

Blankets

Shanah Tovah

This morning, I'd like to share a wonderful story about Howard Schultz, the former chairman and CEO of Starbucks, and Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel, who was the Rosh Yeshiva of the Mir, the largest Yeshiva in the world. The coffee magnate, along with a delegation of entrepreneurs, met with the rabbi in the religious neighborhood of Mea Shearim in Jerusalem. Schultz admitted that at first, he didn't know anything about Rabbi Finkel, nor the Yeshiva that he led. After fifteen minutes of anticipation, the sage welcomed them in his study.

Schultz immediately noticed that Rabbi Finkel was severely suffering from Parkinson's disease. Schultz and the group naturally looked away because they did not want to embarrass him. Rabbi Finkel banged on the table. "Gentlemen, look at me right now. I have only a few minutes for you because I know you're all busy American businessmen."¹

Then, the rabbi asked, "Who can tell me what the lesson of the Holocaust is?" Even the acumen of these entrepreneurs and business magnates couldn't find the right answers. One answered, "We will never forget." Another person nervously answered, "We will never, ever again be a victim or a bystander." Rabbi Finkel quickly dismissed both answers.

He said, "You just don't get it. Let me tell you the essence of the human spirit. During the Holocaust, the people were transported in the worst possible, inhumane way by railcar to a death camp. After hours in this inhumane cold corral with no light and bathroom, they arrived at the camp. The train doors swung open. Men were separated from women, mothers from daughters, and fathers from sons. As they went into the bunkers, only one person was given a blanket for every six. The person who received the blanket needed to decide: 'Am I am going to push the blanket to the five people who did not get one, or am I going to keep it for myself to stay warm?'"

Rabbi Finkel concluded, "It was during this defining moment that we learned the power of the human spirit because we pushed the blanket to five others. Now, take your blanket. Take it back to America and push it to five people."²

This is [truly] a wonderful message from two, totally different, people: a successful businessman and an ultra-orthodox rabbi. Sometimes it's the stories like this that really capture the heart of the High Holidays. It's at this moment, when we welcome the New Year, we yearn for hope and for new purpose; it's how we muster the strength to "push the blanket so that five people can be covered," as Rabbi Finkel really asks of all of us [to do]. [But, before we can do this, I think many of us just simply want a better year!].

Since the first week of March, we've been hanging on a thread due to the pandemic. Some of us were hit hard. Others of us were dealt a knockout blow.³ We thought about bankruptcy. We waited patiently for our businesses to receive the PPP loan. The volatility of the economy increased our anxiety. This disaster hit our pensions, our college funds, and our savings. We were also afraid,

¹ Howard Schultz, "A Blanket of Trust," <https://www.aish.com/ci/be/48880957.html>

² Ibid

³ Rabbi David Frank, *Gam Zeh Ya'avov: This, Too, Shall Pass* - Yom Kippur 5770 (2009)

lonely, and isolated. We missed spending time with our family, grandchildren, and friends. Many of us are still shell-shocked, trying to regroup and to recoup what was lost and what was unjustly taken away from us.⁴

It's also been a tough year for this temple family. We've experienced sudden staffing changes. We welcomed new faces, new voices, new organizational charts, and a new collaborative vision with the leadership and staff. Novelty can be a rewarding experience, but sudden interruptions and uncertainty can still slither on the surface. We all know that any change in general is difficult. And, dealing with synagogue change during a pandemic, there is only one thing that we can say, "Oy Vey!"

But, nevertheless, the High Holidays remind us about patience and introspection. During the High Holidays is when we stand in judgment and assess our situation. Our liturgy teaches us that we cannot control our mortality, or whether the wheel of fortune will turn favorably in our direction. But, as Judaism tells us, we always have the ability to respond to all of life as it is presented to us – even during this difficult year that we all experienced.⁵ During this defining moment of the coronavirus, we learned the power of the human spirit with ourselves and with our community.

So many of you pushed and covered our city with your blankets. You have spent countless hours volunteering at food drives. You supported our most vulnerable populations. You have offered care, supplied school lunches, financial assistance, and emotional support. Some of our Birmingham Jewish agencies repurposed its operations to ensure that our Jewish values reach every corner of this city during our trying times. It's no surprise that Judaism teaches us, "One who has fed strangers may have fed angels."

But, there's one question that still must be answered this morning: "How can Temple Emanu-El push its blanket onto each of you?" During these unprecedented times, synagogues are going to face a major crisis. We expect that some families will consider a sabbatical from synagogue life this year - or even indefinitely. Some families can't commit to additional distance learning for their children's Jewish education.

Our 138-year-old multi-generational synagogue is heading directly into a storm that we have never experienced in our existence. As your rabbi, I feel that I must respond to these pressing concerns, especially as we welcome a New Year still filled with uncertainty, obstacles, and [of course], empty pews.

[Because] long before the coronavirus even reached our shores, America was still facing a battle with another epidemic: loneliness. Nearly two-thirds of Americans reported being chronically lonely before social distancing measures.⁶ And, when social distancing measures were forced upon Americans already suffering from loneliness, this country saw a massive increase in deaths by suicide.⁷

Anticipating a greater mental health crisis, Temple Emanu-El would not allow loneliness to continue to wreak havoc on our members. This synagogue took on this crisis head on because this is what we

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ <https://www.cigna.com/about-us/newsroom/studies-and-reports/combating-loneliness/>

⁷ Jack Kelly, The Pandemic Has Caused An Increase in Anxiety, Stress, Depression and Suicides," <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackkelly/2020/08/18/the-pandemic-has-caused-an-increase-in-anxiety-stress-depression-and-suicides/#15cbd1935863>

do. Though we could not be together physically, the advancement of technology allowed us to celebrate the joys of Judaism together – just in a new virtual realm with some slight [and early] complications!

Although while it is true that it took us time to learn how to zoom, or even to unmute ourselves, or to figure out who the host was, but, we still saw each other's faces. We still studied Torah. We still welcomed the Shabbat queen. We even celebrated our students becoming a b'nai mitzvah. And, we still had our lunches with Hal on Fridays. It's not surprising that a recent survey indicated that individuals belonging to a religious community during this pandemic felt significantly less lonely than those who did not affiliate with a house of worship.⁸ Sometimes we can feel the warmth of the blanket through a computer screen.

But, when we can safely gather together, we are still stuck in a comical paradox about the synagogue. The great sage, Rabbi Hillel taught us, "Do not separate yourself from the community." Yet, another Jewish teaching tells us that "A Jew on a desert island will build two synagogues – so that there is always one he does not want to go to!" But, deep down past the comedic criticism that we do sometimes deserve, the synagogue has been around for 2000 plus years to keep Jewish life alive even when we face unprecedented adversity and suffering. This is why the synagogue as always served as your essential blanket.

And, Temple Emanu-El is a sacred community for this exact reason. It is here, on Highland Avenue, where we unite as Jewish people. It is here, where we have come together to educate our children and where we deepen our understanding and connection to Judaism.⁹ It is here where we open a prayerbook and the generations that went before you come alive within you.¹⁰ It is here, where we comfort the mourner. Temple Emanu-El is not only a bond to our past, it is also a bond to the Jewish people of the present.¹¹ And, as the great Rabbi Jack Reimer perfectly reminds us, "The sense of being connected in this time of great isolation, loneliness, and bewilderment, creates healing because we are members of the temple family."¹²

Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel passed away in 2011. And, since his death nine years ago, I think it's accurate to point out that we've become more decisive, judgmental, and even tribal. We're living in a polarized world, separated by our absolute ideologies and political philosophies. As a Jewish community, we've seen such divisions unfortunately play out inside the sacred space of the synagogue.

[So] for us to survive and grow in a Covid and tribal world, the synagogue can't be a place that exacerbates the brokenness and divisions. It must be the special place where we gather together free from the punditry and anxiety. It must be a place that provides refuge from suffering; it must be a place that gives us the tools to repair our souls and the community. When we do this, we allow the synagogue to return to its purpose for existence: to learn the power of the human spirit so that we push the blanket and cover everybody. And, despite our current circumstances that we face, Temple Emanu-El will always push the blanket and cover all of us.

⁸ See Moshe Daniel Levine, "Synagogues Once Saved Judaism, Now they Needed to Save Jews," https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/synagogues-once-saved-judaism-now-they-are-needed-to-save-jews/?utm_source=Aug+26%2C+2020&utm_campaign=Wed+Aug+26&utm_medium=email. Cf. Samuel J. Abroms article reported in *The Forward*, <https://forward.com/opinion/452742/despite-shuttered-shuls-members-say-they-feel-less-lonely/>

⁹ Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt, "A Shul is Not a Gym," https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/a-shul-is-not-a-gym/?utm_source=Copy+of+Aug+26%2C+2020&utm_campaign=Thurs+Aug+27&utm_medium=email

¹⁰ Rabbi Jack Reimer, "Why Belong: An Open Letter to An Unaffiliated Jew?"

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

So for those considering or have even taken a break from us, just remember that we're still here, waiting for you to come back. We're not going away. Our doors will never close. Our support is unending. And, when you do return, allow this temple family to heal the isolation, the loneliness, and the bewilderment. This is what we've been doing since 1882.

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