

## Exploring Community During Changing Times

This is kind of surreal.

I am standing here in our shul; on the bimah with 11 others on Rosh Hashanah, just 12 people when there should be 1200 of us.



The 12 of us constituting a *minyan* were chosen not because we are special, but because we have roles to play in our services this morning.

There would be nothing, nothing more meaningful than for all of you at home to be here physically with us, as we have been every year that this shul has existed.

Or every year that there has been Rosh Hashanah: for thousands of years.



The Jewish people have gathered during wars, during pogroms, even in ghettos during the Shoah, during the Holocaust, but we know

we should not let a virus endanger our lives.

Our tradition is clear on this.

We are not allowed to do anything that puts our own lives or another person's life at risk unless there is a very clear higher moral purpose!

As the Torah states: "*v'hai bahem* - you shall live by them (Lev 18:5)."

So if any commandment puts our lives at risk, we make adjustments.

And as you can see, we have made some adjustments!

Our beautiful shul is almost empty....

And I cannot tell you how much it pains me that all of us cannot be together....

And what a year it has been....

I think back to standing before you a year ago today, and never, never in my wildest nightmares would I have imagined a year that unfolded the way it has.

Much of the past year was terrible. I will explore some of that before Yizkor next week, but today I will try to focus on some of the more positive aspects.

First of all, here at Emunah, we are all now Zoom pros. We Zoom our Shabbat morning service - sometimes in meeting format; sometimes, it's a webinar!



Second, we have continued to build community even in person throughout this pandemic. Yom Haatzmaut falafel pickups and car parades, drive-in movie nights, teen fire-pits,



evening minyan in our courtyard, social events, and a spirited kick-off to our Religious School last Sunday with families in cars for an opening ceremony followed by a physically-distanced introduction to their teachers where they received their books for the year.

I was able to teach my seventh graders and their parents in our renovated courtyard. Not to mention opening our Preschool by building more playgrounds and outdoor spaces so we can operate safely.

Has it been easy? No.

Has it been expensive? Yes.

Has it required hiring more staff? Yes.

Has it been worth it? Absolutely!

Standing on the cliff behind the shul on Wednesday morning blowing shofar from a safe distance for our preschoolers, I felt it.



In the evening, I watched our teens



interact over dinner safely and I knew this was exactly why our staff, lay leaders, and I were working so hard, burning the midnight oil this entire time.

Because when a crisis comes, you don't just dial it in.

You put your mask on and demonstrate real leadership and creativity.

That's why we have not closed down our programming; we have altered and expanded it.



This type of leadership has been at the core of the Jewish people's experience for millennia. As a people, we have experienced many crises.

Some that even make this bizarre and challenging pandemic look small. But each time, we have risen to the moment.

I want to go back to one of those times 2,000 years ago to see whether we can extrapolate from it a lesson for this time.

During the first century of the Common Era, the Jewish people were in disarray. There were many different groups which were competing for power and influence: Pharisees, who were becoming what we would know as the rabbis, and Sadducees, and other smaller groups as well.

The Roman Empire was in control of the land of Israel and the Jews were in disagreement about what to do. Some urged revolt against this harsh and powerful overlord, while others supported appeasement.

We know which side won out in this debate.

The revolt began in the year 66 of the Common Era; it did not go well.

In the fourth year of the war, the great Roman Army crushed the small Jewish resistance, leaving pockets of survivors including a small band of 1,000 Jews stranded at the top of Masada. Those Jews would commit suicide three years later when they felt they had run out of options.

One leader of the Jews in Jerusalem,  
however, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, saw  
the writing on the wall.

We do not know much about his life,  
but clearly he understood what was going  
on.



In the year 70, Ben Zakkai saw the Temple burn to the ground and  
was filled with profound grief. Tearing his clothes (something we still do  
when we lose a loved one - *kriyah*), he stood by the side of the road, took  
off his *tefillin*, which in that period were worn all day. He sat down and  
cried, and then his students circled around him and did the same.

Similarly, all of us have experienced losses - whether large or small in  
this pandemic. We have lost loved ones and we have lost time. We have  
lost jobs and we have lost human connections. All of these losses are real  
and deep and lead us to pause and mourn, as our tradition teaches us.

\* \* \*

Let us return to Ben Zakkai.

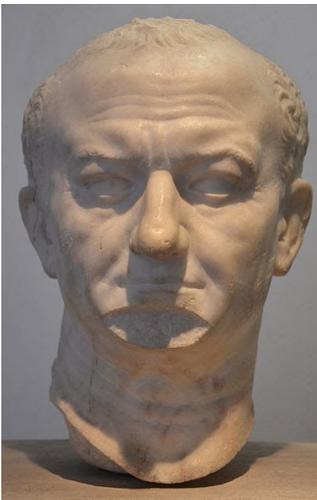
The very foundation of Jewish life and faith has just been burned to  
the ground. What does he do?

After he mourned, he did not give up.

In fact, Ben Zakkai anticipated that the Jews were going to lose Jerusalem and its Holy Temple.

He had developed a plan a year earlier.

He had already made a radical decision: he had his students sneak him out of Jerusalem in a coffin to avoid detection by the Jewish Zealots.



This way he could meet Vespasian, the Roman general in secret. It turned out that a few days later Vespasian would become Emperor of the Roman Empire.

Ben Zakkai asked him for the little town of Yavneh on the coastal plain.

Vespasian responds, “Fine, no problem.” In the context of the revolt and the big prize of Jerusalem, giving a little hamlet to a bunch of harmless scholars seemed fairly insignificant.

Ben Zakkai explains, “I will go there and teach my students, and I will establish prayer there, and I will do all the *mitzvot* [mentioned in the Torah].” (Avot D’Rabbi Natan 4)

At first glance, it might not seem like it was such a big deal.

But, it was.

He was reconstructing Judaism.

No longer would Jerusalem and its Temple be the foundation of Judaism.

The sacrificial system would no longer be operative.

The practices of Judaism that had been maintained for the previous millenium would no longer be at its core.

Ben Zakkai would go on to rebuild Judaism in Yavneh. He would create a tradition of scholars and sages.

Instead of offering sacrifices and salting them on the altar, it would be the Shabbat and holiday dinner table in one's home and the salt on our *hallah* - a round loaf today for Rosh Hashanah, that would help us atone for our sins and help us connect with each other.

As the Talmud states explicitly, "*shulhano shel adam mekhaper*, the dinner tables of the people will [now] atone!"

Instead of offering animal sacrifices to ask for forgiveness, we will offer words of *teshuvah*, asking for forgiveness, bringing prayers of atonement, donations of *tzedakah* and acts of kindness. Instead of fixed offerings at certain times, we will hold spiritual services - *Shaharit*, *Musaf*, *Minhah* and *Ma'ariv* at those times.

And so it has been for two thousand years.

\* \* \*

And now, we are at another inflection point. Another moment of change. This pandemic has brought us to another Yavneh moment.

We are changing things.

I am preaching to a TV camera in a mostly empty shul on Shabbat/Rosh Hashanah!

This is pretty different.

We are making many changes. We have held MANY religious committee meetings to change our practices - sometimes several a month! I have officiated at conversions without leaving my desk! I have officiated at funerals with only a handful of people present. Zoom *shivahs* with hundreds from around the globe. Zoom *b'nei and b'not mitzvah* celebrations with family members in Israel. Zoom baby namings of grandchildren all around the country and on and on....

What's next?

Honestly, I don't know.

But what I do know is that this moment needs the ingenuity and creativity and thoughtfulness of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, but it also needs one more thing.

It needs another great teaching from the Talmud in which our community already excels.

This is the famous phrase *Kol Yisrael areivim zeh bazeh* - all of Israel are responsible for each other.

From this Talmudic notion, we learn that we are all responsible for one another in *halakhah*, in Jewish law. This is not just a nice thing - which it is - but a legal obligation. If one sees someone in need, it's not just a nice thing to help them; you MUST help them. You must make sure that they have their basic needs met for food, clothing, shelter, and health care.

That's community.

The *Midrash* explains it this way: "the people of Israel are like a ship. If there is a hole in the lower hold, one does not say: 'only the lower hold has a hole in it.' Rather they immediately recognize that the ship is liable to sink and they must repair the hole down below." (Tanna De-Bei Eliyahu Rabbah, Chapter 11)



We are all part of one organism, one community, one people.

The keyword *areivut* in the phrase is connected to the word *Le'Areiv* - to mix (according to Rabbi

Yehudah in the Talmud); we are all mixed together into one entity. *Klal Yisrael* - the Jewish people is one people, sharing one destiny, even as we have different practices, interpretations and disagree on many things! And we do disagree!

Have you heard the joke about the Jewish man who has been stranded on a desert island for months during this pandemic?

When he is rescued, he shows off two laptops, each open to a Zoom shul, he exclaims: "this is the Zoom shul I go to and this is the Zoom shul I would not be caught dead in!"

But seriously, we are supposed to be a community that takes care of each other and we at Emunah have done just that.

Our community has been deeply engaged in this work for each other and the world. Our Hineni committee chaired by Jane Aronson, our bereavement committee chaired by Sandra Levine and Helen Marcus, which now brings meals to those who experience losses, our Hineni Connecting Team chaired by Linda Skolnik. And when the pandemic hit, a new group came together to reach out to EVERYONE in the shul.



Our Social Connecting Initiative overseen by Linda Skolnik with assistance from Alisa Kotler-Berkowitz and Gami Maislin, Social Action Chairs, with staff support last year from our rabbinic intern Rebecca Weintraub, Rabbi Kling Perkins and myself.

The initiative has 68 callers, 27 grocery & errand volunteers & 8 volunteers who helped senior adults with their technology needs. Those who really helped tremendously in this mitzvah:

Jonina Schonfeld

Leon Gunther

Judi Canter

Dawny Gershkowitz

Janet Goldberg

Stacy Simon

Wayne Goldstein

Stan Wolf

Garry & Eileen Feldman

I also want to give a shout out to Janet Goldberg and our Sisterhood who have started a new project of bringing meals to some of our older and home-bound members for the holidays. These acts of *hesed* - of kindness - go a long way!

\* \* \*

We know that we constitute a special community here at Emunah. I have been blessed to experience this for the last 16 years.

As this pandemic continues, even after we have a vaccine, we will still need to take precautions, and thus, we will still need to reach out to help each other in many ways.

So, let's keep supporting one another and keep reaching out to one another and keep calling each other.

\* \* \*

I am most especially concerned for our older members, those who live alone, and our teens. How do we keep them connected and less isolated?

How do we make up a Bar/Bat-Mitzvah year when our kids were planning to bond with each other and those moments were taken from them?

How do we get back a summer trip to Israel?

A first kiss?

I am not just speaking as your rabbi, but as a dad. And I get emotional.

Because it's my kids too....

I know that they got short-changed and while our community and our staff are doing incredible things - and we really are - on zoom and in-person - it's just not the same.

We come to shul to daven, to learn and to hang out, to schmooze in the hallways, to run around (just don't tell the rabbi), to play ga-ga, basketball, and ping-pong during kiddush and to have kiddush!

All of which we cannot do.

And so many of us come to shul on Rosh Hashanah to see each other. And many of us hopefully have our video turned on and are scrolling through the hundreds of zoom boxes at some point in the course of the morning so we can at least see each other, but I know it's not the same...

And so we are sad...

And we pride ourselves at Emunah on being a shul that is like the best of a Jewish summer camp for all ages - learning, praying, (of course), and Israeli music and dance and singing, going on retreats, sleeping over on a shul-in -- that is the essence of our program, hanging out for hours at kiddush, the core of what we do is challenged by this pandemic.

So, we as parents owe it to our kids, and we, as a community, owe it to each other to do more and find more ways to be creative, to come together, to support each other and to connect.

We are doing that tonight with a Rosh Hashanah Seder led by Me'ir Sherer.

We are doing that tomorrow with our in-person *tashlikh* events, which are fully subscribed.

And wait until you see our awesome *Sukkot* and *Simhat Torah* events for which you will have Zoom options, drive-in options - where you will be

able to see through your windshield and hear through your car radio and, for some, be able to enjoy the service while standing under our new solar



canopy!

And things are being delayed. I am working with couples who have postponed their wedding dates several times and that's the way it is.

We will find our way through this with the same creativity that Ben Zakkai exhibited in founding Yavneh when Jerusalem was destroyed two thousand years ago and I know that we are all in this together.

*Kol Yisrael areivim zeh bazeh* - all of Israel is responsible for each other and *Kol Emunah areivim Zeh Bazeh* - all of Emunah is responsible for each other.

And that's for certain.

And wherever you are, let us all say:

Amen.



T E M P L E  
E M U N A H