

Put on your Oxygen Mask – It's Going to be a Bumpy Ride

Joseph Curl, of the Washington Times, recently wrote: If you wrote a screenplay of what's happened so far in 2020 and gave it to Hollywood producers, they'd laugh you right out of the room. "So, let's get this straight," they'd say, "you're proposing a movie that has the president of the United States being impeached, a global pandemic killing upwards of 200,000 Americans and almost 1,000,000 worldwide, race riots and looting in dozens of U.S. cities, a billion animals killed in Australian wildfires, smoke from American wild fires blocking out the sun on the entire western seaboard, 4 hurricanes at once in the Mediterranean, and a wave of murder hornets to boot? Get out!"

No doubt about it, these have been traumatic times which means that, if you have been participating in the last six months, then you have been exposed to trauma. We're lucky enough to have in our congregation a nationally recognized and sought-after psychologist and teacher. Doctor Betsy Stone has written extensively about the trauma that we have all been experiencing and she uses the [SLIDE] medical definition as follows. **Trauma is the response to a deeply distressing or disturbing event that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope, causes feelings of helplessness, diminishes one's sense of self and ability to feel the full range of emotions and experiences.**¹ Yeah, that about sums up what it has felt like.

Another PhD psychologist, Dr. Ann Masten, of the University of Minnesota, has written about the human response to crisis and describes our technique as "surge capacity". She calls this a collection of adaptive systems, both mental and physical, that humans draw on for short term survival in acutely stressful situations.² Typically, we use this approach of drawing upon our reserves of strength and resilience to get us through short periods of crisis but, experts write that **this** is a crisis that just keeps going. Meaning, what worked for us initially was never designed, evolutionarily, to get us through acute stress lasting for extended periods.

¹ Stone, Betsy, PhD. [Trauma and Covid-19](https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/trauma-and-covid-19/). Ejewishphilanthropy.com, 4/24/2020.

<https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/trauma-and-covid-19/>

² Haelle, Tara. [Your 'Surge Capacity' Is Depleted — It's Why You Feel Awful](https://elemental.medium.com/your-surge-capacity-is-depleted-it-s-why-you-feel-awful-de285d542f4c). [www.elemental.medium.com](https://elemental.medium.com/your-surge-capacity-is-depleted-it-s-why-you-feel-awful-de285d542f4c). Aug 17, 2020. <https://elemental.medium.com/your-surge-capacity-is-depleted-it-s-why-you-feel-awful-de285d542f4c>

In the early days of the shut-down, I was so alert and responsive. I was operating at crisis-management speed, focusing on the Temple, my family and problem-solving – and everything was critical!... And then, after about four months, I slowed down...Way down. I couldn't and didn't want to make decisions, I fought a feeling of impatience with everybody around me and found it hard to maintain the personal rituals which have provided much comfort in my life. I felt spent. My surge capacity had run dry – but luckily, I was in a position to know that I was not alone...That helped.

At a recent healing service for concerned parents of kids headed back to school, one of the participants said she was stunned to learn that others were dealing with the same things she was and she felt totally validated. **[show slide]** This was the list of challenges created by Sinai members like you. The bigger the word, the greater the number of people who felt it. The explicit losses (like loved ones and jobs) and the ambiguous losses³ (like gatherings for Rosh Hashanah or graduations) plus the foreboding sense that we have a *long* way to go doesn't make it any easier. So, perhaps it is worth looking to a people who has some measure of experience with extended crises.

I wish it weren't true, but it seems that *our* Jewish people has known almost countless examples of acute and extended stressful situations. Every expulsion (and I can count at least 42 of them since the sixth century BCE⁴) every Inquisition, every pogrom, the holocaust, you name it and there is a decent chance that we have suffered through it!

The period of Inquisitorial Spain was a dark one for many reasons but in particular one parallel to today. In addition to the horrors of the persecutions, each Jew suspected his neighbor of being his accuser. The church, actively searching out hidden Jews, took accusations anonymously and without verification. The Jew dragged before the inquisitor had no way of knowing who had named him.⁵ This created suspicion and extreme caution around everybody in one's life. Like the virus, we rarely know who has it and who might transmit it and therefore,

³ Boss, Pauline, PhD.

⁴ Article: Expulsions and exoduses of Jews. Sept 8, 2020.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Expulsions_and_exoduses_of_Jews

⁵ Wilson, Suzanne, research fellow at the University of Lancashire. The Conversation.

<https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-aftermath-how-do-communities-recover-from-trauma-134967>

every interaction begins on the assumption that this person could be a threat to my health and the health of those I love – leading to customers in the grocery giving each other wide berths, families foregoing the gatherings that are so important and our havens of emotional and spiritual safety shutting their physical doors – like houses of worship! We’ve got experience and thankfully, our tradition long ago created responses to the most challenging of conditions. So now, too, we already have highly effective Jewish teachings to help us through this newest crisis.

The first is gratitude practice. New research is expanding our understanding that feeling grateful has positive impacts on your brain’s chemistry and function.⁶ But we Jews have known this for a long time. Waking up each morning with the first words, “*Modeh Ani* – Thank you God, for giving me another day to live,” has started us out on the right foot for centuries. We follow that closely with a litany of blessings for the everyday miracles – designed to ensure our attention remains in that space of gratitude and finally there is an instruction to try to find reason to utter 100 blessings each day. All these techniques remind us how lucky we are, even in the midst of challenging circumstances.

The second is acceptance of the reality. Denial does us no good and so acceptance of this situation as it is, right now, is essential. We can complain about how we got here and the handling of our response and we can fret about where we're going - and we should! But, those are the past and the future. Right now, it is like this. Jewish theologian, Jay Michaelson encourages us to remind ourselves that “the world is not as it should be, but as it must be.”⁷ Another Jewish response comes from the Talmud when we read “*gam zeh ya’avur* - this too shall pass.” It's a wonderful tool to remind ourselves that all is temporary - the good and the bad, the ugly and the unbelievable.

Nobody likes a complainer – but it is really helpful to the individual in maintaining your sense of self in the midst of disorienting conditions. So, the piece of third Jewish wisdom is to tell your story – having a witness reassures us that we matter and that what we’re feeling is

⁶ Brown, Joshua & Wong, Joel. *How Gratitude Changes You and Your Brain*.

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_gratitude_changes_you_and_your_brain

⁷ Michaelson, Jay, PhD. *Non-Dual Judaism. All is God*.

real. It was our advice to the Dalai Lama who asked a delegation of rabbis how the Tibetan Buddhists could hope to survive desperate circumstances. After all, we are surviving a 2000-year exile from our land and the Tibetans have just begun, what might be, a lengthy exile from theirs. Exile and expulsion from one's place are forms of isolation from where we wish to be. So, rather than just whining, gather your thoughts and put them down systematically in a journal (like your personal Haggadah) or find a compassionate partner to receive them - It helps.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, is maintaining your connection to others. Humans are social creatures from our earliest evolutionary forms. We are not meant to live in quarantine, hence the statement in Genesis, "לֹא-טוֹב הָיְתָה הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ - It is not good for man to be alone⁸". And when we *are* forced to be...we suffer...ever hear of solitary confinement? This is on that spectrum. Jewish community has always been built on structures designed to emphasize our interconnectedness teaching, "*Al tifrosh min hatzibur*⁹ - Don't separate yourself from the community." The minyan, community ritual events and lifecycle markers are all mechanisms to bring us together. We are a creative people – we have learned to rapidly develop solutions to answer the needs of our lives and it is showing now more than ever.

Speaking of which, and for a little *good* news, on Monday morning, we will be announcing the launch of another 15 Sinai circles. 15 groups of people who want *you* to join them to share common affinities, interests and goals. 15 opportunities to deepen your relationships with others while pursuing the goals you already have. 15 new examples of the ways in which Sinai can be a meaningful part of your life.

This matters because, as Tim Denning, a writer currently living through the midst of Australia's 2nd-wave lockdown wrote, "the first shutdown required us to have hope. The second one requires us to have faith in humanity."¹⁰ It is easy enough to laugh at the idea of faith in humanity but in all seriousness we're only going to get through this by relying on the people all around you – the ones you cannot control. Cantor Micah always reminds me of the

⁸ Genesis 2:18

⁹ Pirke Avot, 2:5.

¹⁰ <https://elemental.medium.com/what-its-like-to-go-into-lockdown-for-the-second-time-97f4d3bcdb5b>

instruction from the flight attendants in the case of an emergency: put on *your* oxygen mask first and then turn to assist those around you. Taking care of yourself through this period is, perhaps, one of the greatest contributions you can make to the common good. So, put on your mask, take a few deep breathes, turn to help those around you and let's make it a much better new year.

Shanah Tovah.