I began learning Masechet Shabbat against the backdrop of the Corona Crisis, as I gradually realized that people all over the world were being asked to accept upon themselves an extended period of resting, retreating, and desisting from labor. Here in Israel, the Ministry of Health issued increasingly stringent guidelines every few days regarding the extent to which we were permitted to leave our homes and engage socially: No gatherings of over 100 became no gatherings of over ten which became no minyanim and no unnecessary social interaction with anyone outside one’s own family. First the schools were shuttered, then the restaurants and malls were closed, and then we were told not to leave home unless absolutely necessary. And so it was while increasingly confined to the private domain of my home that I learned the first chapter of tractate Shabbat, which begins with a discussion of the limits placed on our interactions with people outside.

In the Torah, one of the defining features of Shabbat is the injunction to stay put: “Mark that the Lord has given you Shabbat… Let everyone remain where he is. Let no one leave his place on the seventh day” (Exodus 16:29). One of the thirty-nine labors prohibited on Shabbat is that of carrying an object from one domain to another. The rabbis of the Talmud explain that there are four domains—public, private, an in-between domain known as a Carmelit, and a Mekom Petor which is none of the above—and it is prohibited to carry from a public domain like the city square to the private domain of one’s home and vice versa. During the past few weeks of tightening restrictions, each passing day has felt more and more like Shabbat. As the reality of this pandemic increasingly set in, I realized that each time I left my home, I was potentially carrying germs that could infect those around me; and each time I returned home from outside, I was potentially carrying germs that might infect my family. I found myself fearing that I might unwittingly be a carrier, and that no amount of handwashing or sanitizing would save the people I love or the communities I am a part of from the threat of contagion.

The opening pages of tractate Shabbat describe a series of hypothetical exchanges between a poor man standing outside a house, and the homeowner inside. May the poor man reach his hand into the house so that the homeowner might place food in his basket? May he take food out of the homeowner’s hand? That is, to what extent are we permitted to engage with those around us who might need our help, or who might be able to help us? I have thought about this question often in the past few days, as I’ve tried to “reach out” to friends in far more difficult situations than my own – single moms isolated at home with young kids, unmarried friends living alone, an octogenarian friend from the pool who is now confined to her assisted living facility. It is more difficult to make contact without contact, but I am learning how to extend my proverbial basket. This week my son taught me how to host a zoom meeting, my twins davened with their first grade teacher on whatsapp video, and I called a few friends I have not spoken with in months. I would like to be able to extend a real hand, but the Corona virus is transmitted rampantly when people use their hands and touch surfaces that have been contaminated. Perhaps it should not come as a surprise, then, that the hand of a person has a unique halakhic status and is considered neither like the public nor like the private domains (3b). The Talmud teaches (Shabbat 14a) that the sages decreed that hands are ritually impure because they are “preoccupied” – they tend to touch dirty or impure objects. That is, our hands are not ours alone, because they bear the traces of everything in the public domain that we as private individuals have touched.

The discussion of carrying in and out of the house on Shabbat begins with the cryptic assertion that these laws are “two which are four” (2a). That is, although the Bible stipulates only two scenarios involving carrying into and out of the home, these cases multiply to four in rabbinic law – an exponential expansion reminiscent of the rate of Corona’s transmission. Each day we check the news, concerned and alarmed by how quickly the number of cases continues to rise. And that is not all – v’lo zo bilvad – because the exponential growth in cases is matched by the exponential growth of our own realization of the magnitude of this calamity. Again and again I find that yesterday’s deliberations are rendered irrelevant by today’s policies. Should we send our kids to school after Purim, we wondered? And then the very next day, school was canceled. Should we take our kids for their annual dentist appointment, we asked each other? And then the very next day, the Health Ministry issued a new policy advising against all non-emergency medical and dental visits. Was it safe to take our mop top son for a much-needed haircut? Clearly not, if we were not supposed to leave the house. Now we are told that only “essential businesses” may remain open, and I find myself thinking about the list of prohibited activities stipulated in the mishnayot of the first chapter of tractate Shabbat: “A person may not sit before the barber… A person may not work in a tannery…. The tailor may not leave the house with his needle, nor the scribe with his quill” (9b, 11a). The Mishnah is speaking about activities that are forbidden too close to the time for Minchah, or on the eve of the Sabbath, lest a person come to miss the time for prayer or perform labor on Shabbat. These are precautionary measures, much like the Corona policies: No haircuts. No shopping. No library visits. We can feel the impending darkness, but it descends not with the angels that visit on the Sabbath eve, but with the specter of the angel of death.

Corona, like all aspects of germ theory, requires a leap of faith. We cannot see the droplets that may be infecting others when we touch a doorknob or hug a friend or sneeze into our elbows. And yet we are expected to respond with extreme measures. We are being asked to desist from most forms of labor, to stay inside our homes, to spend time only with our families. But if so many people are not working, we wonder, won’t the economy come to a grinding halt? Is the threat of Corona so dire as to warrant such a drastic cessation of productive and creative human activity? In the first of this week’s parshiyot, Vayakhel, Moses interrupts the inventory of objects and materials used in the construction of the Mishkan to remind the people of the sanctity of Shabbat. One might have thought that the productive labor of building the Mishkan would override the commandment to keep Shabbat, but this is not the case. The mention of Shabbat interrupts the detailed discussion of the Mishkan to teach that on Shabbat, all such labors must be ceased. Shabbat, like Corona, is a matter of such great magnitude that it overrides regular human activity. Avivah Zornberg notes that in Parshat Vayekhel, the commandment to keep Shabbat precedes the discussion of the Mishkan as if to suggest that “the effect [of Shabbat] is not simply counteractive, but prophylactic.” We stay indoors and keep away from our workplaces not just in response to Corona, but in an attempt to reduce its spread.

And so we are home with our families, working by Zoom in button-down shirts and pajama bottoms in a surreal reality in which the second half of Adar is more topsy-turvy than the first. My husband and I speak of the period of our lives before Purim as B.C.E. – Before the Corona Epidemic. My kids fantasize about what they will do “acharey HaKorona” – after this virus at last has passed and they can go to the park and see their friends again. I sleep five hours a night, not because I’m restless and insomniac, but because I relish the early-morning and late-night hours when the kids are not underfoot. Often when I wake before dawn or stay up past midnight, it is to learn daf yomi – in bed on my cellphone, on the couch with an open Gemara, by podcast as I take a solitary walk through the darkness. As I near the end of my second cycle, I am grateful to have daf yomi as one of the few constants in my life when so much normalcy has been suspended. Shabbat lasts 25 hours, but the length of “Chufshat HaKorona” is indefinite. Each week in Lecha Dodi we welcome Shabbat with the words, “Arise! Get up! Your light is coming.” I pray that by the time we conclude the last chapter of tractate Shabbat, the chapter that begins with the words “one on whom darkness descended” (מי שהחשיך), the light will have come at last so that we may arise and get up – and go out.

<https://ilanakurshan.com/2020/03/19/daf-yomi-in-the-time-of-corona/>