



Temple Rodef Shalom

Rabbi Jeffrey Saxe

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Hearing the Cry of Our Neighbors Where They Are

Family walks with our dog have become a central activity for us in recent months, at least once a day, as I know they have for many of you. It's great to get outside the house, and the interactions we have with neighbors are life-saving, even from the distance of front porch to sidewalk.

On one such evening, we spoke with a man about his dilemma. He wanted to return to his office and join his coworkers in their new, socially distanced setup. He said his wife wouldn't allow him to go, and he was honoring that. "Yeah," we said, "We get it." "She's worried you'll get the virus." And he said, "Oh, no. It's not that. She doesn't want me to leave her alone with the kids all day."

For people with kids at home right now, this sentiment really rings true. And for all of us, it captures the state of mind we are in. On one hand, many of us are so overwhelmed by the struggles happening within the walls of our homes that we are turning inward. The barriers are great, and the load is heavy, whether it's kids, health, finances, or even just the fatigue of fighting through the zoom problems, the closures, and the dangers of gathering.

On the other hand, we are desperate for connection and community. I'm sure my neighbor wished he could go to his office just to be able to see his coworkers. Our situation today gives us a new perspective on the image painted by today's Torah portion, as Moses tells the people, "*Atem N'tzavim hayom, kulchem*. You are standing today, all of you together." The entire Jewish people, crowded in, uncovered faces no doubt inches apart, listening to Moses as he sends them on their journey. We are reminded of the timeless Jewish value of maintaining that closeness through all kinds of challenges, of staying connected, and of staying engaged with what our community demands of us.

This year is one of those challenging times. There are friends we haven't seen in so long, we've even started to lose touch with of them. The distance is taking its toll. Still, with all of the barriers and challenges, I have also noticed this community's successes, and the little miracles of what we have been able to do with technology and creativity. While it's different from meeting in person, for me, there has been something intimate about Zoom, being in someone's living room, or kitchen, seeing the art on the walls, the shabbat candle holders on the table, being brought into each other's homes. It helps us feel closer. Paradoxically, the screens that feel like they are separating us have in some ways lowered the barrier between us – suddenly it's become a regular thing to have Neil Diamond talk to us and sing, unproduced, from his home.

Within TRS, from Torah study, to camp, hundreds of people at a time are brought together in intimate ways. Our many families whose B'nai Mitzvah ceremonies have been affected by the pandemic have risen to the occasion with grace, and as hard as it has been, there are some awesome moments. Relatives in Australia or Israel singing the Torah blessings from their living room couches. One mother, whom I called to apologize that her son's Bar Mitzvah was delayed 30 minutes by technical glitches, told me what the morning meant to her. She herself had gone without a Bat Mitzvah as a child, and her father had his canceled by the tragic death of his own mother, 77 years ago. Nothing was going to

diminish the joy of seeing her son affirm his connection to the Jewish people with his family around him, even if it was virtual.

I heard an expert recently, who said, “If you haven’t already, get yourself a really comfortable mask.” She was telling us this pandemic will be with us for a while. But I loved this because we are all so uncomfortable in our masks. We stay even farther away from others, in our homes or our cars, so we don’t have to wear them. And yet, again, what feels like it separates us is really what brings us together. Every one of us should get a mask we don’t mind wearing, so that we’ll want to come closer to other people. I’m not suggesting we do anything that will make us less safe. But this is a symbol of what it takes to follow the teaching of Hillel the Elder, “Do not separate yourself from the community.” A mask shows that we are ready to engage with the world outside, that we care about others outside our family. We’ve heard from scientists that we don’t wear a mask primarily for our own protection –it may help us to some extent, but we really wear it to protect others. We do it because we recognize that so many of our own actions, even including our breath, have potential to impact our neighbors, our community and our whole world. And, unlike Zoom, where we’re always looking slightly away from the camera, we wear a mask so we can look each other in the eye and speak face to face.

We need to come closer because we all need that connection with our community. We need to speak to each other because our community is part of a nation in need of healing, and there is so much that needs to be said and heard. It hurts to think how much is at stake in this moment, from the pandemic to the election to everything in between.

And, there are difficult conversations to be had. We all remember those days in late May, during the third month of the coronavirus shutdowns, when we witnessed the beginning of an incredible wave of protests about the injustices faced by people of color in America. This challenged the whole nation, including the Jewish community. We wanted to be allies to communities of color, some of whom are members of our own congregation, but we didn’t know how to respond. Do we join in the protests? Is it the right time to take on this issue, in the middle of a pandemic? Many of us would have preferred to wait. In addition, the conversation itself is filled with pain and blame, guilt and defensiveness. The divisions in this country, along racial lines and other categories, put distances between us that make it hard to understand and to relate to each other’s experience.

However, we don’t get to choose the time or the circumstances of this conversation. Our fellow Americans are telling us they can’t wait any longer. This is the place they have come to after so many years of being ignored. They are demanding we stop trying to stay comfortable in an uncomfortable situation. They are demanding we speak up, speak out and hear their voices.

Last week, on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, many Jews read from the Torah the powerful story of Hagar. Hagar and her young son, Ishmael, are banished from Abraham’s house, and they wander in wilderness of Beer Sheva with a little water and bread. The two of them lose their way, and soon, they are desperate. There is no shade, and nobody in sight to help them.

We read from the book of Genesis: “When the water was gone from the skin, she left the child under one of the bushes and went and sat down at a distance, a bowshot away. She thought, ‘Let me not look on as the child dies.’ And sitting far away, she burst into tears. God heard the cry of the boy and an angel of God called to Hagar from Heaven and said to her, ‘What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the cry of the boy where he is.’”

In this moving story, we have two different reactions to Ishmael's expression of pain and fear. Hagar cannot bear to hear, and distances herself; in contrast, God hears the cry of the boy where he is. In this difficult time of the pandemic and of racial division in America, as in many moments of our personal lives, there are times when we don't feel we have what it takes to engage. We all have the Hagar instinct to look away. But the goal must be to emulate the divine response, to hear the cry of the other where they are.

Each one of us needs a comfortable mask, or a great zoom connection, because we cannot keep ourselves at a distance. We must find ways to maintain and deepen our relationships. We must stay close with loved ones even if they live across the country, and find ways to celebrate important moments. And, we must be open to conversations, even ones for which we do not feel ready. We can't turn our backs or look away. We must hear the cry of our neighbors where they are. And, we must be ready to respond to what our community demands of us.