

Cave Dwellers
(Kol Nidre 2020/5781)

By Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch

Let us proclaim the sacred power of this day. It is awesome and full of dread. On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed. Who shall live and who shall die? Who shall see ripe old age and who shall be taken before their time? Who by earthquake, who by climate disasters, and who by plague? Who shall be tranquil and who troubled?

We are troubled this year. We are numb, anxious and afraid. We grieve for those taken by plague before their time. We pray that the angel of death passes over us, leaving our families in peace. We mourn the 200,000 Americans and another million worldwide who died. We weep for our brothers and sisters in the Jewish community. We pray that Israel rapidly overcomes a catastrophic second wave of COVID-19. We take into our hearts our own Stephen Wise congregants who passed away, precious souls who had so much more to live and so much more to give. We pause now in silent prayer, honoring their memory, as I invite you to mention the names of your friends and loved ones who succumbed to this awful disease.

And to the many members of our congregation who fell ill, we pray that you will see a complete and speedy recovery.

Mi sheberach avotenu v'imotenu... hu yivarech et hacholim — may the One who blessed our ancestors, restore you to health and strength. May you have a complete and speedy recovery, of body and spirit. Amen.

We have known epidemics before. The Talmud describes a plague that decimated an entire generation of Torah scholars, 24,000 disciples of Rabbi Akiva. Only five students survived. Were it not for the five, Judaism would have disappeared 2,000 years ago.

We have known sheltering-in-place before. One of the five surviving students was Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. He lived in the Land of Israel in the second century, an especially brutal period immediately following the destruction of the Second Temple. When word reached the Roman emperor that bar Yochai spoke ill of Roman rule, he and his son, Rabbi Elazar, fled for their lives, and hid in a cave. They spent 12 years there, studying Torah, praying and immersing in deep thoughts. The Talmud tells us that God miraculously provided for all their sustenance.

Their emergence from extended social isolation teaches us about our own times.

After the emperor's death, Shimon bar Yochai and his son emerged from the cave. They observed farmers planting and plowing their fields — a commonplace scene in ancient Israel. It should have been a relief for the two scholars, but their long isolation changed them. Instead of gratitude that life returned to normal, they raged at the normalcy of life. "The people are abandoning eternal life for temporal life," they complained. In other words, rather than immerse themselves in God's words, the people waste their lives on trivialities like planting crops.

Father and son, alone for so long, forgot that real life requires making a living and feeding your family. Those long years of social isolation distorted their values, obscuring a fundamental rabbinic truth:

Judaism does not denigrate daily toil. Jews sanctify the secular. Farming, tilling the land, work, daily chores are filled with spiritual potential.

The state of the world so enraged Shimon bar Yochai and Elazar that everything they looked at immediately burst into flames. Thereupon, a heavenly voice proclaimed: “Did you come out to destroy my world? Go back to the cave!”

Bar Yochai and his son spent another year in the cave. When they emerged for the second time, twelve months later, Elazar was unchanged. Everything he looked upon was set aflame. But Shimon bar Yochai had been transformed by the additional year. He extinguished every fire his son lit. The Talmud states that wherever Elazar would strike, Shimon would heal.

By the end of the 13th year, the physical effects of sheltering-in-place severely compromised bar Yochai’s health. We know this phenomenon today. Tailors report that they spend much of their time not tailoring new suits — people aren’t buying — but expanding waistlines and moving buttons to accommodate the weight gain of so many New Yorkers cooped up since March. Bar Yochai developed a painful skin ailment, perhaps from lack of sunlight. He immersed himself in healing waters. The Talmudic passage ends with Rabbi Shimon saying: “Since a miracle transpired for me, I will go and repair for others.” Since God was kind to me, I will be kind to others.

We have in this one passage two models of how to emerge from a long period of social distancing. Elazar came out distanced. He was selfish, self-absorbed, destructive, unforgiving, unsympathetic, and uninterested in the daily problems of others. He probably resented having to shelter-in-place. His father spoke ill of the Romans, not him. Bar Yochai, on the other hand, developed an innate compassion for fellow human beings. He finally understood the interconnectedness of all creation: that Torah means nothing if it does not lead to restoration, repair and relief. Eventually, Shimon bar Yochai voiced some of Judaism’s most compassionate sentiments and profound ideas: “Arrogance is akin to idolatry,” he taught. “Better that you should throw yourself into a fiery furnace, than shame another publicly.” How will we emerge from the cave — from our extended period of social isolation: Angry, impatient, selfish, self-absorbed, self-centered, narcissistic? Will we want to set the world aflame, to destroy rather than rebuild, unable to empathize with those who have had it worse? Or will we have used the time to think deeply about what we truly value in life, finding renewed meaning and purpose? Will you try to sanctify the secular? Every moment of our lives is pregnant with spiritual opportunity. Even our most mundane daily tasks can birth a new awakening.

It is not our choice to sit at home month after month. It was forced upon us. You did nothing to cause the pandemic and you cannot end it. We need to get through it, with discipline, patience and determination, with courage and dignity, emerging stronger than before. Do not begrudge these days. They may make us better. We have opportunities for deeper reflection, a second chance to clear away the inertia, the moral and emotional rot that has accumulated over time.

Judaism preaches the potential of renewal: second chances. Shimon bar Yochai got it right only the second time, not the first — and only after sheltering-in-place. His mentor and teacher, Rabbi Akiva, was illiterate until the age of 40. The leading figure of rabbinic Judaism started over later in life — the second time around, once he had time to think deeply about his future. Yom Kippur, itself, offers the prospect of starting again. “Prayer, repentance and charity temper the divine decree.”

If it is any consolation, you are not alone. The whole world is in pain. Jews do not welcome suffering. It often lessens people. They — their bodies, their ailments — assume disproportional dimensions. When you are hurting, it is difficult to think of anything else. Even a toothache dulls our emotional senses. Suffering saps our physical energy and spiritual vitality. “Too long a sacrifice can make a stone of the heart.”

Jews seek joy, happiness, peace of mind, tranquility. “Eat your bread in gladness, drink your wine in joy,” Ecclesiastes teaches. “Let your clothes always be clean. Enjoy happiness with the one you love all the fleeting days of your life.”

Tradition urges to confront suffering directly, working to diminish its scope and effect. Judaism teaches to fight evil actively. We do not advocate passivity, neutrality or resignation. Jacob wrestles with the angel all night, rather than submit. We fight back with every God-given tool at our disposal. We intervene to alleviate suffering, diminishing the impact of ecological, sociological, biological, and political catastrophes. We embrace science, technology and medicine as powerful tools to improve life. It is one reason why there are so many Jewish scientists, doctors and inventors.

Yet tradition acknowledges that we will not always prevail. We are born into a disordered world, filled with disharmony. We are mortal, vulnerable and frail. Everyone is broken inside. When we suffer, as each of us inevitably will, our faith urges to find opportunities for dignity, courage and compassion. We could never have imagined how quickly our lives would change. I wish with all my heart that this cruel pandemic would not have emerged; that these days of fear, anxiety and isolation would never have come. I wish that so many had not perished. I wish that those who we lost in our synagogue were still among us. I grieve for those who grieve. The cruelty of this pathogen causes the dead to die alone, and the mourners to mourn alone. At the very moment when most in need of embrace, two mourners, four mourners, gather alone — masked and socially distanced — to lay their loved ones to eternal rest. Even we, their rabbis, cannot embrace them. We can only offer prayers and comforting words from 10 feet away.

How cruel that the very thing we most need as human beings — human contact — is precisely what we must avoid if we are to stay safe. How absurd that flattening the curve requires flattening our lives. Human nature is the opposite: what we need when we are ill or anxious is the presence of people. Their absence exacerbates our distress. But microbes do not care about human needs. They attach to us when we attach to others.

To all who are despondent, depressed, demoralized, I want to remind you of what you already know: We will get back. This pandemic will end. All pandemics end. This one will end more quickly than those of years past. Medicine is so much more advanced. We have so many brilliant scientists and medical experts. There will be a vaccine, or effective therapeutics, or both, and our isolation will end. We will eat our bread in gladness and drink our wine in joy.

New York will be renewed — not necessarily as before. Many enterprises will not return. They will not survive. But new energy, new vitality, new creativity, new prosperity, will flow into our city upon our reaching the other side of the pandemic.

Jeremiah prophesied: *Od yiknu vatim ve’sadot u’chramim ba’aretz hazot* — “homes shall be bought again in this place.” The fields and vineyards of human initiative will produce abundant fruit. Those who seek opportunity, who yearn to maximize themselves, and interact with like-minded people, will stream back. You will see. It may take longer than we would like. There will be suffering and hardship along the

way, measured in loss of life and livelihood. But New York always comes back. New York is America. New York is the world. The energy of the city is indomitable, its ambitions irrepressible, its aspirations uncontainable, and its dreams indefatigable. Reconstructing our home will provide opportunities to rebuild in better ways, more productive, more just and fair.

I pray that emerging from the darkness of the cave, and stepping into the bright sunshine of a rehabilitating city, will restore our faith in each other. I pray that the absence of people for so long, will remind us of what we have taken for granted. That the clasp of a hand, the brush of a touch, a penetrating glance, an endearing embrace — the presence of others — these are what make life worth living.

I hope that this pandemic reminds us what Shimon bar Yochai learned during his long period of social isolation. Look how interconnected and interdependent we are! One person, visiting one market, in one city most of us had never heard of before, ignited a once-in-a-century worldwide cataclysm. What affects one, eventually affects all. Humanity is indivisible, made of the same cloth, sewed together by a common thread. United, we are immensely strong. Divided, our power turns against us.

Victor Hugo wrote that humanity is like a rope. Take the rope apart, separate it into the small threads, and you can easily break them one by one. You think, “that’s all there was?” But twist them all together and you have something tremendous.

We are social creatures. Never forget. We are bound to each other. Nothing can replace human contact: Not computers, not social media, not online learning, not working from home, not worshipping in your living room, not Zoom shivas, not Netflix, Google, Amazon, Facebook — nothing can replace human contact. “*Lo tov eyot adam levado*” — “it is not good for us to be alone.”

Of course, online is better than offline. Of course, distanced learning is better than no learning at all. Of course, online Torah is better than no Torah at all. Of course, online worship is better than no worship at all — welcome to the many thousands of virtual worshippers with us now. Blessed are you who come in the name of God. We bless you from this House of God. I cannot imagine how our synagogue would have engaged you had the pandemic erupted 20 years ago. I had never even heard of Zoom until this year.

Still, nothing our synagogue has done — and nothing anyone else has done during these long months of hibernation — can replace personal, physical connection. Do not get so used to being alone in the cave that you will become like Elazar — convincing yourself that you do not need people, that a virtual community can replace a real community. Social distancing can harden and coarsen us. Songwriter Paul Simon put it this way: “I have my books to protect me. Hiding in my room, safe within my womb, I touch no one and no one touches me. I am a rock. I am an island. And a rock feels no pain. And an island never cries.”

We praise the miracle of virtual technology. Until the pandemic ends, we depend on it to keep our heads above water. But I suspect that several years after we have emerged from the cave, even the most cutting-edge, forward-thinking for-profit enterprises will eventually cease preaching the gospel of distance. Over time, they will conclude that it is less profitable; that whatever money they might save by employees working from home, will not be worth the loss of creativity and productivity that only physical interactions can produce. We learn by observing others. A doctor learns her craft by observing other doctors. She becomes good at it by doing it with others. So what if you can draft a contract at

home? A lawyer learns to practice law through other lawyers. He becomes good at it by doing it with others.

Do not become too enamored with the power and potential of technology. Technology is a tool, not the essence. Science will cure the virus, but not our basic ailment, our existential angst. “What do we intend to do with our one precious life?” A vaccine will protect our cells, but not our souls. Medicine will end the biological pandemic. It will not end the spiritual pandemic, a world unnecessarily violent and cruel, where so many are spiritually adrift, cast aside, alone, and aimlessly bobbing in a sea of suffering and sorrow.

To cure that pandemic, we need different medicine, one that science cannot invent. We need a shot of inspiration, an injection of meaning, the sense of transcendence that lay within every human heart - what William James called “the will to believe.”

Everyone wants to believe. Everyone needs to believe. In this sense, everyone is a believer. Our knowledge of the natural world is limited. There are mysteries of existence that we will never understand. Not everything can be explained. Human reason cannot solve every problem. In fact, it often distorts. We can reason ourselves into almost anything. Even murder can masquerade as enlightened philosophy or high principle.

It is simply not true that all we need is to shine the light of science on a problem and all the answers will be clear. This is a myth, as powerful and as fantastical as the old religious myths of antiquity. Google is a titan, but so was Cronus. Amazon bestrides the narrow world like a colossus, but so did Zeus. Facebook is a behemoth, but so was Hercules.

It is not human reason alone that propels action. Love, friendship, solidarity, sympathy, mercy, humanity, righteousness, goodness, justice — these are not fundamentally rational concepts. They can be, and are, rationalized, but they are born in our heart, not our head. These are intuitions, emotions, social constructs placed upon our passionate yearning for transcendence, our will to believe. They are what make us human. We suppress them at our peril. Do not subjugate your heart to a machine. Do not prostrate your spirit to an algorithm. Do not worship at the feet of a false god.

On this Day of Atonement, we sense our human vulnerability as never before. An invisible microscopic microbe exposed our frailty and fragility.

“U’netaneh tokef kedushat ha’yom” — “let us proclaim the sacred power of this day.”

“Hinei yom ha’din” — behold, this is the season of judgement.

“Adam yissodo me’afar” — we are mortal: our origin is dust and dust is our end. We are like broken vessels, like withered grass, like a flower that must fade, a shadow moving on, a cloud passing by — mere dust on the wind, a dream that flies away.

But You, God, are forever – and you have linked Your name with ours.

King David wrote, *“chaneni Elohim, chaneni”* — “Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me. For I seek refuge in the shadow of Your wings until the danger passes. I call to God Most High, to God who is good to me. Reach down from heaven and deliver me. Send me Your steadfast love.”

David wrote this psalm inside a cave, fleeing a vengeful Saul. In social isolation, alone and afraid, the future king confessed: *“kafaf nafshi”* — “my soul is bent low.” He was not sure he could endure. “My heart convulses inside me, the terror of death assails me.”

David’s days in the cave were not coincidental to his life. They were the prelude to, and the prerequisite for, political greatness and personal fulfilment. Alone, in fear, and on the run, David broke the chains of youthful arrogance, and conditioned himself for his unique destiny. At this, the most isolated, fearful, and lonely time of his life, David found the intellectual and emotional resources he never knew he had.

“Nachon libi Elohim... nachon libi,” he wrote — “My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is firm.”
“Ura chvodi ura... a’ira shachar” — “Awake, O my soul, awake... and I will awaken the dawn.”

Dear Congregants: Remain steadfast. Even now, in the dimness of the cave, as your soul is bent low; at this, the most isolated, dark and lonely time of our lives, keep the faith. You will see the sun again. It will heal your aching body and relieve your suffering soul.

Keep a firm heart. If God was kind to you, be kind to others. If you were restored, restore others.

“Ura chvodi ura” — awaken your soul, awaken — and you will awaken the dawn.