I have tried to think, what is this like? What period in history can I compare this to, to draw strength in the similarities and maybe even the eventualities?

It's not like a war, in a war you can see the enemy, you know the battle lines, you can fight and if you can fight then you can win.

This is not quite like war.

It's also not like 9/11 when as an American I lived in fear of a terrorist on an airplane, or at a shopping mall. The real possibility that I would be caught up in a terrorist attack in the United States having lived so long in Israel was almost incalculable.

The similes could go on and on but the one that keeps coming to mind as I sit here in front of my computer screen – that image behind me is just a projection of our sanctuary; and you sit there in front of your computer or tablet is of another period great rending and reimagining of Jewish history. Tonight, I think of the period after the destruction of the second temple, when the rabbis and their students fled Jerusalem, retreated to the coastal city of Yavneh and set about recreating Judaism beyond the walls of the holy temple. Because the walls had come tumbling down, the temple was inaccessible, and the people were scared.

Led by a great Jewish leader, Rabbi Yohanan Ben Zakai the rabbis looked around them, the temple was gone, and along with it, the sacrifices, and all the rituals they knew and took comfort in.

They could have given up, many a religion had done the same before and ever since. Destroy the holy places and you destroy the religion that worships it. But not these rabbis, not at that time. Instead they relocated Judaism, from the people they placed it in the home and the synagogue.

Judaism's religious language became prayer, Torah study, and mitzvot. The Pesach sacrifices became the home-based seder, and the daily sacrifices became the Amidah, the classic statement of Jewish prayer. The rabbis finalized the authoritative canon of the Hebrew Bible, and re-established the Sanhedrin – the great rabbinic court to render rulings on all the things the generations before them could never imagine.

Now, 2,000 years later, Judaism is having its "Yavneh moment." We are experiencing a transformation perhaps as deep and as pervasive as that moment when the ancient temple gave way to the synagogue. Those transformations have been coming for decades; now, they are fully upon us.

To quote my teacher Rabbi Jeff Salkin, “Like the rabbis in Yavneh, we are renegotiating where Judaism happens. Just as the loss of Jewish sovereignty moved the sanctity of Jewish practice to the Jewish home — to the Jewish table, the symbolic remnant of the ancient altar — and to the synagogue, the coronavirus crisis has, at least temporarily, “moved” Judaism out of synagogues. We are now in cyber-Yavneh: Across North America and beyond, synagogues are temporarily closing, moving their core operations — services, classes — to Facebook, Zoom, and other platforms. Just like we are tonight.”

As I mentioned earlier Judaism is now in the cloud — which, let the record note, is a biblical euphemism for God.

Is this where I want it to be, is there where I think Judaism belongs? No, I think of Judaism as the anti-tech of our day. The sabbath is the great moderator of screen-time, carrying more weight and authority than any parent could ever muster.

But and here is the Yavneh thing – if we are not here, if we do not make this work till we can return to our sacred places we will lose too much, and we may never come back.

Judaism dies in isolation. Our community needs community. It is not a Jewish thing to go off into the woods by yourself or to find god in solitary moments on a mountain top all alone. Yes, God dwells there too but, God dwells more between us, than in any one of us.

Martin Buber taught us this. In his transformative lens of I-Thou relationships. Buber explained that God is the hyphen between me and you, between I and thou. God is the bridge. When we act to help each other, we make God present.

Melissa Raphael is an author, she wrote a powerful book called, “The Female Face of God in Aushwitz” In it she says that what died in the Shoa was the masculine presence of God the Kadosh Baruch. The heroic, manly God, superhero God that would always be there to save you, save us; but what remained was the Shehinah the motherly presence of God, that provided comfort and became present in acts of helping each other. Where was God in Aushwitz? God was in the acts of kindness, of hesed, of compassion that in spite of everything and all attempts to destroy our humanity still remained.

How do you survive the unimaginable? A Global Pandemic? Its not with Toilet Paper, its with hesed.

The Talmud declares Tzedakah teyzil m’mavet/Tzedakkah saves from death. Why, because of the hyphen, because the dash between me and you is godliness. Hesed/Tzedakah gets us out of ourselves, our own worries and gets us into giving to others.