LAUGHTER IN THE FACE OF A PANDEMIC
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A popular joke is circulating in Israel this week as nearly 100,000 Israelis are under quarantine due to the coronavirus. It goes something like this:

"Almost the entire country is in quarantine. Who do you think will be busier in nine months? Midwives or divorce lawyers?"

Like any good joke there is a bit of painful truth in it – will our forced confinement with the people we love and care about most in the world (at least those that we are fortunate enough to share a home and or a city with) bring us closer together or drive us further apart?

It's also a very Jewish response, a very Purim appropriate response as our tradition teaches and as the holiday of Purim which begins Monday night celebrates; Jews laugh in the face of danger.

Rabbi Arthur Waskow taught me this.

The dark villain Haman, the mythic tyrant from the Scroll of Esther is but a place holder for all the times that a tyrant, movement, or even natural force has risen against us at so many moments in our Jewish history, personifying the worst in human fear and hatred of the other. Waskow taught that in such moments we need to do what we've done for generations in the face of hateful danger – rise above with courage, humor, faith, strategic activism, and deep compassion. I would add only one more action – we also need to wash our hands!

I want talk about three things tonight – they are all related:

1. The Coronavirus
2. Purim
3. A page of Talmud that I learned as part of the Daf Yomi – the daily Talmud study

Let's start with the virus – as I know it is top of mind for many if not all of us.

We can joke and laugh; they are good coping mechanisms as our tradition teaches us. (So apparently is bulk purchasing of toilet paper if my experience at Costco this week is any indication).

The virus is deadly serious, particularly for our elders and those with pre-existing health conditions as we well know from the news. How serious? It's hard to calculate, but the spread knows no borders of nations or socioeconomic status and as the infection rate increases

exponentially so does the mortality rate and very soon we could be getting into some very large numbers.

When we remember, as we should never forget, that those numbers are somebody's father, mother, grandfather, grandmother, brother, sister – this very likely will affect people that we know, people that we love.

Vikor Frankl, the Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist as well as Holocaust survivor taught, as I have often related that, "human beings can endure any suffering if they can find meaning in it".

The problem presented by the coronavirus is that it falls in a category of natural evils, like earthquakes, hurricanes and tornados that has long been a challenge for Jewish theologians.

You see human evils we know what to do with; we can explain them as the corruption of free will – that Hitler came from us not God. Gun violence is our fault not God's. But what is the meaning of an earthquake, a tornado, a virus?

The fundamentalist would urge, perhaps while standing on a street corner with hand lettered sign reading, "Repent! The end is nigh." that the virus is all part of a divine plan. Most of us in this room, maybe all would reject such rationalization as nonsense. The virus is no more a punishment for the sins of humanity than AIDS was seen in its day, or racial integration was in its day.

But then if it is not a punishment from God; why can't God stop its spread? Why are our prayers for health and healing going unanswered? Why pray to God if God can't save us from natural disasters?

The existentialist Philosopher Baruch Spinoza would say the terms good and bad, indicate no positive quality in things regarded in themselves, but are merely modes of thinking, for the comparisons of things one with another. Thus, something like a virus can be at the same time good, bad and indifferent. For instance, music is good for him that is happy, bad for him that is sad, and for he that is deaf it is neither good nor bad.

But I prefer the answer from 20th Century Jewish Philosopher Mordechai Kaplan who wrote, "Evil is the part of the universe that has not been subdued by human beings and God. Since God is the power that makes for salvation, as humans find ways to subdue evils, like disease, God, through human beings, subdues more and more of the universe and, therefore, slowly conquers evil."

Kaplan's response builds on Spinoza's view that a virus is neither good nor bad, like a hurricane it just is. BUT human beings have been given immense power of reason, intellect and collaboration to subdue these naturally occurring events and conquer them.

What is the meaning of these "natural evils" – the meaning is that we must pull together all of us to subdue them. Self-quarantining not just to protect ourselves but to protect others. Providing our tax dollars to fund the schools and research that will ultimately find a cure. Helping our neighbor in their time of distress so as to reduce the pain and suffering for all of us. Yes, even sharing our Costco size cartons of toilet paper if that is what is needed.

The virus is a test, not of God but of us. Can we pull together to fight this and subdue it, or will we tear each other apart?

Briefly about Purim.

As I mentioned at the opening, one of the great lessons of Purim is that Jews laughed in the face of danger. Once again, the eternal 'they' rose up with a dastardly plan to kill us and we outsmarted them, we used every ounce of our cunning, resilience, power and courage to turn the tables on Haman. He died and we survived, indeed we thrived.

Layehudim hayetah orah vesimkhah vesason vicar - Ken tihyeh lanu.

The Jews of old had light, and happiness and joy and love — may it be so for us!

On Purim, our rallying cry is heard in the echoes of our joy. As it is said, "Mi sh'nichnas Adar Marbim B'Simcha," "When the month of Adar (the month of Purim) arrives, we should increase our joy."

There is a lesson about confronting the virus in this teaching of Purim too. A tenacity and resourcefulness that will not allow the horrible to happen, that will stop at nothing to avert disaster, will pull out all the stops and then like at Purim when we make it to the other side we will rejoice. Its living life with a vision of hope not despair. To imagine the world as we would desire it and then to make it so.

I doubt that we will sit on the other side of this outbreak and laugh. In the Purim tale the only one to die was the wicked Haman. Sadly, that is already not the case for thousands around the globe and there will be more, much closer to home. But can we imagine the abundant joy we will feel if/when we beat back this latest attempt to destroy us. When we all pull together to do the seemingly impossible, to make our own miracles of human design?

in joy, we show our strength.

In joy, we show our resilience.
In joy, we show our pride.

Perhaps Purim comes that this time of year to remind us that we have faced the longest odds before, and we have come out the victor time and time again. Hamen is dead, Amelak is dead, Hitler is dead; but we, we are still here. *Ken tihyeh lanu* – may it be so for us.

Lastly a teaching from the daily page of Talmud than many of my colleagues and most orthodox Jews are learning on a 7 ½ yearly cycle.

This morning I read Rabbi Reuven Fink's letter to his congregation in Long Island sharing the news that he had contracted the Coronavirus and was thus undergoing self-quarantine. It's a beautiful letter that shows great faith, compassion for those in his community similarly affected, angst over the unknowns of the unfolding situation and rabbinic leadership I could only hope to emulate, though I pray I will not have too. You can find it online and I urge you to read it.

Toward the end of his letter he teaches all of us a little torah. Stuck home as he is, he has the solitude and the lack of distractions to focus more intently on his family, his reading and his daily Talmud study. It is in this moment he discovered a fantastic insight into current events in yesterday's daily page of Talmud.

Quoting directly from his letter to his congregation, Rabbi Fink explains:

"The Talmud is in the midst of discussing various seminal events in the life of King David. It tells of an error he made. He decided to conduct a census of his kingdom. He wanted to have an accurate count of Israel's population.

According to the Torah, a census can only take place by counting tokens that represent a person but not by counting the people themselves.

The Torah says: Count half-shekels so there "will not be a pestilence when you count the people."

King David ignored this rule and counted people one by one. The prophets tells us that a plague commenced as a result. The strange occurrence that guided that plague was that exactly 100 people died per day. The prophets and sages of that era ascertained from heaven that if they would institute a new mitzvah, the plague would end."

And it is from this instance that the rabbinic mitzvah to recite 100 *brachot* or blessings each day was established.

Rabbi Fink continued: “Could it be only a coincidence that we learn this portion in the Talmud specifically today during this crisis of a possible pandemic? Perhaps. But perhaps we can take a lesson from it. Maybe we can accept upon ourselves to be more mindful and meticulous in reciting brachot.

A bracha, a blessing, is our way of acknowledging the profound awareness that we have of G-d in our lives. A blessing can elevate the most mundane activity into something lofty and holy. It takes seconds but launches us into eternity.”

I thought this was a beautiful teaching, to acknowledge the blessings, perhaps as many as 100 that surround is even in the midst of the whirlwind of this growing pandemic.

And still even more particularly I thought of the one blessing that is perhaps most appropriate for this situation, *al natilat yadaim*, the blessing for washing your hands.

The rabbis never intended this to be for hygienic reasons, they were modelling after the mikvah the priest would immerse in before making that biblical sacrifice in temple times. BUT Jews have long held through the law of unintended consequences that because we are commanded to wash our hands before we eat, our people have benefited from the clean hygiene that the practice also promotes.

Why was there a plague in the time of King David? Because, he treated people like numbers not human souls. Why was there a plague? Because he ignored God commandment to not bring the people in close proximity to each other on such a massive scale that they would all spread virus and disease.

From this we learn, that every human being has value, those numbers we see on the TV screen are not statistics they are the precious loved ones of somebody, even if they look different from us, speak a different language than us, come from or live in a different country than us.

We also learn the biblical lesson of appropriate social distancing when there is a concern for transmission of a contagion. Human beings have been helping each other stay healthy by putting the greater good over individual self-interest for thousands of years. And in that same time, we have also ignored that advice with deadly consequences.

When the order comes to stay home – please stay home. In this context those who do will be among the real heroes; along with the first responders and medical professionals that will put themselves in harm’s way for all of us.

How did they stop the plague in the times of King David? They replaced each death with an act of blessing, an act of *gimilut hessed* a deed of loving kindness. That in itself may not bring about a cure, I am counting on medicine not miracles. But it will make the next period, however long and how ever difficult it may be more bearable. Remember when we talk about healing in Judaism we prayer for a *r'fuat hanefesh v' r'fuat hagoof* – a healing of body AND soul.

Through those acts of hesed like sharing our resources (yes even the toilet paper), caring for each other, they will heal and bring joy to our soul. In fact some of those moments that require blessing, like washing our hands may in fact keep our community healthier, reduce the spread, protecting the body and ultimately save lives.

The Israelis joke – will it be divorce lawyers or midwives that will see an uptick in business nine months from now?

We control very little in the face of this virus, but we can control how we treat each other. I'm rooting for the midwives; I hope you will too.