

self

## What Happens When the Cantor and Her Family Get Covid-19

By Rebecca Moses May 5, 2020



I'll admit it, when the rumors first circulated about needing to stay at home due to coronavirus, I was not that upset. The winter had been beyond busy, and I thought that being forced to stay in one place might allow me — OK, *force me* — to slow down a little and focus on my family.

I'm a cantor, and the week before the physical shutdown of our synagogue building on March 13 was one of the busiest weeks of my professional life. I felt pulled in at least eight different directions and I may have run myself down a bit. Also, my 4-year-old son was already home sick. It was nothing, really, just a cold, and I didn't think anything of it when my husband got a cold, too. Then my daughter, 7, spent a couple of days feeling less than her usual awesome self, and eventually, I too, caught the family cold. Or so I thought.

My son and daughter bounced right back, as children do. But my husband started to exhibit strange symptoms of loss of taste and smell. That, combined with the fact my cold just wasn't getting any better — it was actually getting worse — led our doctor to believe that it might be Covid-19. She told us to assume we did and to stay in place; tests were needed for first responders and those in much worse shape than us.

So, we stayed home, and for a couple of weeks my husband and I grappled with an array of symptoms that really took the wind out of our sails — he couldn't taste and smell things, while I just couldn't seem to catch my breath or stop coughing for more than a few minutes at time. We are among the lucky ones who had presumably contracted Covid-19 and will recover. That said, even the mild symptoms we experienced were not for the faint of heart.

I have spent my life training to do two things: to sing and to help people. My small bout with this awful virus has robbed me temporarily of my ability to do both.

As a singer, I have spent more than 30 years talking and thinking about breathing. That's really all that singing is: manipulating your breath so that you can make music. Breathing is largely an involuntary process, so it takes imagination and science and art to make the whole thing work. That's why it takes time and effort to sing well. But Covid-19 attacks the lungs, and for weeks I couldn't take a proper breath. The relentless coughing left my throat raw, and my inability to draw a full breath meant that no song could come out of my mouth. I spent many hours wondering: If I couldn't sing, could I still be me?

Plus, as a cantor, I've spent years cultivating my skills as a teacher and a pastoral presence, someone who draws upon our beautiful traditions to help in times of crisis. Since Covid-19 had stolen the breath right out of me, it robbed my ability to have any sort of conversation. I was unable to make phone calls without breaking down into paroxysms of coughing, causing *more* concern for the people I was calling, rather than offering comfort. I was so exhausted from just trying to take each individual breath that I couldn't focus on what anyone was telling me. I couldn't teach classes and I wasn't able to be the partner to my colleagues that they needed and deserved. Basically, I was unable to be of any use to anyone.

So, what is a hard-headed, hard-working, mom and cantor supposed to do when confronted with the fact that she cannot be any of the above at the moment? I had to follow some of the advice that I had been giving for years: I needed to slow down and take a break. This, I quickly realized, is easier said than done. Like so many of us, I am accustomed to operating at full speed. However, life sometimes pulls us up short and teaches us a few things, maybe even in unpleasant ways. Here are a few, but certainly not all of the things I learned while I was NOT on vacation with Covid-19.

## 1. I cannot do it all!

I know, this may seem obvious. After all, we know somewhere deep in our hearts that we are *not* the human equivalents of that Energizer bunny. But popular culture is stacked against the modern working mom: We are told time and again that, not only *can* we have it all, we *should* have it all — and it's our fault if we don't. As a result, we are full-time workers, full-time wives, and full-time mothers. That's three full-times and I'm pretty sure that's mathematically impossible.

So, when I got sick, something had to give. I had to stop trying to do it all. Thankfully, with the support of my colleagues, I was to step away from work and focus on getting better. It sounds so simple, and yet it is not. Being the cantor of a large synagogue in the midst of a crisis, you would expect a grumble or two, and perhaps there were a few, but I never heard them. All I heard and saw were the texts and emails of support and care, the packages dropped on my doorstep of activities and snacks for my kids, and the looks of relief when I was finally able to get back on a staff call, even if only for a few moments. I couldn't do it all, but I knew I could leave everything in good caring hands and step away. It was a humbling but wonderful lesson.

## 2. Our bodies are an amazing work of art.

In Judaism's morning prayers there is a blessing called Asher Yatzar. During this prayer, we recognize the wonder that is the human body and thank God for it, all while marveling at its complexity. I used to think that I could muscle through any illness on the strength of a good cup of tea and the power of positive thinking. But Covid-19 was something different, and I have learned to respect my body and the time that it needs to heal in a new way. I am unspeakably grateful to the medical professionals who are working

around the clock to help those who are sick, ease the fears of their loved ones, research cures, vaccines, and medical protocols to help fight this disease and so many others. While this global emergency has helped shine a light on their heroism and sacrifice, they deserve our gratitude every single day.

### **3. I am surrounded by the best people in the entire world.**

I've known this one for a while. But being forced to slow down really highlighted this for me. My husband and children have proven to be the best medicine — now that I am spending so much time with them, it turns out they are funny, sweet, and have a huge amount to say! Who knew?!

As so much of our lives have switched to Zoom, I've reconnected with my cantorial school classmates. We now have a weekly call during which we catch up, problem solve, vent, laugh, and cry. We understand each other in a way very few others can, and it has been one of my great joys to reconnect with them, even if it did take a global pandemic to make it happen.

### **4. A job is a job, and a calling is a calling.**

When I began my current job almost 9 years ago, I quickly realized that it was my calling to serve this community. But there is something profound and humbling that happens when a community takes care of their clergy, rather than the other way around. Without ever making an announcement, word quickly spread that my family and I were ill, and I want to thank all those who sent emails and left messages; these seemingly small actions had a huge impact on our recovery.

### **5. Patience, please.**

At some point we *will* come together again. Together, we will begin to grieve and celebrate and heal, but it's going to take a very long time. For me, I'm going to take it one day at a time, one breath at a time. In the meantime, I'm going to remember to be grateful for the family, community, relationships, and body that I have.

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