

Rabbi Benjamin David

RH AM 2020

The year was 2020 and everyone was sick. And for a brief, impossible moment we were all thinking the same thing. Whether you lived here in America or Israel or China or Italy or anywhere at all really, we were all thinking all the time about Covid. Not just thinking about it, worrying about it.

We worried we'd get it or our children would get it or our parents. Many worried they wouldn't recover from it. We worried about our friends and co-workers. We worried about leaving our house. We worried about groceries and when to have playdates. We worried about our jobs and our future.

We worried about the kind of world our little ones were thrust into, a world that was already too complicated, now even more complicated by talk of distancing and vaccines, spikes and surges.

Some filtered it all through politics. Some filtered it through science. Some managed to filter it through faith. Some filtered it through art with colorful signs of thanks popping up on overpasses and street corners.

We came to appreciate our doctors and nurses anew. We saw our postal workers as warriors. EMT's were called heroes, as if they hadn't always been heroes. We celebrated the teachers who kept teaching, the parents who kept parenting, the volunteers who wouldn't be scared off.

We glued together our own masks. We tried to unglue ourselves from Facebook.

We learned to live a life of Zoom: Zoom meetings, Zoom reunions, Zoom birthdays, there were Zoom weddings. We grew accustomed to TeleHealth. We learned that you actually can watch too much Netflix. We learned just how far we'd drive for toilet paper. We took up a hobby. We FaceTimed more, cut our hair less. We ate too much and slept hardly at all. We attended services online.

We consoled our kids and, whether they realized it or not, our kids consoled us.

We answered all the questions we could. We dreamed of camp and the shore and all that used to be a given. We took part in Zoom funerals, as if bereavement weren't hard enough.

It was the time of Covid, or maybe *Kavod*, the Hebrew word for 'honor' and we tried hard to honor the sick and save them and save ourselves from a horrifying fate as well.

Let's say it clearly: It made an already tough year just shy of unbearable. We were already up against searing national division, an environment cracking before our very eyes, anti-Semitism, homophobia, xenophobia and yes, writhing racial inequities and prejudice. We already felt such stress deep in ourselves, an unspeakable angst we couldn't fully articulate, let alone solve. We carried it with us every minute of every day and every night.

I turned to the words of our tradition again and again. I know many of you did too. I sought solace in Psalms, lines such as, 'have mercy on me O Eternal One...O God hear my call, accept my prayer' from Psalm 6 or the words of Psalm 31: 'O God you are my rock and my refuge, lead me, guide me...into Your hand do I entrust my soul.' I was hearing those words anew.

I held onto the prayer book and found comfort in expressions like, 'with You are true protection and safety...watch over us as we go forth...spread over us Your shelter of peace.' Those words sound different in 2020, so earnest, so raw and right, so prayerful.

Torah portions spoke anew this year as well; the isolated ill of *Tazria* now felt so relatable, all of us feeling what the cast out felt like thousands of years ago when our biblical story was written. Or Moses praying for his ailing sister Miriam: *Al Nah Refah Nah Lah*. 'Please God heal her.' We prayed urgently for our sisters and brothers too.

For so long – I will tell you – I thought about what I could possibly say here and now, on this holy day, this day that has healed us so often in the past. What can be said that would help? Is there even anything left to say? Could words possibly capture what we've endured and are still enduring?

Look at us, look at us now, confined to our homes, Rosh HaShanah morning, maybe the first Rosh HaShanah you've ever spent away from the synagogue. I am standing here now on this sacred morning in a sanctuary that's all but empty.

How could my words capture all the pain and disappointment and tragedy?

For a while I thought maybe I could consider the phases of the Corona Virus through the corpus of the Jewish holidays. We had a beginning, that was Rosh HaShanah, a time of uncertainty and so much learning about our new normal. We wondered what awaited us. We felt hopeful.

Soon we expressed regret, personally, communally, nationally. Maybe we felt remorseful. Could we have done more? Should we be doing more? Could things have been different? Have we learned anything at all? Do we owe an apology to teachers or students? Could we have acted sooner or more swiftly?

And this: Will the dead forgive us? That was Yom Kippur.

In time we learned our way around our newfound insulated life, a physical and emotional space that was both reassuring and unnerving somehow. Our home was a place of both quiet stability but also frailty, both strong and unsure at the same time. That was Sukkot.

We embraced the miraculous, however small, some good news in the mail, or someone who had recovered, places that had managed to flatten the curve. They thought it would last and last but actually *Nes Gadol Haya*, a miracle came and this country or that state was essentially in the clear now. That was Hanukkah of course.

We learned to appreciate the outside in ways we never had. A short walk was like a gift. A sun-filled day was a blessing. We saw stretching green trees above us and birds in the sky like visions from another world. That was Tu B'Shevat.

In time we got comfortable in our masks, these costumes we wore, as if we were hiding from each other. And they didn't only cover our face: The masks helped conceal our anxiety and hesitation. They covered us up, so we couldn't really see each other in any sense. And to take off your mask, to finally reveal yourself, was to put yourself in harm's way. That was Purim.

There came doses of liberation, a first venture to the beach, careful social distancing at an outdoor restaurant or friend's house. We ventured to little league or soccer. We felt free, even if only for a time, and the joy that comes with freedom. That was Passover.

Tisha B'av, the summertime memorial when we commemorate the fallen Temple in Jerusalem, traditionally a time of mourning and sadness, came when we wondered aloud how to pay homage to all who had fallen, including members of our congregation. How do we say goodbye to those we knew and never knew, both individuals and hundreds of thousands spread around the globe?

For they were people, like you and me. And now they've left us.

But even after all that I was left wondering if there was more to be said. Consider what we just experienced, you and I. Consider what our kids are experiencing, as so much of life is stripped away, no school to go to, at least not in a typical way, no proms or graduations, no visits with the grandparents, at least not in a typical way, nothing normal, nothing familiar, nothing comfortable.

How will my 7-year-old remember all of it? Did he feel safe throughout? Will he feel safe again? Have we started to wonder if keeping a distance from each other in general, even when all this is over, is maybe the safer, more advisable way to live? Can we still trust each other?

What does it mean to not have full control of your story, or the story of those souls closest to you? Where do we put our anger, our hurt, all that worry? And where do we put our gratitude, our quiet contentment, our solace?

I wondered if there was another way to think about it all. I turned to music, as I often do, and maybe you do too.

How can we take it in all of its messy, unbridled grandeur, an illness that wrapped its way around our world, and make even some sense of it?

If you want something giant and diverse with countless layers then where would you look other than the Beatles? Let's try this. Let's think about the Corona Virus through the lens of the Beatles.

With Help we remember that it's ok to ask for help, that we can all relate to the refrain 'I need somebody,' no matter how strong we might claim to be. COVID taught us that we all need help and, more than that, we all have it in us to be of help.

With Blackbird we remember that ‘the dead of night’ can be such a scary time, a time of restlessness, a time of angst, but that the sun comes up and a new day always dawns. COVID taught us not to dwell perennially in the dark but to hold onto the idea of light and possibility, that tomorrow can and will be a better day.

With Let It Be we remember that we can’t dictate everything, even if we want to, not the news, not our neighbors, not the behavior of those in other towns or states. ‘Words of wisdom: Let it be.’ COVID taught us that we can only make our own choices and encourage our kids to do the same.

With Good Day Sunshine we remember the simple pleasures of a ray of sun, a bit of warmth, some air in your lungs. COVID taught us to step outside when we can, take a breath, give yourself a break and some space and the space to remember that there’s a world larger, more beautiful and more inspiring than any headline or commentary.

With I Want to Hold Your Hand we remember both the healing touch of a friend or loved one, a hand in our hand, a hug from a dear one, and how refraining from touch and closeness is in fact what will save us. COVID taught us that the power of touch is real and we won’t take it for granted anymore.

With When I'm 64 we remember to look to the future with optimism, not doubt or scorn. COVID ironically taught us to be relentlessly hopeful.

With Dear Prudence we remember to be thoughtful, prudent, not trust every talking head, not heed every self-proclaimed expert, but rather to be studious, to be wise of history and science and Jewish tradition. COVID taught us to come from a place of learning and wisdom.

With Hey Jude we remember to acknowledge our pain and hurt, but not stay there, ‘take a sad song and make it better.’ These days we have to urge ourselves to places of joy and gratitude. COVID taught us that we need to actively work to get to those places, so as not to let ourselves surrender to hopelessness and haplessness.

With Eleanor Rigby we remember ‘all the lonely people,’ that this is a time of loneliness for so many. COVID taught us anew that one of the greatest mitzvot we can do is check-in, stop by, remind others that we care.

With a Hard Day’s Night we remember that it’s important to mark time, the end of the day, the end of the week, the end of one year and beginning of the next, although it may feel like it all blurs together. We must number our days, as Psalm 90 teaches. COVID taught us that, by marking time, we remind ourselves that at we are doing this, moving forward – even if slowly - and growing in perspective and courage and faith as we do.

With Imagine we remember to hold onto a vision of peace, a vision of unity, a vision of goodness, not to throw our hands up and turn sour on humanity. COVID taught us the value of dreaming big, especially in a time of distress.

With Yesterday we remember to take comfort in the adversity overcome by our parents and theirs. We recall that they too endured illness; they too endured social unrest; they too worked to undo injustice. COVID taught us to look backward in order to live with forbearance and purpose today.

With Come Together we remember that community is and has been our salvation for millennia. Although we were in our homes for months, we know we had a community that backed us, supported us, loved us and loves us. We were alone, together. From phones and computer screens we found a way to pray together, learn together, laugh together. COVID taught us once more that in our togetherness there is strength and healing.

We are together today, even if it may not feel like it completely. But we are. We are together with God, even if it may not feel like it sometimes. God hears you. God believes in you today and always.

We are together with generations of Jews whose lives enabled our lives, even if you can’t see them. They are there. You can feel them. They are urging you on.

We are together with those around the world right now, all the lonely people, praying together for a year of healing. Amen.