

Venturing into the unknown - again?!

This past March, we all ventured into an unknown. As a consequence, our shul was locked down completely until mid August. It was then that we received livestream equipment and could finally engage in some way with you, our Beth Emeth family members. During the lockdown, Shabbat, at least for me, was frankly, brutal. Being without my synagogue family left me spiritually bankrupt.

By mid August, we started to experiment in our sanctuary. Could we get a weekday morning or evening minyan of ten in the sanctuary so that we could recite a full service? We tried hard for weeks, but to no avail. However, we succeeded in getting a core group of 20-25 people on Shabbat morning, with a majority of men and a smaller number of women. This model, combined with 70-100 households participating by livestream was clearly not normal, as in the days of 200 regulars in shul, but it was something. I was getting used to the new normal during this awful pandemic. I felt my Beth Emeth community surrounding me.

Today, based on a decision that I made as Mara D'Atra, the rabbinic decision maker for the shul, I stand in a naked sanctuary, surrounded by my two clergy colleagues only. I am trying to feel the presence of the livestream participants, but I cannot see you in the way you see me, and none of us can see anybody else. How frustrating! Another new normal has come after the most recent new normal, from 25 in the room to almost no-one in the room. This is brutal!

I feel, as many of us do right now, like our patriarch Jacob at the outset of today's Parsha. Jacob finds himself outside his familiar comfort zone for the first time in his life. He has no choice. He has to leave his family surroundings to guarantee his safety and wellbeing. One can feel his anxiety, loneliness, and fear. Jacob sets himself down for the night at a certain place. There, he experiences God in a way he never has before. In his daze, he accepts belief in his new situation. Nevertheless, when he says "Surely God is in this place, but 'Anochi Lo Yadati - I did not know,' Jacob could be saying, I did not know God, or I did not know myself, until this very moment.

My friends, I feel so much like Jacob this week. I believe that God is in this place and every place with us all the time and in every moment. At the same time, I am struggling with better knowing me or God during this pandemic. I can only try to have trust and belief, along with loneliness and anxiety, that the situation will improve. At this moment, I feel the paradox of being almost alone in our shul and being surrounded by virtually 200 people.

Beth Emeth was founded as halakhic traditional synagogue. As such, we do not publically interact with electronic objects on Shabbat at shul. Thus, unlike some more progressive synagogues, we cannot utilize Zoom on Shabbat.

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Beth Emeth was founded as a halakhic traditional synagogue. As such, we permit family and mixed seating. We encourage men and women to attend synagogue services. We are not a men's only club when we gather to pray as a community, notwithstanding the technical requirements for the minimum of ten men needed for a Minyan.

This past week, the City of Toronto and elsewhere mandated a maximum of ten people in total who could gather for religious services. What to do?

In today's Parsha, Jacob, an inexperienced davenner, prays to God and says, if you be with me, then I will accept you as God. Only years later does Jacob daven with maturity when he says to God, "I am undeserving of all your kindnesses." Today, sadly, I feel like the young inexperienced Jacob wanting to play let's make a deal with God.

This past Tuesday night, both rabbis and a select number of shul leaders met on Zoom to discuss what to do with Shabbat morning services, given the new regulations. We all agreed that "the show must go on." But how?

To have a Minyan necessitates having ten men. Ten is the maximum we are allowed to have in our sanctuary right now. If we go that route, which ten men? The three clergy? alright. Then whom? How do we decide? A lottery? Are we disqualifying a man who needs to bring a caregiver because that takes up two seats? Also, we would need to identify the ten men before Shabbat. If one does not show up; he overslept, he did not feel well, or God forbid, something worse, there is no Minyan for services! There is no back up squad on the bench, as it were.

Equally as important if not moreso, what message are we sending to the women of our shul? Most women understand the traditional requirements of ten men needed to comprise a minyan. But a Shabbat service at Beth Emeth, where not a single woman is to be welcomed into the shul? What kind of message is that? What are the values that we are promoting here?

Our committee was divided. On the one hand, we want to recite a full service, not having to skip those passages which require a Minyan. We want the familiar Kaddish, Aliyot, Borchu, Kedusha, the repetition of the Amidah. On the other hand, some men and all women would be unable to attend based on the new legal requirements.

I decided. This kind of decision making is on me, after learning and listening with a microcosm of our congregation. While it is always preferable to pray with a Minyan, it is not an absolute requirement. The dignity of our entire congregation took precedence for me. Quite frankly, it was a member of the committee who opened up my eyes. Nevertheless, I sympathize with the person who wants to recite the familiar Kaddish. I sympathize with those who either in person or via livestream want to recite the entire service. I sympathize with the person who says, everyone will understand why there are ten men only in shul for the next few weeks, so that the service can be inclusive, even if gender attendance cannot be inclusive.

The decision I made is not a right or wrong. We will daven this way on Shabbat morning today and next week. Then, I and the same committee will reassess. In the meantime, I need to hear

your voices on how we should proceed beyond the next couple of weeks, in case this regulation capping attendance at ten people goes on much longer than through December.

Regarding the less familiar Kaddish that we have been permitted to recite without a Minyan, I want to say a few words. First, it is authentic. While less familiar, it originated in the very first printed Siddur by Rav Amram Ha'Gaon, in the tenth century. Second, I want to share with you from an essay written by a Jewish woman who chose to recite this form of a personal Kaddish when she was a mourner but not near a shul:

" Corona Kaddish, by Naomi L. Baum, in her book, My year of Kaddish - Mourning, Memory, and Meaning:

I recited the individual Kaddish aloud and found it both grounding and reaffirming. The individual Kaddish granted me the time and space to remember my mother, and also gave me a feeling that I was blessing her on her journey wherever she was, and no matter where I was in the world. The connection was precious."

Our patriarch Jacob ventured into the unknown, but he did so with a growing sense of faith and purpose. So shall we!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Howard Morrison