

From the Rabbi

Sivan 5780/June 2020

“Down for the Count”

When it became obvious that we could not assemble on the rollicking night of Purim (it was March 9), we assured ourselves that we could reschedule our beloved Purimspiel for a few weeks down the road, when the coast was clear. It allowed us to make ourselves feel better.

When it became obvious that we would not be having in-person Passover seders in our homes (on April 8 and 9), we got creative. The Torah has a “mulligan” Passover one month later, known as *Pesach sheni*. Ancient Israelites who were out of town, indisposed, or ritually impure during Passover could nonetheless fulfill their obligation to bring a paschal sacrifice to the Temple a month after the fact. Aha, we thought. We, too, would have our seder in early May on *Pesach sheni*. Surely the sheltering in place would end by then. We felt better.

From the second night of Passover, we started our annual seven-week counting of the *omer*, the sheaves of barley that symbolically link Passover’s freedom theme with Shavu’ot’s idea of taking responsibility by receiving the Torah. We logically thought that in seven weeks we would be past the worst of it. In the meantime, the assigning of a

number to each day would help us to overcome the sameness that the sequence of days and nights brought:

Get out of bed. Suddenly remember that real life is suspended for yet another day. Dress for lounging around the house. Feed children and pets. Get children situated for their day of Zoom education. "Go" to work in some quiet part of the house. End the work day. Try to take a walk. Eat dinner. Create diversions with board games, television, internet. Try to sleep (invariably waking numerous times a night from the unease of it all). Then get up and do it all again. Groundhog Day. Sameness.

But the counting ritual gave each day meaning and distinction. As did Shabbat once each week. As did the smattering of notable days in between: Israel's memorial and independence days; Lag b'Omer; Mothers' Day; Jerusalem Day; college commencements online; the Governor's dangling of goal days for re-opening this or that. The counting gave us the impression that we were reaching a conclusion, and that we would certainly reap the rewards of our diligence and patience, like ancient Israelites reaping barley at the end of the season. We were "down for the count," but not down and out. Not by a long shot.

Finally, Shavu'ot arrived. It began beautifully and meaningfully, even online. The end of the shutdown was nowhere in sight, but there were signs of opening and hope. The counting of the *omer* did not magically end our waiting, but it certainly helped us to move through our uncertainty as if certainly itself were around the bend.

Yet before we could settle into the tranquility of the holiday, disaster struck. A routine arrest call caught on camera; a suspect brutally held to the ground, unable to breathe; an unrelenting police officer, expressionless, emotionless, merciless.

A black civilian down for the count, and a white man of authority holding him in a death grip. Yet again.

Those of us who love the great American origin story, but who also know the saga of American racism, slavery, bigotry, and inequality, did not need this horror to teach us something new. We knew the narrative, and we even knew our own complicit role in delaying its amelioration.

But please, not now, we all thought. Not until we can get through this virus. Not until we can restart our economy, and our schools, and our businesses, and our shul calendar, and our social lives, and the fall election, and our ski trip, and...

The ellipsis tells it all. For many millions of our fellow humans, the indefinite counting has gone on long enough. For so many, life is an ellipsis, not a confident counting toward a hopeful endpoint. “Be patient, dot-dot-dot.” “We will fix this, dot-dot-dot.” “We will change and grow and do better, dot-dot-dot.”

It seems the referee’s count has run out. Either we will all get up from the mat together, or we will never get up again. After all we have done as a community to reach out, to communicate, to partner, to build confidence, to nurture relationships, to work the system toward equal laws and resources, we will have to do that much more, and we will have to do it that much better.

We are suddenly caught between our disdain for racial violence and our fear of burning cities. We are stuck between our need to protest and our worry for our own safety and our children’s. To where do we turn our eyes for guidance?

Part of a rabbi’s job is to connect us Jews with the wisdom of our vital texts. This would be an obvious time to do so. Yet we know all the relevant texts already. We know about the stranger, and the neighbor, and the corner of the field, and the swords-into-plowshares, and the waters of justice rolling down, and the mighty stream, and the dry bones coming back to life.

Perhaps at some point we recited our texts so often that we mistook recitation for application. We say what we mean and we believe what we say, and yet there is so much we have not yet given meaning to by truly changing ourselves, our immediate surroundings, and our world.

If there is one text that might revive us, it would be the opening word in the Decalogue. (We just read it on Shavu'ot.) The word is *anokhi*, meaning "I," as in "I am the ONE your God." The first letter of that word is *aleph*. Reb Mendl of Ryminov taught that the *aleph*, God's pronoun, is visible in the structure of the human face. The broad stroke from upper left to lower right is the nose bridge. The two strokes on either side are the eyes. Just look at a human face. Any face at all. Beneath the color, the hue, the wrinkles, the facial hair, the despair and the joy, is an *aleph*. It is undeniable. It is truth incarnate.

If we can learn to see the *aleph* in every person down for the count, tired of waiting, tired of the ellipsis of empty promises, tired of being invisible, then we can begin to see the *aleph* in our own unaccepting selves and do what is necessary. Only then can we begin to make our days count, and get us a much-needed heart of wisdom.

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