

“This stinks ...

I planned to go on a one-in-a-lifetime trip, but Covid said NO

I planned visit my grandchildren, but NO

I planned to go to back to school, but NO

I planned to start kindergarten, but NO

I planned to have food for the next week, but NO

“This stinks. Really, My God? Come on? Now what?”

Missed opportunities, once-in-a-lifetime opportunities plans gone awry. Frustration. Anger. Uncertainty. The DIRECT AND INDIRECT injustices of a hidden virus now plague our lives and our neighbors' lives. That's also what plagued Moses -- many millennia ago, the subject of this week's parsha.

Moses, God's reluctant servant, who spent so much time and energy to help his people Go. Moses who survived the ten plagues. Moses who brought down the Ten Commandments. That Moses. On the eve of entering the Promised Land to enjoy his own sabbatical with his own people. What did God SAY to Moses?

“Sorry, dude. You can't go. You've got to stay behind,” to paraphrase God's message. “All those plans you made. Gone. Oh, and by the way, can you share all these rules with your people, even though you can't join them?”

Moses had got to be thinking: “This stinks. Really, God? Come on? Now what?”

Thanks to my daughters, I've been immersed in story and lyrics from Lin-Manuel Miranda's musical Hamilton. Alexander Hamilton, the founding father without a father, shared similarities with Moses: Both were orphans, on a journey during turbulent times, who spent a lifetime building plans on behalf of a new nation of immigrants. To deliver the afterbirth of a new nation – a young Alexander Hamilton decided that he was “NOT GIVING AWAY [his] SHOT” ... only to be shot down ... in the prime of life ... before seeing his own people enter the American promised land, under the laws he helped create. Alexander and his wife Eliza – like Moses -- were left questioning God: Why me? Why now? What next? Who will write the story?

Our modern plague has cancelled so many plans for many of us in this Congregation, and we've been forced to rewrite our stories. For those of us with means and savings – these cancelled plans are really only inconveniences, some of them very annoying. Cancelled vacations. Remote work. Online classes. But there remains, to quote the great Martin Luther King, Jr., “An Other America ... where “little children ... are forced to grow up with clouds of inferiority forming every day in their little mental skies. ... an arena of blasted hopes and shattered dreams.”

Along with other pediatricians serving low-income communities in the Bay Area– however – I have been bearing painful witness, day by day, to this Other America –in both the DIRECT and INDIRECT injustices of the coronavirus pandemic. Each injustice -- seen through the eyes of little children – are best laid plans gone terribly wrong.

I see the DIRECT INJUSTICE of the pandemic through the eyes of Pablo, a bright 12 year-old boy who planned to attend a local summer program at the Boys and Girls Club, which offers effective supports to reduce the widening academic achievement gap – this little boy forced to stay home because of the DIRECT effects of the pandemic. His uncle, a local grocery-store worker and housemate, was positive for Covid-19. A disproportionate share of Covid-positive patients in our community live in immigrant families with a PERFECT STORM of risk factors that place them at higher risk : an adult family member with a chronic condition, an essential worker (perhaps a local grocery-store stocker or hospital maintenance worker), and living in crowded living conditions (often with multiple families in a single dwelling).

Like Moses, Pablo has got to be thinking: “This stinks. I miss my friends and the club. Really, God? Come on? Now what?”

I see the INDIRECT INJUSTICE of the pandemic through the eyes of Giselle, a social 5 year-old girl who planned to start kindergarten this fall, and because Covid-19 has eliminated her single mother’s housekeeping job, her family is food insecure, reliant on local food pantry’s for next week’s meals. Their home has no internet access, no one to home school her, and no transportation or language access to other families who are setting up their own social “pods.”

Like Moses, Giselle’s eyes are saying: “This stinks. No kindergarten. No food. Really, God? Come on? Now what?”

In the end, like Moses, nearly every parent seeks a new normal. When I ask a parent about their worries and their hopes for their child’s well being, they commonly say they want their child to be NORMAL, to have a normal life, to be accepted “just like the other kids.” We often share some tears. “And How about for you? What do you want for yourself?” Nearly every parent – especially those with the least financial resources and made most vulnerable by the pandemic - says something like -- “I feel so blessed ... to be able to care for this beautiful, child.”

Just last weekend, I got a call from a father of another child with bright and hopeful eyes – Oscar. I’ve cared for Oscar since he was born with a congenital heart condition and severe developmental delay. They didn’t think he’d survive his first year. He’s now 6 years old, and would be starting second grade. The father works 3 jobs to support his family of 5. During the pandemic, he lost all 3 jobs and has filed for unemployment. I was worried. “What’s wrong, amigo mio?” I asked, “Is Oscar OK?” “Si,” he said, “we are OK. I was just worried about you,” he said. “I want to make sure you and your family are OK.” All of Oscar’s plans were cancelled. No school for his 3 children. No work for him or his wife. And all he wanted to do was call and check on me. We cried. After the tears subside, I witnessed in Oscar’s father what can only be described as Grace.

The Torah this week is full of Grace, or, in Hebrew, CHEN. At the same time that God asks Moses to stop – he asks Moses to instruct and to accept his fate. To instruct the people with the laws (the Ten Commandments) to his people. This is also the first place in the Torah to reveal the sacred nature of ACCEPTANCE, with the recitation of the Sh’ma: LISTEN O Israel, The Lord Our God in ONE.”

Accept. Listen. Be one.

During these pandemic times, then, I suppose the best we can do is to listen to Torah.

Perhaps, the Torah suggests, we should simply LET GO of our best laid plans. But still we can plan and hope and love. Like parents everywhere, and Pablo and Giselle and Oscar – we should not look back on old plans and visions– but rather prepare ourselves for an uncertain, new normal.

We have less control over this journey than we thought. As Moses learned to accept that he would not reach the Promised Land, so we must accept that things will not be as we planned. As Moses rested, so must we rest. As Moses served and listened to his people, so must we serve and listen.

Let us – in the spirit of the Torah and in the words of Lin-Manuel Miranda -- sit under our own vine and fig tree ... and rewrite our story.