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### Scribe

## Meet The Guy Keeping Your Synagogue Running During The Coronavirus Crisis



By Ben Vorspan

A lot of you don't know me... I'm usually busy behind the scenes. But allow me to introduce myself.

I'm a producer. A director. A tech expert. A monitor of social media chat. I'm on seven days a week, mornings, nights, candle lightings, havdalas, minyans, meet-ups, adult ed sessions, parent talks and preschool classes. I'm "please mute yourself when you're not talking," "we can't hear you - you forgot to unmute yourself" and "please don't use that Zoom virtual background next time."

I'm the man behind the many, many, emails you receive [way more than we used to send], the thrice-daily website updates, and the waterfall of Zoom links that comprise what used to be the "COVID-19 updates" page, and is now simply our website.

In case you haven't guessed yet, I'm a synagogue communications director during the coronavirus outbreak.

On a good day I only work 10 hours, primarily on my way-too-old home computer, which is still running Windows 7 and has no direct access to the files on my synagogue computer. I am in a constant state of triage, since each week, and sometimes each day,

brings new government-imposed or clergy-inspired changes that require tweaking, pivoting, or occasionally a full stop.

I don't even remember what it feels like to have something ready to go a week in advance. I have hundreds of existing flyers and graphics at my disposal, but haven't re-used a single one, since nothing we do these days in any way resembles what we did at this time last year, or last month, or last week.

I'm everywhere. I'm involved in almost everything. It's exhausting. So. Very. Exhausting.

But it's also amazing!

On Friday, my family lit candles with more than 60 congregants – many of whom I've only seen in databases. On Saturday, I attended two different Shabbat services from my living room - one my parent's shul, with melodies I haven't heard in a decade, and the other our synagogue's first ever virtual bat mitzvah! On Saturday night, for the third week in a row, we participated in two different community havdalas. I can't remember the last time we did havdalah one week in a row in our house.

In the past week I attended my first lunch 'n learn (and brought the average age down quite a bit), watched our Hazzan lead an adorable Friday afternoon preschool Shabbat service, co-hosted a zoom session helping 60+ members learn how to lead their own virtual seders, and got to witness our Rabbis' endearingly-goofy dancing ("I'll go up, you go down") behind the scenes of our broadcast as our Hazzan sang Aleinu.

Yes – I, like synagogue communications directors everywhere, became the equivalent of a television studio manager overnight (without relinquishing many of my usual 40-hours of standard weekly tasks, oh – and while also becoming a homeschool teacher), and yes – I'm in desperate need of a day off (I'd settle for a half-hour lunch break at this point), but I'm also energized by what I see happening, and what this means for our future.

We are now forced to deliver 100% of our content directly to your phone, and it's rejuvenating our community. It's eliminating the barrier that led many to believe we could only attend classes and services in our own sanctuary, or our own city, or our own time zone. It's enabling us to re-open the door that many Conservative Jews closed when they decided Judaism in "the building" wasn't their brand of Judaism.

And when the current "new normal" is simply a set of Facebook memories that pop up each Spring (please let it only be Spring!) - that door might still remain open, and we will have an entirely new modality for connection that our community is not just accustomed to, but looks forward to!

And the most exciting part (for me) is I'm not just an observer or participant in this Jewish metamorphosis – I'm a driving force behind it. I'm the executive producer of the genesis of Conservative Judaism's "new normal". I'm also the broadcast engineer, multimedia designer and station manager. I'm the physically and emotionally drained, but spiritually invigorated synagogue communications director during the coronavirus outbreak.

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## Scribe

# Working From Home And Missing My Morning Commute

By Ben Zion Ferziger

A recent meme featured a man standing in his shower room in work attire – jacket, briefcase, sunglasses and earbuds – gripping the curtain rod subway-style. The image was deliciously surreal, and conveyed an unspoken truth: Even amidst the extreme disruption caused by coronavirus and social distancing, we are happy to leave some things behind. When I saw the meme I giggled and scrolled on, only to stop as I came to an odd realization: I actually do miss my commute.

Yes, you heard me right. The commute, that insult to outer-borough living, archenemy of the bridge-and-tunnel person. Most people have, at best, mixed feelings about their commute. A long commute is widely considered a modern-day terror, a purgatory on earth. It's why you wake up earlier and get home later; it's the ultimate drain on free time. Who could miss that?

Truth be told, the 'love' half of my love-hate relationship with my commute has been gaining traction for quite some time. As with all unlikely romances, the starting point was not ideal. My wife and I live in Riverdale, a Bronx neighborhood situated on a hill overlooking the Hudson River (or the Henry Hudson Parkway, depending on your vantage point). This lovely setting is also what deems Riverdale a transportation-challenged neighborhood, formerly known as a 'two-fare zone.' Public transit is close enough to be doable, yet far enough to be annoyingly inconvenient. To get to my office in the Financial District, I traverse all of Broadway, the longest street in New York, going from the above-ground tracks of 238th St. to the Charging Bull. In my first weeks on the job, dreams of crowded subway cars and uncooperative turnstiles riddled my sleep.

Yet somehow, over time, the morning commute became a highlight of my day.

It turns out that a consistent commute functions to carve out an hour each day to read books, make plans,

think and meditate. It's a few extra minutes to myself before plunging into the work day. The subway isolates me from the distractions of home and the demands of work. There's limited email access and, since I'm technically already being productive, no pressure to maximize the time. These rare commodities make subway rats and rubbing thighs with fellow New Yorkers a worthwhile trade-off.

I also learned to appreciate how my commute expands the horizons of what could otherwise be just another dull day in the office. Like a portal between two worlds, the train enters the subway tunnels in sleepy northern Manhattan and, in less than one hour, emerges somewhere so different it might as well be another planet: the urban canyons of the Financial District with its swarms of tourists. In between, the subway covers the entire length of New York City, offering a sampler of the metropolis above as boarding passengers bring the energy and diverse character of the neighborhoods under which we're passing. Riding the train every day, I get a taste of what the city is reading and discussing, and keep up with the latest witty ads campaigns and fast-fashion fads.

In the grand scheme of things, losing my morning commute is a minor worry. It's not the economy, or all of sports, and certainly not on par with the life-or-death challenges that matter most right now (as movingly described by my friend Raphy Rosen here in the Forward). I am grateful to work from home and full of appreciation for the essential workers who get out there every day. It's even nice to feel like a short-commuter for a change and catch that extra hour of sleep. Nor do the features that I romanticized most about my commute feel particularly urgent right now: Time, for better or worse, is a cheap commodity these days.

The gap that I find harder to fill is the emotional demarcation that the transit experience used to provide me: The opportunity to ramp up my energy before a meeting or unwind at the end of a long day. Without that buffer, life can become a blur: work, synagogue, personal life and everything in between all mashed together. Thankfully, technology has allowed me to maintain much of my routine in quarantine. Can

the solace of the commute be reproduced as well?

There is help to be found. Advice columns and blogs abound about working from home, most focusing on maintaining a semblance of normalcy: DON'T work in your pajamas, DO designate a work space. I personally try to replicate the mindless commuting experience by bookending the work day with menial household tasks (sitcoms help too). I know it's working when I manage to be late to work, just like the good old days.

Yet at a time like this, when the physical spaces that usually compartmentalize our lives have been padlocked, and the spare bedroom moonlights as a gym, office and shtibl, there is potential for unexpected cross pollination between formerly isolated spheres of life. For me, the challenge of working from home shed new light on a Jewish teaching about preparation for prayer, which in turn helped me adjust to the current homebound circumstance.

The *mishnah* in *Masekhet Brachot* [5:1] recounts that "The pious men of old [*chassidim rishonim*] used to wait an hour before praying so that they might direct their thoughts to God." Like working from home, the act of prayer, by definition, demands transporting oneself beyond the immediate physical surroundings. Praying in a synagogue or in nature can help, but only to an extent; a mental leap is always required. To facilitate that difficult shift, the sages recommended a pause, a passive buffer in time to allow the previous preoccupations of the mind to subside. A spiritual commute of sorts between the mundane and the holy.

In our isolated and digitized moment, this teaching can be applied to the work-life balancing act we're all trying to pull off. In the absence of a physical commute, I pause for a few minutes, relax, and let time pass before moving on to the next thing. My mind will eventually get me where I need to go.

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Scribe

# No, I Haven't Read All Of Proust. Fighting The Coronavirus Humble Brag

By Tom Teicholz

David Hockney has painted 10 new iPad works. Barbra Streisand is working on her memoir. On Instagram people are baking bread and working out. Friends are calling to say that they've Marie-Kondo'd their homes.

And all their getting-things-done is stressing me out.

What this is is an epidemic of humble brags.

People are knitting and quilting and reading children's stories aloud, and giving lessons on how to play the slide guitar and reading plays aloud and performing music together with other people in their rooms all over the world.

It is incredible. And it is insufferable.

Yes, I could be using this time to read all of Proust, or Dante's *Inferno*, or even Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*. I know I could because other people are.

But I just don't feel like it. This pandemic is sucking the ambition right out of me.

I could be out searching for a box of 100 latex gloves or a stack of N95 masks. I could be braving the lines at Costco or Trader Joes. But I just don't want to.

I have things to do. Things that I should be doing to make money for all the things I'm not using – like my office and my car.

Every morning I seal myself off in our guest room which I have taken over as my office. And then, I sit there.

I'm not saying that I don't get anything done. I'm just saying that I'm getting less done than before, and I certainly don't have time for extra personal projects.

Yes, I really do want to learn to play chess well. Or maybe even Bridge. Or Mah-jongg. I have always

wanted to be able to play blues piano. Or the Harmonica. Or even the Ukulele. Or memorize the lyrics to a dozen great Bob Dylan songs.

But I'm not going to. I'm going to spend most days looking at my computer screen. How do I not hit refresh on Google News? How do I not spend time with the evening news?

I feel I should be supporting my local restaurants and ordering takeaway meals from all those highly rated restaurants I've never been to and normally couldn't get a reservation at.

But I'm not. Instead, I'm making sandwiches out of leftovers. Last night's bolognese meat sauce was today's sandwich (and it wasn't half bad).

What I'm doing most of all is going on Facebook and Instagram and Twitter – but mostly Instagram, to hear about all the things that other people are doing.

I'm watching movies with my college age daughter. Of course they are not the movies I want to watch or feel I should be watching – revisiting all of Fellini, or the AFI's 100 best movies. No, we watch what my daughter wants, which is reliably something with Mark Wahlberg in it.

That's what I'm doing. How about you?

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*Tom Teicholz is an award-winning journalist and best-selling author who is not doing that much right now in Santa Monica, CA.*

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Scribe

# A New Life And A Virtual Bris

By Merrill Silver

In Genesis 17:12 God tells Abraham, “This is my covenant... And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every male throughout your generations...”

Apparently God left out the part about pandemics. And that a mohel could provide a substitute mohel for the “virtual” *brit milah* – the bris – because one hour before the scheduled ceremony he had just learned of his exposure to COVID-19.

And did I say “virtual” bris?

So we mortals have a lot to learn about this 3,000-year-old custom, which marks the covenant between an 8-day-old male – and the Jewish people – with God. My family learned quickly as the clock ticked toward eight days after a birth in the family.

Dan and Shira Lee, my son and daughter-in-law, gave birth to a five-pound, 13-ounce bundle of dark hair and soft flesh on March 16, 2020. At 12:06 a.m., their lives changed.

Unfortunately, life outside the hospital was also changing. Because of the coronavirus pandemic, by the time the new parents brought their little “Peanut” home from the hospital, the world was unrecognizable.

They realized a traditional bris, with family, friends and bagels, was out of the question. Nonetheless, they were determined to welcome their son into the Jewish religion and give him a name among the people of Israel. That dilemma, and a screaming newborn, kept them up at night.

As they consulted with health professionals and clergy, their plans fluctuated like the stock market.

First, the idea was that just grandparents and siblings would attend the Simcha. Never mind – let’s limit it only to grandparents. On the other hand, what about performing a circumcision in the hospital? But what about the religious element? Instead, should we wait a few months until the “war” is over?

Finally, Shira Lee and Dan arrived at the perfect solution on the *brit milah* roller coaster. The mohel would perform the circumcision and name the baby in their Upper West Side apartment. By streaming via the Zoom app, family and friends would participate in the Mitzvah. This was a sensible plan, at least until the mohel’s exposure to the virus suddenly put everything in flux.

With quick-thinking parents, who rejected the idea of a last-minute substitute mohel as too risky, and with the wisdom and generosity of the two rabbis in their synagogue, the virtual bris morphed into a simple, yet extraordinary, baby-naming ceremony.

The four proud grandparents were the first to “zoom” in and make their screen debuts on computers, iPads and iPhones. Slowly, guests magically popped up to chat, appearing in three-by-three grids before the actual ceremony. We swiped our iPad screen and eventually found guests populating at least six screens.

There was Shira Lee’s Grandma Selma beaming and streaming from her Florida kitchen. My three-and-a-half-month-old grandson in Philadelphia, clad in a onesie tuxedo and red bow-tie, was ready to welcome his new cousin. We were a quilt of well-wishers from as far away as Israel, and as close as around the corner. “mazel tovs” flew from square to square.

When the new parents appeared on the screen, we held our collective breath. How would this work?

“Give us a wave if you can see us. Give us a wave if you can hear us,” Dan instructed everyone. He also explained that he would “mute” us but we would be able to hear the ceremony. That is how a virtual bris, which became a virtual baby-naming, began.

We listened and watched, mostly with our hearts. From her apartment a few blocks away, the rabbi “officially” welcomed this virtual community. She explained that just as we welcome a bride and groom, we say, “Baruch haBa” to a new baby. She encouraged each of us to repeat the welcome. We were muted but we weren’t silent.

The rabbi invited us to sing “Elijah HaNavi” with her, as Shira Lee held the baby. With our support and love, we summoned the Prophet Elijah, a harbinger of a better world. Everyone sang along. We were muted but I know we sounded like a celestial choir.

Making Kiddush sanctified the wine and the occasion. In Hebrew the rabbi announced the baby's name, "Eitan Shai Ben Daniel Aharon v' Shira Lee. May Eitan Shai's mother be blessed with strength, may both parents find joy in their child and inspire him to seek truth and may he have a life of Torah, chuppah and good deeds."

The climax, one of many in this emotional half hour, began when our children explained the significance of both the Hebrew and English names. "Eitan" means strong and enduring, an appropriate name especially for today's time and for the challenges yet to come.

"Shai" means gift. Shira Lee explained how this child is their precious gift. Shai is named for her Savta Shirley, a pillar of her community, someone who valued family and enjoyed "phone visits" with her many friends and relatives. She died the day after her 97th birthday but, thankfully, did get to know her granddaughter's future husband.

Dan explained the significance of the English names: Isaac Howard. When God told 90-year-old Sarah she would have a child, she laughed. She named her baby Yitchak, which means laugh in Hebrew. When Shira Lee and Dan saw Isaac's first sonogram, they, too, laughed in disbelief.

Isaac is also named for his great-grand-uncle Irving. He was an airline radio mechanic who travelled the world. While we cannot safely leave our homes today, Dan envisioned a time when Isaac, too, will see the world. Irving always packed lightly. Dan told Isaac, "You don't need a lot of stuff. Just show up for your family and friends."

Although Dan knew Irving primarily through family stories, he did know Isaac's great-grandpa Howie. Howie was the only grandparent to have the pleasure of knowing Shira Lee. He joined our family late in life. Although not related biologically, he valued the importance of family. Dan and his Grandpa were best friends, sharing their love of baseball, jazz and puzzles.

Toward the end of the ceremony, the rabbi bestowed on Isaac the priestly blessings that we recite on Friday nights and at weddings. Although her arms could not

physically extend a few city blocks to cover Isaac's head, we believe Isaac felt her love. She encouraged everyone to take their hands and symbolically bless the new parents and Isaac Howard.

After the grandparents shared brief readings about the continuity across generations, Dan un-muted us. Together we sang the "Shehecheyanu."

We were so proud of our son and daughter-in-law for adapting to the difficult circumstances. There was no Brit Milah that day, no handshakes, no hugs. There was distance and closeness, hope and despair, and lots of tissues. Through it all, we were present for the naming of Isaac Howard (Eitan Shai), as Dan and Shira Lee welcomed him into their family and the Jewish faith. Savta Shirley would have loved this ultimate "phone visit."

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## Scribe

# From Jewish Pride To Self-Doubt, Teenage Writers Sound Off On The Rise In Anti-Semitism

By Forward Staff

A young woman experiences the fear her ancestors must have felt for the first time. Another wonders if she should even talk about Israel around her friends anymore. A third feels the urge to fight back against anti-Semitism, but isn't sure how.

These are just a few ways that teenage girls participating in the Jewish Women's Archive's Rising Voices Fellowship said that their lives have been affected by the rise in anti-Semitism over the past several years.

Deadly attacks against Jews in Pittsburgh, Poway, Calif., Jersey City, N.J. and Monsey, N.Y. have dominated headlines during their high school years. But these young women haven't given in to their fears.

Before the global coronavirus pandemic took hold, we asked the 18 fellows to answer our questions about how this new era of violence against Jews is affecting their generation. Nine of them responded, telling us about feeling inspired to share the beauty of Judaism, to show the world their Jewish pride and to fight against hate on behalf of Jews and other minorities. Below are excerpts.

## What's the worst anti-Semitism you've ever experienced?

One day in the fall of my freshman year, a boy whom I didn't know very well was running up the steps. I didn't pay him much mind. But as he passed me on the stairs, I distinctly heard him say, quite casually, actually, "Heil Hitler."

I froze. It was the first time anyone had said those words to me. It caught me completely off guard. So I didn't say anything. I continued to walk to class.

After school, I told my sister, and she said that that was

awful, but that it wasn't worth making a fuss about. But when told my parents, they said it was definitely something to bring to the administration. I went to the principal and told him what had happened.

He had me fill out an incident report, and I made clear to him that I didn't want the boy who said those words to be punished. I just wanted him to learn the power those words had and the horror and generational trauma often triggered by those words for Jews and other groups.

Per my request, he was not punished. He did however send me an apology letter, which I still have.

I still think about it when I see him, but I also remember that people are good, and he learned from that experience. Better to learn his freshman year of high school than when he's 64.

*Eleanor Harris, 17, Edmond, Okla.*

When I was in middle school, I heard a lot of anti-Semitic jokes, particularly relating to the Holocaust. In retrospect I don't think these people were motivated by genuine anti-Semitism. I think they were pushing the boundaries to get a reaction or because they thought of the Nazis as more fascinating than monstrous. But that doesn't negate the fact that they should take responsibility for their actions or that all people must be educated enough to understand why those actions cross the line.

As a young Jewish person, the worst part for me was the self-doubt it made me feel. I felt like I didn't know who I could trust or be friends with. It felt like I had an obligation to fight against these jokes but I didn't know how. It felt like I was being oversensitive in my trauma and relationship with the Holocaust since for other people it was clearly just a joke.

*Ellanora Lerner, 17, New London, Conn.*

In eighth grade I had the strongest, most painful, personal attack. After I left the lunch table, a girl – whom I thought was my friend – called me "too Jewish." It wasn't physically violent or threatening, but seldom have I felt more uncomfortable with my Jewish identity. I wasn't scared. I was more angry. I won't apologize for loving and living my proud Jewish life.

After this, I started to consider more carefully how often I bring up my Jewish identity, fearing that if I discuss it too much I'll become just "the Jewish girl" and the rest of my identity will blur away.

Coming back from Israel I so often want to talk about my experiences, but every time before I say “When I was in Israel...” I fight the voice telling me not to.

*Lilah Peck, 17, Charlotte, N.C.*

Last summer, I did a homestay program in rural Bavaria where I lived with a host family. While spending mornings at the local school, we were taught about the history of the German people. While many time periods were discussed in great detail, the historical events of the 1930s and 1940s were not even mentioned. On the last day of lessons, we discussed the Holocaust, and the teacher showed us anti-Semitic books from the Nazi era where Jewish people were portrayed as having large noses.

This teacher then asked us to raise our hand if we were Jewish. While I was the only person to raise my hand, I felt isolated. Although the teacher said that she did not want to be offensive while teaching, I began to wonder if this teacher might have behaved differently if I had not raised my hand. Would she have uttered anti-Semitic comments?

*Ilana Drake, 17, New York City*

### **Have you ever had to explain anti-Semitism to non-Jews?**

A non-Jew will never be able to understand the fear of anti-Semitism and the conflicting imperatives of celebrating and hiding a religious identity.

I explained to my friends anti-Semitism through the following story. My grandmother died and left my mother a valuable piece of jewelry. My mother, holding this necklace in her hands, looked into my eyes, her face bearing a somber expression I had never seen. She said, “never sell this, not because it is an heirloom, but because if we ever need to flee, this can fit into a jacket pocket.”

In that moment, I truly understood the threat I faced, the threat my family faced, the threat my people faced. The threat my non-Jewish classmates will never be able to understand.

*Lilah Peck*

Sometimes explaining anti-Semitism means explaining why it isn't okay to make Holocaust jokes; other times it means opening their eyes to the Jewish stereotypes portrayed in the media; and still more times it means

reminding them that hate crimes against Jewish people occur the most out of all religion-targeted hate crimes.

Sometimes, they empathize. I have friends who face discrimination based on their races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, gender identities, and other immutable characteristics, and those people can often relate to me. They struggle just as much as I do.

Others simply have no way to compare their privilege to my lack thereof. Yes, I explain, I am white-passing, and that brings its privileges. However, I don't have the privilege to feel included with the rest of the school during Christmastime. I have to fight to ensure that my religious absences aren't counted against my nine allowed absences per semester. When we learn about the Holocaust in school, the jokes are all around me. A lot of people don't get it. But at least most of them try.

*Eleanor Harris*

I've had this experience many times, and the non-Jews have fortunately been incredibly receptive to my history lesson. It is sometimes difficult for me to share this history and this current oppression because I know that any empathy I receive from my non-Jewish friends comes from a place of not sharing my history. But history has oppressed us all; we must listen to these diverse stories if we hope to achieve collective redemption and protection for all marginalized peoples.

*Madeline Canfield, 18, Houston, Texas*

### **How has the recent rise in anti-Semitism affected you?**

The recent rise in anti-Semitism makes my blood boil. When I hear a joke at school, I pounce. On the other hand, the rise in anti-Semitism has exhausted me. When I see another cemetery vandalization in Europe, sometimes I don't even repost the news story. I can't stand up every time. It's getting too hard. But I know how important it is to speak out, and I do when I can. It's been the norm for almost half my life. How can we fix it?

*Eleanor Harris*

The rise in anti-Semitism has reminded me that we cannot afford to not prioritize our Jewishness. As Jews, we must fight for equity for all people, but the hatred and danger we have faced in both our history and

our present means that we too must be fought for. And often, we are the only people who will fight for ourselves.

*Ellanora Lerner*

Whenever we have Jewish events or gatherings, I feel like there's a target on my head. In this new wave of anti-Semitism, I am able to truly feel the fear of my ancestors. Maybe not to the same extent, but on a level that is enough for me to feel afraid every week on Shabbat as I pray.

*Neima Fax, 18, Los Angeles, Calif.*

The recent rise in anti-Semitism has made me think more about how Reform and Conservative Jews are able to pretend that the anti-Semitism is not directed at them. Because we do not "look" Jewish and may not even belong to synagogue, we have a tendency to delude ourselves that anti-Semitism is directed only to our ultra-Orthodox brothers and sisters. A threat to the Jewish community, no matter which sect, is a threat to everyone.

*Ilana Drake*

Last year I participated in a summer program with an extremely diverse group of girls. On the first day, a few girls noticed that the lunch I was eating was different from theirs, since it was kosher, and they asked me about my food.

I hesitated. In the end, I decided to explain that my food was kosher, instead of just vaguely saying that I had a dietary restriction. I explained that I was Jewish, and answered questions about kashrut and about what keeping kosher means to me.

But I still remember my initial hesitation. I didn't want to admit that I was Jewish because I didn't know if I would be judged for it.

*Ellie Klibaner-Schiff, 17, Newton, Mass.*

While I am still thrown off every time I enter a synagogue and a police officer greets me or pats me down, I am no longer surprised. The threats and attacks though should not have had to come to my backyard to draw me into the issue, but now that they have arrived, I am more conscious of my Jewish identity than I have ever been.

That said, as the Jewish people face increasing

discrimination, we can not forget about other marginalized communities. When others rush to our aid, it is a reminder that we can not leave their side and abandon our commitment to allyship and social justice.

*Mica Maltzman, 18, Bethesda, Md.*

### **What do you think should be done about the rise in anti-Semitism?**

Much of today's anti-Semitism stems from negative views of Israel. For some people, all they know about Jewish people is their association with Israel and in turn – depending on their views of Israel – they might have a negative view of the Jewish people.

What I think we can do as individuals is be proud Jews in all of our endeavors. Spread your message of *tikkun olam*, be kind to the people around you, and tell people you are Jewish. That matters. You might be the one Jew someone knows, and the rest of the Jewish people are relying on you to show that person that we are a nation of good deeds. Sometimes, it is all we can do to feel safe. Individual interactions matter.

*Neima Fax*

I believe anti-Semitism is rising because of the increased presence of right-wing conservatism and white supremacy in this country. Events like the 2017 alt-right rally in Charlottesville have emboldened average people to explore their capacities to gain attention and power through racism and xenophobia.

Anti-Semitism exists and thrives in American culture, and it takes active effort to dispel rumors and defend Jewish people. To achieve any kind of solution to this problem, action is required from more than just Jews; allies and friends of our community must stand up as well and be able to recognize anti-Semitic rhetoric and know how to put a stop to it.

*Lila Goldstein, 17, Wellington, Fla.*

I have always believed very strongly in the power of education. There must be better understanding of the Holocaust, Jewish history, and Jewish culture and identity within both Jewish and non-Jewish communities.

There must also be better understanding and better education around Israel. The conversation around

Israel has become hyper-binary and the majority of people don't understand or attempt to understand the nuance of the issues.

*Ellanora Lerner*

I think that hate in general stems from fear. But in the last few years, the rise in hateful crimes can be partly blamed on the current president of the United States. I think that his hateful speech towards minorities and women have validated people who otherwise would be too afraid to act on their hate. If the leader of the country seems to think it's okay, then isn't it?

I think what we can do is to show people our pain and show them how beautiful Judaism really is and we have to give second chances. Because people don't shift their mindsets from hate to love by rotting in a prison cell. Instead, we must show them how much it hurts, we must connect with them and their own painful experiences, we must try to create an understanding between us that transcends hate and creates a bridge of love.

*Eleanor Harris*

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## Scribe

# Wearing A Face Mask? You're Doing A Mitzvah. Make A Brachah!

By Michael Knopf

Among the Jewish tradition's most cherished values is the sanctity of human life. With a few notable exceptions, one must not endanger their life in order to fulfill a religious obligation. And one must violate even the most significant commandments in order to save another person's life. Saving one life is regarded as the equivalent of saving an entire world, and consequently, taking a life is seen as tantamount to destroying an entire world.

It's not just about saving people who are in mortal danger (known as *pikuah ha-nefesh*). Jewish tradition also expresses its commitment to the supreme importance of human life through laws related to the preservation and protection of life. This class of commandments is known as *shmirat ha-nefesh*; literally, protecting life. It is derived from a biblical verse which teaches, "Be cautious with yourself and seriously guard your life" (Deuteronomy 4:9).

Rabbinic tradition understood this verse to mean that we are not allowed to knowingly endanger our lives or engage in behaviors that would likely result in disease or death. And we are similarly obligated to take steps to protect others' lives, like building a parapet around the roofs of our houses to minimize the risk of someone accidentally falling.

Seen from this perspective, Jews ought to regard actions which help prevent us and others from contracting or communicating the novel coronavirus, like thoroughly washing our hands, wearing face masks, and remaining at home, as *mitzvot*, sacred obligations. These behaviors are more than wise acts of self-preservation and kind contributions to public health; they are holy deeds, religious requirements, with the force of divine injunction.

And if behaviors like thoroughly washing our hands, wearing face masks, and remaining at home are *mitzvot*, then they should be preceded by blessings.

Relevant blessings accompany the performance of most other *mitzvot*.

To offer a timely example, consider matzah, the unleavened bread Jews are obligated to eat on the first night of Passover. Before eating matzah at the Passover Seder, one is supposed to recite, “You are bountiful, Infinite our God, majesty of space and time, who has sanctified us with divine commandments and has commanded us about eating matzah.”

We recite a blessing before fulfilling a commandment to indicate that the deed we are about to perform is thoughtful and deliberate. We affirm that we are doing the action intentionally, and for the sake of fulfilling a religious obligation. In this way, we affirm the spiritual significance of the behavior, turning the thoughtless and the mundane into the intentional and the sacred, and helping us live with more meaning and purpose.

Since protective acts like hygienic hand-washing, wearing face masks, and sheltering in place should be considered *mitzvot*, at least during this pandemic, it seems to me that they should be preceded by an appropriate blessing, just like other *mitzvot*. Requiring a blessing would underscore the significance of these acts and encourage vigilant observance.

Additionally, since several months into the coronavirus pandemic these protective actions increasingly feel habitual or burdensome to many, requiring a blessing would properly elevate them, reminding us of their profound sanctity.

And yet, for some unknown or inscrutable reason, there are not traditional blessings over each and every act that could be considered *shmirat ha-nefesh*. There is a blessing for constructing a parapet: “You are bountiful, Infinite our God, majesty of space and time, who has sanctified us with divine commandments and has commanded us to make a parapet.” But by tradition, building a parapet is the only act of protecting life that has an associated blessing.

Since there is a traditional blessing over erecting a parapet, it is tempting to simply apply that blessing to actions like hygienic hand-washing, wearing face masks, and staying at home. There are undoubtedly parallels between putting a fence on one’s roof for others’ safety and, say, putting a mask on one’s face for others’ safety. Still, it feels odd to use the same blessing for both acts. While analogous, they aren’t

identical. Putting on a mask while reciting “to make a parapet” could diminish, rather than enhance, the intentionality of the act.

Instead, I propose creating a new blessing for the actions we take to keep ourselves and each other safe and healthy during a pandemic: “You are bountiful, Infinite our God, majesty of space and time, who has sanctified us with divine commandments and has commanded us about protecting life.” Or, in Hebrew: *Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh ha-olam, Asher keed’shanu b’mitzvotav, v’tzeevanu al sh’mirat ha-nefesh.*

While it is unusual for contemporary rabbis to create and mandate new blessings, it is not without precedent. And moreover, this novel blessing is in no way radical. It merely fills a gap in the tradition, giving an inexplicably blessingless commandment a traditional benediction like other sacred deeds.

More importantly, a blessing will remind us that these actions are not just good but godly, not just for safety but for sanctity, not just required but righteous.

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## Scribe

# Why On This Night Do We Sit When We Could Be Dancing?

By Amie Segal

As I sat down for my family's telededer this year, the parallels between slavery and the physical confinement of quarantine were irresistible. We discussed how Pharaoh was or wasn't like an oppressive pandemic, or how the virus is or isn't like a plague. And while I appreciate those questions, I would also like to bring up a fascinating but under-explored component of the story of Exodus: the dance party.

Three years ago, I started an organization called The Living Room that hosts ongoing gatherings dedicated to building deeper connections around dance and Jewish ritual. And though I've never hosted nor heard of such a thing as a Passover dance, this year, amidst a global lockdown that would restrain people's movement, I was eager to investigate freedom as a sensation or embodied expression. Three weeks into quarantine, I partnered with NuRoots, the young adult initiative of the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles, to create a zoom dance experience for their annual Passover festival called Collective Escape. The more I researched in preparation for leading, the more I thought, *What better way to express our liberation than with joyful dancing?*

As I soon learned, the idea is embedded in Exodus itself.

Having made it safely across the Red Sea, the Israelites sing triumphantly about their deliverance. Either immediately following or simultaneously, Miriam, Moses's sister "took timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her in dance with timbrels" [Exodus 15:20]. An exalted, impromptu dance party ensued.

Miriam's get-down would not be the last time we celebrated our triumph over evil with vigorous

dancing. In 1947, Jews from Palestine sent the first folk dance delegation to post-War Europe to represent Eretz Yisrael at the International World Youth Festival in Prague—a convention meant to bring hope and renewal after the devastation of the war.

One young dancer who observed the intricate and mesmerizing dances from China, Africa, and Korea thought that the Hebrew dances seemed provincial by comparison. Indeed, they had a practical simplicity. And yet the dancers took great pride in their originality—they represented a country-in-the-making and all the verve and immediacy that came with it. A certain joie de vivre overtook the dancers and affected the international audience too.

For the second phase of their tour, organized by the official kibbutz movement, the dancers visited the displaced persons camps in Europe, where survivors of World War II awaited official papers and relocation. Some, such as those in Dachau, were still living in the camp of their imprisonment.

The sixteen dancers in the troupe, half men and half women, had been selected from a fervent and growing folk dance scene that sprouted in the kibbutzim. In an effort to reimagine Jewish festivals celebrating the earth's natural cycles and harvest times, choreographers on the kibbutz made dances to honor 'the first fruits' or the discovery of water in the desert. They drew creatively from their environment as well as from their own backgrounds, which meant the dances reflected both Middle Eastern and European influences.

Dance often succeeds in expressing complex psychological or social states that words cannot do justice. In the 1930s and 40s, before the creation of the State of Israel, there was an intense desire to create a national culture distinct from that of countries where Jews had experienced anti-semitism.

Folk dancing spiritually unified people from the diaspora while building their stamina in preparation for the physical labor that was needed to tend the land. It then traveled to the cities—Haifa and Tel Aviv—becoming a widespread cultural phenomenon that represented Zionist values of gender and social

equality. For Haifa's annual Independence Day parade, massive crowds gathered to watch men, women, and children dance together in large circles that filled the streets.

When the folk dancers arrived in 1947 at the displaced persons camps they were a jarring sight; young, energetic, tanned men and women from Palestine dancing animatedly on a truck bed or a patch of dirt before a grieving and weary audience. Nonetheless their audience was rapt, weeping in awe. One dancer overheard someone say in Yiddish "Are these Jews?" before kissing the hem of her embroidered dress.

Many people in the camps joined in, especially kids, excited to learn the dances and feel their souls lifted. It seemed to send a message to all those who wished the Jews gone, that they were still alive—and very much so.

These performances were about more than spreading cheer, they formed a stunning vision of the new land—the Zionist spirit embodied. And just as they had done after crossing the Red Sea, Jews were beginning to reclaim themselves, their bodies. They were expressing their ideals in a way that was visual and visceral.

As I think about our current situation, the pandemic, I can't fathom the devastation and suffering that is coming in the weeks ahead. I only hope when it's time to leave our confinement that we remember, like Miriam and those who came before us, that liberation is not just a thought or a feeling, it's an action.

Amie Segal is the founder of The Living Room, a Los Angeles-based organization that hosts hip, fun evenings of dance, havdallah, and music. Their mission is to harness dance and movement to build deeper connections and a more vibrant Jewish culture.

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## Scribe

# 'It Felt More Meaningful, More Symbolic:' Readers Share Their Seder Stories

By Jodi Rudoren

We knew these seder nights would be different from all others. Turned out some of those differences were positive.

My own extended family seemed to talk over each other less via Zoom than we do in person, and we relaxed our recitation of the hagaddah to make room for more personal interpretations, which may also have been more meaningful. On the second night, I Zoomed with friends I would never otherwise share Pesach with – that was cool.

Dozens of readers shared similar stories of surprising benefits to this Passover-in-a-pandemic, writing in from a range of places including South Africa, Nova Scotia, New Hampshire, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Bay Harbor Islands, Fla., and Burbank, Calif. Many were thrilled to be able to experience the seder with loved ones in far-flung countries – and to be able to wear sweatpants.

"A really big surprise was that one of the participants was actually somebody I went to high school with who lives in Pennsylvania," said Ella Leitner, 47, who with her 80-something in-laws Zoomed into the congregational seder of Manhattan's Central Synagogue. "It was nice to see him and his family pop up on my screen. It made us feel that the world is actually much closer than we think."

There were laments, too – for favorite foods and, as 72-year-old Martha Levy of upstate New York put it, "the camaraderie in the kitchen when cleaning up." But several people said they would take lessons from this year and bring them back to the table next year – likely via Zoom.

"Honestly, I think we should all wear sweatpants to seder," said Jon Savitt, 28. "I hope that in the future, whether hosting Passover Seder or watching the NBA finals, we embrace getting in touch with the ones we truly care about – if you can get past the initial technical difficulties, it's really not so bad."

Below are more excerpts, lightly edited for length and clarity. Add your story in the comments.

### **'My late husband would have been so proud'**

As I lit the Yom Tov candles, I displayed to all the family Seder photo taken in 1936 – before I was born – showing my Russian-born grandparents, my parents, five aunts and uncles, and 13 first cousins. The candlesticks in the center of that table, were now on my Passover table. Although there was only one place setting, for me only, I truly felt the presence of all those who came before me and was comforted that I could, because of our immediate family [Zoom] gathering, share my personal observations more readily.

My two children and their families were together for the first time in years as they live in two different cities. So for me, personally – a widow, living alone, and the one matriarch present – the experience gave me a great sense of “*L'Dor V'Dor!*” Observing my immediate family [ including three adult grandchildren] sharing this experience was extremely comforting. My late husband would have been so proud!

– *Deanne Scherlis Comer, Elkins Park, Penn.*

### **Remembering our blessings**

Instead of the 10 plagues, we did the 10 blessings. We normally diminish our cups because we feel the pain of the Egyptians who suffered, but this year we aren't diminished by sharing the pain of others, so with each blessing – which I asked each person to repeat after me in English, just like in the 10 plagues – we added some wine to our cups.

The blessings were: We are healthy. We are volunteering. We are reaching out. We are learning new technologies. We are innovating. We are slowing down. We are staying home. We are supporting local restaurants. We are appreciating the arts in new ways. We are paying attention. Then we made a l'chayim and drank! Will do again!

– *Rabbi Elyse Goldstein, Toronto*

Sixteen singing on Zoom was chaotic, but all O.K.

– *Allyson Gall, 73, Scituate, Mass.*

A new seder chef is born I'd never made horseradish or charoset before; I'd just taken them for granted.

Making some of the foods fresh is better than at larger institutional seders I've been to, and I didn't know how easy charoset is, so maybe I'll experiment more with charosets next year.

– *Noah Kahrs, 24, Rochester, N.Y.*

I thought I'd be really sad and putting on a brave face for my family. Instead, I felt empowered, full of joy and really proud of myself for pulling it off!

I always thought that without my family, I would cut out more parts, but now I realize I love the singing! I found myself adding and adding as we went along. We actually took time to literally tell the story of the exodus, since our toddler didn't know it. She was enthralled.

– *Carly Pildis, Washington, D.C.*

### **A story that transcends borders and nationalities**

Although we have always cherished our large family gatherings around our seder table, I believe we were most surprised that we were able to create a feeling of intimacy with our Zoom Seder of 91 people from all over the world.

We learned that by creating a large international Virtual Seder, we were able to bring together family and friends of different faiths and ethnicities who would never have had the opportunity to interact with one another. Not only did we host this seder with Christians, Muslims and Jews, but some of our guests were our dear Palestinian friends from Ramallah in the West Bank. They stayed awake as long as possible despite the seven-hour time difference. I believe that our goal was to demonstrate that we are all Children of Abraham and that we have more similarities than differences.

We all took a break from the seder to have our individual dinners offline and then we reconvened after an hourlong break. I missed watching our grown children continue their annual contests to see who could swallow the most horseradish at once.

– *Barbara Dworkin, 67, Schenectady, N.Y.*

Keeping traditions and ritual in a time of fear and stress can be a comfort.

– *Rachel Haus, 51, Kalamazoo, Mich.*

The virtual seder hosted by an old friend from grade school was a much larger event than the planned in-person one. Without the limits of physical space, they were able to include more people from more places, expanding the number who could share the simcha.

I wrote an original song for this year's celebration that we played before Kadesh. Maybe we can keep that in the program to remember this night so different from all other nights

– *Oren Levine, 57, Washington, D.C.*

### **'It gave purpose to the screen time'**

In a typical family-dinner type of setting, we have a hard time getting the kids – and, frankly, all of us – off of devices. There was something very nice about all being connected to the same one device. It gave purpose to the screen time.

It also gave us a really nice sense of shared connection, and we for the first time in a long time had a great conversation about the meaning behind the Four Questions, and what Exodus really means. It opened up a lot of great conversations about privilege and what it is that we are truly grateful for.

We missed the tastes and smells of grandma's amazing cooking. We had to improvise a lot of the elements on our seder plate, and we had to make do with recipes that were passed down to us but that we are not experts at producing. We missed being able to sing along as a family that is much larger than the four of us.

When we got to the section on plagues, there was a directive from our congregational leader to type in modern plagues. Of course lots of people wrote in Trump, but otherwise really thought-provoking plagues such as inequality and climate denial and lack of belief in science.

We loved the idea of talking about plagues in a modern context, and would love to incorporate that into our future Seders. We especially loved the perspective of our children and what they consider to be modern plagues. They mentioned things like education in equality and lack of civil rights for all.

– *Ella Leitner, 47, Torrington, Conn.*

### **'No point in sticking to the script'**

Right as I finished cooking, setting up my table and

collecting all the necessary materials to lead my family seder, my Internet stopped working. It was the strangest of phenomena, and I irrationally considered if wasn't an act of hate – had a Nazi hacker intentionally disrupted my WiFi service to prevent me from performing the Passover rituals?

As I frantically tried to restart my router and search for my login password [so I could at least log into Zoom on my phone rather than my laptop], my family started sending me texts that they were waiting to be admitted into our seder. Despite all my attempts to "order" the evening, it began in a state of panic. I soon realized that there was no point in sticking to the script; what was most important was that we were together, and seeing each other's faces on the screen was enough.

I missed the experience of lingering in the kitchen after the seder. I made my meal alone, and ate it in my bedroom – as a way to find privacy from my non-Jewish roommates and create intimacy with my family 2,000 miles away. But the kitchen is the place in my family where Passover is centered, and I felt that I had to diminish my time there to preserve something different online and separate myself physically in my current home.

– *Julie Weitz, Los Angeles*

### **'Some things you simply can't replace'**

Besides my grandpa mastering Zoom, it surprised me that in a way I felt more present than during traditional seders. It felt more meaningful, more symbolic. It wasn't just going through the motions of reading the Haggadah. We all chose to be there from across the country.

Usually, I have seder with my immediate family, or a few close friends. I can't remember the last time I had a seder with this many people in my family. As horrifically terrible as everything is right now (and it is), in a way some of us have the opportunity for a reality-check. I think we get so hyper-focused on our day-to-day habits that it's hard to imagine doing something differently – i.e., "Oh, I guess I can catch up with all my cousins across four different time zones." Our virtual seder was the perfect example.

I think a big part of our Jewish traditions involve incorporating all of our senses. Seeing the reflection of the Shabbat candles, smelling matzah-ball soup,

hugging your friends and family after havdalah. I believe this is partly why I have such strong attachments to certain traditions, and feel so connected to my Judaism in general. While virtual alternatives certainly have their own benefits, some things you simply can't replace.

– Jon Savitt, 28, Washington, D.C.

Cooking for two and 22 is much different!

– Irene Goldie-Petras, 80, Union, N.J.

### Don't sit on the Afikoman

A miracle: everyone watched my husband go somewhere unknown to hide the Afikomen. When it was time for the hunt [after we said, "Now comes the meal! Now we are going to pretend we ate it already"], my husband told all the assembled Zoom-kids that they'd get paid double next year since no one was present to find the Afikomen. And then – amazingly – our 3-year-old grandson, Zooming in another state, came running to his family's computer to show us that he found it! Somehow, defying the laws of science, he found the Afikomen in his house and he held it up in celebration, for all to see! We were all appropriately amazed!

I missed the hello hugs and the goodbye hugs, and the hour before the seder starts when everyone is hanging around schmoozing, nibbling, and checking their watches for whoever it is that is always dangerously late to arrive.

This seder was bigger than any we've had before, with more limbs of the ever-growing family tree. While we will probably not host the couple from Switzerland [but how nice that they stayed up late enough to drop in!], I do have a different feeling about size than I did in the past. So what if we only have so many chairs or plates or cups. The bigger the better!

– Nancy Star, 64, Montclair, N.J.

Since we could not search for the Afikoman, one member of our family constructed a game called "Searching for the Afikoman" in history.

He came up with the name of a person who may have had a seder and a search for Afikomen. The participants had to guess the historical time, the person, and what may have been the discussion at this historical seder. It was challenging and we will probably include this as a yearly assignment as we do not always have children present to search for the afikomen.

– Eva Eiseman, 83, Milwaukee

### 'People actually seemed more engaged'

We worried that participants would feel disengaged or that there would be too many distractions. Instead, I think both because people were so happy to see and hear each other, and precisely because we weren't sitting around one table and instead were focused on a screen as our only point of connection, people actually seemed more engaged, less distracted, more focusing on really listening to each other and on participating in the retelling and the ritual.

We understand the traditional Halakhic position, but we may well invite out-of-town family members to join virtually because it was wonderful to have them with us as they would not have been even absent the pandemic.

– Rita Ruby, 61, Richmond, Va.

We thought we'd spend an hour or two together, but our first seder lasted almost three hours and the second was close to two hours. We felt like we were actually sharing the experience because our hearts were in it and we were flexible. To accommodate our daughter and her family in France, we started our second Seder at 12:30 p.m.

– Aileen Grossberg, 75, Montclair, N.J.

Doing the actual seder felt surprisingly normal. It was only later, talking during dinner that it sunk in how very different this night actually was. And the sadness began to creep back in as we chatted about the future. But during the seder – business as usual! – Peggy Walt, 60, Halifax, Nova Scotia

### One for the books

Every year we note an event in our Haggadah and recount it at our Seder – some happy, as in the time a grandson sang the Mickey Mouse song, the only song he knew, when we all sang Dayenu. Some scary, as in the time the fire alarm went off telling us to "leave immediately, do not panic;" some sad, as in the first seder without "elte bubbe" to make the chopped liver. So we will update our Haggadah and recall the Time of the Coronavirus. – Shelly Heller, 76, Silver Spring, Md.

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