

From Rabbi Kogan...

Dear Friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center,

On March 13th, as we marked one year from the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Silvia and I shared some thoughts with the congregation during Shabbat morning services.

Aren't you curious to know what will be the new normal after COVID? How many things will come back and in which form? Are we finding that Zoom meetings are convenient, especially during a snowstorm? Are our lives quieter and more relaxed since we are not running from one place to the other? Are we finding pleasure in life's little things? How were your own experiences during this last year? What did you miss? What things didn't you miss?

Tomorrow, March 14th, marks a year since the COVID lock down. Many things have changed, and many of these changes are here to stay. The good and the not so good. The convenient and the inconvenient. A new normal is setting in and designing our lives.

I recently read an article that talked about "Pandemic Guilt." Have you heard this term? First time for me! But as I read it, it really resonated with me.

"Pandemic Guilt" is the feeling of unworthiness that some people are experiencing for being blessed with good health while others suffer during the pandemic. Leave it to a Jew to feel guilty! We could call it Jewish Pandemic Guilt!

While many of us have been blessed with health, family, a healthy home environment, financial security during the pandemic, there is still an underlying, invisible type of suffering that we endured even while we also enjoyed these many blessings. We missed traveling to visit our parents, we missed celebrating graduations and milestones, we missed being with our loved ones during their final moments. We missed coming to shul and schmoozing over a bagel.

Reality hit us a year ago, and made us grow suddenly. Psychologists call it "post-traumatic growth." The Harvard Business Review has an interesting article by Richard G. Tedeschi about it. I'll share with you a few of its main points

"What good can come of this? In times of stress, crisis, or trauma, people often ask that question. This year we've been hit by a pandemic that has caused hundreds of thousands of deaths, unprecedented unemployment, and a global economic downturn. In the face of such a tragedy—personal and collective—it might appear that the answer is "Nothing." However, at some point we will be able to reflect on the long-term consequences of this terrible time and what it

has wrought for each of us as individuals and for our organizations, communities, and nations.

We've learned that negative experiences can spur positive change, including a recognition of personal strength, the exploration of new possibilities, improved relationships, a greater appreciation for life, and spiritual growth.

So despite the misery resulting from the coronavirus outbreak, many of us can expect to develop in beneficial ways in its aftermath. One of the ways that this post traumatic growth can be facilitated is through Service. People do better in the aftermath of trauma if they find work that benefits others—helping people close to them or their broader community or victims of events similar to the ones they have endured. This way you are simply expressing gratitude and showing compassion and empathy to others”

We read in this week's parsha:

“Take from yourselves a portion for Hashem, everyone who is generous of heart shall bring it.” (Exodus 35-5), and “And let all among you who are skilled come and make all that the LORD has commanded.” (Exodus 35-10), and finally, “And everyone who excelled in ability and everyone whose spirit **moved him** came, bringing to the LORD his offering for the work of the Tent of Meeting and for all its service and for the sacral vestments.” (Exodus 35:21).

If God is asking you to bring the very best you have to offer, what would you bring? What is special about you? How can you use it for a higher purpose? One of the things that the pandemic showed us this last year is that we don't need to have special superpowers to help our isolated friends and neighbors. Like in the building of the Mishkan, we all contributed according to our possibilities. We saw people running errands for others, grocery shopping, picking up medicines, making phone calls to check on someone who was alone and afraid, first responders going to work at the risk of their own lives, last responders working non-stop to assure that people would have a proper funeral.

Indeed, our spirits were moved and each one here has been generous of heart. We did it. We built a modern Mishkan, right here.

Silvia Surazski Kogan

Many times, when people talk about how COVID-19 is affecting them, they use the expression, “We are all on the same boat!”

Truth being told, however, we might be in the same storm, but not everybody is in the same boat. Using the boat metaphor, while some people might be fending the storm in a 100 foot yacht, others are struggling to keep their rowboat afloat.

COVID-19 is affecting all of us. However, it is not being affected in the same way one who was able to leave Manhattan with his wife and move for 6 months to a country home upstate, as someone who is living with 3 or 4 children in a small apartment in the Bronx. People with pre-existing medical conditions had a harder time than people who otherwise were healthy. There are those who lost their job and didn't have their basic needs covered. People with access to technology fared better than those without. Many elderly people were locked for months in a nursing home without being able to see their children, and many of us couldn't say our last goodbye to our loved ones who passed away during this last year. Many people got sick with COVID-19 and many died from it. The words of Unetaneh Tokef still resonate in our ears: "how many shall pass away and how many shall be born, who shall live and who shall die, who in good time, and who by an untimely death..."

As we all look forward with optimism to better days ahead, we remember those who succumbed to COVID-19, over two and a half million people, including over half a million in our country alone, and including three beloved members of Hillcrest Jewish Center: Pazia Siev, Irving Goldberg, and Joseph Levine, may their memories be for a blessing. While I write these names I am being reminded that loss and pain are never anonymous; they always have names and faces, even when we don't know these names or these faces.

May Hashem give all of us strength, to make a difference in our lives and in the lives of others, and may we all enjoy very soon brighter days ahead.

Rabbi Manes Kogan