“Why is this night different”

Every morning, Jews traditionally recite early-morning blessings, one of which expresses gratitude for being born a ben or bat chorin – a child of freedom. But today, we don’t feel our freedom much. We go out for short walks, carefully avoiding others. We watch the buds slowly forming, we look up at the clouds, we breathe as deeply as we can, and then we head indoors – without seeing our friends, our families, or our community in the flesh.

On the other hand, we’ve never seen so much of OURSELVES before – we spend hours on video chats, faced with our own visages on the screen, the aging, worry and exhaustion in plain view to ourselves and we think perhaps to the world.

We are about to celebrate a Pesach different from any we could have imagined even a few weeks ago. Most of our families cannot gather in person. Some of us will be making or leading seders for the first time in our lives. We may not even be able to gather the requisite items for our celebration in time.

Yet, we will gather. We will gather as best we can with our families, and we will gather as a congregation on April 9, the second night of Pesach, to seal our fates to one another as we escape the dark and narrow place and come metaphorically into the open light. We know we can do this because we have seen, over the past month, an extraordinary outpouring of congregational and communal will, the fire and life of the Jews rekindled yet again in yet another difficult time, always rising to help lift one another up, and help each other make a future together.

On the fly, Bet Am Shalom has rebooted our entire congregational life in just a couple of weeks since the COVID-19 coronavirus struck our region. We have set up a system to help our elders stay at home, so they do not need to shop or do other things that might put them at risk. We are reaching out to one another with calls and emails to check in. We are helping each other with vital errands. We are teaching one another the technologies needed to stay in touch without leaving our homes. We have recreated our ritual life online not only on Shabbat, but on weekdays too. We have rebooted our entire Torah La’am religious school to run remotely. We have robust virtual adult education and numerous meetings and get-togethers. We have regular hangouts for parents, chats with the Rabbi; we get meetings, bill-paying and decision-making done. We read Torah from dining room tables, and we participate in shiva minyans without leaving our homes. We reach out to the sick and needy. We serve the underserved and immigrant populations of our region, and reach out to support local hospitals.

We plan a congregational Seder.

How do we do all this? Because of you.

In the past four weeks, scores of you have stepped forward. Instead of asking how the leadership could better serve you in your time of anxiety, you asked how you could be of service to someone else.
Because Bet Am Shalom is built on a foundation of love, spirituality, service, warmth, genuine devotion and, yes, a lot of rolled up sleeves, we are on our feet and thriving while many other “organizations of faith” are foundering.

When you gather at whatever Seders you attend this year, and especially if you join us on April 9, remember that this night, so different from all other nights, is also NOT different in a key way. It is not different because our community can always be counted upon to lift one another up and carry one another across the sea to a safer and better future.

I am so deeply proud and moved to be, for a few more months, the lay leader of Bet Am Shalom, a community where we truly are present for one another through our darkest times and narrowest places, where we turn our anxiety and fear into something good and beautiful and rich. From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

Ilene Semiatin