

A Hanukkah Message from Rabbi Berger

The truth about COVID-19 is that most human beings are not in serious danger. For many people, even if infected, G-d forbid, it feels like a bad flu. So why not let our kids go out and play? Why should we make our teens uncomfortable by making them wear masks or forcing social distancing? Why should you bother to test your child when he or she is not feeling well?

As Jews, we often teach and profess the high principles that every life is holy and we have a responsibility to everybody else. These normally remain in the realm of platitudes, and we rarely have the opportunity to put these high ideals in effect. But today, and every day for several months now, we have had a chance to live these high ideals daily. We have a responsibility to act for all of those people who *are* vulnerable. We have a responsibility to act for all those who are immuno-compromised. All of these measures that are being taken are not for our own sake, but for the sake of others. We have the opportunity every day to enact and live the mitzvah of “he who saves a life, saves a universe.” We should show a sense of responsibility, because we care about the rest of humanity. We care about everybody else.

Hanukkah, as in all mitzvot in Judaism, is about the ability and importance of each Jewish person, regardless of one’s stature, to participate proactively in Jewish life. By lighting the menorah on Hanukkah, we affirm the miracles that enabled us to reach this day, time, and place. We light the candles to illuminate a planet darkened by the loss of clarity, and carry the Hanukkah messages of the miracle of nature, Divine Providence, and the extraordinary potential of each person toward themselves, their family, their community, and the entire world.

Hanukkah is also unique in that we share our lighting with our community. Departing from normative Jewish law, we put our menorahs in our windows and invite people from the outside to look in. It is one of the few times people are encouraged to look into our homes. Normally, in Jewish law, privacy is preferred and protected. Even one of our biggest enemies, Bilaam, couldn’t help but praise us for how we protected the privacy of our houses even as we lived in the desert in a thin-walled, nearly open sukkah almost on top of one another. Privacy is paramount in Jewish tradition, and its laws often go beyond Canadian law.

As we consider how to help and react to community needs, we need to keep this in mind: people are entitled to their privacy. Rather than focusing on who has COVID-19 and how they got it, it would be a great idea to focus on reaching out to emotionally support and be there for the vulnerable and elderly, who have a real reason to be worried. There are souls suffering – not from the actual virus, but from the isolation and mental anxiety that the crisis has created for them. We may not have the skills to create a vaccine ourselves, but we all have the ability to reach out to other people and help ease their pain and suffering with a little social connection. They might not be able to let us into their homes, but they might just be willing to let us into their private feelings and their hearts.

During this Hanukkah of 2020, we have such a rich opportunity to do so many mitzvahs that we have not had the opportunity to do before. Let’s deliver happiness. This is really the mindset we need to maintain. No panic or self-centeredness. Instead, let’s embrace a strong sense of responsibility to everyone in our community.

Chag sameach,
Rabbi Stephen Berger