

From the Rabbi
December 2020/Kislev 5781

“Fatigue”

I am mentally exhausted from maneuvering among the restrictions and requirements of the Coronavirus pandemic.

There are moments (not days, but brief moments) when I start thinking about skirting the rules and doing whatever I feel like. That’s especially true when it comes to our synagogue. “Let’s pretend it doesn’t exist, even for one Shabbat,” I say to myself. “Let’s fill the sanctuary with joyous folk – even for an hour – and let everyone let loose in song!”

I know you’ve thought the same thing. “Hey, wouldn’t it do wonders for our souls? For our sense of isolation? For our spiritual malaise? For our hunger to have human contact? For our Zoom indigestion? Hey, how bad could it be?”

The reason I don’t follow up on my instincts is simple: It would be both murderous and suicidal to do so.

How do I know? Because epidemiological experts, whose only interest is saving lives, say so. They in turn advise public officials, who take that advice and translate it into restrictions on the sizes and types of gatherings we can safely allow. Whether those gatherings are “religious,” “secular,” “commercial,” or work- or play-related is immaterial. Their assessments are based on exposure, transmission, ventilation, and potential for contact. If one kind of gathering is more dangerous than another, so be it. It doesn’t mean they prioritize, say, bowling over davening. It has only to do with scientific measurement.

Truly religious people know this. Religious folk walk around thinking that God’s sacred image is implanted in all people, all creatures, even all things. They approach every contact as if it is an encounter with the divine. They do everything in their power to acknowledge and celebrate that divinity, and they go out of their way to “do no harm” to the equilibrium of holiness.

It does not occur to them to label a temporary ban on large worship services an attack on religious freedom. Within the rational reasoning system of Judaism, certainly, such bans by governmental authorities are an acknowledgment of our worth to society, not an act of discrimination against our very being. They are consistent with the covenantal understanding we have with a government that neither imposes nor restricts our religious practice, but that nonetheless protects us from those who would harm us, and even from harming ourselves.

In case we need some encouragement from our own illustrious past, we can turn to the Maccabees. In First Maccabees (not entirely historical, but nonetheless a representation of the practical thinking that led to the flourishing of Rabbinic Judaism), Antiochus Epiphanes has

figured out that he can attack Jews on their Sabbath and they won't pick up weapons to defend themselves. They are easy prey, vulnerable to their own stalwart religious adherence.

Mattathias issues an emergency ruling: His Maccabees may (no, *must!*) take up arms to fight on the Sabbath "so that they may live to celebrate more Sabbaths in the future."

It is meant as an exception that proves the rule. Jews must *not* violate the Sabbath, *except* whenever necessary to save their lives (or other people's lives).

If the irony in this story is too subtle, I apologize. To me, it is the quick and effective antidote to my own COVID fatigue, and it is why Chanukah couldn't come at a better time.

To wit, Chanukah commemorates *religious freedom!* It marks our right to practice our religion *without the oppressive dictates of anyone else*, whether it be our own government or an outside tyrant. We light our menorahs in such a way as to "publicize the miracle" of our staving off that tyranny and reinvigorating our faith.

But, say the Rabbis, when it would be dangerous to light our menorahs outside our doors or in our windows, we may (no, *we must!*) light them in the interior of the house where oppressors cannot see them. And when we do, we do so with the understanding that as soon as it is safe, we will return to our very public display of Jewish pride. *As soon as it is safe!*

It is one thing to resist attempts to minimize the meaning of our faith, and certainly to stop those who would find advantage in oppressing or repressing us. That commitment to resistance is one of Chanukah's greatest lessons. It is quite another thing to refuse to work in tandem with all people of goodwill to save as many lives as possible, and to give everyone, including our fellow Jews, a chance to thrive once again.

As Mattathias and Judah Maccabee might have said to their battle-weary comrades, this is no time to give up or give in. The prize is within sight. This is the time to light candles and sing songs and do everything we love to do in the safest way possible, *so that* we will be able to celebrate Chanukah and Shabbat and everything else we love in the future that is surely around the corner. *Chazak chazak v'nit'chazek.* "Be strong, be strong, and strengthen one another."

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