

President's high holiday message 5782

Rosh Hashanah, 5782

First, a little bit of housekeeping. At the annual congregation meeting I committed to delivering an annual report. In the lead-up to the High Holidays there were too many other communications, and too much preparation, that we decided to hold off. Within a few weeks after Yom Kippur you should be expecting to see the report in your inbox.

And what happens on Yom Kippur? The Book of Life will be closed and sealed. In our collective memory, if ever there was a year to close the books on, this was it.

Some things were very difficult. People and places we could not visit. Loved ones lost, and unsatisfied mourning. B'nai mitzvot that fell far short of our dreams. Hunting for toilet paper.

An epidemic is defined as three out of 500 people dying over three consecutive days. Where does it say that? In the Talmud. Which also mandates that we stay indoors during an epidemic - shelter in place.

How could the Talmud be so specific about an epidemic?

It should be obvious. Epidemics have been happening throughout the history of humanity.

The instruction in the Talmud isn't to isolate the sick, but the healthy. Imagine what hunger and suffering that caused to the healthy ones, not having Instacart.

Since ancient times, it was understood that the healthy will bear the burden during an epidemic. So let's put the negatives into perspective. As a colleague recently said, "it's not like cossacks were knocking at the door."

If I may summarize the positive achievements over the past year by a single outcome, it would be this: we have learned to build a virtual synagogue that reaches into our homes and can be more inclusive and more convenient than ever before. In order to get to this remarkable result,

we have had to adapt by weighing our Conservative norms against the reality of our situation.

Rabbi Elliot Dorff co-chairs the Conservative movement's committee on Jewish law, and he said, "Once this is all over, this is going to be a really interesting case study of how *halachah* evolves quickly when it needs to."

We often can't see risk and danger because we are distracted, and if we can see it, we may be too comfortable to adapt. But never let a good crisis go to waste. In the midst of an historic epidemic, we now have an opportunity to make positive change.

Shouldn't we be afraid that we will make bad choices? There can be no guarantee that we will make the best possible decisions. But we can make it far more likely to enjoy great outcomes when we more fully understand our situation.

And to that end, I would like to tell you all a few things that I know about you. How do I know these things about you? Because you are American Jews. And it so happens that the Pew Research Center just released a large study of American Jews. And even better, this was the second such study in eight years, so we also can see trends, plus there are several other fantastic studies to draw from. So, let's talk about the things we know to be true.

The Jewish population in America is shrinking, right? No, it isn't! The Jewish population in America is larger today than eight years ago, both in absolute numbers and as a fraction of the total U.S. population.

The Conservative Movement is shrinking, right? No, it isn't! The population of Conservative Jews is mostly holding steady over the past eight years.

What is changing? For American Jews 50 years and older, only 3% are non-Hispanic Whites, whereas for people under 30 it is 15% racially diverse.

What is changing? For American Jews married before 1990, 42% had a non-Jewish spouse, but today the intermarriage rate is 61%.

What is changing? The proportion of young people entering Reform Judaism is lowering slightly, while the rate is strongly increasing for both Orthodox and unaffiliated Jews. For affiliated Jews under 30, about twice as many now identify as Orthodox than Conservative, and that is a large shift from several decades ago.

We, Conservative Jews in America, are getting older, while younger people are becoming more diverse, increasingly intermarried, and either tending towards orthodoxy or a less traditional religious experience.

It would be quite understandable if we couldn't see the risks ahead, since we have been very distracted as of late. But here we are today, presented with an epidemic.

A crisis for sure, and opportunities if we are willing to look directly at the challenges and respond. We may still experience an epidemic over the coming year, but I can foresee a lot of positive change. Right here in Holliston.

May your families enjoy sweetness and good health.

Shana Tovah