

A More Perfect Union: Hopeful Lessons from the Pandemic

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We are running out of adjectives to describe this time. “Historic,” “Unprecedented,” “Unique,” “Remarkable,” all are getting a little old; as are some of the descriptions of our response to it. “Resiliency” has lost its luster and “Patience” is a virtue we can relate to more in its absence. I have been instructed by some close to me not to mention the word “Zoom.”

Since last we gathered for the start of the Jewish New Year, we have been afflicted in ways we could not have imagined, not even when listening to those articulated during our Yom Kippur liturgy. A global pandemic has stricken the lives of millions, a world-wide recession has crushed economies and livelihoods, millions of jobs lost, untold millions of hopes shattered. Add to that centuries of racial injustice, which brutalized in the dark, are now captured on videos for all to see; the passions they stir have led to, at times, violent unrest calling for a long overdue reckoning of societal norms. And hovering in the background is the relentless reality of Climate Change, as we see fueling the wildfires devastating Oregon, California and Washington; Climate Change which will continue to force ever greater disruptions in our world and in our civilization. These are Historic, Unprecedented, Unique times.

Of course, for the Jewish people, with a history as long as ours, with a literary trail as ancient and modern as ours, these are not unprecedented times. We have seen plague, destruction, disruption, economic and environmental devastation before. And we have written about it. In every generation we have cried out with the words of the Psalmist **מִמַּעְמְקִים קָרָאתִיךָ יְיָ!** “Out of the depths I call to you, O LORD” (Ps 130:1). For us there is truly “nothing new under the sun” (Ecc. 1:9).

But the usefulness of this longevity, depends on our willingness to remember.

A few months into the COVID-19 lockdown, I participated in a clergy panel with my colleagues at St. Mary’s Cathedral and Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in a program we called “Congregations in COVID.” We were trying to understand and discuss the effects of the pandemic on our 3 varied religious institutions. This was about a month after Easter and my friends had just had to invent the kind of experience we Jews are having today with our most sacred High Holy Days. In our conversation, Dean Nathan LeRud of Trinity described how he prepared for Easter by searching the archives of his historic institution, established as a parish 7 years before our own synagogue. Dean LeRud told us that he wanted to see how his congregation had experienced the 1918 flu pandemic, so that he could learn from their example. What he found surprised him. No record in the minutes, no descriptions, no discussion of the pandemic at all. This

despite the fact that the cumulative excess death rate in Portland from the Influenza epidemic about a century ago is thought to have been an astonishing 505 per 100,000 people.¹ By comparison the current death rate from COVID-19 in the entire United States is under 60 per 100,000.² That rate, of course, will likely rise.

How is it possible that such a dramatic event affecting the lives and livelihoods of everyone in the parish should earn no mention in the church's official records? My colleague believes that the effects were so shocking and devastating that the people wanted to collectively forget. They wanted no reference to the time of loss, and chose to move forward and engage in collective amnesia.

Of course, that is not the Jewish way. We are a people of memory, and our long history includes enough loss to inure us to even an epidemic's devastation. So, as we began preparing for the High Holidays, I decided to do the same investigation as was done at Trinity Episcopal. I contacted our friends at the Oregon Jewish Museum and Center for Holocaust Education, which holds our Temple's archives, covering over 160 years. I asked for any and all references to the epidemic of 1918 and 1919 in the Temple's records. They reported back to me. . .the same as with Trinity. Nothing. No mention of the most significant event to afflict the city at that time. Congregation Beth Israel was over sixty years old then, and record-keeping was, presumably, fairly sophisticated. And yet, nothing. Even *our* people chose to forget.

I don't want future historians to look back on this time and wonder what we experienced, how we dealt with the challenges. I want us to understand and learn from our past. And most importantly, I want to know what lessons we can take from this time and how we can rebuild differently.

I have already committed to the Museum that we will preserve all of our records, including Zoom services and life-cycle moments. Future historians might be interested in the choices we made to preserve health and safety while deeply expressing our Jewish religion and peoplehood. But it occurred to me recently that perhaps the most important documents we could preserve are not our Board Minutes or videos of our services (although we will save those). To me, one of the most important sets of records we could save, are the *d'verei Torah*, the speeches of our Bar and Bat Mitzvah celebrants. These young people who have experienced great disruption in the years-long plans for their coming of age commemoration have a view of the changed world we older adults don't quite see. They are agile with technology and are intimate with the challenged learning they are receiving through it. They see the tears in community bonds and work hard to build and maintain their own communities in their own ways. Listening to the sermons of these young people – seeing the pandemic, the isolation, the

¹ <https://www.influenzaarchive.org/cities/city-portland.html#>

² <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/mortality>

mask-wearing through their eyes has given me greater insight into the shifting landscape we are resting upon.

For their sake, for the sake of all our children and the generations to come, we cannot forget. We have to learn from this time – we have to face how unequally economic disruption falls. We have to face the chasms of justice we have carefully covered over for generations with thin layers of willful blindness. Having our world broken apart allows us to consider how we will put it back together.

For the sake of our young people: can we form a more perfect union?

The Talmud (*Taanit* 21b) tells the story of a time of plague in the Babylonian city of Sura. But – it was noticed – no plague appeared in the neighborhood of the great Rav. The people assumed that it was because of Rav’s merit, but it was soon revealed that it was not the great man who protected his neighbors – it was the kindness and decency of a simple man who quickly buried the dead, and loaned out his tools so that others could do so as well. The actions of what we would call an “essential worker” made all the difference.

The COVID-19 Pandemic has revealed that those we consider to be “essential workers,” Heroes, we call them - in medicine, food, social services, education - are often our most poorly compensated and least well protected. We honor them with nightly cheers, but are we willing to honor them with better pay, health care, child care so that they can safely do the work we all need? We pledge allegiance to a flag proclaiming “liberty and justice for all,” but are we willing to listen to those who have been intentionally excluded from this promise? We have willingly protected a system with wildly differing outcomes of liberty and justice, determined primarily by the color of one’s skin. We have perpetuated a racist system which benefits some and brutalizes others with daily indignities and violence. Modern technology, in the form of ubiquitous social media videos, has broken that system open for all to see; much as a generation ago the new technology of live television shocked the world in its culminating exposure of the brutal repression of peaceful protesters on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. From this very bimah, Representative John Lewis, of blessed memory, told us about his brutalized experience there and extolled us to get into “good trouble, necessary trouble.” TV brought these images into the living rooms of unsuspecting White middle-class folks. The reality could no longer be denied. These and previous images of peaceful protesters being met with state violence brought about the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965; fundamental, historic and at the time highly contentious legislation. What will the images of the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Daniel Prude and so many others bring us to? Civil unrest is painful to experience – even shocking and disruptive.

But it can lead us, if we are willing, to a more perfect union.

In the Mishnah, we are taught about generational responsibility:

בְּכֹל דּוֹר וְדוֹר חַיֵּב אָדָם לִרְאוֹת אֶת עֲצָמוֹ כְּאִלּוּ הוּא יֹצֵא מִמְצָרִים

In every generation a person is obliged to regard themselves as though they personally had gone forth from Egypt. (*Pesachim* 10:5)

Judaism teaches us that we have to take personal responsibility for building a future using the lessons of the past. We experience the reality of another as if it were our own, to ensure that things change.

This Pandemic has taught us, as if we didn't already know, that health care is not something to be reserved for the few who can afford it, but is a right and necessity for all. The health and safety of each individual helps protect the health and safety of all.

This Pandemic has taught us the government matters. That Science matters. That decency and empathy matter. We should demand no less from our leaders.

And most importantly, this Pandemic has taught us the importance of community. We slip so easily into tribalism, searching for ways to divide ourselves from those we consider "other." Throughout our history, we Jews have often been designated the "other." But the virus does not care about our signs, our affiliations, our artificial borders. We are all in this together. We need each other. Isolation and loneliness are greater dangers than encountering someone we disagree with, or who looks differently than us, or votes differently than us. We need to step out of our certitude and instinct to protect what we have and be vulnerable enough to see our common humanity and the responsibilities we all have for each other.

All this I hear in the sermons of our young people, coming of age in the Age of Pandemic. They know that the disruptions and tears in our society cannot be healed with band-aide bromides and vague promises for some future changes. They know that we have to put the pieces of our broken world back together differently. It is not hard to accomplish – we just have to agree on the goal: a more perfect union. A union where people are treated with equality of opportunity and equality of justice. As has happened in the past, we have seen and experienced in just a few months of plague, unequal economic devastation and demands for equal justice. Unlike our ancestors, though, we cannot close our eyes in pain and hope to forget. For the sake of our young people we have to remember. We have to do better.

As Rabbi Tafron teaches in Mishna Pirke Avot (2:16)

לא עֲלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לְגַמְרָהּ, וְלֹא אֲתָהּ בֶּן חוֹרִין לְבַטֵּל מִמֶּנָּה.

It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it

We may not do all that must be done. But, as our young people remind us, the world must change to be more inclusive, to be more just. For their sake we should strive for perfection as our nation's founding fathers dreamed – as our Torah demands. As we rebuild from the devastation of 5780, may be pledged in 5781 not to go back to the way things were, but to build together a more perfect union.