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COVID-19 Column

Dearest congregants and friends,

Life sure has increased its efforts to teach us all to value each and every day, to live each day to the fullest, and not to assume anything will be the same tomorrow! This global, total lockdown happened so suddenly, without warning. And yet, despite all the weirdness and uncertainty, we all have so much to be thankful for, including our beautiful Beth Jacob community which is working so hard to keep us all connected and cared for through this whole experience!

This Shabbat is Shabbat HaChodesh, where, under normal circumstances, we would take out two Torah scrolls. In the first we would read the regular weekly portion (Vayak'hel-Pekudei), and in the second the passage from Shemot (Exodus) where God commands Moses and the Israelites to prepare for the first Pesach. It opens with the words, "This month (Hachodesh hazeh) will be for you the first of the months."

Up until this point, Tishrei, the month with Rosh Hashanah, was considered the first of the months. From the exodus onwards though, the Israelites were to consider Nisan as the first of the months. Nisan is half a year after Tishrei, so according to this recalibration, the beginning of the year now occurs on the first of the seventh month!

This was done though to emphasize the significance of these events – slavery and exodus – in our collective Israelite lives. Our people were not the same after living through these experiences, and it warranted a big change in our yearly rhythms forever.

It seems clear to me that we are now living through a similar historical moment. After COVID-19, humanity will not be the same as it was before. Perhaps we will start to count months from the day the global quarantine is lifted, or perhaps we will start to count years from the time we find the cure and can go back to a normal semblance of communal life.

In the HaChodesh section, we read the commandment to place blood on the insides of the Israelite door frames, to keep the plague out. "They must take the blood and place it on the two doorposts and on the beam above the door of the houses in which they will eat the sacrifice... I will pass through Egypt on that

night, and I will kill every first-born in Egypt, human and animal. I will perform acts of judgement against all the gods of Egypt. I alone am God. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are staying. I will see the blood and pass you by ('pasach'). There will not be any deadly plague among you when I strike Egypt." (Ex. 12:7,13) And again later, "...Touch the beam over the door and the two doorposts with some of the blood in the basin. Not a single one of you may go out the door of their house until morning." (Ex. 12:22) Those regulations sound eerily similar to how we are being instructed to disinfect everything and stay inside our homes to protect ourselves from the current plague.

If we see the similarities, we can have faith and hope for a similar resolution as well. The miracle of the exodus happened in the blink of an eye when they were unprepared. They didn't even have time for their bread to rise. Hopefully this will happen with us too, and we'll all be able to return to relatively normal lives much sooner than we now fear it will be. I'm placing my bet on Israeli medical research!

Our regular weekly portion, Vayak'hel-Pekudei, speaks of the completion of the construction of the Mishkan / tabernacle, the portable temple the Israelites used while wandering in the desert. Once again I suppose we find ourselves in tabernacle mode, where we have to take our worship out of our synagogue building and into our homes for the foreseeable future. Perhaps it's comforting that Judaism by design is rather portable and has experience being performed in makeshift structures. Shira and I are working hard, day and night, to make sure you have spiritual content from Beth Jacob right in your homes daily. The structure may be changed for the moment, but the ruach (spirit) of the beautiful Beth Jacob family which we all are lucky to share, remains intact.

I look forward to seeing you all on Zoom today at 5:30pm! (Remember to sign up in advance!)

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Hillel Lavery-Yisraeli.



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