

WISDOM IN THE TIME OF CORONA: REFLECTIONS FOR 5781

WISDOM IN THE TIME OF CORONA: REFLECTIONS FOR 5781

As we prepare to celebrate the High Holidays, we're delighted to share an anthology of teachings given at our virtual UJA Community Pre-Shabbat Gatherings. We're grateful to all of the wonderful leaders who participated in this series from March to July, which brought teachers and listeners of all denominations and backgrounds to learn together.

Here you'll find a sampling of the beautiful Torah and lessons that were shared over these past few months, covering an array of ideas. We hope you find meaning in the essays that follow, and that they continue to inspire hope, growth, and reflection during this time.

As Rabbi Creditor movingly articulated at one of our pre-Shabbat gatherings: "We've gained lessons in the preciousness of unity, the vitality of keeping an open imagination so that we can come together as a community again. May we be blessed as we take these steps to learn well from each other, and maybe to record what we are learning so that we can move forward having internalized these lessons and pass them on to generations to come."

You can view recordings of each week's program featuring these and additional teachers on UJA's Facebook page.

Shanah tovah.



CONTENTS

FINDING MEANING

<i>Clocks and Clouds: Navigating Uncertainty</i> by Dr. Erica Brown	1
<i>Skin as a Divider and a Connector</i> by Rabbi Jeremy Kalmanofsky	2
<i>Give me Yavne: Judaism in Times of Destruction</i> by Rabbi Joy Levitt	3
<i>Koach and Gevurah: Strength and Resilience</i> by Rabbi Shaul Robinson.....	4
<i>Destruction and Rebuilding</i> by Rabbi Ethan Tucker.....	5
<i>A Time for Preservation, or Reimagining?</i> by Rabbi Gordon Tucker.....	6

INTROSPECTION AND REFLECTION

<i>On the Other Side of the Door</i> by Rabbi Menachem Creditor	9
<i>To Be Without Elbows</i> by Rabbi Josh Davidson.....	10
<i>People of the Door: Making the In-Between Holy</i> by Rabbi David Ingber.....	11
<i>Tradition, Evolution, Love, and Dignity</i> by Rabbi Amichai Lau-Levie	12
<i>Finding Our Voices by Framing Our Places</i> by Rabbi Isaiah Rothstein.....	13
<i>A Lesson for the Jewish Community: Reconciling Multiple Truths</i>	14
by Dr. Rivka Press Schwartz	
<i>It's in Our Hands</i> by Rabbi Chaim Steinmetz.....	16

COMMUNITY

<i>Do You See Me? Zoom and Kiddush Hashem</i> by Dr. Mijal Bitton.....	18
<i>Make Sure a Crowd Seeks Your Welfare</i> by Rabbi Angela Buchdahl	19
<i>Uphill Climb</i> by Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove	20
<i>Sharing Crowns of Holiness</i> by Rabbi Steven Exler	21
<i>Good Habits for a More Connected Community</i> by Eric Goldstein.....	22
<i>Community Ties: Bound Together Within the Eruv</i> by Rabbi Rick Jacobs.....	24
<i>Inherent Interconnectedness</i> by Rabbi Rachel Timoner	26



FINDING MEANING

CLOCKS AND CLOUDS: NAVIGATING UNCERTAINTY

Dr. Erica Brown, Mayberg Center for Jewish Education and Leadership,
The George Washington University

Karl Popper, the great philosopher of science, teaches the difference between two types of problems.

“To understand a clock, you need only to take it apart. It is mechanical; you could remove each small part and study it ... by studying the pieces you can understand how it works. In fact, it is predictable by design. If it breaks, you can find the problem and fix it.” **Clock problems are easily fixable; there is an organized structure, an established pattern, and all you have to do is fit the pieces in place.**

“Cloud type problems, on the other hand, are complex and dynamic. You cannot take apart a cloud the same way you can take apart a clock. Clouds are unpredictable and constantly changing. Since you cannot break it down and look at each piece, you have to study it as a whole ... You have to look beyond the cloud to understand the weather patterns [and other] factors that created the clouds in the first place.”

“In a time of uncertainty, we should be led by that which anchors us.”

Right now, we're in uncharted territory, battling our way through a global pandemic. It's a “cloud” problem, not an easy challenge to break down into parts and solve. The pandemic and its aftermath are something we are going to be struggling with for a long time. Perhaps we can learn from our ancestors and leadership in the desert — the Jews wandering in the desert in many ways represents the situation we find ourselves in now.

In the desert, Moses asks his brother-in-law Hobab to accompany the Jewish people to Israel. There isn't a clear reason why; perhaps it's the general joy and generosity of the moment that spurs Moses to invite him. Hobab replies that he won't go; he will return to his own land. But Moses asks him again to come, and we begin to understand there is a reason behind the request. Moses tells Hobab that he wants him to come because *“al kein yadata chanoteinu bamidbar”* — Hobab knows how to camp in the wilderness. Unlike Moses, who thrives in an orderly world, Hobab is experienced in the ways of the wilderness; he knows how to thrive in uncertainty — to address cloud problems — and Moses wants him to serve as a guide.

However, Hobab refuses to guide the Israelites through the wilderness, and **Moses ultimately sends the Ark of the Covenant in front to lead them through the desert. Not a person, but the Ark of the Covenant, which holds our tablets — our law, our structure, our compass.** Moses realized that in a time of uncertainty, we should be led by that which anchors us. That which endures, which traveled with us to the promised land and turned into a magnificent Temple. That which, years later, turned into study halls and synagogues. The enduring impact of the Ark itself has turned into the center of our Jewish life.

Today, we again find ourselves in a time of overwhelming uncertainty. But while our synagogues and communal spaces were shuttered, we once again turned to that which anchors us. We moved our prayers and communal gatherings online. We found new ways to connect to Judaism and to each other. **As we grapple with this enormous cloud problem, we must count on clear eyes and innovation, grounded in the tradition we love, to guide the way and lead us through.**

SKIN AS A DIVIDER AND A CONNECTOR

Rabbi Jeremy Kalmanofsky, Ansche Chesed

“I look forward to a day when the lights within us are again able to shine through our skin.”

I’ve been thinking about skin and the way it can work socially and religiously, positively and negatively. **We Americans understand more than most societies how skin can divide people.** We know the unique history of how Americans have dealt with people who look a certain way and the grim, terrifying legacy of racism. If you have a certain color skin, other people will hate you, and darker skin has this pernicious and pervasive and persistent association with economic discrimination.

In this Covid moment, when we’re frightened for so many of our loved ones, it’s impossible not to note that skin also correlates with how people are experiencing this plague. One in eight Americans are African-American, yet one in four Covid cases are in the African-American community, and 38% of Covid deaths are in the African-American community. It’s impossible for us not to recognize that skin still affects and determines often how we experience things, even this very universal human plague. In his song “American Skin,” written in 1999 after the killing of Amadou Diallo, Bruce Springsteen reminds us that “it ain’t no secret ... you can get killed just for living in your American skin.” The song includes a heartbreaking story of a mom begging her son to “promise Mama” that if stopped by the police, he would “always be polite and ... keep [his] hands in sight.” In this Black Lives Matter era, it’s a vivid and resonant image.

But skin doesn’t only have to be a divider; it’s also permeable — a connector. Think of all the ways that our skin enables us to take something in and let something out.

When Adam and Eve sin in the garden of Eden, God sends them off into the world, and God makes for them *kutnot ’or*, skins of leather, and garbs them. *’Or*, the Hebrew word for “leather,” is spelled differently but sounds incredibly close to the word *ohr*, the Hebrew word for “light.” **A midrash imagines that in an original Torah, it wasn’t written that God gave them clothes of leather, ’or with the letter ayin. It was written that God gave them coats of ohr with an alef — light. God garbed the original human beings in bodies that were luminous, that let all their inner light shine out.** According to the teachings of kabbalah, in this world, our bodies grew denser and more divided. Then the light, the *ohr* with an *alef*, disappeared behind the *’or* with an *ayin*, the coats of leather that we wear nowadays.

But a different era is coming when our skins, *’or* with an *ayin*, will turn back into our skins of *ohr* with an *alef*. R. Shlomo Halevi Alkabetz, who wrote the poem “Lecha Dodi,” evokes this image in the line *hit’oreri ki va orekh*, “arise for your light has arrived,” poetically suggesting that the era of wearing merely leather skin will come to an end, and our *’or* will become *ohr* again — that leather will become light again.

I look forward to a day when the lights within us are again able to shine through our skin.

GIVE ME YAVNE: JUDAISM IN TIMES OF DESTRUCTION

Rabbi Joy Levitt, Marlene Myerson JCC Manhattan

In the year 70 CE, the city of Jerusalem was on fire. The Romans were breaching the walls and the Jews within the walls were about to die. The zealots understood this and believed that with the Temple destroyed and religious life over, life was not worth living. Those zealots perished, most of them in the flames. Had that been the only response, the story of the Jewish people would have ended.

Another group fled the city for the south, establishing themselves on Masada with the hopes of staving off the Romans as long as possible. When it became clear that there was no chance of survival, they entered into a pact of mass suicide. Had that been the whole response, that too would have ended our story as a people.

A third group fled north to a town called Tzipori. They essentially assimilated into the surrounding culture and while they survived, their Judaism largely disappeared.

Three responses to crisis, all understandable: die fighting, die by one's own hand, or assimilate. Had these been the only responses to the destruction of the Temple, Judaism would have died altogether. But there was one small group that took a different course which made all the difference. Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, a prominent leader in Jerusalem, came up with a plan. He would pretend to die, and his students would bring him out of the city in a coffin. He was snuck out of the city and met with Vespasian, a Roman commander. He asked for a favor: "Give me Yavne and its sages." Recognizing that Jerusalem was lost, ben Zakkai understood that Judaism wasn't about a particular piece of real estate, but about the continuation of study and teaching.

The commander agreed, and this is why Judaism survived the cataclysmic loss of the Temple. I doubt that Yohanan ben Zakkai understood the full weight of this decision or its implications, and his deal was not without significant sacrifice. But Ben Zakkai was clear about the core of Judaism and what was possible within the realities of the time.

"In the face of so much disruption...we will once again have to focus on what really matters."

I think it's fair to say that circumstances in Jewish history have made us a pivoting people. We've developed a muscle not just for surviving, but for animating our values in new ways with what emerges from tragedy. So perhaps this is our moment. **In the face of so much loss, so much death, and so much disruption, we will once again have to focus on what really matters, what can be saved and what must be let go so that Judaism — its values and its path to help us be better, kinder, more generous humans — can thrive.**

Even though Yohanan ben Zakkai was forced to give up the most important Jewish place in the world, the Jewish literature, tradition, and culture that had developed over thousands of years persisted. So at the same time that we must grieve for all that has been lost, we must think big and be clear about what matters most. **We must find the strength within ourselves and in our communities to move forward.**

KOACH AND GEVURAH: STRENGTH AND RESILIENCE

Rabbi Shaul Robinson, Lincoln Square Synagogue

My teacher Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks defines Israel as the home of hope. Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, our lives and our horizons feel very limited. **For me, one of the most challenging things to face about this pandemic is that Israel closed its borders to anyone who isn't a citizen.** Of course it is the right decision for public health. But this is the first time in my lifetime I can't just get on a plane and be in Israel.

Every year, we commemorate Yom HaShoah and then celebrate Yom Ha'atzmaut just a week later, highlighting the resilience of the Jewish people and the transition from the Holocaust to Statehood. Somehow, this pattern seems to mirror the dichotomy of these days we're living in. **In this time of the pandemic, the Jewish people and the world at large will undoubtedly once again go *m'Shoah l'tkumah*, from the depths of despair to the miracle of rebirth.**

This pandemic is one of the first times humanity has confronted a shared enemy, where we're not each other's adversary. Countries around the world are working together to pull humanity through this time. In the future, when the story of how we as a human race climbed out of this abyss, among many other countries, the contribution of Israel will be found to have been pivotal. To get through this time though, we must be strong.

We have two words used for strong people: *koach* and *gevurah*, often translated as strength and heroism. Rabbi Sacks makes a distinction between those two terms. ***Koach* means to be physically strong. *Gevurah* means to be resilient.** Israel, its story of climbing from the catastrophe of the Holocaust and not merely

managing to stitch together a just-about-good-enough country, but to bring about the renewal of the Jewish people in every sense of the word, shows us the importance of *koach* and also of *gevurah*.

“In this time of the pandemic, the Jewish people and the world at large will undoubtedly once again go *m'Shoah l'tkumah*, from the depths of despair to the miracle of rebirth.”

Gevurah is the strength we need today. The *gevurah* to be resilient, to carry on dreaming. **No matter how difficult these times are, we need to continue sacrificing to keep ourselves and our neighbors safe.** And as we continue sacrificing, we are in fact demonstrating acts of hope, acts of faith, acts we have seen in our lifetime, in our parents' and grandparents' lifetimes — the promise that from the depths of despair can come the most incredible things that we truly need. We must never stop dreaming and never, ever stop hoping.

DESTRUCTION AND REBUILDING

Rabbi Ethan Tucker, Hadar

In his essay “*Churban U’Binyan*,” or “Destruction and Rebuilding,” Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel explores what ultimately makes humans different from other beings. He starts by citing a midrash in which God creates the human being and shows it off to the angels, and God says to the angels, “This creature’s wisdom is greater than yours.” Rav Finkel asks, how could that be so? **In what way are human beings better than angels?** He reflects on another midrashic tradition that talks about God in a very striking and surprising way, that at the dawn of time God did not create just the world we live in, but in fact, created many worlds. Many worlds that did not find favor in God’s eyes and were destroyed, until this world was created and pleased Him.

Mishlei, the book of Proverbs, says that God founded this world in wisdom. We can thereby deduce that those rough draft worlds that preceded this final draft were somehow part of the fundamental wisdom of what followed, and the creativity of finding favor in God’s eyes was also somehow spurred on by these earlier cycles of destruction.

“Most importantly, we are spurred to creativity by moments of crisis.”

Angels, at least as they have been classically understood, cannot go through cycles of destruction and rebuilding. In fact, angels cannot cope with destruction at all. They are extensions of God’s will. They follow orders and to the extent they grow in wisdom, they do so inexorably day after day. **Human beings on the other hand, are created in the image of God.**

This aspect of being created in the image of God, and what makes us greater than the angels, is that we, like God, experience loss. We, like God, have the freedom to choose what we will do. We, like God, can destroy. Most importantly, we are spurred to creativity by moments of crisis.

This theme of crisis and destruction ushering in the next great chapter of human and Jewish history is seen over and over throughout the Bible and throughout history. Perhaps the most powerful example is the *mishkan*, God’s house, which was built out of the moment of the golden calf. It is only after the corrupt idea of worshipping God through an idol finds its place in the tragic annals of our history that we are able to figure out how to use gold to build a house for God.

Without the destruction, there would be no rebuilding, no creating. This is true in all kinds of ways. The great Chicago fire in the late 19th century ushered in a total architectural revolution, and the buildings that we have today are only possible because of some that were destroyed. **Covid-19 brought on a moment of destruction of all kinds of institutions and frameworks. Somehow this destruction must lead us to a rebuilding.**

There is so much uncertainty in this moment. There are many worlds that are being destroyed, whether it’s the people we tragically lost or the ways we have assumed our lives and our communities are supposed to look. We hope many of those will return, but hopefully we will not just go back to exactly the way things were. There is something about this moment of destruction that offers the possibility of reimagining who we might be as individuals and as a community.

A TIME FOR PRESERVATION, OR REIMAGINING?

Rabbi Gordon Tucker, Temple Israel Center of White Plains (Emeritus),
Shalom Hartman Institute

The opening chapter of *Pirkei Avot* is neatly framed by two similar but very distinct sayings. The first is from Simeon the Righteous, who said, **“The world stands on three things: on Torah, the worship of God, and deeds of kindness.”** The very last piece in the chapter presents us with a different triad. Simeon ben Gamliel taught: **“The world is sustained by three things: justice, truth, and peace.”**

They sound similar. So why do we need both of these three-pronged lists? And is the difference between them significant?

The first distinction is that you have to be Jewish to appreciate what Simeon the Righteous says: he talks about Israel’s Torah and the worship of Israel’s God. You don’t have to be Jewish to appreciate Simeon ben Gamliel’s message — he talks about justice, truth, and peace.

“The world stands on three things: on Torah, the worship of God, and deeds of kindness.”

The late Robert Cover pointed out that Rabbi Joseph Karo suggests what the contrasting formulation might indicate. He explains that each sage taught in the context of his own

times. Simeon the Righteous was one of the last remaining members of the Great Assembly, facing the transition to the culture of post-biblical Judaism. He lived in a time of rebuilding, a time of vision. The culture he and his colleagues were creating was based on collective acceptance of the teachings of the recently canonized Torah and ritual practices that would inculcate these teachings, which were grounded in the worship of Israel’s God and emphasized treating one another with kindness and generosity. It worked because it was accepted by members of that generation and subsequent generations as expressing the essence of who they were and who they aspired to be.

“The world is sustained by three things: justice, truth, and peace.”

Simeon ben Gamliel lived through the Roman wars and the profound Jewish losses that resulted. There was so little left that he couldn’t be concerned with laying the foundation of a rejuvenated religious culture; he sought instead to hold on to a weakened culture. **And so he enumerated the sorts of things that in truth sustain any culture at all — a justice system to enforce the truths already accepted by the culture, and the preservation of peace.**

“Will we look for conservative, guarded, preservation...Or can we believe and assert that the times call for bold initiatives, for revivification and reimagining of what a more perfect American union and what a more perfect vision of Zionism could be?”

In this way, the first chapter of *Pirkei Avot* presents us with two polar trends that recur throughout Jewish history. **There are times of hope and vision, times when the future needs to be met with bold formulations of a vision, ethos, and a set of guiding values.**

And there are times of fear — real or imagined — of dire threat of the reigning culture taking over. At such times, generally the dominant mood and agenda are deeply conservative ones. The result is an effort to *preserve* the existing order and institutions as much as possible. No new ideas are forthcoming; rather the premium is on justice, truth, and peace — on the already accepted truths and conventions. There’s no risking the discord that new conceptions might introduce into the fragile community.

And so, what are we to say today? What are we to say to citizens of this great but ailing republic? We, who are devotees of a Jewish state struggling with its own maladies — are we going to see our world as Simeon ben Gamliel did? Will we look for conservative, guarded, preservation that gets encapsulated in slogans such as law and order, return to normal, remember the past? Or can we see it the way Simeon the Righteous did, and believe and assert that the times call for bold initiatives, for revivification and reimagining of what a more perfect American union and what a more perfect vision of Zionism could be? The first chapter of *Pirkei Avot* doesn’t decide this for us. It merely lays out the choice.

INTROSPECTION AND REFLECTION

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE DOOR

Rabbi Menachem Creditor, UJA-Federation of New York

As a child, I always wanted to be the one to open the door for the Prophet Elijah on Passover. It was always so exciting, so full of anticipation. In later years, I recall children sneaking out just before it was time to open the door, only to show up dressed like Elijah, ready to surprise us. The laughter that accompanied Elijah's entrance still rings in my ears. Doors can be wonderful.

As an adult, I often think about the courage it's taken in different moments of Jewish history to open the door to the world around us. Often, there have been frightening things lurking just beyond. Doors can be scary.

“As we approach the New Year, we muster the hope that the world and what lies ahead will be better than we expect, sooner than we expect.”

It is especially powerful today to think about opening the door for Elijah in the global moment we are experiencing. On Passover, before the redemption and liberation of the Jewish people, the Israelites were told, **“Mark your doors; shut them and stay inside. There is something harmful outside.”**

It resonates profoundly today, but it is important to note that it is not only a Jewish story this year. It is the world's story. For the past seven months, we've been largely confined to our homes, concerned about the pandemic spiraling through the world — just outside our doors.

And so, as Rosh Hashanah approaches, we have another door before us — an opening to a new beginning. There is a sense of hope and renewal as we in New York begin to return to a semblance of normalcy, carrying with us the lessons we've learned from living through a pandemic. As we approach the New Year, we muster the hope that the world and what lies ahead will be better than we expect, sooner than we expect.

The book of Malachi, the final book of the Prophets, criticizes the behavior of the Jewish people in post-exile Jerusalem for not being faithful and just. But at the end of the book, Malachi shares a promise from God: One day we will emerge from all suffering. On that day, God will send Elijah the Prophet to announce that “the great day” is coming. **But what defines that great and awesome day is something we can all take to heart and learn from: On that day, we will return to each other.** Generations will look at each other with love again. We will find light in ourselves and in one another. We will be close together, once again.

Friends, may we cautiously and hopefully step through the door ahead of us into the New Year, and find each other in the light very soon — a modern fulfillment of an ancient promise.

TO BE WITHOUT ELBOWS

Rabbi Josh Davidson, Temple Emanu-El

Once there was a man, who, as Passover approached, had the most unusual dream. He dreamt that Elijah visited his seder table and took him to a mansion in a far-off land. Elijah ushered him into the dining room where around a great table sat many guests. The table was piled high with delicious foods. **When the man looked closely at the scene, he saw the guests looked hungry, their faces lean and lined. He couldn't understand why, until he realized that none of them had elbows.** While they could reach the food on the table, they couldn't bring it to their mouths. The man turned to Elijah and cried, "This is too ghastly to behold. I cannot look at it any longer, please take me away from here."

“Because they could not bring the food to their own mouths, they were reaching across the table and feeding one another.”

So Elijah grasped the man's hand and whisked him away to another land and another dining room in another mansion that at first appeared the same as the one they had just left behind. Around this table, too, also overflowing with food, sat many guests, again with no elbows.

The man turned to Elijah and pleaded, "No, I told you I cannot look upon this hell any longer. It's too terrible." But Elijah insisted the man examine more closely. **To his amazement he saw that these guests were not hungry at all but were instead smiling and laughing.** Because they could not bring the food to their own mouths, they were reaching across the table and feeding one another. With that, Elijah took the man and led him back home.

Sadly, right now too many of us aren't able to bend the elbow to wrap our arms around the loved ones and friends whom we had hoped to be together with this season. Nor can we worship and celebrate in our typical way, in the physical presence of the communities sacred to us. This hour in history has taught us what in truth we already knew — that physical distance need not separate us. We've discovered new ways to reach out and remain present in one another's lives, to listen and support, to cry and comfort, and even to laugh. The tale reminds us, too, that **we must extend our arms even further to the most vulnerable in our society, to those who cannot help themselves.** The homeless and the hungry, the poor and the sick, the isolated and the lonely need us now more than any time in recent memory.

Like those with no elbows — if there's one lesson to be learned from this time, it's about our own limitations and abilities. **May we turn our shortcomings into gifts that can help us and others get through this challenging time.**

PEOPLE OF THE DOOR: MAKING THE IN-BETWEEN HOLY

Rabbi David Ingber, Romemu

It is undeniable that we are the people of the book. But I would like to offer another peoplehood definition to reorient ourselves toward where we are right now, both in our trajectory Jewishly, and also in light of current events.

One of the most powerful moments in Torah takes place in chapter 12 in the book of Exodus, with the Jewish people leaving Egypt. It offers a moment to consider what the necessary conditions were for us to become free people, to be liberated from the shackles of slavery. What is radically clear from that chapter and from the holiday that commemorates the Exodus, is that **we are people who pass over. Although, truth be told, it was only God in that story who passed over. We are a people who passed through.**

The signature event of the Exodus is the pascal offering, a willingness on our part to do something very scary and very dangerous: to slaughter the God of Egypt and place its blood on the door posts — on the liminal space, on the place between. On the door that both held the Israelites back from their liberty and also beckoned them toward their freedom. It was that act of courage and the willingness to do the most brazen, radically unheard-of thing, to slaughter the God of Egypt, that forever became our calling card as a people. **It was our willingness to pass through from a place of fear to a place of possibility, from a place of degradation to a place of dignity.**

That moment became seminal for us, and we mark it with a mezuzah, the emblem on Jewish doors, marking that we are people who passed through. We are a people of the door. A door is something that is between; we are forever the people who know what it is to make the between something holy.

So, it should not come as a surprise that God speaks to Moses in the desert and gives us the Torah there. The midrash wants to know why it is so significant for the Torah to emphasize that God is speaking to Moses specifically *bamidbar*, in the wilderness. Of course God is speaking to Moses in the desert — where else would they be? The Torah reminds us that the exchange took place in the desert to highlight that it was not given in Egypt, it was not given in land of Israel, but it was given in the place between — the “doorway,” as it were.

“We are forever the people who know what it is to make the between something holy.”

Between one place and another, we are given not just the Torah as we know it, but the Torah of the wilderness of Sinai. A place of no man’s land, uncharted and uncertain, where we built resilience. **Sure, we are people of the Torah, but more centrally perhaps, we are people of the door — of the place between, where we marked with the blood of the thing we most feared, the possibility and the hope of what may come.**

Perhaps we find ourselves in a doorway now. Not in the height of the pandemic, but neither are we free of it. **As we stand in the between, it’s our opportunity to look back at the fear, the illness, and the loss, and channel that for good, for growth, and for rebuilding.**

TRADITION, EVOLUTION, LOVE, AND DIGNITY

Rabbi Amichai Lau-Levie, Lab/Shul

“Sometimes we evolve and we change so that human dignity, all humans, all of us, as we now know, are worthy of all the love and dignity of the Divine Image.”

How do we find the courage to change? How do we find in this and other challenges the ability to look truth in the eye and realize what needs changing for good?

While we're in the middle of this global rite of passage, many of us are frequently asking, how can we be here for each other more? For ourselves more? How do people in the Jewish community, in the global community, grow from here for good?

We all turn to our elders and our teachers for insights. One of my teachers was Helene Aylon, whom we lost during the Covid-19 pandemic. Helene was born in Borough Park 89 years ago in a Hasidic community. She grew up to become a matriarch, an important feminist artist, and a friend to many. During the High Holidays, Helene always sat in the front row of our shul, these last years with a walker, and she will be very missed this year — like so many. Like so many, she leaves behind a legacy.

Helene dedicated years to a project entitled “Liberation of G-d,” in which she highlighted Biblical verses of controversy, where perhaps the lessons from the time of the Torah's origins no longer hold up. They raise questions about ethical behavior and human dignity, and her intention was always to discover God's meaning.

In Helene's memory and honor, I want to explore a verse from the Torah that is difficult for me and for many of us.

In Parshat Acharei Mot, the overarching teaching that God gives us is to live a holy life. Shortly after that commandment comes other verses, such as the one that says, “A man will not be with another man sexually as with a woman; it is an abomination.” I'm an openly gay man, I'm 51 years old, just a little older than Stonewall, and I was so lucky in my life as a gay man who grew up religious to have teachers who said, “We love our tradition, and we have the courage to look it in the eye and say sometimes we evolve and we change so that human dignity, all humans, all of us, as we now know, are worthy of all the love and dignity of the Divine Image.” It's the challenge of evolution. The challenge of change, of adaptability — this relay race of tradition.

I hope during this time, we all rise to the challenge to look in the eyes of truth, of status quo, of life as we know it, and figure out how we can change so that all are included and everybody lives the better life these verses promised us.

FINDING OUR VOICES BY FRAMING OUR PLACES

Rabbi Isaiah Rothstein, Jewish Federations of North America

Our sages teach us that Torah reading is meant to be read *b'zman*, at its set time. For example, there's a reason the Torah reading for Passover includes topics related to Passover. There is a reason why before Purim we read about Haman's ancestor, Amalek.

Nachmonides and other commentators share that each parsha reflects what is happening *b'zman*, in this moment in time, too.

So what does the Torah tell us about what has been happening in this time? Throughout the book of Bamidbar, the book of Numbers, the wondering and wandering Israelite nation of the desert reaches adolescence and new maturity. But how did they get there? What helped them survive the desert experiences? **How did they find their voice (*dibbur*) in the desert (*midbar*)?**

The book of Bamidbar opens describing the physical positioning of the *shvatim*, the tribes, in their camp. They position themselves *l'mishpichotam, l'beit avotam*, according to their families and according to their houses.

“Each of us is able to keep our voice intact in the desert once we frame our place in society.”

Rav Soloveitchik suggests that each of us is able to keep our voice intact in the desert once we frame our place in society. **In the vastness of the desert, we find our positions and our identities based on our backgrounds, on our families, and on our ancestors.**

My ancestors include Carole Robertson, my cousin who was killed with three other girls in the Birmingham Church bombing of 1963, and Charles McGruder, a stud who was used for slave breeding. I have thousands of black (and white) cousins from his seed all with the last name McGruder.

While I grew up in the Jewish community in Monsey, reconciling my mixed-race identity has certainly played a part in defining my position in the wilderness that is the world. But it's not my responsibility more than anyone else's to address racial justice.

Each and every citizen has a role in fighting racial injustice and dismantling racism and bigotry in this country. Addressing the killing of black people in America is all of our responsibility not only because we should see this as a civil rights issue or a race issue, but because injustice and discrimination based on the color of skin is a human rights issue.

One lesson we can take from Bamidbar and the Torah portions we read in this book is to **look at who we are, where we come from, and how that shapes who we want to be.**

A LESSON FOR THE JEWISH COMMUNITY: RECONCILING MULTIPLE TRUTHS

Dr. Rivka Press-Schwartz, SAR High School

Why is it that as Jews, and especially within the Orthodox community, we have such a hard time seeing structural racial injustice in America?

I think there are real reasons why many in the white-appearing Ashkenazi Jewish community have a hard time seeing and understanding the structures of racial injustice that Black Americans know all too well. Only if we start to think about the blind spots that prevent us from seeing those structures of injustice, can we do something and finally start to see them. Only in seeing can we take the actions we need to address them.

“We have to give ourselves permission to know that we can hold multiple truths at once.”

The first and lowest stakes piece is this: **the Black American story is so different from our American story that for us it doesn't compute.** My grandfather came here from Poland in the 1930s, served in the American army during WWII, came home, built a life for himself, established a business, and left a legacy (material and financial) to pass on to my mother. This is what the scholars call the intergenerational transfer of wealth — from being an immigrant off the boat to building and passing on material advantage to his children.

Because that's our American story, it can be hard for us to assimilate and take in what the story of African-Americans has been.

We need to understand that our story is not everyone's story, and we have to therefore really, really hear, study, listen, and learn other people's stories to understand their experiences.

But there's something even further than that. **There's a feeling that acknowledging the “other's” story takes away from my story.** If I acknowledge that my grandfather, when he came here from Eastern Europe, through no planning, fault, or design of his own, ended up the heir to a racial scheme that with his white skin conferred privilege and advantage upon him — to say that sounds like I'm saying his accomplishments are less, that he built less, that he achieved less on his own. I think for many of us, it feels like that takes away from our families' stories — those boot strap stories, the “making it” stories of which we're so proud.

We have to give ourselves permission to know that we can hold multiple truths at once. We can know that our grandparents worked, strove, and accomplished, and can take pride in that — and *still* know that other people's grandparents worked hard and strove and were *prevented* from accomplishing by structures that disadvantaged them and didn't disadvantage our grandparents. Once we recognize that we can hold multiple truths, we can move on to the next issue. Which is that **it's very hard for us as Jews — even in America and with the blessings America has given us — to see ourselves as being in a position of power.** That has become even harder over the past few years as anti-Semitic attacks have proliferated. The security around our shuls, schools, and houses of worship has increased our sense of vulnerability, and the threat is all the greater.

Given all that, it really is hard for us to think of ourselves as occupying a position of power. You may say, “But I feel so vulnerable. I feel so nervous walking to temple or taking my child to their day school.” But let’s return to the notion that we can acknowledge that two things can be true at once. Anti-Semitism is true and real and present and more frightening now than it was fifteen years ago. It’s also true that when I get pulled over by a police officer and they look at me in the car, they see a white person and that changes how they relate to me.

The last and most difficult thing that keeps us from hearing and seeing is the extent to which we as beneficiaries of these racist systems are implicated in them. If we have accumulated wealth through systems that have advantaged some people and disadvantaged others; if we have built institutions, structures, and communities; **if we have gotten our education and our jobs, not in ways that simply reflected our merit, our bootstraps, our effort, but also reflect profound societal systems and structures that helped us and disadvantaged others, what does that say?** How does that make me feel about myself and my community? Sometimes I think it makes us so uncomfortable we just turn away. “I’m a nice person, I’m not a racist, so I don’t have to get involved.” But this isn’t about our personal goodness, or lack thereof. It’s about structures that have been built and maintained. Sometimes these are structures we didn’t build, but slid into. Sometimes these are structures we unconsciously reinforce without realizing, and we have to own when these are structures we actually helped to build because they advantaged us without our thinking about how they were disadvantaging others. Entire structures in the United States that have been built by the law and enforced by the law that we have to face and acknowledge in order to be able to start thinking about how we can dismantle them.

“Anti-Semitism is true and real and present and more frightening now than it was fifteen years ago. It’s also true that when I get pulled over by a police officer and they look at me in the car, they see a white person and that changes how they relate to me.”

We as a Jewish community don’t need to feel threatened by this. We need to know that we can hold our stories and our truths and our veneration of our ancestors and still hear other people’s stories. We can retain an awareness of the ways and the places in which we are vulnerable and even powerless, and nevertheless, acknowledge the ways and the places in which we have and yield power. **To know that we may not be solely responsible for creating systems of oppression, but that we have lived in and often benefited from them. This gives us an obligation to look at them, identify them, face them, and think about what we’re going to do to dismantle them.**

IT'S IN OUR HANDS

Rabbi Chaim Steinmetz, Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun

Each Friday night, we raise a glass to say Kiddush and sanctify the Shabbat, marking it as a special day. On its face, it's actually a strange ritual. Sundown to sundown on the seventh day of the week is Shabbat — with or without us making a declaration that it is so. But our sages insisted that we say Kiddush, that we affirmatively declare that we are sanctifying this holy day. I believe what the rabbis intended to convey is that on this day of rest, a day that is inherently passive, **we must never forget that even Shabbat is in our own hands.**

“The question is: what will we do to make sure its effects — not least of which, loss of life and time — are not for nothing?”

Shabbat may arrive on its own, but the quality of how we experience Shabbat is up to us. This lesson is more important today than it ever was. We're confronting the greatest health crisis in the last 100 years and perhaps the greatest economic crisis in the last 90 years. We can't walk into our offices, or go visit our friends. In many ways, life has turned upside down. **We must remember that how we encounter this crisis is in our own hands.**

There are, of course, heroes who are battling on the front lines: doctors, nurses, hospital staff, ambulance drivers, and Hatzalah volunteers working double time to combat the disease. Thousands of healthcare workers who came out of retirement to join the fight. **But even those of us not on the front lines can take matters into our own hands.** We can call people who are vulnerable or lonely. Connect with those who may be anxious or scared. Go grocery shopping for elderly neighbors. We need to use this time to spread more love to our families, to our friends, and to our acquaintances. We need to build the morale of our community so that together we can fight the virus. That is in our hands and we must grasp it.

Judaism is a religion of action. We're not just given Shabbat to receive and enjoy, but we act on it to accept it and make it ours. It's a holy day in and of itself, but we also take measures to feel its holiness — through reciting the Kiddush, enjoying festive meals, through special prayers.

Somehow like Shabbat — this pandemic is something that happened to us. It's a reality independent of ourselves. The question is: what will we do to make sure its effects — not least of which, loss of life and time — are not for nothing? That can turn this into something positive.

In years to come the coronavirus crisis will be a distant memory. We'll look back at this time and hopefully take pride in what we did for others and what we did to fight this disease. Hopefully, we can look back and say that for us, this was our finest hour.

COMMUNITY

DO YOU SEE ME? ZOOM AND KIDDUSH HASHEM

Dr. Mijal Bitton, Downtown Minyan

A few weeks into the pandemic, I noticed that before any Zoom meeting, I'd spend a bit too much time thinking about the bookshelves behind me and what books I wanted people to see. When I realized what I was doing, I considered that much of our lives right now have become very curated. Each of us presents ourselves through this small digital Zoom screen, and we get to show others very minimal, specific things we want them to see.

We have a concept in Jewish tradition of *Kiddush Hashem*, sanctifying God's name. One way the rabbis explain this idea is that when a God-fearing person showcases positive actions, it causes others to see their actions as reflective of God's teachings and thus to love God, too (TB Yoma 86a).

This leads to a sociological experience for those seeking to sanctify God's name: living among others and having people see us as potential representatives of God helps hold us accountable, motivating us to be the best people we can be and to live up to our values. When we walk into shul, or to work, or even the supermarket, **when we know we are seen by others who see us as God's representatives, we are moved to behave closer to our better selves.**

The embodied dimension of *Kiddush Hashem* highlights one of the challenges that we have right now. Through our virtual realities, we get to curate very specific and artificial representations of ourselves and thus miss out on the opportunity to become better people since we don't feel the pressure of others' gazes inspiring us to enact a *Kiddush Hashem*.

Despite these challenges, **I believe that the concept of *Kiddush Hashem* can help us explore what it would mean to overcome the artificiality of Zoom.** What would it mean to, instead of curate, make ourselves vulnerable, to say,

"Here I am. I want to invite you to see me in my fullness and to inspire me to be a better person, the person that I want to be."

"Living among others and having people see us as potential representatives of God helps hold us accountable, motivating us to be the best people we can be."

We can invite others to see us more fully and we can make an effort to see others. **Through Zoom we can see each other's faces, but do we spend enough attention trying to really see each other fully?** Do we notice the expressions, the eyes, the smiles. Do people seem O.K.? Can we pick up the phone after a Zoom call and say, "Hey, I want to know what's really happening in your life? How can I be there for you?"

If we do this, we'll be engaging in bringing about a *Kiddush Hashem* in which we work hard to see each other, one that will inspire us to be kind, to give, and to be there for each other. **My blessing for all of us is, God willing, we will get through this time and be able to look back and be proud of the people that we've been, people who can increase the holiness in this world through our actions and by seeing each other fully.**

MAKE SURE A CROWD SEEKS YOUR WELFARE

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl, Central Synagogue

“You’ve got a Jewish community looking out for your welfare, you’ve got a federation of Jews of all stripes who say: We are with you in this, and you’re not alone.”

Sometimes you find a text that is 2,000 years old, and you feel like it’s written just for us, today.

We’re in a time of uncertainty, and that uncertainty is based on real things that are scary — about our future, our job, our health, the economy. In many ways, fear is an imagination of what’s going to happen in the future. The Talmud, recognizing this as human nature, shares a relevant thought.

A passage on Yevamot 63b says, **“Do not suffer from tomorrow’s trouble. That is, do not worry about problems that might arise in the future, as you do not know what a day will bring.** Perhaps when tomorrow comes, the individual who was so worried will not be among the living, and he was consequently upset over a world that is not his.”

It’s not the most cheery way to think about the passage — that “maybe you’ll be dead tomorrow, so don’t worry about the future!” I don’t think that was the intention. Rather, perhaps the intention is that none of us know when our last day will be on this earth. If we’re constantly worrying about what might be, we’re not living in the present moment, and we’re living in a continuous state of fear.

Fear in some ways is an imagination of what might be. To worry about *that* is its own kind of insanity because it hasn’t happened yet. Now, that’s different from taking *precaution*, and different from real danger. Real danger you stay away from, but fear is a *choice* — and that’s what the Talmud is telling us. We’re living in hard times, and there is truly danger out there and we need to take precautions. But the Talmud is telling us, do not live in a state of fear.

Now what I love is the very next line of the Talmud. While the first part tells us not to fear the imagined threats, the second instructs us to still be responsible. It says, “Prevent a public crowd from inside your home. Do not let many people enter, and do not even bring all your friends into your house. **Make sure, however, that a crowd seeks your welfare, and that you have many allies.**”

The Talmud is telling us that while we shouldn’t live in fear of what could be, we also shouldn’t be cavalier and irresponsible when it comes to the real dangers presented to us. The second half of this line says, “Make sure you have a lot of allies, that you have a community that’s paying attention to your welfare.” **Just because we might need to be physically distanced right now doesn’t mean we aren’t together. You should know that you have allies out there — family and friends who are caring for you.** You’ve got a Jewish community looking out for your welfare, you’ve got a federation of Jews of all stripes who say: We are with you in this, and you’re not alone.

UPHILL CLIMB

Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove, Park Avenue Synagogue

There's an old joke about the difference between an optimist and a pessimist. The pessimist says, "This is beyond anything we could have imagined — things couldn't possibly get any worse." To which the optimist smiles and responds, "Sure they could!"

I feel these days like that optimist. Here we are, facing trouble after trouble, one anxiety after another. And in this unnatural virtual, solitary reality. With fears for our health, jobs, families. Concern for our neighbors. Marking one holiday after the next from our homes. **What sort of humanity is it, separated one from another?**

I read a journal article from a social psychologist on a fascinating study that talked about visual perception — the way that our psychological resources impact how we see things. This particular study was on how we see the steepness of a hill in front of us. The subjective measure of how steep the hill is, is affected by our psychology, our physical fitness, our age, by whether we have a big backpack on our backs, by all sorts of things. The article goes on to say that participants who thought of a supportive friend during the task of looking at the hill saw a less steep hill than participants who didn't think of someone they loved. In other words, the hills that we have to climb — and there are more than we can count right now — are made surmountable by way of connection and relation with other people.

While we would never have chosen the circumstances of the last six months, right now people are seeing past each other's quirks and failings, realizing that relationships are more important and letting bygones be bygones. We're expressing concern for each other. Most importantly, we're realizing that in addition to exercising, eating right, and social distancing — we're each better off by having one another. **When we reach out and connect to each other, when we realize that even in this most inhuman condition, we can lean into our shared humanity and know we are capable of transmitting far more than a deadly virus.**

“The hills that we have to climb are made surmountable by way of connection and relation with other people.”

SHARING CROWNS OF HOLINESS

Rabbi Steven Exler, Hebrew Institute of Riverdale - The Bayit

What does holiness look like in a pandemic?

We are bereft of gathering in our holy spaces, our synagogues, bereft of gathering together for holy moments, sharing lifecycle events. Bereft of opportunities for *chesed* and raising voices for justice in person together.

God commands the Jewish nation in the desert: “Be holy.” **But what remains to create holiness in our lives during this time?** Rabbi Abin, a figure from the period of the Talmud, offered a parable: The citizens of a province provided three crowns for their king. What did the king do with the three crowns, having only one head? He didn’t place two away for later, rotate their wearing, or try to wear them all at once. Rather, the king wore one and bequeathed the other two crowns to his children.

“Holiness is understanding that if I have three of something, I keep one and find two other worthy recipients.”

Every day the angels crown God with three sanctities: “*Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh, Holy, Holy, Holy* is the God of hosts.” Receiving those gifts of holiness, what does God do? God keeps one measure and crowns us — God’s people, and perhaps all people — with holiness. That’s why the Torah mentions we are “a holy nation,” “...Because I the Lord, your God, am holy,” and then gives us the commandment to “Be holy.” **With all of God’s holiness, God keeps one portion and gives us two.**

I think the most basic message of this midrash is that **holiness is not just something which is shared; holiness is sharing.** Holiness is understanding that if I have three of something, I keep one and I find two other worthy recipients. Reaching out to each other and making sure that if we have some of something, we give just as much, if not more, to others who may need it. This is holiness, and we all give and receive.

Holiness is sharing, but what is shared? What are the crowns? “*Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh, Holy, Holy, Holy.*” The crowns are words. Pieces of speech that come forth from the mouths of the angels and take shape and begin to glitter, becoming gifts to God and gifts to human beings. **Holiness comes through words, and this is a time of words.**

In the absence of being physically together, in the absence of shared physical, communal spaces, we resort to words. And those words are crowns. After a long day when my phone beeps and I see “Thinking of you, how are you managing?” Or I get a text in the middle of the day that says, “I’m putting in an online shopping order, do you need anything?” I can feel those crowns being placed on my head and I try to keep one and distribute two more, reaching out to others with words to crown each other with strength, and connection, and holiness.

GOOD HABITS FOR A MORE CONNECTED COMMUNITY

Eric S. Goldstein, UJA-Federation of New York

One of the most famous and frequently quoted lines of the Torah is **“Love your neighbor as yourself.”** We generally cite this principle on its own, as a stand-alone concept. But if we look in the Torah, it’s actually not an independent idea; it comes at the end of a much larger passage about human interaction.

The passage in Vayikra, Leviticus 19, begins: “You shall not commit injustice in judgment ... You shall judge your neighbor with righteousness. You shall not gossip. You shall not stand idly by ... You shall not have hate in your heart. You shall confront your neighbor ... You shall not take revenge... You shall not bear a grudge ...” And finally, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

In laying out these guidelines, the Torah recognizes our human tendencies. It recognizes that conflict among neighbors is inevitable, that we’re inclined to differ, to judge, to grow angry, and even — when pushed to our limits — to be hateful. But the Torah here is seeking to create a process, a progression by which we can move from those natural human tendencies toward love — or, if not love, then appreciation and understanding.

Looking at the context for this tenet to “love your neighbor as yourself,” one guideline stands out. At the root of the progression is the instruction **“You shall confront your neighbor.”** **Among the warnings against hate and vengeance, we are commanded to engage with the other. Even if we disagree, we can never disconnect.**

In many ways — perhaps surprising considering the growing divisiveness we’ve been grappling with for some time — Covid has given us new opportunities to connect and engage.

“Amid all our disjointedness and discombobulation in this moment, the pandemic has shown us just how truly connected we are.”

Over these last months, while we haven’t been able to be together in the same place — sit side-by-side, let alone share a hug — we’ve found time to Zoom with friends we don’t speak with often, and check in with elderly family members, friends, or neighbors. We’ve held virtual family reunions and tuned into interesting online opportunities taking place all over the world. One of the great ironies of Covid has been that while we’re more physically isolated than ever, in many ways, for those fortunate to have access to technology, geographic barriers have been diminished.

Amid all our disjointedness and discombobulation in this moment, the pandemic has shown us just how truly connected we are.

UJA's pre-Shabbat programs have been one platform that allowed us to connect from a distance. We brought together teachers and community members from across all denominations to learn together, often featuring Jewish leaders that some may otherwise never have had the opportunity to hear. These sessions have been a shining light for so many in our community, a moment of peace and inspiration amid the chaos and uncertainty that has interrupted our lives.

“So how do we make sure the meaningful changes we’re experiencing now will last? When we return to normal, God willing, how do we sustain all the beautiful connections that our community has been forging during this time?”

At a virtual program UJA held in April, Tal Ben-Shahar, the renowned professor of happiness and positive psychology, reminded us that **in the aftermath of 9/11 in New York, there was an enormous wave of kindness.**

In all the unease, people reached out to others and asked about one another. The city known for its gruffness and bustling was infused with a shared sense of purpose and community. But it lasted all of six months, and then we went back to our old ways.

So how do we make sure the meaningful changes we’re experiencing now will last? When we return to normal, God willing, how do we sustain all the beautiful connections that our community has been forging during this time? Tal says that the answer lies in establishing regular rituals, which is the key to creating lasting habits.

We need to establish practices that allow these behaviors of outreach and connecting to become a steady part of our communal calendars and routines. A return to normal social interaction cannot and should not replace the new and improved ways of communication and connection we’ve established — online and off.

Especially in divisive times, as the Torah reminds us, we need to work harder to “love your neighbor.” My hope is that we’ve formed good habits these last six months. And that newly appreciated sense of mutual responsibility will help us sustain an even more vibrant, diverse, and strong Jewish community long after this crisis is over.

COMMUNITY TIES: BOUND TOGETHER WITHIN THE ERUV

Rabbi Rick Jacobs, Union for Reform Judaism

I received a call a number of years back on erev Rosh Hashanah from Rabbi Jake Rubenstein, of blessed memory, who was then the rabbi of Young Israel of Scarsdale. He excitedly told me, “I convinced my colleagues to change the path of the eruv to include Westchester Reform Temple. I wanted to make it easy for people in my Orthodox synagogue to celebrate with our friends at WRT.”

It wasn't that my congregants especially cared about the borders of the eruv. It was that Rabbi Rubenstein drew a map of his Jewish community and he deliberately made sure we were part of his circle of responsibility and relationship. I thought, “What have we done recently that expresses even a fraction of that remarkable love and inclusivity?”

The eruv — the boundary that is literally put around the Jewish community — sometimes just a little fishing wire, somehow ties us together. On Shabbat an eruv allows me to carry my tallis, my keys, push my stroller. It also allows me to participate with a placard at a protest in my community, a protest against the endless killing of Black and Brown people by law enforcement. You may wonder, is this an appropriate Shabbos activity? Is it permitted? I would ask — is it not required?

Now let's just think for a moment about an eruv. **An eruv is a ritual construct that joins my home to my surrounding community, my private home to the public space.**

The streets, the homes, and the people within the eruv are linked to me. They become an extension of my personal, private life. It's a remarkable Jewish practice. **For those of us who have had our worlds confined to home and Zoom for the last couple of months, take a moment to reconnect to the public spaces in our community and to the many people we're not sheltering with.**

“What have we done recently that expresses even a fraction of that remarkable love and inclusivity?”

Who's in my eruv? Jews who think like me, vote like me, pray like me, and believe just like me? Yes, there are plenty of people like that. But **it has got to go broader. Particularly, we need to focus on Black and Brown Jews who are in our eruv. Do we see them? Do we know them?** Are they in our leadership? Do we know why many are not active in our communities? These questions are always important, but especially now.

“We cannot distance ourselves from those hard realities in our community. Let’s count our blessings, but let’s also be accountable and honest about what we are not facing.”

Inside our eruv, let’s be proud of our Jewish institutions, institutions of learning, spirituality, and activism. But within each and every one of them is also narrow-mindedness, intolerance, bigotry, and, I’m pained to say it — racism. We cannot distance ourselves from those hard realities in our community. Let’s count our blessings, but let’s also be accountable and honest about what we are not facing.

Let’s also use our time this shabbat to think about those within our eruv in whom we do not see, but they are there and yes, a part of us. Black and Brown people who are not safe walking to their houses of worship even though they are within our eruv. Some of those Black and Brown people are members of our Jewish community and many do not yet feel included, valued, and understood.

Fundamental to being a person of Jewish commitment is to be an *ohav ha’briot*, a lover of human beings; it also means to be antiracist.

Black and Brown lives have been devalued for centuries. Yes, there’s an eruv in New York, Minneapolis, Louisville, Atlanta, and it includes a whole lot of Black and Brown people along with plenty of Black and Brown Jews, and many others. **And because we in the eruv join our personal space to the neighborhood community space, their well-being is our responsibility.**

INHERENT INTERCONNECTEDNESS

Rabbi Rachel Timoner, Congregation Beth Elohim

In some sense, this time of forced separation and seclusion is also a time of forced reflection for all of us. In a way, it has a taste of Yom Kippur. We are required to refrain from all sorts of things, which naturally brings us to reflect about the way we've been living and the way we want to be living.

The Torah gives us a list of mitzvot, which are the highest call to an ethical life. Leviticus 19:9-10 tell us, "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not pick your vineyard bare or gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and the stranger. I, Adonai, I am your God."

"When there are those in our midst who do not have what they need, it actually puts us all at risk."

This mitzvah reminds us that we are profoundly interconnected. **We are in a web of mutuality and this is something that I think, ironically, we are being reminded of in this time of separation.** When we cannot touch each other, when we cannot gather with each other, we are more aware than ever of how much we need each other. We're more aware that we are one: that actually our health is

dependent on one another's health and our well-being is dependent on one another's well-being. **We are only as safe as the most endangered among us, and we are only as well as the sickest among us, and when there are those in our midst who do not have what they need — food, shelter, healthcare, or health insurance — it actually puts us *all* at risk.**

I'm reminded of a piece of commentary by Rabbi Moshe Alshich, who notes that in the aforementioned verse, pronouns go from plural to singular. He suggests the plural at the beginning, "When you (pl) reap the harvest of your (pl) land," teaches us that the land being reaped doesn't truly belong to the landowner. None of us actually own what we think we own; what's mine is really not mine — it's ours. We shouldn't think that we're giving to the poor person from our own property — we're giving from our collective property. But in the second section when the pronouns change to singular, we understand the act of giving is personal, from one to another.

We might think that behind the fences of our field or behind the closed doors that now separate our spaces more severely than ever, we are not actually connected. But what we are finding in this time when we are forced to be separate is how much we yearn for that connection, how much we need each other. How much **what's mine must be shared as much as I am able, because my well-being depends on your well-being, and your well-being depends on my well-being. We need each other and we are profoundly one.**