Dear Friends,

To paraphrase familiar words from the Passover Seder, Mah Nishtanah Rosh Hashanah ha-zot mikol ha-shanim! How different is this Rosh Hashanah from all others!

On a normal Rosh Hashanah Eve, I would begin by telling you great it is to see all of you in this sanctuary. But this year, Mah Nishtanah… the seats are empty, and you are at home.

Yes, you are sitting in front of some sort of screen at this moment, but let’s see if we can somehow summon the memory of Rosh Hashanah’s past.

Can you remember what it's like to walk into our sanctuary when it's packed to capacity, both downstairs and in the balcony, on Rosh Hashanah: the sensory overload of faces, voices and bodies, the happy buzz of greetings and conversations, the press of hugs and handshakes as you find your seat before the service begins? Can you remember how that looks and feels and sounds?

What comfort and power there was in that togetherness: the comfort of community and the power of solidarity, a unity as powerful as the "amen!" that rumbled up from the floorboards when we responded to a familiar blessing!
We’ve known for months that we’d be streaming High Holy Day services online. CBI’s staff and volunteer leadership concluded last spring that there was no safe way to pack our Sanctuary and Smith Auditorium with worshipers during a global pandemic that was, and sadly still is, infecting millions and killing and tens of thousands of our fellow Americans. We couldn’t risk replicating news reports of church services and large weddings that had become “super-spreader” events. Our sages teach us that *Pikuah Nefesh*, saving a life, is paramount, and we were not going to take any chances with this community’s safety, or the safety of others outside of our congregation.

So, we've no doubt that this was the right decision. Even so, *Mah nishtanah!* Sarah Avner, Rabbi Levy and I know that you are out there. We are thankful for the countless volunteer hours and for your donations to purchase the new streaming equipment that carries this service to you right now. But there's no getting around the fact that we are *alone* in an empty synagogue. It's not the same without you here.

Oddly, even though I've known for months that this is how it was going to be, the reality didn’t hit me until last Saturday night, standing here, leading *hadvallah* with Sarah at the beginning of our *Selichot* service. When I looked over at the nearly burnt out, braided blue *havdallah* candle sitting on this little table, next to the silver
spice box and the kiddush cup, framed by the walls of this empty sanctuary, I felt a sharp and unexpected pang of sadness.

I found myself remembering another havdallah ritual, the one that always concludes the Yom Kippur fast ten days from now. It comes each year at the end of Ne’ilah, the fifth and final service of Yom Kippur, just after Yizkor, when some of the Yizkor attendees leave, and a new wave of people pushes through the sanctuary doors to catch the dramatic end of Yom Kippur. Then, the last teki’ah gedolah is sounded on the shofar. And as we light the candle and pour the wine of havdallah, children swarm onto the bimah, and our ushers toss little sachets of fragrant havdallah spices to the exhausted yet elated worshipers.

Then, as we sing the havdallah blessings, we look up and see you. Many of you have your arms around each other’s shoulders, you are swaying back and forth to the havdallah blessings. At the same time, the heavenly aroma of homemade kugel and other delicacies from our break-fast in Smith Auditorium begins to penetrate the sanctuary. Between the low blood sugar from fasting and the smell of the food down the hall, well, let’s just say that some of us are having some intense spiritual experiences at that point…

Togetherness. Community. A ten-day spiritual journey of introspection, reconciliation and return, surrounded by friends and neighbors in as our traveling companions in the synagogue.
But not this year.

This year we are grieving and exhausted, frightened and uncertain, and painfully aware that we’ve lost so much.

We've lost the normalcy of our children going off to school each day to learn from teachers and be with friends, and we wonder what long-term effects this traumatic time will have on their childhood and later years.

We've lost a world in which the simple pleasures of going out for a meal, attending a concert, shopping in a crowded store, going to a sporting event, were routine activities that didn’t require an anxious risk/benefit analysis.

We mourn the loss of casual socializing, a life in which work and school and conversations with family and friends aren't literally flattened into two dimensional pixels and mediated by technology.

We grieve for the chance to visit a sick friend in the hospital, for a world in which the terminally ill don't have to face death without their loved ones by their bedside.

We miss the simple freedom of coming and going as we please without hesitation and without fear.

There are times when ancient, familiar words from the prayer book, words we've heard many times before, take on sudden, unexpected relevance. I'm thinking of those plaintive, somber questions from the medieval poem *Unetaneh Tokef* that we've recited countless times in the past, the prayer that asks, "Who shall live and
who shall die?" Living in the 21st century, with its advanced medical science, the question *mi ba-magefah*, "Who by plague," seemed archaic and out of place. Yet here we are, struggling to make sense of nearly 200,000 American lives lost, with millions more made sick, struggling with the long-term side effects of the COVID-19 virus. But the unwanted relevance of *Unetaneh Tokef* doesn’t end there. *Mi ba-esh*, asks the poet, “Who by fire?” as the West Coast of the United States goes up in flames. *Mi ba-ḥanikah?* “Who by strangling,” asks the prayer, and we are forced to answer, “George Floyd,” whose violent strangulation under the knee of a Minneapolis police officer set off a wave of protests and a renewed reckoning on American racism.

You know, there is a custom in Jewish tradition of reading Psalm 27 every day during the month of Elul, the month preceding Rosh Hashanah. The end of the Psalm is optimistic and strong: "Hope in Adonai; be strong and of good courage! Oh, hope in Adonai!"

Where can we find that hope, courage, wisdom, perseverance and purpose in such a time? There are many Jewish answers to this question. Let me share one that has been helpful to me.

Repeatedly during these six months of isolation and quarantine, I've thought of our Rabbis’ play on words suggesting that the Hebrew word for Egypt, *Mitzrayim*, is
derived from the Hebrew word *tzar*, meaning "constricted" or "narrow," even reading the word Mitzrayim as "*metzar yam,*” the narrow sea.

Of course, we use the same metaphor of narrowness in the English language whenever we talk about "being between a rock and a hard place," or being in "dire straits." We feel limited and shut down, we feel trapped or stuck, and life seems *devoid of possibilities.* (By the way, the Hebrew word *tzar*, narrow, gives us the Yiddish word *tzuris*, meaning “troubles.”) Yes, life during this pandemic and quarantine is what the sages meant when they spoke of *Mitzrayim*, The Narrow Place. Our lives during this pandemic have become tight, constricted, limited, constrained in so many ways.

And yet, we learn from the tradition that *hidden within* the Egyptian enslavement, the narrow place, are the seeds of our liberation and redemption. How so? Because this narrowness, this constriction, has a way of stripping things down to their essentials. Confined to our homes, devoid of so many of our habitual busyness, we are forced to ask the basic Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur questions: What truly matters? What is real?

A great Hasidic teacher, Rabbi Menachem of the Ukrainian town of Chernobyl, taught¹ that the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt was a spiritual one, one in which they suffered from a joyless, narrow, limited consciousness. (He uses the

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¹ This teaching appears in his commentary *Me’or Enayim* (Light for The Eyes), commentary on Deuteronomy.
Hebrew words *mohin d’katnut*, meaning "small mindedness.") The Israelites didn't know how to serve God joyfully because *da’at*, meaning deep wisdom was, in his words, "in exile." So, he teaches, the Exodus, leaving Egypt, was moving from a state of limited, small awareness, *mohin d’katnut*, into expanded consciousness, *mohin d’gadlut*. We might even say that for Rabbi Menachem of Chernobyl, moving from a constricted awareness to an expansive awareness *is* the actual Exodus! It was in that expanded awareness that our ancestors rediscovered doing mitzvot and serving God with joy.

What is this broadened awareness that Rabbi Menachem refers to? My teacher, Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg, puts it this way:

“What is the most basic call to us as Jews? *Shema Yisrael.* Moses is calling us, “Hear, O Israel!” What does he mean, “hear”? I think he means, “pay attention!” *Shema* means, “Listen deeply! Open to the underlying truth of reality.” And what is that truth? The truth is, that all the forces and energies in the world, that seem to be divided and separated, are really connected and united. This means that we are all part of one great reality, and our task is to see that, respect that; pay attention to the ways we are connected to life, to each other.”

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2 Transcribed from a meditation CD available at [http://jewishspirituality.org](http://jewishspirituality.org)
The beginning of release from narrowness and constriction is the awareness that many of the boundaries that give us emotional security and tribal solidarity simply don’t exist.

“A midrash tells a story of passengers on a boat. As the boat pulled away from the dock to begin its voyage, one passenger opened his bag and took out a drill. The other passengers became alarmed as he put the drill bit against the floor under his seat and begin to make a hole in the bottom of the boat. The other passengers, in fear and astonishment, pleaded with him, “Stop! What are you doing?” The man was surprised by their objections. He calmly said, “What business is it of yours? Why should you care? I’m only drilling under my own seat. I have no intention of drilling under yours.” The other passengers frantically told him, “The seat might only be yours, but the water will rise up to drown us all!” [Leviticus Rabbah 4:6]3

What better teacher of the truth of our interconnectedness could there possibly be than this pandemic? The Talmud notes that on the night of the tenth plague in the Passover story, the Israelites were commanded to quarantine inside their houses, because "once the Angel of death has been set loose, it makes no distinction between the righteous and the wicked." We experience in these times that all our constructs of borders, divisions, political philosophies, religions and ethnicities

3 With thanks and appreciation to my friend and colleague, Rabbi Jeff Goldwasser, for this retelling.
vanish like mist in the face of a virus that plays no favorites and respects no
national borders. And all that's left is our common humanity.

This insight into the ultimate oneness that binds us to all people is at the heart of
every great wisdom tradition, including our own, and it has been said in countless
ways by innumerable teachers. Martin Luther King, Jr., famously said, “We must
all learn to live together as brothers, or we will all perish together as fools. We
are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable
network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For
some strange reason I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you
ought to be. This is the way God’s universe is made; this is the way it is
structured.”

That means that we need to expand our awareness, to leave the narrowness of
Egypt, and to never forget how our actions impact those around us, perfect
strangers, people we've never seen in whose names we will never know. Keeping
this perspective is a greater challenge in this historical moment then ever in my
lifetime. The voices of division, hatred, the voices of “us versus them” have
become very loud. And yet, not only can affirming that greater vision of unity lift
up our hearts and our hopes in this dark time, it can also save lives, especially now,
because we will know that the only correct answer to Cain’s immortal question,
“Am I my brother’s keeper,” is an emphatic and unhesitating “yes.”
Let this, then, be a time of expanded awareness born of our current, narrowed circumstances. Let us remember that the masks and the social distancing are expressions of the biblical commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Dear ones, we although we are physically distant from each other at this moment, we can still be one in spirit and one in hope. Let us choose life and serve the cause of life so that one blessed day, we will again be able to physically gather together to embrace, to sing, to rejoice, and to greet a future new year… together.

Amen.