# **COVID 19 Sermon by Rabbi Rosenstein**

**Everyone here right now is affected by the current pandemic of Covid-19 coronavirus. I want to share with you some thoughts I have gathered together with the help of my fellow rabbis, to help us manage this confusing time where information changes at the speed of light, and confusion, anxiety, uncertainty and fear are becoming the norm.**

**I will divide this conversation into three parts beginning with some spiritual approaches and insights that I hope will bring some degree of calm and comfort during this trying time. Then, I’d like to move to some practical ideas and then put everything into a Jewish context, since we are, after all, Jews.**

**Let’s begin by listing some of our worries that are only made worse by this pandemic: We have elderly loved ones or are we are elders in our own right. We have pregnant women or newborns in our lives all of whom are statistically at greater risk for contracting COVID19. We are worried about being cut off from our community – our homeowners’ clubhouses are shut down; synagogues are closing until after Pesach; scheduled Hadassah events are cancelled or postponed, cruises, zoos, concert venues, legitimate theatres even some libraries are closing. People are afraid to get together for the weekly card game, etc.**

**The stock market is in a state of flux. You might be panicked because you see your retirement savings evaporating. Some of you have no insurance, or are under-insured, or work by the hour. You are either working less and less or are compelled to put in extra hours because your employer’s needs have intensified. Let me offer you this: I see you; I feel you and I acknowledge the depth of your concerns.**

**What’s a person to do? Having no crystal ball before me, and not being able to predict the future, I can only say, I’m not entirely sure. But I have some helpful spiritual approaches to share.**

 **#1 – Stop for a moment, just sit and take an accounting of where you are – not your physical space, but where you are between your ears and in your kishkes. Tell yourself the truth about what most concerns you.**

**See if you can find the place in your body where the pain, worry or fear is. Focus on that point and take some long deep breathes. If the place of pain and worry can be touched, place your hand there, continue with the deep breathing and bring compassion and acceptance to yourself at this moment. Accept where you are emotionally right now. Sit, breathe, accept your own feelings – what ever they may be, even if they are ever changing. Also know – you are not alone. Thousands of us, maybe millions, are experiencing these same exact feelings.**

 **#2: Work With the Fear you have. This comes courtesy of a wonderful teaching by Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav (1772-1810). He said:**

***The whole world is a very narrow bridge;******the important thing is not to make yourself afraid.*** *(****Likutei Moharan (II:48))***

**We are on a narrow bridge right now.** **Not sure what tomorrow will bring.**

**Uncertain about the present: Who is contagious? What should I cancel?**

**Rebbe Nachman’s “narrow bridge” wisdom has often been mistranslated as “don’t be afraid” – but that is not correct. The Hebrew is written in the reflexive tense and that makes all the difference to our understanding. Here’s the Hebrew:**

***k’she-adam tzarikh la-avor gesher tzar m·od, ha-k’lal v’ha-ikkar shelo yit-paheid k’lal.***

**It means “don’t make yourself afraid.” That’s different than “don’t be afraid.”**

**Rebbe Nachman acknowledges that fear exists. He teaches that we should not make it worse by “en-fearing” ourselves. What does that compound word mean?**

**It’s the kind of thinking we do without even realizing it. It’s when we allow the stories in our mind to take us into extensive land of “what if’s.” It’s when we jack up our fear, unnecessarily. For example –**

***“My husband is 76 and has diabetes. Suppose he gets sick? What if there aren’t enough nurses in his assisted living facility to help him? What if she goes to the emergency room and they don’t have tests? Imagine if the hospital has no beds?…..etc etc etc****.* **In this way, our brains ratchet up our anxiety, going from one to ten in a microsecond.** **A certain amount of fear and concern is necessary for our survival. Too much, though, can be unhealthy. Neuroscientists have** **learned** **that excessive negative thinking can affect healthy brain function. These times call for clear-thinking and good decision making. To do that we need the healthiest of brains, ever!**

**Therefore, it is imperative to begin to notice when we are telling ourselves a story about the future that we** ***do not yet know*, thereby increasing our anxiety and fear.**

**Stay with what you know now. Yes, be prepared. Take what actions you need to be safe and make plans for yourself and your loved ones and perhaps your neighbors. But stay in the territory of what you know now, and pull yourself off the ceiling when you begin to spin out.** **Don’t “en-fear” yourself. I cannot emphasize these words strongly enough, so I will repeat them: REPEAT paragraph.**

**Now to the practical: Be a blessing to yourself and your community – wash your hands with soap and water excessively – at least for 20 seconds. Some people are washing up upon entering the shul. I wont complain. We are all washing before our Oneg and Shabbat Kiddush lunch. We have food service gloves for those of us who do our food prep. Our challah does not cut that well, so I’m going to glove up before I tear the challah. We have decided that displaying the challah and cookies in a particular way where people can touch ONLY the piece they will take and eat, is even better than using communal tongs. DO NOT TOUCH ANYTHING THAT YOU ARE NOT GOING TO PUT ON YOUR PLATE. We really have to pay attention to our habits. Many of us touch different cookies or challah in search of exactly the piece we want. That will not work right now!**

**If you blow your nose during services, please, put your tissue in the trash and go wash your hands. If you want, after services help us by wiping down your prayer books and chumashim before you put them in the bookcase.**

**Away from the shul If you are going to hoard toilet paper, water or food, think to buy enough to share it with someone who can’t get to the store and can’t do their amount of hoarding! If you are going to stock up on chametz before Pesach – instead of empting your pantry to it’s bare chometz- bones, DO think about those in our community who might not have the pantry space, money or wherewithal to pick up those bags of rice, pasta and/or beans or other perishables that can sustain them should they be quarantined once Pesach is over. I’m not suggesting that your hoard. We can all drink tap water in this community, even if we don’t love the taste of it. Leave some toilet paper for the next guy, ok? Also, I’m also not suggesting that you stock up on chometz before Pesach, but if you do, think of those who with whom you can share your largess. And for goodness sake, don’t for get to sell your chometz to a non-Jew or the me as your agent, before Pesach, so you are not in violation of having chometz in your home during the yontif.**

**Here’s the last of the three topics we need to cover today: Where are we as Jews with all of this? What is the Jewish context? We have an obligation of observing the mitzvah of pikuach nefesh – the principle in Jewish law that the preservation of human life overrides virtually any other religious rule. That is why you are seeing so many larger congregations closing its doors until after Pesach. I never thought I’d say this, but I am so, so glad that we are a small congregation. Even as we observe “social distancing” we can still meet as a kehillah! Who knew there was an advantage to being so small! But seriously – while it is true that our primary obligation as Jews is to preserve life – in this case via fanatic 20 second hand washing and social distancing, as your rabbi, I have to consider the psychological ramifications that befall those who find themselves forced into isolations, not because they are ill, but because their daily activities are suddenly and indefinitely unavailable to them. The preservation of their souls matters too. Depression, fear and anxiety run rampant when those of us with a less than a robust mental constitution can no longer live a routine and orderly life. Human contact is important for all people, psychologically robust or not,. But for those who struggle on a daily basis with the dark clouds of depression or even mild dysthymia, social isolation is a trigger for disaster I do not want foisted upon them. In great part that is why I am extremely reluctant to close the shul. Mental health is as important as physical health. Depressed people frequently will themselves into physical illness and they become more and more depressed as they self-isolate. As your rabbi, it is my job to find the balance between the provisos of the CDC and other reputable health organizations and people’s real but objectively unwarranted fears. It’s a tough call, but that’s what leadership is all about. So for now, we will keep meeting, reduce our touch time by not shaking hands hugging or kissing. We can greet one another by saying hello and smiling with both our mouths and eyes. Nod our head, elbow or foot bump…which ever method you like best. You can sit as far apart from each other as you please. We certainly have enough room for that!! So until things change – this is our action plan. Remember, use the two spiritual techniques I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon 1) assess and accept where you are emotionally and 2) work to not “En-FEAR” yourself. These are essential tools available to us all as we navigate the white water rapids called the COVID19 pandemic. Be prepared, but learn how to not make yourself more afraid. Above all, know that we are abundantly blessed to have each right now in this time of uncertainty. We are small but mighty. We may struggle, but there’s nothing wrong with that. We shall prevail and come out stronger for it in the long run.**

K**en y’he ratzon – so may it be. Shabbat Shalom!**