HERE WE GO AGAIN
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I have given 25 sermons about COVID in the past 21 months. If I give 52 sermons a year, that's ¼ of every sermon has been about COVID.

Honestly, I'm surprised that ¾ of the time I managed to speak about something else.

I know I have given 25 sermons about COVID because today I counted; I'm really not sure I am up for giving one more; I am pretty sure that you don't want to hear one more. Not that what is happening in our world and community right now is not in need of context and illumination; it most certainly is. And it not that this week's torah portion, Vayechi is not relevant to the situation and circumstance we still find ourselves in; it very much is. It's just that I don't think have the strength to keep doing it.

I'm so tired of COVID; I'm so tired of making plans and then having to change them; abandon them. Rabbi Brown and I both gave High Holy Day sermons about living with uncertainty; but it's the overwhelming certainty of the relentlessness of this virus and its disruption to our way of life, our relationships, our mental health that is hard to bear.

I know that other generations have had far greater challenges than having to endure endless zoom calls and binge watch Netflix while trying to maintain social distancing. The Great Toilet Paper Crisis of 2020; and The Supply Chain Delay of 2021 that meant my Amazon Prime orders took weeks instead of days is nothing compared to the hardships of The Great Depression or the collective sacrifices of WWII – but still in the ineloquent words of our Prime Minister, "The Sucks!" Yeah, he actually said that; yesterday when describing the new restrictions just as we enter into Winter Break and Holiday travel plans. It may have been one of the few times that all Canadians agreed with him.

So I shouldn't complain – but kvetching is almost a Jewish birthright; and if you don't identify your emotions, your feelings it's very hard to deal with them; heal them.

Where do we draw strength and courage in such times of challenges and uncertainty?

As I indicated earlier, our Torah is a model. Its story of a people, our people who endured plagues and famine, slavery and subjugation; hopelessness and disappointment; and that's just in the book of Genesis, the first book of the torah which we will conclude when Ben chants from it tomorrow morning.

When Ben chants from the Torah, after his last Aliyah; as we finish the last words of the book of Genesis our cantor will lead us in the customary proclamation, Chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek –

"Be strong, be strong, and we will be encouraged" that's what we'll say at the end of this week's parsha.

The first part of the phrase uses the singular form; the individual should be strengthened. The second part uses the plural form, indicating two key outcomes of individual strength: not only the individual, but also the collective of which she or he is a part can be encouraged by the message and add its efforts to those of the individual.

Chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek this seems like a fitting prayer for the end of 2021 and the dawn of 2022 - even if at this particular moment there is not much indication that the two years will be all that different from each other, as least as with regard to COVID-19.

And still in the eternal hopefulness of Torah and the Jewish people we proclaim, Chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek - "I've had strength to get to this point; may we all have the strength to move forward."

This week's parsha is ironically called, "Vayechi"- and he lived. It refers to Jacob, who lived 17 more years in Egypt before his death. That too is a fitting proclamation and prayer for this particular moment. Vayechi – he lived! Vayechi – We survived! we got through it.

In the entire Torah Scroll, Vay'chi is unique in that there is no extra space between it and the preceding parasha. A Torah reader, often finds it difficult to find the beginning of this Parasha. One of the several reasons offered for this is by Rashi who says Vay'chi is "S'tuma," (closed), which is meant to teach something about the mood of Jacob's children when he died. At that moment the hearts of the children of Israel were closed expecting suffering and despair due to the impending bondage in Egypt.

We may feel "S'tuma" at this moment, a sense of despair of what the rise of this new variant and its all too familiar restrictions and limitations that are placed upon us just as we thought we saw a light at the end of our COVID tunnel.

As disheartening as we may feel tonight, Vayechi – and we lived! We are the fortunate ones who have survived this year, and we take a moment to acknowledge that 2021 like 2020 before it has seen COVID-19, a virus unheard of two years ago become one of the leading causes of death around the world, and THE leading cause of death in the United States. We mourn this tragic loss of life, acknowledge the unimaginable grief of so many who must face the new year with empty places in their hearts. We pause to consider all the other ancillary impacts and wounds that this virus and our response to it has caused on our economy, our families, arts, culture, childhood, education, metal health – our very way of living. (PAUSE)

Vayechi! We survived, but most of us are in no mood to celebrate. Happy new year seems terribly stilted. By just one measure, parenthood, 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; the impacts are of course generational.

I understand the hopelessness of those in my age cohort that look at this pandemic, climate change, rising inflation, political strife, social discord and question whether to bring up children into such an unredeemed and broken world. Jacob might have asked the same question; "S'tuma," the children of Israel were expecting suffering and despair; and indeed it came just as he foresaw. But before he dies he makes his children swear an oath that they will not bury him in Egypt, in this narrow place, but they will take him back to Cannan, back to the Promised Land.

A Torah portion that begins with the words "And he lived" ends with the announcement of his death. Why? Because only his body died, his spirit, his soul, that part of him that his children admired, fell in love with, was unique to him it lived on, it guided them not only to return his body to the land of his birth, the land of his forefathers, but one day to return there themselves as well.

His memory lived on inside of them through all the darkness of Egyptian bondage, all the hardship and suffering. You are strong he is saying to them, you are even stronger together; you will get through this, and you will return to the land my father's showed me; a land flowing with milk and honey. This is not the end of our family story, its merely the end of a chapter.

Vayechi! He lived, his memory lives on in you, the memory of what life was like before all the challenges of the present moment. It wasn't perfect then either, but "Chazak, Chazak, v'Nitchazek," Be strong, be strong together and the story will continue next year will be different, not just different, next year will be better. Not because it has to be, but because through strength, and perseverance we will make it better.

And what comes next week when we read Torah, Exodus, Moses, and the story of our redemption and our return home. Chazak, Chazak, v'Nitchazek