Children As Act of Faith – Rabbi Dan Moskovitz
Based on a sermon by Michael Gold

"There went a man of the house of Levi, and took for his wife a daughter of Levi." (Exodus 2:1)

Let me begin with a true story. Thessaloniki, Greece once had a thriving Jewish community. At one point the port was even closed on Saturday. Then Hitler attacked Greece and destroyed most of the Jews. One family that survived the Greek Holocaust was the Bourla family. In 1961 they had a baby boy, who received the Hebrew name Yisrael Avraham, the English name Albert. Albert grew up and studied veterinary medicine in Greece.

Eventually he moved to the United States, married a Jewish woman named Miriam and raised two Jewish children. He switched careers to the pharmaceutical industry, worked his way up, and eventually became the head of global vaccines for Pfizer. Today Albert Bouria, this son of Holocaust survivors, is the CEO of Pfizer, the company that created the first COVID-19 vaccine, and now just received FDA approval in the US and hopefully soon in Canada for a therapeutic pill to treat the symptoms and effects of COVID at home, much like one take Theraflu for severe flu symptoms. According to the public health doctors that I have spoken too, the approval and prescription of this new pill will be the third leg of the stool that will allow us to truly live with COVID. The other two being vaccinations, and as difficult as it is to accept the spread of the virus through this new, and apparently less deadly variant, that will allow people to build natural immunity.

Imagine if Albert's parents, living in the ruins of the Holocaust, had said that it is too dangerous to bring children into the world. How can we risk subjecting a child to another Holocaust? I often hear that sentiment. In fact, I spoke about it last Friday night when I quoted the statistic that 25% of Canadians aged 15 to 49 are considering not having more children in 2022 because of the pandemic and its related impacts. There were 13,434 fewer births in 2020 than in 2019, the greatest year-over-year decrease (3.6 per cent) since records began and the lowest number of births in any year since 2006. Parents not wanting to have children; is perhaps the most sobering indicator of hopelessness and despair;

With the threat of global warming, inflation, and racial violence, how can we bring children into this world? My answer, and that of this week's Torah portion, not to mention the whole of Jewish tradition is that having children is an act of faith.

Nowhere is that point presented more clearly than in a famous Midrash about Miriam, based on this week's portion (Sota 12a). The Torah said that a man from the house of Levi took a wife from the house of Levi and gave birth to baby. The baby was named Moses. But we know that Moses had an older sister and brother, Miriam and Aaron. According to the Midrash, when Pharaoh decreed that all baby boys should be drowned in the Nile, the man separated from his wife. At that point all the Israelite men separated from their wives. Better to bring no children into the world.

Miriam was a young girl when she challenged her parents. "Pharaoh only decreed against baby boys, but you have decreed against both boys and girls. Pharaoh only decreed against life in this world, but you have decreed against this world and the world to come. Pharaoh's decree may be overturned, but your decree cannot be overturned." Miriam convinced her parents to come back together, and Moses was born of that union. Miriam then followed Moses as he floated down the Nile in a basket, watched as Pharaoh's daughter rescued him, and arranged Moses' birth mother to become his wet nurse. For these actions she is called Miriam the Prophetess.

The Rabbis elaborated on the wonderful deeds of Miriam. She took the women aside after the crossing of the sea, playing a tambourine as she led them in song. While Moses taught the men Torah, Miriam taught the women Torah. Perhaps the most famous Midrash, she had a well to provide water for the people Israel in their journey through the desert. Today many Jews place a cup of water for Miriam alongside the cup of wine for Elijah at the Passover seder. But it was Miriam who convinced her parents to have a baby, even as Pharaoh threatened all the baby boys.

Having children during difficult times is a sign of hope in the future. Atlantic Magazine had an article last year; on having babies during the current pandemic. The difficulties of childbirth are many, including finding healthcare in overcrowded hospitals and the effect of both the virus on pregnancy. The article contains words that reflect our Midrash. "Even in the darkest days of the pandemic, new life has found a way. But COVID-19 has made this most basic of human endeavors more fraught and more dangerous this year, everywhere the disease has touched."

Our tradition teaches that having a baby during difficult times is an act of faith in the future. We never know if that baby will grow up to be a Moses, or an Albert Bouria; but we do know the story of the Jewish people and the story of the human race would be quite different without either of them.