

The Longing To Be Near

This is the third Shabbat that we are experiencing under the emergency conditions of the COVID-19 crisis. Two weeks ago, we were able to come together with the provision that we spread out sufficiently, so we met in the Zwerin Sanctuary on Erev Shabbat and spread out to the best of our ability. We did the same the next day during our Shabbat morning service in the Abrahams Family Chapel. But then last week, it was determined that it simply was not safe for us to have anyone join us in the building, so besides the clergy, we'd only have a staff member or two present to help with the Zoom and Facebook broadcast of the services.

We are continuing that policy until the CDC and other health authorities are absolutely convinced that it is once again safe for us to be together. By now, every family has instituted its own rules of isolation. Indeed, the entire state of Colorado and much of the nation have also declared a moratorium on non-emergency gatherings. Sadly, the collateral damage has been crushing. In addition to losing our freedom of movement, some have lost jobs; businesses have gone bankrupt or are teetering on the edge. We have had to postpone weddings and B'nei Mitzvah services and celebrations. Even funerals have been reduced to a gathering of immediate family at the gravesite. Just today, I paid a *shiva* call to honor the memory of one of Temple Sinai's founding members, Manny Dworkin. What would have been a large celebration of a good man who shared his tremendous musical talents and friendship with us and our Sinai choir for many years was instead kept to a private burial and an online Zoom *shiva* gathering.

It was sweet. It was meaningful. But it was not enough. It wasn't what we wanted. We wanted to be near.

It's not even possible to bring comfort to those in the hospital because only select medical personnel are allowed in. So today, instead of being with a Temple Sinai member, a beloved father and husband who is suffering terribly from COVID-19, we set up a Zoom healing service for the family. It was sweet. It was meaningful. But it was not enough. It wasn't what we wanted. We wanted to be near.

In a week and a half, on *Erev Pesach*, instead of being with loving family and friends, we'll be in small groups of immediate family. Indeed, most of our family from out of town won't be able to join us for the Passover Seder because of travel restrictions and of the very real concern that we might unwittingly expose others to this deadly virus. To help ease the disappointment of not being able to crowd together around a table laden with the symbols, foods and *Haggadot*, Susan and I will set up a Webinar Passover Seder. Every Temple Sinai member will be welcomed to login. The camera will unite all of us and, if the technology holds up, we'll share from the same *Haggadah*, reading and singing and sharing the story of our people's redemption from slavery and oppression. It will be sweet. It will be meaningful. But it will not be enough. It is not what we want. We want to be near.

This week's Torah portion, *Vayikra*, begins the Book of Leviticus. It details the laws of sacrifices and the ritual offerings made by our ancestors. This is how it begins:

א וַיִּקְרָא אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֵלָיו מֵאֵהָל מוֹעֵד לֵאמֹר:

ב דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם אָדָם כִּי־יִקְרִיב מִכֶּם קָרְבָן לַיהוָה

¹Adonai called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying:

² Speak to the Israelite people, and say to them: When any of you presents an offering (a *Korban*) to Adonai....

The word for sacrifice or offering is קָרְבָן (*korban*), meaning “that which is brought near.”

At the very heart of our ancient worship and our modern prayer services is the instruction to come near. And while our ancestors gathered at the Temple in Jerusalem and approached God with offerings from their flocks, herds, and the produce of their fields and orchards, we come together in our modern Temples and synagogues to approach God with *avodah sh'balev*, the offering of our hearts and souls. With prayers and songs we come near to God. And just like our ancestors, a major part of that worship experience is coming near to one another. Together we feel the warm embrace of old friends, we make new friends, and we affirm bonds of faith and common concern. We lift each other up with a collective energy, a powerful current of human emotion, hope and spirit that elevates the community, reminding all that we are greater together; that we are much more than the mere sum of our parts; and that the family of the Children of Israel has a sacred meaning and purpose; a calling to be what the prophet Isaiah described again and again as an *or l'goyim*, a *light to the nations*. That's what makes this current state of separation such an emotional and spiritual blow. It strikes at the core of our strength. We want to come near. We want to fulfill the *mitzvah*, the sacred duty to bring a *korban*, to approach God, to be near God along with all our family and friends and yet, we are now forbidden to come near. Therefore, we search for alternative ways to come near, to approach God. Yes, by Livestreaming services. Yes,

through Zoom and Facebook and webinars. These are our creative ways to keep the light shining.

As a light to the nations, it has been our task to remind all people, regardless of faith or nation, that all humanity are brothers and sisters; we all are children of God. It has been the calling of the Jewish people to demonstrate to the world that even in the darkest of times there is always the light of hope. Indeed, no family on earth has transcended the sweep of time and history like the Jewish people. We have survived slavery. We have survived brutal sieges. We have survived the destruction of our Temple and exile from our homeland, Israel. We have survived the murderous crusades and pogroms. We have survived the Inquisition. We have survived the Nazis and the Holocaust. And after every test, after every horrific experience, we stood firm: tenacious in our love of life and the dream that we must continue building and healing and repairing this world.

And now, for ourselves and for our neighbors, let us keep shining that light of hope. Yes, we need to continue shining without coming near. We need to continue shining without coming together. It is not easy...but then again, this isn't the first time we have had to find a creative way to keep the hope alive.

In that spirit, I want to share with you a moving poem that was written by Lynn Ungar and published in the New York Times. It's called "Pandemic."

What if you thought of it
as the Jews consider the Sabbath --

the most sacred of times?
Cease from travel.
Cease from buying and selling.
Give up, just for now,
on trying to make the world
different than it is.
Sing. Pray. Touch only those
to whom you commit your life.
Center down.

And when your body has become still,
reach out with your heart.
Know that we are connected
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.
(You could hardly deny it now.)
Know that our lives
are in one another's hands.
(Surely, that has come clear.)
Do not reach out your hands.
Reach out your heart.
Reach out your words.
Reach out all the tendrils
of compassion that move, invisibly,
where we cannot touch.

Promise this world your love—
for better or for worse,
in sickness and in health,
so long as we all shall live.