

Seeing Each Other's Faces during the Coronavirus
(*Shabbat Parah Ki Tissa 5780*)

I wanted to open with some humor, but this has been kind of a tough week where laughs have been hard to come by.

In case the anxiety about climate change, our broken politics and Israel were not enough, we have been given a pandemic with a side of stock market mayhem.



Before this week, I was thinking I would have a word with the rabbi who would schedule his own son's *Bar-Mitzvah* during the same week as *Purim*. But *Purim* became the least of our concerns given the Coronavirus.

CORONAVIRUS DISEASE 2019 (COVID-19)



www.cdc.gov/COVID19

So let me start by saying thank you.

Thank you for coming. To those streaming, thank you for watching!
Your virtual support is so appreciated!

And for those at home, please come by and pick up your lunch after Shabbat – lunches are individually wrapped and no, I am not kidding.

Matan, thank you for having this *simḥah* and for being such an incredible human being and a *super-mensch*.

It's hard to have a celebration when almost all your guests including family and friends are not able to



attend in person and it has been a stressful time as we have scrambled to hold onto the joy amidst all of this.

Luckily, I checked and *Shabbat Parah* with your *parashat Ki Tissa* is available next year so hopefully, we can do this again next year, God willing, without any Corona.

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Those of you who are here this morning – both in person and by streaming – are creating community. For those in the *shul*, we are taking extreme precautions including social distancing by separating from one another and changing our food handling, which when added to our full cooperation have made this gathering *kosher* according to medical professionals.

The tradition places the community above many other priorities, since it was aware that community is the source of our strength. The Jewish people have survived centuries of challenges due to the fact that we are bonded with each other in such an intense manner.



Communities are both strong and vulnerable.

Communities give us the support and strength to mourn and the love and joy when we have a *simhah* like today.

But communities are also fragile. They can transmit viruses quickly and they can transmit other things quickly. Words spoken without proper care, email listservs where posts make others feel bad and gossip all destroy the very fabric of the community.

These challenges to communities are not new and relevant lessons are found right in this morning's *parashah* that Matan read so masterfully.

I always find it amazing when the *parashah* has spot-on lessons for this moment in time and sure enough, *Ki Tissa* does.

Let me share three of them this morning.



First,
a very
simple one: wash your hands!

Yes, you might have thought that Judaism's great gifts to the world were ideas like Ethical Monotheism, learning, justice, Shabbat and the concept of the 7-day week, but no, it might be something as simple as washing your hands.

Toward the start of the reading, the Torah states: *yirhatzu mayim v'lo yamutu* – wash your hands with water



(and thankfully, these days we also have soap) and you will not die.

That pretty much sums up what we are doing and should do. Keep washing your hands, don't touch your face. It will help tremendously. After services today, please use one of the restrooms around the *shul* and take a full 20 seconds to wash with warm water and soap and use a paper towel to turn off the water and touch the door. Then compost it.

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Second, *Parashat Ki Tissa* contains the famous episode of the Golden Calf. The people miss Moshe, they feel scared and they panic. *Va'yika'hel ha'am al aharon* – the people gather, but not in a good way, they gather “*al*” – on or against Aaron.

Panic with a mob mentality – not a good mix.

And then Aaron demonstrates poor judgment as he does not remain calm, but immediately responds to the people's freak out with a bad decision to



join in and aid and abet the making of the Golden Calf.

A good reminder that when we get anxious we should stop and try to calmly make thoughtful decisions. This week has been a non-stop exercise in trying to do that. I know that I, for one, have been able to do that in

some moments and less so in others. As they say, keep calm and carry on.

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Third is how important being connected is. When we lose connection with others, we are at risk.

Why do the Israelites get so scared? Because they do not see Moshe's face. His absence is frightening.

Due to the Coronavirus, Talya was home from college early this week and was participating in an online class on Thursday morning. The instructor was concerned because some of the students did not have their cameras turned on. It was disconcerting not to be able to see each other's faces.

Connection is something so elusive.

Today, as hundreds are streaming this service, they (you!) are getting a degree of community as they are able to see and hear (I hope!) what is taking place here on the *bimah*, but we in *shul* cannot see them and thus, it does not build connection in the same way for those of us who are here.

So, that leaves us with the difficult situation we have now. Like every *shul*, Temple Emunah is in the business of building community. The best way of doing that is person-to-person, giving someone a handshake, a hug



or a kiss of the cheek. It is through physical contact and emotional connection.

All of this is now off the table as we practice no touching.

No handshakes, no kissing, not even an elbow bump – this is hard as we lose some of the ways we connect.

Fortunately, through Zoom and other technologies that we will use more and more in some settings including classes, we can still experience some of what it means to be looking into each other's faces.

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The *parashah* has a deep insight on this. After some of the dust has settled over the Golden Calf, we find that the text relates that God speaks with Moshe *panim-el-panim* – face-to-face. That seems clear.

But then when Moshe asks to see God's *Kavod* – God's Presence, Moshe is told that no human can see God's face and live.

So which is it? Does Moshe see God's face or not?

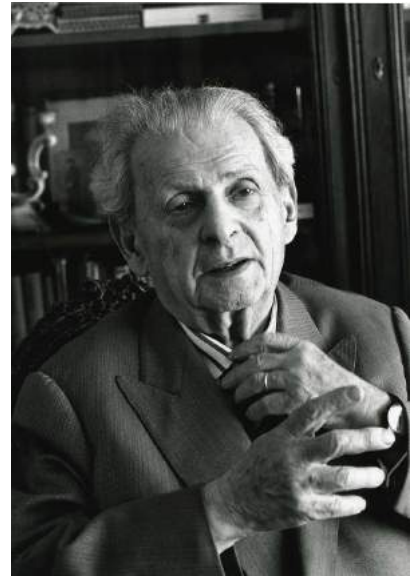
My friend and colleague Rabbi Michael Bernstein points to the distinction between seeing someone's face and speaking face-to-face. What might it mean to speak to someone face-to-face, but not see their face?



Rabbi Bernstein cites the French Jewish philosopher, Emanuel Levinas, whose ethical work radiates from the encounter with the face of another person.

In an interview, Levinas claimed that “even to see the color of the other person’s eyes is to objectify.”

In other words, when we use our power of analysis to look at someone, we turn their face into an object, “instead of respecting the face as a source that must be allowed to teach us understanding. When we look into the face of the other person, we can either make the appearance of the face the focus of our penetrating, analytical gaze or respond to something that is invisible. The former is ‘seeing the face’ the latter is speaking ‘face to face.’”



This is not easy.

While we all desire real and deep connection, it is not always easy to have or to maintain. Many times, we put up roadblocks and defenses that do not allow us to get close to others.

We are afraid or uncomfortable holding onto another’s gaze or stopping and simply being in one’s presence in silence.

This is now our challenge and our opportunity. As we no longer shake hands and embrace and we will gather less and less in person, we will need to pay attention to each other’s voices more carefully and more deeply, listening to the tone and nuance of what is being shared. And we must hold each other without hugging, but by holding the other person’s gaze.

These days, our world has become so fast-paced and distracting that it has become harder and harder for most people to feel connected to look intently at each other, maintaining eye contact.



Perhaps during these days of the Coronavirus pandemic, our community will be called upon more and more to really see each other face-to-face – both literally and metaphorically.

While we are confronting enormous challenges in our world, let us not forget to take the time to wash our hands, not to panic, and truly hear and see each other face-to-face, as best we can and as safely as we can.

May we all be blessed to continue to sustain each other as a community, holding onto the ideal of face-to face connection and and let us all say: Amen.