

## Things we learned from the pandemic

Erev RH 2021

Rabbi Nancy Rita Myers

I would like to share with you some vignettes from the pandemic year:

1. My husband started working from home this week. He works at the kitchen table so he sees me and the cats repeatedly coming in for snacks. One day, he exclaims, "So, you guys just eat all day, huh?" I shake my head. He does NOT understand our office culture and I don't think he's fitting in at all.
2. The housecleaner said she was going to start working from home, so she sent me a list of chores to do
3. When working from home, for focus and mental health, it's really important to NOT just wear your pajamas! Instead, wear yesterday's clothes you grabbed off the floor
4. I made the mistake of telling my husband that one of the early symptoms of COVID 19 is a loss of smell. He's taken to passing gas in my vicinity and then when I react, he informs me that he is helping by "performing a health check." He taught the children the technique. I may divorce him.

What a crazy year and a half it's been! Let's go back to March 2020, when the floor collapsed beneath us. Covid 19 was spreading, businesses, schools, and synagogues were shutting down in rapid order like dominos falling on one another. It happened so fast. Within days, we shifted to virtual services, meetings, Jewish school, and programs. For the technologically challenged, I included, it was stressful adapting in quick order. And then many of us stopped seeing friends and even family. We would wave on Zoom, Facetime, and Skype among other applications. Many of us thought that it would all blow over in a couple of months but then we had to contend with more closures, remote working, and avoiding close contact for far longer than we ever imagined. Even worse, some of us lost our job, our livelihood, or had to get by on far less. The stress of fewer resources, in the midst of a global pandemic, was immense as some of us had to navigate how to pay the mortgage and bills. And then tragically, some of you lost loved ones to this odious virus.

What a whirlwind it has been. Perhaps now that many of us are vaccinated and have been able to resume some if not all of our normal activities and interactions, it's time to reflect on this past year or two, where we have been and what we have learned about ourselves.

For me professionally back in March 2020, I remember praying that if I was to get Covid, please don't let it be in the initial few months. Any time my throat felt a little scratchy, I became very nervous. What if it's the virus! And then psychosomatically, I could feel my cheeks get

warm. Using a thermometer, I would see that my temperature was normal. Hmmm, maybe it's just in my head. This was before easily accessible Covid tests. And then a year ago, in the summer I prayed, please God don't let me get it before or on the High Holy Days. If it's meant to be, let me get it afterwards. I was lucky in that regard. I needed and wanted to work and make sure the synagogue continued to offer everything that we could for you. Fortunately, we also have a very committed leadership, our board and staff, that believed the same and so we all worked hard to do what was possible to reach out and sustain our synagogue during this difficult time.

On a personal level, like you, I was shocked how difficult it was to procure toilet paper, paper towels and hand sanitizer. When Costco had it, I remember coming home with the large package of TP and feeling like I was a wealthy woman. I had ample rolls of bath tissue, the banality of it all. Not coincidentally, I seemed to always have extra bottles of wine. Did I really need all that cabernet sauvignon and pinot noir? It's debatable but it just made me feel better.

It was sad when we had to cancel my daughter's birthday party, when my father canceled his trip out here for Rosh Hashanah, and I canceled my trip to Buffalo for Thanksgiving. I experienced loss but that is nothing compared to those of you who had to contend with financial hardship, illness, or the loss of a loved one. My heart went out to you who couldn't even visit your relatives in hospitals or long term care facilities. It felt so cruel and inhuman to prevent the basic loving contact that we all need to thrive.

This past year and a half has been a time of trial and challenge. This morning's Torah portion is about Abraham having to face the ultimate trial, that of sacrificing his son. The opening words of this Torah portion state, "וַיִּהְיֶה אַחֲרַיִם הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַהֲאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת-אַבְרָהָם, And after these things, God tested Abraham." How did he test him? God demanded that he offer his beloved son Isaac on the altar. If we were asked, even by the Almighty, to sacrifice someone we love, we would decline. Call us heretics. We wouldn't care. However, we recognize in life, we aren't asked if we are willing to be tested. It just happens. And then we have to swim in the frigid depths of uncertainty and even despair and sadness.

In a medieval Jewish work called Pirkei d'rabbi Eliezer, we are taught that Abraham faced not one but ten trials. In the beginning, Abraham had to escape death and prison as a child. As an adult, Abraham was told to *Lech lecha*, to leave all that he was familiar with to go to a new land. Abraham's remaining trials included having to flee to Egypt to escape famine, seeing his wife seized, battling with 4 kings, envisioning our people's subsequent subjugations, having to circumcise himself at the age of 99 (ouch), sending out his son Ishmael, and the famous almost sacrifice of Isaac. That's a lot of hardship for one person. When Abraham inquires of God as to why he was put through so much since God knew what he would choose to do, God answers him that, "it was to make known to all who come to the world that it wasn't for nothing that I chose

you from all nations that I had made. It was in order to make known to them your propriety and goodness.”

This answer is not satisfying for us living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If we were laid off, the idea that God is just trying to publicize how good we are, wouldn't alleviate our distress. We wouldn't care what others think of us, just spare us the hardships and the losses. However, we know that we aren't necessarily given a choice as to the loss of our livelihood, a loved one, or our health. There are things that will happen no matter how good or pious we are. The choice we get to make, though, is what we do during these times. How do we motivate ourselves to keep trying and applying for other jobs? How do we inspire ourselves to get up in the morning and make it a productive day? How do we live so that we honor the memory of our loved ones?

It is in times of challenge, we can only do what we can to be true to who we are, our values, and to live as fully as possible. Abraham does that. His faith in God keeps him going even as he moves from Israel to Egypt and back to Israel. Abraham's belief that he will get through these trials, gives him a strength that makes God's blessings later on possible.

Our experiences, the good ones and the bad, also shape us into the people we are today. We may be a few pounds heavier, have some more gray hair and lines on our faces, but we are who we are. Hopefully, we are wiser and more grounded as a result of our past. But most importantly, we are still here.

During this past year and half, we've learned how we deal with stress. And it's been a nerve wracking year. Some strived to take on line classes, took more frequent walks, called friends often, and learned new skills. What did you do with your time? Was there anything good that arose during this past year and half? For me, I was grateful to have my kids, Gabriel and Shane, at home. I enjoyed spending time with them. Also for me, to maintain my sanity, laughter was very important. Whether being goofy at home or with you for the Inappropriate moment of humor on Friday nights, it helped me to keep things in perspective.

All of us also have had to make hard decisions as to what we were willing to do. We all draw the line in different places regarding risking contracting Covid 19 versus living fully. These are not easy decisions to make and we change our rules for ourselves and family, time and again. For me, when we had a choice whether my son would do his senior year remotely from his bedroom or go to high school in a hybrid fashion, it was an easy decision. I was more worried about his psychological/social development than the effect of Covid would have on him. And so Shane went, learned, and was in a number of drama and dance performances.

All of us on some level continue to live with uncertainty. We don't know when the virus will be contained. We don't know how our bodies will react if we contract Covid. With these unknowns, we still have to navigate our day to day life.

I heard an intriguing lecture by Rabbi Donniel Hartman, director of the Shalom Hartman Institute, many years ago about the myth of stability. He says, we work hard to ‘hold up well’ and believe that stability is a given. So much so that for some ‘stability’ has become a replacement for God. Stability, as desirable as it may be, can’t ever be counted on because life itself is in flux. And so, what do you do in times of tumult, times when the earth has been shaken?

Within Soloveitch’s theology, a twentieth century philosopher, Hartman teaches are two responses. The first one is the classic response. All is governed by God and we should look at our behavior. If things aren’t going the way we hoped, perhaps we erred in some way. Looking at Genesis chapter two, if we are suffering, we must have eaten of some kind of ‘forbidden’ fruit. Basically, we must have done something to bring on this pandemic. This model according to Hartman, can be cold, depressing, and alienating even as it emphasizes the performance of mitzvot.

On the other hand, a second model is found in the first chapter of Genesis. Here God creates us in the divine image, in essence, replaces the divine self, and then leaves the world to us. We are created but then we are on our own. The pandemic isn’t a punishment but it’s something to be dealt with on a personal and global manner. The hardships from Covid or any suffering, according to this model, Hartman would see as an opportunity for change and transformation. Instead of stubbornly holding on to the myth of stability, we can see it as an opportunity for growth. It can be an opportunity to rise up and be the best version of ourselves. It can take us out of the status quo and be a catalyst for growth.

And so I ask you, have you grown this past year? What have you learned? I learned that I can navigate through technology better than I thought. Flexibility and adaptability have become common words for me. Knowing that I can only act on what I know today and make the appropriate changes, is a good skill to have. Some of you had more time on your hands. Perhaps it was good to slow things down and not to have to race from activity to activity. Some of you did a lot reading, writing, gardening, and baking.

Most important of all, I’ve come to appreciate the power of personal relationships. Our family and friends. There are wonderful people in our lives and it’s good to be reminded not to take them for granted. First of all, seeing people in person is a far superior way to connect. However, it’s good to have other means when we cannot see each other in the flesh. Many of our loved ones live far away or we just can’t visit with them, it is then that we are fortunate to have Facetime, Skype, and other video chat aps. Making our relationships a priority can only help us live more fully whether we see one another in person or virtually.

And so we are here, on the cusp of a new year. We have faced trials and challenges and the future is unknown. We have to live in a world of uncertainty. There is no going back to the

innocence and safety of the Garden of Eden. We are in the real world, with real risk and challenge. And yet, we need to find ways to live as fully as possible and make every day matter. I believe this is why Abraham was chosen by God to be the father of our people because no matter how hard the trials were that he had to endure, he never stopped living and believing in a higher purpose. He came out of this time of hardship still being able to love his family and God. And it was because of the way he went through the trials of his life that we speak of him today. He didn't give up or give in. And we as his descendants know how to persevere even in hard times as we have throughout history.

It is with holding on to who we are and knowing what we value that we merit the blessings of Abraham. We are a people who learn from our past, live in the present, and look ahead to the future. God promised Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars up above. We look at the same night sky and we pray, that this year will be productive, healthy, and one of growth for us and our families. We hope that Covid can be contained and diminishes in its spread. In the meantime, let's cherish our interpersonal relationships and live every day with purpose and meaning.