

From the Rabbi's Desk

May 2020

Friends,

Like most of you, I've been spending nearly all of my time at home lately. Polly and I have had to do some rearranging in the house. As you have seen on Friday nights, part of our house has become our Zoom sanctuary. That is a lot of stress on everyone. I am grateful to Polly, Nava, Ilan and Aaron for making it work as well as it has. It hasn't been smooth sailing but we've all done our best. During the reorganizing, I came across some old pictures and papers that came from my mother's house. There was an envelope my father had stuffed in a drawer that had not been touched since he died in 1990. Inside the envelope, there were pictures of my grandparents, my brother, and me. Tucked inside a portfolio with a picture of my father's mother, Alice, was the ketubah of my mother's parents, Anne and Meyer Greenberg. Looking at the ketubah, I noticed that my grandparents were married in 1936.

Many of us have been reading about the Spanish flu epidemic that came in three waves in 1918 and 1919. As I was looking at the Ketubah I realized that my grandparents and their parents struggled then just as we are now with COVID-19. As it happens, I also have a copy of my grandfather's birth certificate. He was born in 1913 and thus would have been the same age as Nava and Ilan during the Spanish flu epidemic. I imagine that Meyer, or Mike as he became known, was probably just like Ilan and Nava. They understand that something is going on. They call it "the sickness". But, they take it in stride. When my mother-in-law, Carole, lovingly made and sent each of us a couple of masks from Minnesota, Nava and Ilan reacted with giddy excitement, like it was an early birthday present. The masks were of all kinds of patterns; flowers, insects, frogs, paisleys, and more. It helps to have a quilter in the family. Nava and Ilan couldn't wait to get out in public and wear their masks.

I wonder if my great grandmother was making masks for her family. Surely she was. Newspapers from 1918 reported that everyone was wearing masks. It was mandated by law. Some were even arrested for not wearing them. Most government, civic leaders, and the public understood what was at stake. This isn't 1918, but we are faced with a similar, extraordinary public health crisis. It is not the Spanish flu but, COVID-19 is highly contagious and deadly. It is not just one of the common flu strains. Most of us get a vaccine for those. Our high rate of vaccination protects even those who choose or can't have the flu vaccine. There is no vaccine yet for COVID-19. Combating this disease will only be successful if we think more about the people around us than we do ourselves.

Just as in 1918, many are making masks. Some are simple, made with spare fabric, elastic string, and staples. Others are more complicated and fashionable. Whatever the style, please make one or get one and wear one. It is really not about you. The mask isn't meant to protect you. Rather it is meant to protect others from you. If you become infected, you likely will not know about it for days. If you are not wearing a mask, you will spread the virus to many people during that time. We are taught in the Talmud, Sanhedrin 37a, that to save one life is as if to save a whole, while to take one life is as if to destroy an entire world. Wearing a mask is an imperative that is for the sake of our world.

Additionally, until there is sufficient immunity, testing, and contact tracing capability, we just simply cannot be face to face. We must physically distance. This is hard for everyone. We are doing our best, transferring some activities to the internet, being creative, and even adding new programs. We are not in person, but we are able to be face to face, celebrating, mourning, learning, and comforting each other. The response has been phenomenal.

My estimation is that service attendance is up by about 50%. I see a lot of smiling and engaged young people on Sunday mornings in the programs created by Armi Rowe and Jennifer Zettler. I see many families joining us on Friday nights and for Havdalah on Saturday evenings. I see meaningful shiva gatherings. We have a great new book group that just started. These are good things, pandemic or not. And when this is over, our online presence will remain. I look forward to the day that we can be in the same space, but for now, face to face in cyberspace is not only holding us together it is helping us grow and thrive.

All of that sounds very positive. However, many of us are also struggling. If you are struggling, please know we are still connected. If you need a mask, food, someone to pick up a prescription, or maybe just a friendly voice, reach out. I am making my way through our phone list with the objective of contacting every family. If you haven't received your call yet, you will. But you also don't have to wait. I'm always here for you. Reach out to me by phone, email, WhatsApp, Zoom, or even paper and pen – any way that is comfortable for you. We *are* all in this together.

L'Shalom,
Rabbi Marc