

Vayeitze 5781

Our province is in the midst of a coronavirus wave that in many ways is worse than the first wave in the spring. In the spring, the 7-day average for new cases never topped 1,000. With the exception of a short-lived dip the last week of October, we've been over 1,000 new cases a day since October 3. Montreal is in a red zone.

At the Maimonides Geriatric Centre COVID is spiraling out of control. 40 residents and 22 staff have tested positive since the start of the second wave. So many staff members are out sick with the virus or in isolation that they don't have enough staff to take care of the residents. Family members are donning full protective gear including gown, gloves, mask, and face shield to voluntarily help take care of their loved ones. One man for the first time in his life found himself helping his 92-year-old mother use the bathroom.

The provincial government has responded to the increase in cases with a second lockdown. Which we're all getting pretty tired of.

One of the things that makes the current lockdown hard to take is how incoherent the policies of the provincial government have been since we emerged from the first lockdown in the spring. Bars and restaurants were allowed to open, but they had to stop selling alcohol at midnight. What's the health rationale behind that? Schools are known as a vector for spreading the disease, yet when the province ordered schools to reopen not much was done to figure out how to do that in a safe way.

The latest incoherent policy not grounded in health science is Legault's decision to allow families to have a four-day window when they could gather for Christmas meals, providing the participants quarantined before and after. Yet Jews are not being given any similar kind of dispensation to allow us to gather during Chanukah. Why shouldn't we be given equal treatment?

How should we respond to this unequal treatment?

At the beginning of this week's Torah portion, Vayetzei, Jacob sent out for Haran, fleeing his brother Esau's anger over a stolen blessing, and going in

search of a wife. He stops for the night, uses a stone for a pillow, and has a dream of a stairway, set in the ground with its top reaching the sky. Angels of God were going up and down the ladder.

The midrash tells us that the reason there are angels first going up – which seems backwards, don't angels live in heaven? – is that Jacob was accompanied on his journey by guardian angels, and as he was near the border, the angels who were with him in the land of Israel were leaving, and they were being replaced by the angels coming down the ladder who were the angels that would accompany Jacob on his journey outside the Promised Land.

God gets God's work done through people. The guardian angels we have right now as we go through a pandemic are the doctors and health care workers who are working hard to keep us all safe.

Unfortunately, until we have been vaccinated, keeping us all safe means staying at home and avoiding contact with anyone not in your immediate household.

The Jewish tradition teaches *pikuah nefesh docheh et hakol*, saving lives overrules every other commandment. The rabbis of the Talmud only made three exceptions: you should sacrifice yourself rather than kill someone else, engage in sexual immorality, or engage in public idol worship, denying God.

We have no religious obligation or commandment to have a Chanukah party. And even if we did, during the time of a pandemic, the principle of *pikuah nefesh* would tell us to set it aside in order to keep ourselves healthy and safe.

The Canadian health authority has a clear message on its website: the safest way to celebrate or enjoy the holidays is with members of your immediate household. Meaning anyone who shares your living space, and no one else.

News outlets across America are warning our neighbors to the south to learn a lesson from Canada. Newspaper articles from Seattle to Washington DC ask, "Will the US heed Canada's Thanksgiving lesson?" The articles point to how a spike in COVID cases after families gathered for Thanksgiving meals in October could be a predictor for what will happen after the American

Thanksgiving, celebrated just a few days ago. A few superspreader events in Canada, where over a dozen people became sick after sharing a Thanksgiving meal, are offered as a cautionary tale.

Here in Canada, we should be asking whether we are heeding our own Thanksgiving lesson.

Doctors give the province's plan for allowing Christmas gatherings mixed reviews. Some say, "well people are going to gather anyway, better they have some guidelines to try and make it a little bit safer." Dr. Andrew Morris, a professor of medicine at the University of Toronto said about the plan, "To me, it sends confusing messaging to people. I'm not sure it's going to make people less likely to gather before that date or after."

We know that COVID can have an incubation period longer than 7 days. We know that people who have no symptoms can be infected and can be very effective transmitters of the disease. We know that being indoors, not wearing a mask, and longer exposure time all make it likelier to spread the disease – and those are all features of an indoor family gathering over a leisurely holiday meal.

We also know that many, many people will hear the part about "it's OK to have Christmas dinner with your extended family," but they won't pay much attention to the part about quarantining.

Allowing family gatherings for Christmas not only endangers those attending those gatherings, it endangers all of us. The more people in the community who are infected, the likelier it is that people we come into contact with, whether at the grocery store or the doctor's office, may also be infected.

People who claim that they should be able to go gatherings if they want to because they are only endangering themselves, fail to see how we're all in this together. It's like the guy on a wooden boat who pulls out a drill and starts drilling a hole under his seat. Other passengers yell at him, "what do you think you're doing?" He replies, "what does it matter to you, it's only under my seat."

We're all tired of the lockdowns and COVID restrictions. We all long to spend time with our loved ones, to see our children, grandchildren, siblings, nephews, nieces, and friends.

This isn't the time to give up. There's a lot of good news. There are three vaccines that have been proven to be effective in large scale clinical trials. Within a few months large scale vaccination efforts will be under way.

We have guardian angels. They are the medical professionals studying COVID, treating people who have been infected, developing vaccines. Our community has a very high percentage of people in a high-risk group, either because of preexisting health conditions or because of being over the age of 65. Lobbying to allow family gatherings is not going to protect the vulnerable members of our community.

The question we should be asking is not "why don't Jews get the same freedom to have a family gathering for the holidays that Christians have?" The question we should be asking is, "Why is the government condoning anyone getting together indoors, without masks, at a time when the virus is spreading rapidly throughout the community?"