

Safety-what does it mean to be safe

YK morning 2020

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Two friends were going camping. Pete told Mark not to bring any alcohol for safety reasons. When they met at the site, Mark had two bags with him. Opening one, Pete noticed it had a full container of vodka. Peter scolded his friend, "I told you not to bring booze."

Mark nodded, "It's just in case we get bitten by a snake. It will work as an anesthesia."

"Oh, ok," Peter conceded, "but what's in the other bag?"

Mark opened the sack, "Snakes! I thought we might not find any here."¹

What do you do to be safe? This word appears often these days. To our friends and family we say, "Stay safe. Be safe." I don't think I've heard this word spoken as often as in the last seven months. What people mean by this phrase is, "I hope you don't get Covid. I hope you stay healthy." It is a heart-felt sentiment. But the idea of safety goes back even before last March. It is used in many other contexts. We buckle our seat belts to stay safe in case of a car accident. We clean our dishes so we can stay safe from bacteria. When we slide into home plate, we want to hear the umpire say, "Safe!" Oh, we have safety manuals, practices, guide-lines, and laws. It makes sense, we want to be safe from illness, protected from theft, be able to work without fear of harm, and even be safe in our relationships with one another.

However, our conception of safety can differ widely from one person to the next. A colleague of mine texted me when I was in Lake Tahoe to, "stay safe." I responded back, "Yes, but not tooo safe." I had just completed a perilous mountain bike ride on the Flume trail with my hands gripping the breaks so I wouldn't careen off the nearby cliff. I was grinning as I responded and my colleague's response was jovial as well. I found myself thinking about safety and how it impacts the choices that we make.

Especially in this time of Covid, we have a myriad of decisions to make. Do you have your groceries delivered or do you shop for them? What about going to work or staying at home? Will your children go to school in person or not? Do you see your children or grandchildren? If so, do you hug them or share a meal with them? What about friends? Do you socialize or leave it to Zoom parties? These are difficult decisions and everyone tries to balance their need for safety with their need to live fully. We all have to take into account our psychological and mental

health and how it impacts our physical wellbeing as we calculate the risks of contracting Covid 19. It is especially daunting at this time.

In Hebrew, the word for safety is *bitachon* and some of the words that are defined as “safe” is *batuah or betach* but also the word *Shalem* is used as well. One example of the Hebrew word, *Bitachon* is found in Ecclesiastes, “For he who is reckoned among the living וְשֵׁן בְּתַחַת הַיָּדָיִם, there’s *bitachon*—that even a live dog is better than a dead lion.”² Here *Bitachon* means that it is evident that it is better to be alive regardless of whether one is a dog that roams the streets or the king of the jungle.

Betah appears many times in the Torah. In Genesis, while the male Canaanites were recovering their circumcision so Shechem could marry Jacob’s daughter Dinah. The Torah tells us that. “On the third day, when they were in pain, Simeon and Levi, two of Jacob’s sons, brothers of Dinah, took each his sword, came upon the city בְּתַחַת and slew all the males.”³ *Betach* here means that no one bothered them. Simeon and Levi were able to enter the city unmolested, without any incident, and wreaked their vengeance. *Betach* here means unharmed.

And then in Deuteronomy, the blessing given by Moses states, “Thus Israel dwells in בְּתַחַת (safety), Untroubled is Jacob’s abode. In a land of grain and wine, under heavens dripping dew.”⁴ Certitude, unharmed, and secure are some of the meanings of *Bitachon* and *Betch*. We would like that to be sure. We want to be assured that we and our loved ones will live securely and remain unharmed and healthy well into older age and beyond. And so, we wait and we wait.

A Wall street Journal article by Walter Russell Mead entitled, “The Pandemic is a dress rehearsal” advocates for realism. Mead writes that, “We must recognize that the end of the pandemic does not mean a return to the relatively stable world of the post-Cold War era. Governments and other institutions have always had to deal with difficult challenges that they couldn’t predict. Disease, famine, and barbarian invasions fell unexpectedly on societies that often struggled merely to survive. The Industrial Revolution brought new perils like financial panics, the business cycle and social upheavals. Millions left the land and learned to depend on the modern economy for sustenance. Revolutionary political movements that challenged the old order could be as destructive and mysterious as the plagues and famines of earlier times.”⁵

Mead predicts that even after this pandemic is over we will have to deal with new risks and complications as the information revolution disrupts the world, declines continue in stable manufacturing jobs decimating areas of our country, traditional retail will continue to plummet,

cyber and biological weapons will increase due to escalating arms races, and we will have to contend with growing populism and nationalism. He concludes, “History is accelerating, and the leaders, values, institutions and ideas that guide society are going to be tested severely by the struggles ahead.” He states that just as in the past, we are in time of change and with that will come many, many challenges.

I can’t help but look at where we are through a Jewish lens. The idea of safety and security was quite allusive many times in our history. When we even trace the history of our families, we get a picture of their struggles. My great grandmother Rachel, for example, related the poverty her family faced in Poland. They often didn’t have enough to eat. They would rummage in the woods for berries and would go to bed without any dinner. One night, her mother was able to scrape together a few coins and procured some day’s old bread. She woke up Rachel and her siblings so they could eat it with some hot watered down milk. I think at times, thank God, my great grandparents left Eastern Europe when they did, because it wasn’t just poverty or the Cossacks to fear, but decades later the Nazis would wipe out 6 million of our people. According to Miriam, a member of my family who lived in Israel, some my relatives who stayed back were some of the victims.

It’s not just late 19th or 20th century that posed hardships for Jews. The inquisition and expulsion from Spain in 1492 is an absolute dark chapter for our people. We have been expelled from Israel, England, Portugal, and many Arab countries. We have faced discriminatory laws and had to survive mobs of people who wanted to kill us for libelous reasons. We have a long history of our people trying to survive in any occupation open to them such as money lending and trading. And sometimes by choice and sometimes by force, they left their homes to start life all over again.

Safety and security were rarely a given and our people had to contend with the changing circumstance of their society and its impact on their lives. Often as they took precautions and even made life altering decisions, they still had to decide how to live in the meantime. There’s a cute saying from the cartoon show, Avatar: the Last Airbender, where wise Uncle Iroh and his disturbed nephew Prince Zuko arrive in Ba Sing Se. Zuko exclaims that he feels trapped and that this is not the place he wants to make a life in. Uncle Iroh, reasons, “Life happens wherever you are, whether you make it or not.”

It’s easy to think that we will live again once this pandemic has waned but given that we still await a vaccine, that it is unlikely that Covid 19 will be eradicated, and there will be other challenges to our society and world, we are left with some decisions. Life is going to happen.

And so, the question is, how do we live as fully as possible, even in a time of uncertainty, even in a time when we don't feel safe?

The answer is what Jews have always done even in times of great peril. We held on to our values even more strongly and we refused to give up observing, celebrating, learning, and being with one another. We refused to stop being who we are and even in a time of limited choices, we embraced what we could do to be true to ourselves, uphold our traditions, and live by the Torah, and in essence, acknowledge the sanctity of life and God.

We didn't wait to learn. We didn't wait to celebrate. We didn't wait to mourn. If our people in the past could still embrace life or as uncle Iroh said, "whether you make it or not," then we must live as fully as possible even with the uncertainty of the virus and even with the uncertainty of life itself. To wait until the coast is clear, till all is safe, I believe is to be paralyzed and one ceases to truly live. Because to wait until there is no danger or threat, one may never stop waiting. To be sure, all must take precautions and follow the best advice of medical professionals but we also have to live with purpose and take care of ourselves physically, mentally, and psychologically. This can mean different things to different people and may even change as the months roll by.

Regardless of what level of chance or risk we may be willing to assume, I believe that instead of seeking out absolute safety of *Bitachon* or *betach*, we should pursue *Shalem* instead. *Shalem* means safe but its root letters, *Shin, Lamen, and Mem*, convey a much broader meaning.

In Gen. 33:18, "Jacob arrived שָׁלֵם (safe) in the city of Shechem which is in the land of Canaan—having come thus from Paddan-aram—and he encamped before the city."⁶ To appreciate the significance of this verse and the word *shalem*, you have to remember Jacob's history. In his youth, he had procured his brother's birthright and stole the ultimate blessing. He fled his brother's wrath and for twenty years, he married, had children, and learned what it was like to be tricked by his uncle Laban. Now, Jacob wrestled with his past, confronted his brother and they reconciled. Leaving Esau, the Torah tells us he is *shalem*, he is not only physically safe but he is whole, he is a peace.

What a lovely word *Shalem* is. What would it take for us to feel *shalem*? How can we feel at peace with ourselves and our lives, even now? I believe the key to this is purpose. It is making every day significant. Here we are gathered physically and virtually on Yom Kippur, I can't think of a better time to reflect on who we are. One of the blessings of this pandemic is that

some of us have some extra time. So what to do with it? We can use it to think about our past, ways we want to improve ourselves, and how we want to live today.

With purpose, we can choose to take care of ourselves in a holistic way that encompasses our physical, mental, psychological and spiritual wellbeing. And we can choose to embrace our Jewish timeless values that emanate from our sacred Torah that compels us to act and speak ethically, ritually connect with our sacred moments, and to uphold importance of peace in our homes and community.

And I would like to add that it is important to have joy in one's life. When we are able to have some enjoyment, our heart rate slows, our fears lessen and life is beautiful. We all need laughter, joy, and even moments of happiness. Now, this may not necessarily entail camping with booze but whatever it is that is enjoyable, I hope that after Yom Kippur, you can have something to look forward to. But mostly, to know that even without a guarantee on safety, we can still live fully, in accordance with our values, and feel *shalem* within ourselves. May we always know that life is meaningful and worthwhile even in times of uncertainty. And may we all be inscribed and sealed for a year of purpose, joy, infused with the vitality of life, and recognize the blessings that we have living today. *G'mar Hatima Tovah*. May we be sealed in the book of life.

Notes:

1 <https://upjoke.com/safety-jokes>

2 Ecclesiastes 9:4

3 Gen 34:25

4 Deut. 33:28

5 Wall Street Journal article by Walter Russell Mead, "The Pandemic is a dress rehearsal" advocates for realism. (August 4, 2020)

6 Gen. 33:18