

Gathering Through Words – *Va-yakhel-Pekudei* 5780

This is not like any other Shabbat that we have ever experienced.

This week has not been like any week we have ever experienced.

We have all made so many changes after we were directed to stay home to stop the spread of the Coronavirus.

Many of us have been working nonstop through this interface of Zoom or other online meeting formats.

We at the *shul* have transformed our community to be online.

Religious School classes are starting on Zoom.



We already held our first Preschool Shabbat Sing on Friday.

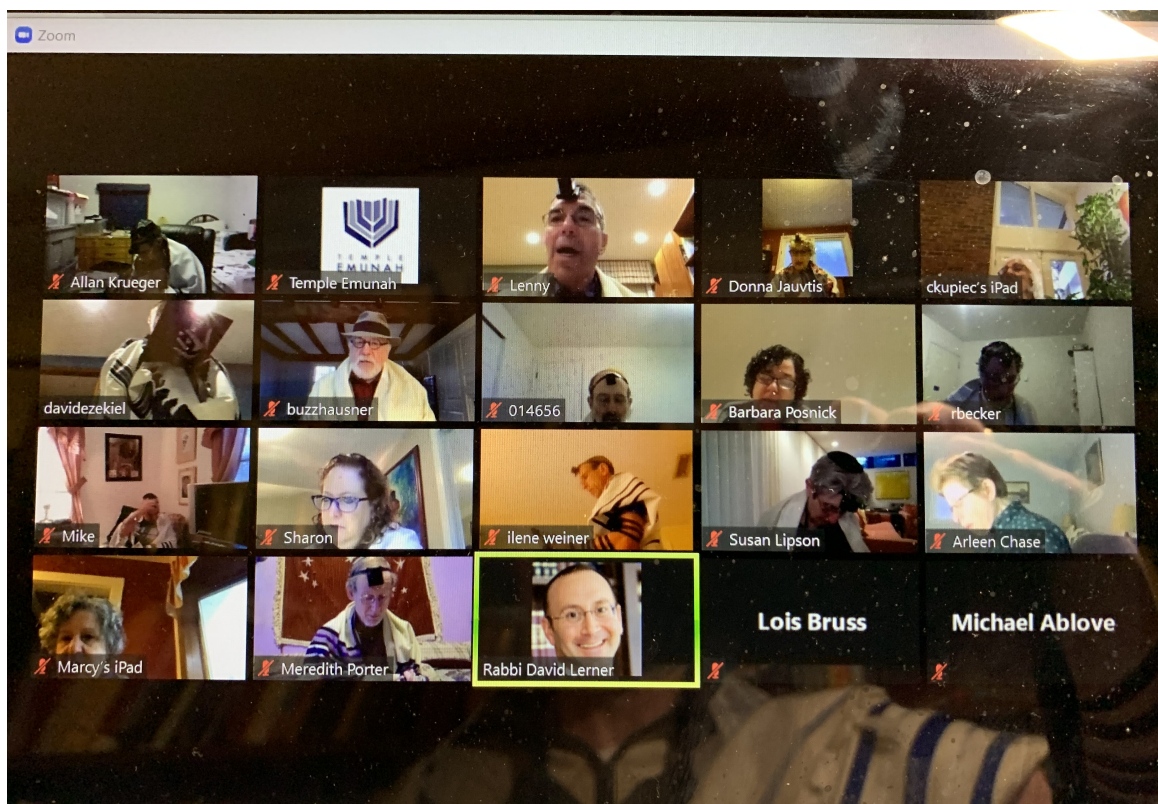
We've been working with our *b'nei mitzvah* families during this time of uncertainty. My heart is with each one of them as we try to figure out what this new world looks like.

We've been meeting people's pastoral needs as best we can thanks to the incredible work of our staff and lay leaders, led by [Rabbi Kling Perkins](#) and [Becca Weintraub](#), our rabbinic intern, our Social Action Chairs: Alisa Kotler-Berkowitz and Gami Maislin, and our Hineni and Hineni Connecting Chairs: Jane Aronson and Linda Skolnik, as well as others who have been helping us coordinate delivering



food, like Bob Russman-Halperin. Let me thank the dozens and dozens of volunteers who have called over 400 members of our community already.

I want to thank you, thank ALL of you, those of you in our little virtual *minyan*/webinar that you can see on your screen, and all those who I cannot see, but can see us in this Webinar format. It is so meaningful to have you here as part of this new world; we are bringing meaning and comfort and solace and kindness to so many.



This Shabbat, I want to thank the Stephenson family and especially Jacob, with whom I will speak to in a few moments.

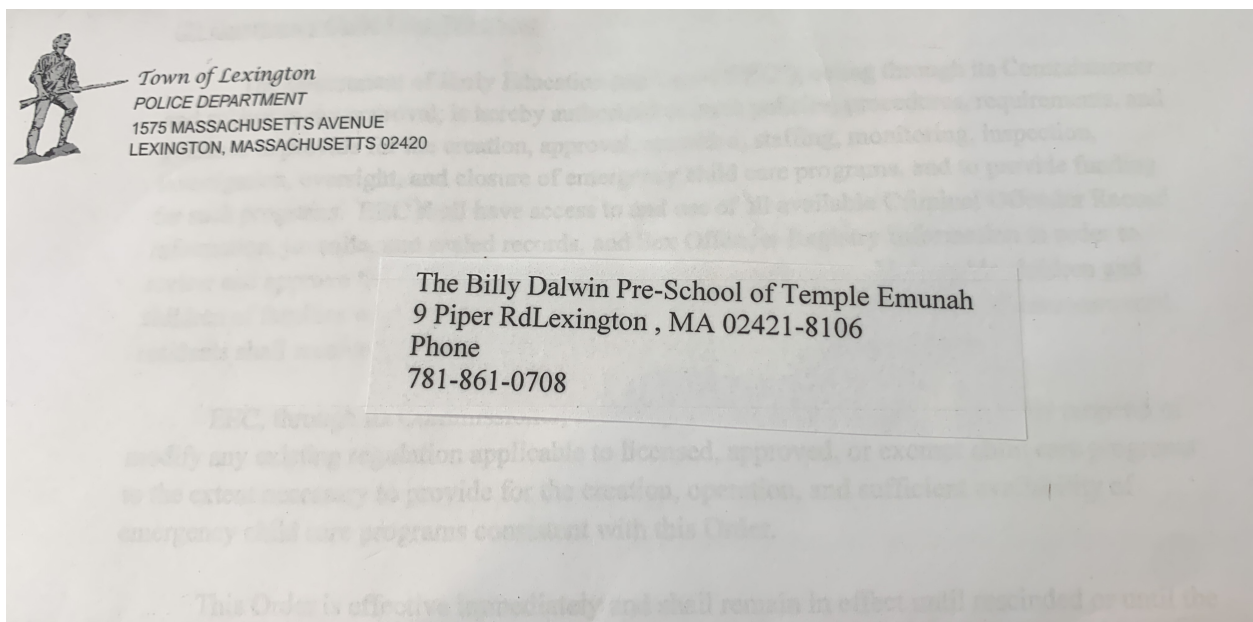
In the midst of this wild week, I headed back to my office to find some books I needed. It was pretty quiet. And as I was looking out the window, I saw a police car pull up. This was Thursday afternoon, so I figured they were just doing a check, the truth is that I often see them here, usually late

at night. (We have incredible town police officers and the state police who check on us regularly.)

But since it is a bit of a disconcerting time, I got a little worried. Usually they just pull up and go around the circle behind the *shul* and drive away. But this time the police car stopped right in front of my window and a police officer got out holding something.

This was most odd.

I met the police officer at the door of our old Founders Hall entrance to see what was going on. The police officer said, "I am here to deliver this letter to you."



This letter is from the Town of Lexington to the Billy Dalwin Pre-School of Temple Emunah and it is from the Health Director telling us that all child care programs like our Pre-School must close.

Luckily, we had already made the decision a week earlier to close our Pre-school, which had been closed all week. But it was the first time in my

life that I ever received a letter by hand. I couldn't help but hearken back to our own Paul Revere sending out messages while riding on his horse a few hundred years ago throughout this town and the surrounding towns also telling us of an urgent warning.



This is the kind of time where we appreciate every kind of message of support whether it is hand delivered or whether it is through a text message, whether it is words or seeing each other's faces, or supporting each other however we can.

Our Torah reading: *Parashat Va-yekhel*, is the perfect *parashah* for this moment. *Va-yakhel* is about gathering the people, building the *mishkan*. While the Torah includes many of the intricate details about creating holy and sacred space, it opens with Shabbat. The tradition loves to juxtapose space and time, helping us think about creating not just sacred spaces, but Judaism's great innovation into the world, creating something that is holier than space: time.

By living differently, we appreciate that we can change our experience of time. The people are all gathered now to build this *mishkan*, this sacred space. They've come together, but what they do is stop and experience creative rest.

Think back to last week's *parashah*, with its tumult and the disarray and even the anger during the incident of the Golden Calf, and now the

people are coming together to let go of that, to put all of that aside, and the first thing again that they are given is Shabbat.

What does Shabbat do?

It transforms the economic and social realities.

Shabbat prevents the abuse of workers and the lower classes who don't have as much financially since it gives everyone a break.

It holds society together because everyone is supposed to participate in it and everyone can do it. It has economic and practical benefits.

Shabbat is what transforms time to make it into what we are experiencing, what we are experiencing right now.

The building of the *mishkan*, this physical space, reminds us that we need physical space, that we are human beings and we need physical things. But the Torah teaches that it should not be an object like the Golden Calf, it should be a holy space in which God's presence dwells. Of course, there is no object for that.

And that space is supposed to help us feel something.

We are invited to go to an emotional place, to a place of pure spiritual presence. And that's something that we can create anywhere. That's something we are creating right now through ZOOM.

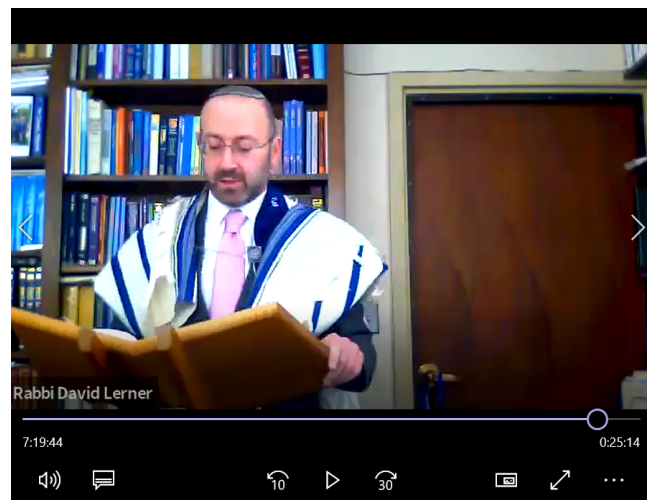
As Nareeluck spoke the beautiful words from her heart, her prayer, each and every one of us felt that connection. We may be sitting in our living rooms, in our dining rooms, in all different parts of our own homes, and we are all disparate places, but in a moment like that we feel the sense of Oneness.

Because Judaism reminds us that sacred space is transcended by sacred time and that is what we can create right now: sacred virtual time. It seems like it may be even a while before we can return to some semblance of normalcy and so we are reminded that even when we cannot get to our sacred space, we can create our sacred space in this virtual reality.

We have created virtual *minyanim*, classes, and meetings. All of this will require a new understanding of how to interact.

I have some suggestions from my friend and classmate and colleague, Rabbi Alexander Davis. He gives us a few tips about how to approach a moment like this and our virtual *minyan* is already modelling them. One is participation. We have a tendency where we go online to just be onlookers, it's like watching TV, we start eating popcorn and pretzels, and it becomes a very passive experience.

Leave aside that temptation. Pick up your *humash*, your *siddur*, put on your *tallit*, sing along, even if you're on mute. It seems a little bit weird, maybe it's a little awkward, but let's give ourselves permission to feel awkward.



Second, Rabbi Davis reminds us that we are using these electronic devices to have this experience, but they are very challenging. Because they try to suck us into another experience all the time. You might be on a Zoom *minyan* and suddenly you'll be checking your text messages or doing

something else. As it says in the *Shema*: “don’t be led astray by your eyes.”

Please turn off your notifications on your phone or computer when you attend a *tefillah* experience or Shabbat. Even if you are leaving your device on, turn off the other aspects so you can have a more meaningful experience.

Third, Rabbi Davis teaches us to dress the part. When we come to *shul*, we wear different clothes because they transform us. Some of us are even very lucky to have a special *kippah* for this Shabbat, a special outfit for this Shabbat, maybe even a special hat. Those help us create the mood. If you’re at home, put on something different that reflects the moment of experience as if you are going there. And, at the very least, if you are at home, change out of your pajamas!



Fourth, Rabbi Davis suggests that we make a sacred space. As you see this morning, we have each tried to create some kind of space and background in our own spaces that create a sense of sanctity and holiness. And that helps us create what’s called a – *m’kom kavua* – a set spiritual place in our homes.

We are going to need this, a different space so that we can create a different feeling when we enter that. We can no longer go to our Sanctuary and have an experience there together, but we can go to our own *m’kom kavua* – our own sacred space.

Last, Rabbi Davis reminds us that if we are going to use certain devices on Shabbat to have these experiences – use them differently. Speaking for myself, Zooming on Shabbat isn't part of my normative Shabbat practice! So I am trying to alter any settings and you may want to consider not using your computer or device as you would normally use them. If you are going to use your computer or click on something, maybe use your non-dominant hand or change something up to make it different.

As we move forward and utilize this technology more and more, we will share more ideas about how to make this experience even more meaningful.

I want to share one more idea about what kind of experience this Zoom *minyan* is.

[Our shul was one of the first, over a decade ago, to share our *minyan* virtually with mourners through Skype.](#) It was a requirement to have ten adult Jews in the room and then a mourner could recite the *kaddish* wherever he or she was through Skype or other means.



When we moved our *minyan* online last week, we simply kept our existing approach and recited a version of an alternate to the Mourner's *kaddish*. (We have used variations of this when we did not have an in-person *minyan* due to snowstorms, etc.) I received several emails asking us to keep this approach and several to change and count our Zoom Virtual *Minyan* as an actual *minyan*.

Rabbi Kling Perkins and I had the opportunity to study the sources on Friday morning. Appreciating the newness of this moment, as well as the fact that whatever we decided, would make one group or another dissatisfied, we strove for the Solomonic approach.

We decided that we would consider our virtual *minyan* a *minyan* for the recitation of the Mourner's *Kaddish* during this crisis provided that there are at least ten adult Jews who can see each other's faces and hear each other (unmuted) so that we can respond to one another. ([For more about the importance of seeing each other's faces during this time, please see my sermon from the previous Shabbat.](#))

However, we decided that is not a *minyan* for other sacred elements or, as they are called, *devarim she'bikedushah* (literally: words of holiness), which include the other *kaddish* prayers, the *kedushah* and the *barekhu*. We may revisit this, but for now, that is where we have settled given the complexities and necessities of this moment.

If you are on a virtual *minyan* this week, then turn on your microphone, during the Mourner's *Kaddish* so you can see and hear the responses. That way mourners can lift up their loved ones' memories and those observing *yahrzeit* can do so, as well, through the words of the Mourner's *Kaddish*. The service will be a little bit changed, but it will continue. As will many of our other experiences.

This is a most strange time. None of us have ever experienced this before, but we are given an incredible teaching right from the beginning of the *parashah*.

The opening verse states that Moses gathers all the people – *va-yakhel*, with the same root as the word as *kehilah*, a congregation. Moses brings everyone together and he says to them, “these are the words that God has commanded you to do.”

Rashi here makes an amazing comment. He notes that the verbal form actually means

that Moses caused all the people to be gathered. And from this we learn that people do not gather each other



with their hands. Our arms are not long enough. We do not gather others like a dog herding sheep.

How do we gather people?

We gather people by causing them to gather themselves. We gather them through words.

We gather with our communication.

And that is an unbelievable teaching for this moment.

While we are separated, we can still gather by sharing our words, words of love and support, choosing our words carefully. Communicating with care and love via Zoom, Facetime, Skype, the phone, text messages, email and Facebook.

We can actually use this time to create a different way of interacting on the internet. Instead of having so much negative communication, we can use this crisis as a time for holy words and holy connection.

I pray that in the coming days, weeks, and however long we inhabit this new reality, that we will be safe and strong, finding ways to take care of one another.

And as we gather, our words, words of love, words of comfort, words that strengthen one another, our community and its bonds will only become stronger.