשמחה ולשלום.

Update: 6/3/2020

Heros

Dear Friends,

This summer, we will celebrate the hundredth anniversary of women’s suffrage. What seems obvious today was anything but obvious not so long ago. It is heartening to know that after war and pandemic came progress. We are not prophets. But with cycles of history wont to repeat, none of us should be surprised if our post-covid lives are somehow enriched by phenomena that emerge from this crisis. But neither do we need to wait until the storm clouds have parted to appreciate the rays of light that shine now.

It is a source of great pride, particularly in the areas of leadership and scholarship, that women play such indispensable roles in our community. We take it as axiomatic that women and men are equally created in the image of God, each endowed with the same spark of divinity. Our sages were quick to notice, not only that so many decisive moments in Jewish history were guided by heroic women; but that so many mundane ones were as well. I suspect it was both the epiphanic and the quotidian that King Solomon had in mind when he enjoined us not to forsake to the Torah of our mothers.

Every year, in the days before or after Shavuot, we celebrate the accomplishments of two women in our community. The Book of Ruth is about two Jewish heroines and so are the Keter Torah awards. This

year, we honor two women who have made outstanding contributions to our ongoing battle against the coronavirus and its victims. Animated by our cherished values, they have deployed their expertise in the service of our most pressing and timely needs.

As we have come to learn, that we cannot gather as we normally would is no reason not to gather in other ways. On the contrary, Zoom has allowed to us include people who might otherwise be unable to join. Particularly during this time when we are all in need of uplift, we cannot afford to pass up opportunities to celebrate. I invite you to join us this evening at 8pm as we recognize the accomplishments of Adira Hulkower and Barbara Paris.

A century from now, a new generation will be curious to learn how we responded in a moment of crisis. Little children will clamber to hear the stories of how ordinary people accomplished extraordinary things. To the extent we absorb those stories now, we'll be able to preserve them for the future. A hundred years hence, who knows what they'll inspire.

With warm regards,

Yosie Levine
Rabbi

Update: 6/2/2020

The Forgotten Danger of Reopening

Dear Friends,

Over the past twenty years, safety and security have risen to the fore of our communal agenda. And with good reason. In the face of violence and terrorism in general and anti-Semitism in particular, we've come to recognize that a reactive approach to these matters is inadequate. So our community has invested millions of dollars and thousands of hours to protect every person who walks through the doors of every shul in the United States. From professional and volunteer security personnel to strategizing for emergencies, we've been cautious and we've been vigilant.

In their haste to reopen, however, synagogues across America are sacrificing one danger for another. The risk of spreading covd-19 is exponentially higher when people gather indoors. So shuls are rushing to identify makeshift outdoor spaces in which to hold their minyanim. With respect to protecting parishioners from the virus, the logic is sound. With respect to protecting them from any other kind of risk, the logic is anything but.

Retailers have already reported a sharp spike in the sale of guns and ammunition. And the events of recent days have reminded us that calm can turn to mayhem in a heartbeat. I read about a shul whose façade was vandalized by angry protesters. I shudder to think what might have happened if, instead of chancing upon a locked building, they had chanced upon a group of people davening in the shul parking lot.

We don't need to be alarmist about these issues. But we do need to be pragmatic. Every shul must take the necessary steps to keep everyone safe. And if a community cannot reasonably assure the safety of those who gather, perhaps it should consider not gathering at all. The push to reopen is understandably powerful. But we cannot allow it to blind us to other basic considerations of safety.

In locations where covid-19 is still infecting thousands of people every week, don't we already have enough risk to worry about? Why run from Scylla to Charybdis? In good time, shuls will find ways to reopen safely and we'll beat a path to their front doors. Let's make sure that path is a safe one.

With warm regards,

Yosie Levine
Rabbi

Update: 6/1/2020

The Better Part of Valor

Dear Friends,

When Denis Papin invented the forerunner of the pressure cooker at the end of the seventeenth century, I'm not sure he knew the extent to which pressure and its release would become household metaphors. Those metaphors seem particularly pertinent today – to both those clambering to reopen and to those aggrieved by an act that was senseless at best and monstrous at worst.

Over Memorial Day weekend, we saw photos of mask-less men and women in crowded public spaces in the midst of a pandemic. The images may have been upsetting, but they were unsurprising. Having been confined and constrained for months on end, is it any wonder that so many people would emerge from their quarantine with too much gusto to preserve the public health recommendations that have been keeping us safe?

Over this past weekend, the images were even more dramatic. Protesters took to the streets and it wasn't long before death and destruction followed. The causes that the agitators were championing were sensible enough. But it should go without saying that violence and criminal activity make for feckless remedies to entrenched problems.

The recklessness of the first group and the agitation of the second are not the same. I'm thinking of them together only because they are linked by a common force that surely exacerbated how each group responded. Without a safety valve, pressure can build in dangerous ways. That we understand these respective responses does not mean they are justified, just explicable.

The Megillah we read just two days ago offers an important Jewish perspective on this issue. Boaz is described as an ish gibor chayil. The expression conjures up images of military might or valor. But there are no military campaigns in the Megillah. Whatever battles were raging at the time, the text is silent

about them. Not only is the book of Ruth not about war, its quietude is one of its defining qualities. So why portray Boaz as a gibor?

Gevurah in the Megillah is, in fact, not about physical might at all. It conveys an entirely different kind of strength. It refers to a kind of inner fortitude that should rightly be translated as resolve or restraint. The act that Boaz does not perform when Ruth appears at his feet on the threshing floor is the defining moment of the narrative. His restraint preserves the legal and cultural norms governing remarriage. Before he could marry Ruth, Boaz had to be sure that Naomi's closer relative was willing to forgo his obligation to do so.

This pandemic has called on all of us to be many things. In this moment, it calls on all of us to be restrained: Both those rushing to embrace freedoms denied them by our public health experts; and those rushing to champion the causes of justice and equality. When caution fails to prevail in its enduring battle against haste, we all suffer. As Alexander Solzhenitsyn once told Shimon Peres, "Only self-restraint can pave the way for saving the world from sure destruction." Maybe he had in mind a moment like this one.

With warm regards,

Yosie Levine
Rabbi