The Blessing and the Curse
Temple Sholom, Vancouver BC
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz
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Let me start this evening by saying again how wonderful it is to be together.

I know we have been calling these virtual Shabbat services, but in truth they are quite real, there is nothing actually virtual about them.

Granted we are not physically in the same place but spiritually I have rarely felt more connected to you, to my prayers and to our greater purpose in being together as a khilah kedosha a holy community.

I am hoping the same feeling will hold true on Wednesday and Thursday night when we gather with our friends and families around our laptops and iPads for our Passover seders.

Judaism has long celebrated dichotomies, our Torah speaks more than once about the blessing and the curse, a famous Israeli folk song sings about Al ha Mar v'haMatok – Over the Bitter and the Sweet. Even the Hillel Sandwich of the seder serves as an example, where we take the bitter herb and the sweet charoset and eat them together in one bite.

If 3,5000 years of history have taught our people anything it is that it's really all a matter of prospective; how we choose to look at our present circumstance, do we see the bagel or the hole?

The virus has forced us to spend more time at home, to spend more time with our family, in physical space or virtual space. Is that a blessing or a curse? It depends on how you hold it.

We eat every meal at home now, we cook every meal at home now, we have been baking cakes and cookies. My waistline thinks it's a curse, but honestly my wallet appreciates that we are not eating out, and the home cooked meals, even with a few more desserts are much healther.

Yes, there is a lot more screen time, but three times a week our whole family gets on a zoom call with grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, that never happened before the pandemic.

Our summer camp does weekly zoom gatherings and more of you attend services online than in our sanctuary on a typical weekend. Not to mention I am wearing sweatpants right now as I lead services!

So too the non-screen time around a board game, puzzle or in our yard is very intentional, when the screens are off, we are present with each other, we read more, walk more, talk more and we appreciate all of it much more.

Its ironic that this Passover our self-isolation and social distancing is also our freedom; freedom for some from the social burdens of family seders; you don't have to sit next to your politically incorrect and socially stilted uncle (and if he starts up on something zoom provides a mute button) – that's a blessing in the midst of the curse of this pandemic.

And this year we can also appreciate the freedom to be with those that we would normally not be able to be with because of distance or obligations.

There is a blessing in that, there is a blessing in what this virus, as brutal and dangerous as it is has compelled us to do.

Our beloved temple member and former religious school principal Anne Andrew reminded me of the importance of perspective in her beautiful Dvar Torah in this month's sisterhood newsletter. If you read this sermon online after services, I will provide a link.

In her drash she points out that the question we must focus on in moments of personal or communal crisis is, "What is this for?"

She teaches us that in the face of a crisis our first step is to surrender. Anne explains, "that doesn't mean that we do nothing, but it does mean we accept things as they are. Emotional pain comes from wanting things to be other than they are, so surrendering can ease that pain. It is mentally healthier for us to accept what is and proceed from there."

She goes on to cite a book by Michael Singer (author of "The Untethered Soul") called "The Surrender Experiment". In it, he describes his life after making the decision to surrender to life's calling. He also explains how to surrender and describes it as a two-step process. First you have to set aside your personal likes and dislikes. Then you ask the question: What does this situation ask of me? So rather than setting goals and making plans according to your own wishes and desires, you ask for guidance to figure out life's plan for you."

The moment dictates the mission.

Her teaching reminded me of the important perspective of holocaust survivor and psychiatrist Vikor Frankl in his book, "Man's Search for Meaning"

Frankl taught, "The meaning of our existence is not invented by ourselves, but rather detected…What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general, but rather the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment."

Put simply – its how you perceive the moment, what it calls or demands of you. You don't get to choose that, only to decode it.

Frankl wrote that most people in the concentration camp believed that the real opportunities in life had passed, even though they in fact had been offered an unimaginably important opportunity — and a challenge.

He wrote, "One could make a victory of these experiences, [of being in the camps] turning life into an inner triumph, or one could ignore the challenge and simply vegetate, as did a majority of the prisoners."

German philosopher and writer Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) framed it this way. One must transform every 'it was' into an 'I willed it thus!', that is, to take hold of the situation, accept one's fate, and strive towards a goal worth pursuing. Not "everything happens for a reason" but "there can be meaning in everything that happens."

Frankl believed that Nietzsche's dictum "he who has a 'why' to live for can bear with almost any how." Frankl writes that this could have been the guiding motto for all psychotherapeutic efforts concerning the prisoners in Auschwitz.

For me, and I think this is the lesson of this moment in history, the pandemic; its value transcends the moment, as horrible, omnipresent and all-consuming as it is.

We are being asked to do great things the face of great danger. The moment dictates the mission, we are not in control.

They call those that rose to the call to defend the world from fascism The Greatest Generation – they did unimaginable, seemingly impossible things, against incalculable odds. They answered

the question, “What is this moment for” with acts of bravery, self-sacrifice, valour, ingenuity and camaraderie.

We are being asked the same question, I hope and pray we will rise to give the same answer.

Tomorrow morning, we are reading the Torah portion Tzav, in it we are reminded of the thanksgiving sacrifices during Biblical times which brought us closer to G-d.

Thanking God for our sacrifices, because they bring us closer to what is holy. In the curse there is a blessing. In the giving; we are receiving.

It’s all a matter of perspective, it’s how you hold it, how you see it and what you understand the moment to be asking of you.

Let us answer this crisis, this pandemic, these challenges large and small, with those age old and powerful words of Torah, Hinei, - I am here, I am ready, I can do this.

Because we can, our ancestors faced insurmountable and unimaginable odds before, and they rose up and they prevailed; now its our turn.

The Haggadah declares, in every generation they rise up against us to destroy us; we are only able to read that line, we are only alive as a people to give voice to it because in every generation the proverbial ‘they’ has been defeated by the indomitable us.

Ken Tiheyeh Lanu and so may it be for us.