

Acting as an Upstander through Zoom

As we all know, it's a surreal time.

We are now starting our second year of this pandemic and although the vaccine is coming into view and into more and more of our arms, we are still keeping our distance, wearing masks and taking precautions.

While the [CDC](#) is loosening its regulations, we know that there are variants and we must maintain our vigilance. Even as we start to consider in-person indoor services for a limited number of vaccinated people wearing masks and situated six-feet apart, we are aware that outdoor services and programs will be easier.



And as the weather warms, we hope you will join us on Sunday, March 28 for an outdoor [Pesah](#) service followed by another one on Sunday, April 4 for the final day of [Pesah](#). While these will be [Zoomed](#) for those at home, I pray that we have meaningful moments together in our beautiful courtyard where we can safely gather under the sun.

Please [click on this text to register](#) for these events so we can ensure there is enough interest to invest in these experiences.

We will be entering a strange new phase of this terrible [Covid-time](#) where we will be starting to have more in-person moments while retaining Zoom for those whose health, vaccination-status, or geographic distance require it.



Since it is so easy to Zoom into *shul*, it will take some time to wean us off the convenience of it and I ask those who are able and willing to start planning for the extra time to drive to *shul*. 😊

The truth is Zoom is so easy. I can be on a walk with my dog Bamba and suddenly remember that it is time for *minyan*, stop in my tracks, open the app on my cell phone and poof, I am transported to *shul* where I can recite the [Mourner's Kaddish](#) for my father who died two months ago from Covid.

When I am home or in my office, this magic continues. One second I am on a pastoral Zoom and then instantly, I am transported to someone's else's home for a *Bat-Mitzvah* interview and then I turn on a dime to a planning meeting with my staff followed by a fundraising Zoom. It is like Scottie on Star Trek where he beams people from one place to another. Except in this case, it is 100% safe and I never hear Scottie call out, "I can't do it Captain; I'm giving her all she's got!"

I always arrive safely wherever I need to be at light-speed, although I never leave the comfort of my desk.

Zoom has made the impossible possible. I now officiate at baby namings of newborns all over the country and my own father's *shiva* was filled with friends and family from Israel.

Truly unbelievable....

That brings me to last week, when I was able to attend a conference where the teacher was in Jerusalem, his students spread out across the globe. Attending this gathering without the expense of a flight, hotel, or food was fast, cheap and instantaneous....

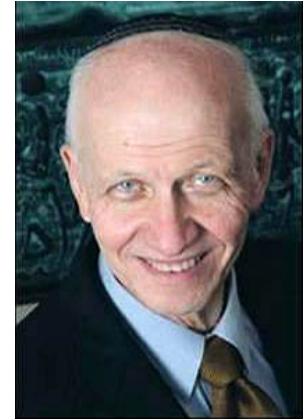


Wild, truly wild....

[Rabbi Yitz Greenberg](#), a luminary on the far-left fringe of [Modern Orthodoxy](#), was teaching in a conference organized by [Hadar](#).



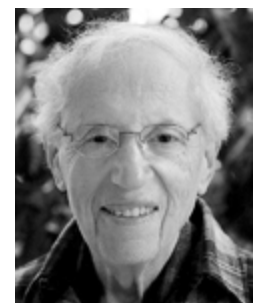
Yitz, as he is known, has a beautiful approach to our faith where he sees it rooted in the intrinsic value of every human being, that every person is created in the [B'tzelem Elohim](#), in the image of God and therefore, each person is a unique soul, of infinite worth and fundamentally equal to everyone else



Expanding this idea, Yitz teaches us that we must see the Divine in every person and thus approach them with love, taking care of them, recognizing their infinite value. It is a beautiful notion which he understands as being at the core of the Torah, explaining the root of every [mitzvah](#) – every commandment. And thus, every *mitzvah* – both the ethical and the ritual – hones not merely our souls, but our moral behavior, teaching us to treat each person as a Divine gift. This means that we approach everyone out of a place of love.

This is certainly not an easy ideology to put into practice, but it is surely worth the effort.

For example, in this week's [parashah](#) Yitz approaches the *korban hattat*, commonly translated as a “sin-offering” in a unique manner. Building on the scholarship of great biblical scholar [Jacob Milgrom](#), Yitz elucidates Milgram's understanding that a *korban hattat* should be understood in a different manner.



Instead of seeing *korban hattat* (חַטָּאת) as related to the Hebrew word *heit* (חַטָּה), meaning sin which most translations, including ours in the [Etz Hayyim Humash](#), utilize, Milgrom teaches that the *hattat* is related to *lehatei* (לְהַטִּיף), meaning, to purify. This offering is therefore more properly called a purification offering.

Then the question is: what are we purifying?

Yitz points out:

“You might have thought that the *hattat* brings purification from sin, so that the difference in name is merely semantic. But in fact this sacrifice is also brought for other reasons. Many of the cases requiring a *hattat* have to do with a person having become impure through contact with a dead animal but not going through purification as soon as possible. Thus, the person has increased or extended the sway of impurity in biblical Israel. What does impurity have to do with sin? Why bring an offering for being in a state of impurity? It makes some sense that a problem of impurity would be followed by a purification offering, but what is the connection to sin?”

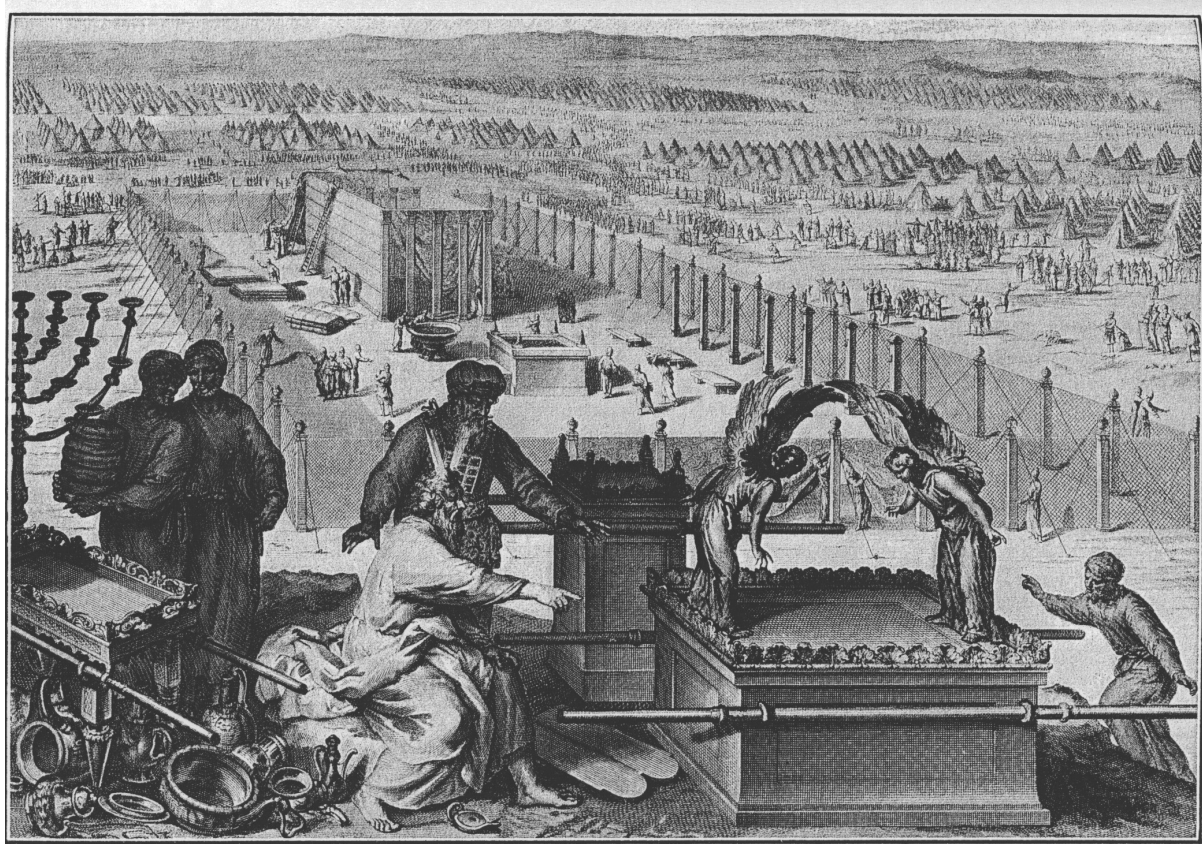
Yitz explains which cases require this *hattat*; for example: if you witness a crime and are told to report it and you do not. You have then violated the tradition and must bring a *hattat* offering.

This wasn't an action; it was choosing not to act.

Milgrom explains that the purification offering is not so much for the person who brings the *hattat* sacrifice. Rather, it is for the [Mishkan](#), the portable sanctuary the Israelites took through their 40 years in the wilderness.

The *Mishkan* dwells in the midst of the Israelites representing the *Shekhinah*, the Divine presence among the people.

Until the people offer the *hattat*, this negative energy caused by not acting builds up, damaging the holiness of the community, eventually causing the Divine Presence to leave the *Mishkan*.



Thus, if we allow indifference to run rampant, it becomes the dominant experience, impacting more and more people. We learn that the sacrifices were a guardrail, maintaining the ethical core of the community.

With inaction, our *Mishkan*, our holy spaces, including our *shuls* and even this Zoom-*shul*, become replete with this spiritual pollution.

As the prophets warned, the very *Beit Hamikdash*, the [Holy Temple](#) in Jerusalem could become “a lifeless sanctuary without God, for the Babylonians to enter and destroy at will.”

Rabbi Greenberg reminds us that “impurity symbolically stands for death. Holiness symbolically represents life. [...] Unless impurity is

checked, God will leave. We must act [...] before impurity or death becomes entrenched and dominant.”

Parashat Va-yikra, our Torah portion, helps us realize that choosing to be a bystander is a major offense, which can spread, poisoning a community.

Being an upstander, speaking out against injustice, however, brings holiness and purpose to our community.

As we continue to move forward through this complicated time, let us remember that apathy and inaction in the face of injustice corrupts the very core of our community. It pollutes the physical sanctuary, and in these days, our *Zoom-shul*, causing us to lose sight of our Torah’s values.

Instead, let us lift up the sacredness of every individual, remembering that each person is created in the image of God.