THE EIGHT DAY
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TEMPLE SHOLOM
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Shabbat Shalom

I want to start with a confession of sorts, I am a prepper. I don't mean I wear Izod shirts with a turned-up collar and penny loafer shoes – I mean I did but that was in High School, totally different and all of those pictures have been destroyed – I saw to it myself.

For those not familiar with the term Prepper, it describes a person who plans for cataclysmic events such as a Global Pandemic years in advance.

I have always been a planner and prepping for things like earthquakes, severe weather, and Global Pandemics is essentially planning for worst case scenarios. It is largely a thought experiment and a modestly expensive hobby, till that day comes and what was in your head is suddenly on the evening news. Then you get to see if all your planning was correct.

So, when COVID-19 hit I was pretty ready, I had my 20-year shelf stable food stores (basically camping food – which thank God we have not had to eat yet), masks, gloves, cleaning supplies and yes I had a stash of toilet paper.

We have thus far weathered the crisis in relative comfort, and I have taken some measure of pride in being able to dip into my long-held stores of supplies when we or a neighbor needed something. Next time though I am stockpiling yeast – the one thing I missed and has been hard to get. Not a problem last week during pesach but now everyone is baking bread!

I planned for a pandemic, but now as we begin to think about re-entry I am trying to apply that same over the horizon thinking to the challenge of "the day after".

To be clear, we are not there yet at all, Dr Bonnie Henry is Rabbinic Authority is our home and I know from her briefings that we still have months of social distancing ahead of us. But God willing, and social distancing observing; the day will come and I am allowing myself to think about it, even to dream.

In Judaism 'the day after' is often understood as, 'the eight day'.

We learn this in large part from this week's Torah Portion, Shemini which means "the eighth." It refers to the eighth day of the opening of the Tabernacle, which was actually its first real functioning day, after seven days of special inaugural rituals performed by Moses, Aaron, and the other priests.

On this 'official opening day,' Moses commands Aaron and the people to bring sacrifices to the Tabernacle, "for today God will appear to you," which is, after all, the point of the Tabernacle.

Vay'hi b'yom hashmini, it begins, "On the eighth day."

The number eight is significant. When we think of important Jewish numbers, we think of 3 for the shovels of earth we place in a grave, we think of 10 for the commandments, 40 for the days Moses was up the mountain, Noah was in the ark and years the Israelites were wandering in the desert.

Seven of course is a Jewish number, the sabbath day, the sabbatical year, weeks of the omer. We just finished Passover, one of two seven-day festivals. A week has seven days, which not coincidentally is how many it took God to create the world. Seven is a number of wholeness and of holiness.

But as my colleague Rabbi Tom Alpert points out, "if seven is completeness, eight is the number for starting over. For instance, the covenant of circumcision takes place on the eighth day in part because it marks a kind of new beginning for the baby boy, one in which he joins the covenant of the Jewish people. But the starting over is never the same. The boy is different after his bris, not just physically but spiritually."

Rabbi Harold Kushner has written that the ordination ceremony ended the period of heightened awareness that began at Mount Sinai and brought us to a more normal state of affairs. As he writes, "On the eighth day, we are challenged to begin living in the day-to-day world of ordinary events." This is true, but I'd add that the day-to-day world of ordinary events isn't the same world that the people knew before they got to Sinai. It isn't the world of escaped Egyptian slaves. It's the new world of Torah that they now have to put into practice. A world with new societal rules, ethics, customs and practices. It's not going back to normal, its going forward to a new beginning. That's the eighth day, a new beginning.

Some have called this period of social distancing and isolation The Great Pause; and if we look at it for a moment, we can see, as I have pointed out before, the hidden blessings in the curse that is this pandemic.

- We are home with our families
- Spending more time with our children
- We are rushing less – my commute to work is 2 flights of stairs and 15 feet
- Our skies are clearer
- Our neighborhoods are more neighbor-hoody
- We recognize and honour the true heroes in our communities, doctors, nurses, teachers, grocery store workers, delivery people

The list goes on and I encourage you to make a gratitude list of your own.

So the planner that I am, I am thinking and planning for what this 'Eight Day" will look like, and what experiences from this Great Pause I want to hold onto even as life as we knew it begins to re-emerge.

When I think about the pre COVID-19 world there are many things that I hope never come back. Such tremendous inequality and division in our society. Materialism and greed that are the antithesis of the sharing and caring I see daily in our neighborhood and across our country.

The hashtag for this crisis has become #InThisTogether and it's a much needed sentiment that has for too long been missing from our social discourse and policies. The fact that the virus knows no borders, ethnicities, religions, cultures or socio-economic status has been the great unifier in what was previously a very fractured world.

No doubt some have struggled mightily to maintain their pre-virus conceptions of left and right, blue and red, normative and other – but thankfully those social views are also being attacked and brought down by this virus.

Like in the period of WWII when everyone knew someone who was serving overseas, once again we have a common thread that unites us, everyone knows someone who has been impacted by this virus, has gotten sick, is caring for the sick, has lost their job, is struggling. No one is immune and that is both tragic and also empowering. No one is on day eight yet, we are all still very much in the wilderness.

Our parasha continues, "And a fire went out from before God and consumed the burnt offering and the fats which were on the altar, and the entire nation saw, and celebrated, and fell on their faces."

This moment, the climax of so much work and ritual, is what the Tabernacle was all about: this was the hallmark of the eight day, the palpable presence of God, experienced by the entire people. The feeling one gets when reading this section is--it worked! They did it! All that effort paid off, and the people really experienced God's presence.

We yearn for that day when the doors swing open, extended families and friends can embrace again, our sanctuary can be full again.

But our parsha gives an important note of caution, as tragically what happens next is a lesson for our present day plans:

"Now Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, each took his pan and placed fire in it, and placed on it incense, and brought it before the Lord; a strange fire which he had not commanded them. And a fire went out from before the Lord and consumed them and they died before God. And Moses said to Aaron: this is what God was referring to when he said 'with those close to

me I will be sanctified, and before the entire nation I will be honored'. "Vayidom Aharon" and Aaron was silent."

Commentators have speculated for centuries about why they offered the fire and why they suffered that consequence. But it's the very uncertainty of this story that makes it so powerful for our time. We don't know. We just know that something went wrong, something no one had anticipated.

Even with the best laid plans, the most detailed preparations something can still go wrong and it could all blow up in our faces. As we plan for the eighth day we must be mindful of not thinking of days 9, 10 and beyond. Of getting too far ahead of our skis that all this work and effort we have put into flattening this curve becomes yet another mountain we will have to climb, with deadly consequences.

We must be measured in our hopes and expectations, the experts tell us it will not be a light switch, much more like the rising of the sun, a slow brightening of the day as day seven recedes and day eight begins to rise.

But a new day is coming and we would be wise to plan for the dawn. We can start by taking stock of things we learned about our self, our family, our job, our society during this Great Pause. What do you want to keep doing even when the sun rises on 'day eight'? What lessons can be applied from this tragic period in history?

I don't think that it is right to benefit from a crisis, as that means that one person's gain comes at the cost of another person's suffering – that's why we poured out drops of wine during the seder to mourn the death of the Egyptians beneath the collapsing Red Sea. But it would be horribly wasteful of us to not learn and take lessons from this experience; to not apply them to making a more equitable, just, safe, compassionate and beautiful world.

It can start with our families. What from days 1-7 do you want to continue on day eight? What will you keep out, banished from your lifestyle hoping and planning that it never return? We can plan and build from there for our community and beyond.

The sun will rise, a new day will dawn, this pandemic will slowly, gradually fade like the night sky, it won't be back to normal, we don't want to go back, we want to go forward – forward to a brighter tomorrow, a better tomorrow, a safer, healthier future, truly a promised land, based on the promises we make to ourselves right now on how we intend to be on that eight day.