

Choosing to Survive and Thrive After COVID 19

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The past year and a half, since March of 2020, we have lived in a world fraught with uncertainties, challenges and even dangers. During this time, this world and its woes have impacted us and, in some ways changed us, as never before.

COVID 19 has dominated our lives for over a year and a half. This virus has been responsible for over a million deaths worldwide. It has caused excruciating pain for the families who have lost loved ones. And even for those who have recovered, the pain caused by this virus endures.

Because of COVID 19, our country, on several occasions, has been shut down and boarded up. Places where people might have interacted, places we shop, places we go to watch sporting events and, of course places we worship have been rendered as toxic locations. The economic hardships of the pandemic have certainly been felt by many. But the damage caused by COVID goes far beyond these objective and measurable examples.

Suffice to say, the challenges we have endured have been unprecedented, relentless, and exhausting. This is where we are... in part. Yet tonight I want to focus on the other part of this year. We, as a synagogue community, have endured all of it and emerged, I believe, stronger, wiser and more unified than ever before. On this holy night of Kol Nidre, I want to speak about the year gone by, not in terms of its challenges but in terms of what we have learned from it, how we have responded to it and how we have grown because of it.

In this context, I return to the story of creation. After Adam had been created, he had the entire world before him. He had whatever food, care and protection he might need. And yet, we are told, something was not right. Despite the abundance of food and resources, Adam recognized early on, that the entire world cannot replace the need for companionship.

Lo tov he'ot adam livado / it is not good to be alone.

Adam realized that the loneliness he felt was not caused by the lack of population. It made no difference whether or not there were others populating this new world. Rather, he realized that he had no one to share his life with, no one to cooperate with, argue with, learn with, fight with and, most importantly and most frequently, be wrong with and apologize to. His was an existential loneliness:

My plate is full, he may have said, but my heart is empty.

Alienation and isolation will do that: make one feel emotionally and cosmically, alone. This is what our Sages meant when they lamented over the passing of a colleague:

"O chavruta, o mittuta / Either companionship or death!

Life loses meaning and value without companionship. This realization has been a hallmark of COVID 19.

Wearing masks and distancing ourselves physically has been relatively easy. The mandated quarantining and the resulting isolation have kept us safer, to be sure. But the safety of isolation has come at a price. Isolation was an unavoidable by-product of the pandemic, and this isolation has been difficult to bear, to say the least. I do not think it overly dramatic to suggest that among the most serious, ongoing side-effects of COVID 19 has been the sense of isolation we have experienced.

In response to this mandate to isolate, we, as a synagogue community, worked instinctively and tirelessly, to address that isolation, to reach out and restore proximity in every way but physically. We have doubled-down, as it were, to confront the emotional impact of COVID by refusing to accept alienation as a necessary by-product of the disease. A community is never required to accept the alienation of its members. We simply said, "No".

The historian of religion, Jarislav Pelikan, commenting on affiliation to religious organizations, wrote the following:

We have a choice: to be conscious participants or unconscious victims.

We have chosen the former. We now see that, even in the midst of the pandemic, we had choices of how to respond, both individually and institutionally. The pandemic which, we hope is on the way toward extinction, has given us the opportunity to choose what religion and what affiliation with our synagogue means to us. And, reflecting on this last year, we have chosen to participate and connect more consciously, positively, and productively with the synagogue. We have chosen consciously, positively, and productively to connect with each other, more closely and more directly than ever before.

That connection between us, as a community, began with a word, previously nowhere to be found in our daily lexicons of parlance. Now, however, it is hard to imagine going for more than a day or so without hearing the word: Zoom.

As the safety restrictions, imposed because of the Pandemic became more stringent, I made, what I considered to be, an easy decision. We began using Zoom. Zoom for meetings, Zoom for classes, and Zoom for our services. From the perspective of Jewish Law, this decision is not without its complexities, specifically, when it comes to utilizing our computers and Zoom technology on Shabbat.

The use of electronic devices is generally frowned upon for use on Shabbat. But when I weighed the restrictions of Shabbat observance and importance of facilitating connections between one another, understanding the pain of isolation which so many carried, that the need to remain connected, in my estimation, outweighed the requirement to forgo the use of electronic devices on Shabbat. And, although many of my colleagues might not agree, our experiences this year have confirmed that, for our congregation, this decision has been an integral, indispensable and unmistakable part of our meaningful and positive response to the COVID virus.

It has been through the use of Zoom, over the past year, that we have orchestrated meetings, presented lectures and aired our Shabbat services. And you have responded. You did not leave us. On the contrary, you and we created programs and projects which would not only be popular but would be presented at the level of quality and content to which we have become accustomed.

Whether in Shabbat Services, Sisterhood meetings, lectures, or scholars-in-residence, we, as a synagogue community, tried to address our sense of alienation from each other, working each day to find a novel way to reach out and feel close in every way but physically. As much as we learned from the classes we attended on Zoom, no matter the value of a synagogue Board of Directors' meeting, a Sisterhood or Men's Club event, that value was multiplied by the fact that we were able to connect with one another in the midst of the pandemic, we were able to engage one another and create a meaningful and powerful way to help each other. It remained our focus and mission, throughout the pandemic's year and a half, to reach out to each other and replace the feelings of isolation with feelings of being part of a vibrant and caring community.

This technology also opened doors which we never realized had been closed in the first place. Among the most difficult situations we faced were the deaths in the families of our members. How could we be there to help set up the home for shiva? How could we respond to a family's requests for help? How could we orchestrate our services and offer comfort? I confess that I was doubtful that we would be able to serve our families properly in this way. I was mistaken. In fact, very much mistaken.

I cannot say that shiva during the pandemic was the same as shiva before the pandemic. The personal contact could not and cannot be replaced. But we created beautiful and, in many ways, more meaningful shivas for you. During the pandemic, thanks to Zoom technology, hundreds of friends and family members, at times, from all over the world, could join and comfort the mourners virtually. On numerous occasions, screen after screen was filled with the faces and the virtual presence of so many who would have otherwise not been able to attend. Touching memories, humorous stories and wonderful recollections might never have been heard, and might never have been known, had we not had Zoom. In moments when I thought we might fall short, once again, we rose to the demands of the moment with solutions which were able to uplift and comfort.

In addition to new technology, we relied on existing tools. We forgot, for example, about the power of the telephone. Not that we forgot how to use the telephone, but we forgot that, in

addition to the convenience of speaking to anyone anywhere in the world, anywhere at any time, the telephone can be a lifeline to connect with those who at times, such as during the pandemic, feel disconnected from their community. And so, we began calling. Board Members and office staff used free moments to contact, on several occasions, each of our members for no reason other than to say,

Hello. We are here and you are not alone.

And here I mention the efforts of Cantor Rosner. Those who are with us tonight may already know what I am going to say because you have been touched by the Hazzan's kindness and compassion. As the restrictions of the pandemic became mandated, and we became confined to our homes, the comfort and rhythm of our services could not be maintained. This became difficult, particularly for those who attend services as they observed the *yahrzeits* of their loved ones. And so, for each *yahrzeit*, for each member of our community, the Hazzan called, spoke and chanted the *El Maleh Rachamim*, the Memorial Prayer. This not only created a way for *yahrzeits* to be marked. This became, for many, among the most meaningful and touching Jewish moments they could recalled. Several spoke with me or wrote to tell me that listening to the Cantor chant those prayers in memory of their parents or other relatives were among the most meaningful Jewish moments of their lives.

And with all of this, we created additional opportunities for connections between you and our synagogue. With a caring a compassionate heart as his motivation, coupled with his logistic wizardry of our Executive Director (the ever-popular and always smiling), Ken Krivitzky, with the creativity and wisdom of Lisa Richman, our Director of Education, and the love and energetic Hallie Chandler, Director of Community Engagement, who provided the spark needed to ignite us all, we orchestrated numerous outdoor programs and drive-byes throughout the year. From birthdays and "welcome homes", from Sukkot to Hanukkah, from The 4th of July to outdoor movie night, we invited you to join us in person in ways that were safe, fun and meaningful.

I mention at this point, as well, our procedures and safety measures instituted, orchestrated with the guidance and approval of our congregational "medical staff". We are blessed with numerous doctors, including quite a few Infectious Disease specialists, as we like to say, "on

staff” at TBHBE. Their advice and support have given us a great deal of confidence and assurance that we were as safe as an institution could be, and that our ECC children and staff were always protected.

With a steady hand and watchful eye, Judith Scarani, our ECC Director, integrated the safety and medical advice into our program. As a result, we are the only pre-School in our area that did not close, for even a day, during the pandemic. We needed to remain together, and that is what we did.

We are extremely proud that, despite the added financial burdens and new situations we faced, we continued, throughout, to pay our staff. No one was furloughed and all were cared for. That is a particular source of pride.

Throughout this pandemic, at no time have we taken an “every person for themselves” attitude. On the contrary, there has been not a single moment in which we did not ask ourselves, “What more can we do? How better can we serve? What kindness and gesture can we extend to each other?” Time and again, we, professionals and you, our members, answered those questions.

One member, Shelly Wolfe, who has a love for spoken Hebrew, refused to allow her weekly sessions to stop. Without missing a beat, those classes moved to the internet and to Zoom. And they continue to this day.

Adena Potok and Mindy Oppenheimer shared their love of Pirke Avot, Mishle /Proverbs, and other favorite texts, continuing to teach online every week, touching their students with the warmth and beauty of these texts, touching their students, each in their own way, with their own warmth and joy.

Another member, Elisheva Apple, loves baking challah. She wanted to begin a modest program of baking one or two challot with Lori and delivering them to members who might appreciate them. With the help of her parents, those challot were delivered. And those challot were an inspiration for others. We now have many of our members baking and delivering Challot each week. If you want to join in this effort, contact Ken.

After recovering, for the most part, from her own bout of COVID 19, Lori also reached out to a few people and came up with the idea of a weekly women's chat group. Every Friday morning at 9:00 you can join the group of about 20 women who log on through a Zoom link to have an informal conversation followed by a discussion of the *parasha* of the week. You'll find that Zoom link every week in our "This Week" emails which you all receive every week.

As the pandemic is, hopefully, leaving us sooner rather than later, we emerge better and stronger than before. We have learned a tremendous amount. We have innovated and created new programs and modes of working. We have demonstrated without hesitation and ambiguity, that at Temple Beth Hillel – Beth El, our focus, our efforts and our mission all came together with strength, with warmth and with kindness.

At the other end of this long day, at the end of the *Neilah* service there is a passage which seems particularly relevant this year. There we read the following words:

Ata noten yad la posh'im, v'yemincha p'shuta likabale shavim / God extends His hand, so to those who sin, His right hand to those who return.

Why does God extend his hand? How is God, extending God's hand, connected to our asking for forgiveness and for atoning for our sins, in the Confessional Prayers of Yom Kippur, where these words are placed?

Although there is no reference here to Yom Kippur explicitly, the image of God extending his hand to us (anthropomorphism aside) is an image more powerful than that any other I can think of. Extending a hand, you see, is not specifically about forgiveness. Rather, it is an act which means

I have not overlooked you. If you have fallen, allow me to help raise you up. If you can stand, allow me to stand with you.

And mostly it means:

You matter to me.

What message could be more important, or timelier, than that which is conveyed by an extended hand? It is a message of caring, an image which has inspired us over the past year and a half. And our response has been both simple and profound: if we reach out to each other, if we can extend our hands and hearts, you will know that, in this congregation, in this community, you matter.

We are not yet at a point at which we can proclaim, “Mission Accomplished”. It remains my fervent prayer that that moment is not far off. But, in the meantime, we shall continue to reach out to you. We look forward to continuing our work together. And we remain excited and optimistic about the future.

As we look to the future, there is much that remains uncertain. But what is not uncertain is that, at our core as a synagogue, is a caring community. What is certain, for the new year and beyond, is that, here you matter. And in a world beset with uncertainty, it is good to have this certainty, as we move forward, cautiously, into the future.

May this certainty be sealed in the New Year and beyond for us all.
