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Congregation Emanu-El of the City of New York
Rosh Hashanah Evening 5781

“Toward the Light of a Brighter Day”

Shabbat Shalom. Shanah Tovah.

When I walked onto the bima Friday the 13th of March, the first Shabbat we closed our doors and could be together only remotely as we are tonight, I shared this tale:

Once there was a farmer, who, working in his field, heard a terrible crash followed by a splash. Running to discover the source of the commotion, he found that his donkey had stumbled into his well. The water level being low, the donkey could keep his head above it. But the shaft being deep, he could not climb out of it. The farmer, unable to lift the animal alone, called his neighbors to help. Together they lassoed the donkey, back and front, and attempted to hoist the animal out of the well. But the donkey was just too heavy.

Sensing itself trapped, the donkey began kicking violently and braying loudly. The farmers looked on helplessly, until one of them said, “We cannot allow this animal to suffer. Perhaps we should bury it.” And so each began to shovel earth into the well on top of the donkey.

When the first shovelful landed on the donkey’s back, he looked up and exclaimed, “My God they’re going to bury me alive!”

Pandemic!

I’ll return the story of the donkey; trust me it ends well. But I begin with it tonight as I began with it six months ago, because we can relate to that donkey! Even now many of us feel trapped at the bottom of an abyss with no way to climb out. And who could have imagined we would be down here so long!

During the first days of the pandemic, as the situation in New York turned so grim, we searched frantically for supplies not knowing where to find them, or even what we would need. Conflicting advice confused us and misled us. First, we were directed, “don’t wear masks”; then, “wear masks.” And as if to relieve some concern, experts assured us that the virus’s most devastating consequences would be limited to people over seventy or with weakened immune systems – which brought no comfort at all! Who among us does not have people we love in those categories if we don’t fit them ourselves?

For many, fear became paralysis. Some bolted themselves in their apartments, afraid even to go outside. Others with the option wondered whether to remain in the city where the health care would be superior but the virus was everywhere, or flee to other parts where the virus would be less rampant but the health care less certain. Children refused to visit their parents, afraid to get them sick. Grandparents seeing grandchildren – out of the question.

Then came the city and state shutdowns; next the inevitable economic consequences. Millions lost their jobs, millions more their savings. While the federal government floundered for a response, hospitals were filling up, heroes on the frontline were risking their lives without appropriate protective equipment, and the sick were dying faster than they could be buried. Our

hearts reach out to the loved ones of the two hundred thousand who have perished here at home, the more than one million around the world.

Then, when it appeared infection rates had at last begun to stabilize, came the killings of George Floyd and Rayshard Brooks, which shined new light on the earlier deaths of Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor. Indeed for a time, the nationwide protests lifted our focus from the coronavirus to a social virus centuries-overdue in its redress...before, in large measure, it drifted back to the physical pandemic. Perhaps the police shooting of Jacob Blake an inexplicable seven times in the back before his children's eyes and asphyxiation of Daniel Prude, naked and handcuffed in the falling snow, can hold our attention long enough to see this fight for racial justice through. I'll return to this theme next week.

Alone

As soon as the pandemic hit, our temple staff and volunteers began calling members to see how they were faring...and we heard the heartrending stories of sickness and loss and loneliness.

Many in our congregation contracted the disease. Some still suffer its effects. Dozens of members succumbed, and dozens more lost loved ones they could not visit as the sick lay dying in their hospital beds. For some there lingers the terrible sense of guilt at not being there. "He died alone," I heard through their tears. "I could not even say goodbye." My colleagues and I officiated at one funeral after another where family were unable even to embrace if they could attend at all. Never has six feet measured so long a distance as when a parent and child could not even hug.

And for the lonely survivors, their isolation and abandonment evoked Job's: "My relatives are gone; my friends have forgotten me...I summon my servant but he does not respond."¹

Make no mistake: there is nothing social about social distancing. *The Washington Post*, in its series "Voices from the Pandemic," shared accounts of numerous Americans including Karen Kollar, sixty-nine, of Pennsylvania: "The company of my colleagues has disappeared," she wrote, "and I find myself...parked in front of a computer for ten hours a day, with just... my cat. I am disoriented, unfocused, lonely, sad and worried...I have control of nothing....I'm existing, not living, the days going by with no sense of accomplishment."²

Experiences varied of course. Many had their hands full with the unprecedented demands of working from home while caring for children as the boundaries between professional time and personal time all but disintegrated. But others, now out of a job, feared for their futures. Retirees saw their savings decimated. Some panicked. As the clock ticked away the hours and the days and the weeks, boredom became impatience; and frustration, anger and depression. Some sought solace in addictive and other destructive behaviors.

Gloria Jackson, seventy-five, of Minnesota wrote: "A day can drag on forever when you're isolated all by yourself. I sleep as late as I can. I try not to look at the clock. It's been almost seven weeks since I've [seen] a real, live person...and it's making me start to think recklessly....I've never been this angry."³

¹ Job 19:13-16.

² *The Washington Post*, April 21, 2020.

³ *The Washington Post*, May 2, 2020.

Our children, too, were lonely; the change to their lives bewildering. Being cooped up at home, even with the people you love, isn't easy. Tempers flare. When parents get tense, kids feel it. For some, the online schooling just didn't work. And even those students who did have effective digital learning programs still remained isolated from their friends. Their b'nei mitzvah were postponed, their graduations cancelled. For many, it was as one mother described it sadly, "a lost year."

And then there were the heroes, whose sacrifice we all admired, but couldn't appreciate fully unless we lived among them.

Megan Boedicker, twenty-six, of Colorado was one: "I am a [volunteer] nurse in a covid-19 intensive care unit," she wrote. "Recently...we had a new patient crash in...a...man in his sixties [in] cardiac arrest...covid-19-positive....His terrified daughter...unable to...visit him because of the restrictions...kept calling for updates. Her father had been safe and...healthy the last time she saw him, just twenty-four hours prior. I explained to her that his heart was likely to stop and [that] we could either continue trying to revive him or...let him peacefully pass away. She...started...sobbing and...repeating, "I don't understand. Why did this happen?"...She...ultimately [told us to]...let him [go]...I asked her if she would [like to] FaceTime...so that she could...say goodbye....I wanted him to be surrounded by love as he died. As we pulled his breathing tube...his daughter talked to him and thanked him for raising her, supporting her and...loving her. His heart rate began to drop....I closed my eyes, [and cried]....Time of death was...12:06 a.m. I had seven hours left in my shift."⁴

"From Whence Cometh My Help?"

"Where shall wisdom be found?"⁵ Job lamented in the face of his own tragic loss. "From whence cometh my help?"⁶ echoed the psalmist. As the pandemic forced us apart physically, intuitively we knew the answer.

Professor Gwendolyn Seidman of Albright College explains that in moments of overwhelming anxiety, human beings seek meaning in relationships, in community, and in faith.⁷

In relationships. We are, as renowned psychologist Elliot Aronson described us a generation ago, "social animals." A recent MIT study actually revealed that isolation and fasting trigger similar human neural responses; we hunger for contact much as we do for food.⁸

We need other people. So despite our separation, we found ways to connect. We had cocktails over FaceTime, Google Hangouts dinner parties, and Zoom seders. People began calling friends long out of touch, college roommates, even old sweethearts. Dormant relationships were rekindled, lingering grievances forgiven.

The Wall Street Journal published the story of Valarie Davis and her once-close sorority sisters. Their half-hearted efforts to stay connected over the years had failed. Then the

⁴ *The Washington Post*, April 21, 2020.

⁵ Job 28:12, 20.

⁶ Psalm 121:1.

⁷ Ashley Fetters, "The Boomerang Exes of Quarantine," *The Atlantic*, April 16, 2020.

⁸ Anne Marie Chaker, "The Irony of Isolation: Reconnecting with Friends During the Coronavirus Lockdown," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 14, 2020.

pandemic brought them back together over Zoom. “It wouldn’t have happened if this crisis hadn’t happened,” she admitted.⁹ Together they shared the milestones in each other’s lives they had missed.

We also turned to our communities. And for many of us, that meant Temple Emanu-El. Indeed when the synagogue’s physical doors shut, its virtual doors opened wide, a wonderful partnership of staff and lay leaders ensuring that the temple would not only be present for our members but set a standard in online Jewish opportunities.

Registration for Streicker Center events burst through the roof. Interest grew in our nursery and religious schools, our teen and family programs, our young professionals and membership gatherings. And attendance at worship services, both Shabbat and daily, increased three to fourfold. Yes, it may be easier to participate from home, wearing pajamas. But that doesn’t explain why so many people did. With all the options on television and the internet to occupy our time, logging in to spiritual community represented a deliberate choice.

It is said that once, on the eve of the New Year, the moon was hidden so the Baal Shem Tov could not go out to bless it. In vain he concentrated his power on the light of a single star to cast off the cover of clouds. But the sky only grew more lowering, until finally he gave up hope. In the meantime his Hasidim, knowing nothing of the Baal Shem’s grief, had assembled in his house to dance. Taking the Besht by the hands, they drew him into the round. And just then came the call from outside: the sky had cleared; the moon had appeared.

Community can lift away the darkness.¹⁰ And Temple Emanu-El will continue to, offering our hands to congregants withering under the weight of these anxious times, and drawing together members with common interests and needs.

Through human community, Martin Buber taught, we connect to the sacred in life.

But what of those moments when darkness conceals those hands reaching out to support us? From whence cometh our help?

Grieving the loss of all he loved and all he owned, and rejecting the notion that he somehow merited his fate, Job suddenly interrupts his own soliloquy with a startling self-realization: “The righteous who cleave to their path...grow stronger.”¹¹ In the midst of his suffering, Job feels strength surging within him.

Strength courses within us. Often we do not know our own mettle until we are tested. Only in the midst of our troubles, do we marshal the fortitude we possess. I have witnessed so many of you carry on, tenaciously, one day at a time, one step at a time, in pain and illness, through uncertainty, after loss. From somewhere within, you have tapped a resilience that restores you...and rallies those around you.

We do replenish our spirits when we extend ourselves to others. I think of those isolated temple members who beat back their own loneliness by making phone calls or leading our daily sunset service; and our “Stich n’ Time Knitzvah Corps” which spent the pandemic sewing caps and sweaters for New York City’s homeless. One volunteer, a survivor of polio and World War Two laughed, “I’ve also woven fourteen scarves, but I’m running out of yarn!”

⁹ Anne Marie Chaker, “The Irony of Isolation: Reconnecting with Friends During the Coronavirus Lockdown,” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 14, 2020.

¹⁰ Adapted from “The Strength of Community,” in Martin Buber’s *Tales of the Hasidim*.

¹¹ Job 17:9.

They discovered what Job had: through compassion and righteousness we grow stronger. Through our faith in the principles of honesty, civility and decency we grow stronger. Through our devotion to this country we grow stronger – our country, reeling from a disaster our President and others denied then minimized, and now cynically politicize mocking the science behind it and defying the public health measures that could control it! Let our concern for the future of our nation invigorate us!

And let us draw strength from the unrelenting force of Jewish history. We are a people acquainted with hardship and loss but most of all with hope. Judaism was made for moments like this. When the Babylonians exiled us from the spiritual center of our world, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel sustained us with prophecies of return. When the Romans destroyed the Second Temple, the rabbis nourished us with new rituals of daily prayer. In the poverty and persecutions of Eastern Europe, the Hasidic masters preached that God could be found everywhere by anyone with faith or the desire for it. And just look how we have answered the coronavirus. More of us have joined in worship today than ever before. In response to every challenge, every trauma, our tradition has grown more inspiring, more durable, more resilient. And so can we.

And finally, let us know because we choose to believe it, that no matter how isolated, how dismayed, how depleted we may feel, God never abandons us. The fortitude in the face of heartbreak and determination to keep living; the hand outstretched to hold us and the shoulder we lend to others; the courage to march for justice and conviction to speak the truth; the unyielding resolve to find light amidst darkness – if we believe God the wellspring of such strength, then we know *Emanu-El*, that “God is with us.”

Toward the Light of a Brighter Day

What these uncertain times demand of us, above all else, is faith – faith in our own power, whatever its source, to persevere.

So I return to the story of the donkey.

The first shovelful of dirt landed on the animal’s back, and he shook it off. But as it fell to the ground, it absorbed some of the water at his feet. So he shook off the second shovelful, and the ground became firmer still. Shovelful after shovelful the donkey shook the earth from his back. And as the ground beneath him began to rise, the donkey climbed higher and higher until finally he emerged from the well and galloped off into the field.

Yes, we have lived through terribly dark days, and the months ahead may be difficult too. But tonight we arrive at the threshold of a New Year, together climbing toward the light. Let this Rosh Hashanah rekindle our spirits. Then, nourished by love and friendship, inspired by our commitments and ideals, sustained by faith in God and in ourselves, we will stride ahead into 5781. May it be a better year, a brighter year, for us all.

Amen.