

Living In a World of Uncertainty  
Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple  
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There is a joke that all Rabbinical Students and graduates of the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion share, or at least we did when I went there. It has to do with what our seminary didn't teach us before sending us out into congregational land, also known as, the real world. When I was ordained, we joked about the fact that we had four semesters of Talmud that were mandatory, not to mention Codes and Responsa (that I happened to enjoy taking), but that Lifecycle Counseling was an elective. For many of us going out into a congregation, we felt wholly unprepared for some of the things I now do on a regular basis.

In truth, as I begin my 10<sup>th</sup> year as a rabbi and my 10<sup>th</sup> year here at Anshe Emeth, I have realized the great validity of what is referred to as the “Core Curriculum” at my seminary. All our classes in Talmud and Rabbinic Tradition helped ground me in the theological language that I use in counseling and there is nothing, no matter how good the counseling class was, that compares to counseling for real. Our classes, whether liturgical, historic, pastoral, or scriptural in nature, gave us exactly what we needed, tools for success, which would be implemented when sent out after ordination. I was also tremendously lucky and fortunate to begin my career here with Rabbi Bennett Miller. I couldn't have asked for a better mentor in the field of counseling and pastoral care, amongst a great many other things.

In truth, the jokes we made about the Core Curriculum were really just manifestations of our concerns about imposter syndrome. But as prepared as I felt the seminary made me, looking back over these 18 months, there are a few recommendations that I would like to offer that they may want to add to the Core Curriculum to better help their soon to be ordained students. These courses include: Cinematography and the Pulpit; Everything You Ever Wanted To Know About Audio Mixing As Well As All The Things You Didn't Want To Know About Audio Mixing; How to Position Your Zoom Camera So You Don't Show Everyone What's Up Your Nose; How To Keep Pre-K Students Focused on Their Computers For Zoom Religious School (the surprise answer is, you don't); and Zoom Service Leading (The secret lessons in this course are how to keep everyone muted and to never rise when you say “please rise” unless you can have the camera rise with you).

Every now and then, while counseling a couple that I'm about to wed, one of the individuals will start to fret over the “what ifs”: What if it rains, what if we can't use the gazebo, what if Uncle Joe gets sloppy drunk during the cocktail hour. What if... and I'll often settle their nerves by telling them that while all these may be upsetting at the time, they can become a really good and funny story given time. Sometimes it's the next day, like recalling how Uncle Henry accidentally dropped Aunt Sally while trying to spin her on the dancefloor. Or it takes a few years like how the groom when posing on the pier for pictures with his groom's men was being told to back up a little for a better angle and accidentally fell off. The wedding had to be delayed while his clothing dried. No one was having fun at that moment, but boy is it a great story now. Just like those “delayed in gratification stories,” figuring out the right way to mix sound for every Friday night service was tremendously frustrating then but makes a really good story now. Just as a little secret to be shared. When we were doing Zoom only services in the sanctuary and it was just the Cantor, myself, and Piano Dave, 9 out of 10 times, when the camera would flip to the Cantor within the first few prayers, it was because I got a text message that the sound was off. I would

put him on the screen so I could run to the mixer, adjust it, and then run back in enough time for the next prayer. If you ever noticed an odd look from the Cantor during, let's say, *Lecha Dodi*, it was probably because a wire took me out as I was running back to the *bima* from the audio mixer. Frustrating then, but funny now.

I wish all the moments that we had over the last 18 months could have become those that turned funny, but unfortunately, that just isn't the case. The other, not so whimsical classes that the Seminary could have offered to help us through the pandemic were: Virtual Funerals; Delayed Mourning; How to Do A Funeral One Year Later; Zoom Shivah; Selfcare for Clergy; How to Willingly Step Out Into The Unknown and Completely Rethink What Congregational and Jewish Life Can Look Like.

We have gone through a lot this last year, not just entering a world of Zoom and the internet, but through countless funerals and grief and mourning. I think I have cried with more people in these last 18 months than I had in my previous years combined as a rabbi. I lost track of how many funerals I have done since the pandemic began, yet I remember them all. With each funeral came a different Covid hurdle. What would the cemetery be requiring today? Could we accompany the coffin to the grave and watch it being lowered and lay earth ourselves, or would we have to remain sequestered in our cars until the coffin was fully buried watching the excavator do the work we wish we could lovingly do ourselves? I wish I could say that I only officiated at one funeral where the family couldn't be present, but the truth is, for various reasons, it was a lot more than that. I even officiated at a funeral where it was just myself, the funeral director, and the grave diggers. Because of quarantine and where the family lived, no one else could be present and we Zoomed the entire funeral. For those who believe that the pandemic was blown out of proportion let me just say that at no point in my career have I walked into Crabriel Funeral Home across the street and seen that all the furniture had to be moved to make way for the bodies and coffins. In May of 2020, they had done their quota for the year. Because cemeteries were back logged to such a degree instead of being able to do a funeral within 24-48 hours some people would have to wait almost a week before an availability. No matter what the scenario, losing someone during the pandemic was awful and often, done without an in-person goodbye. I cried with you and for you for all the loss of life.

I cried with you and for you as we sat on Zoom together and discussed how your A+ student was failing at online school. How your school systems had no idea what they were doing and how difficult the expectations were of parents. You had to be fulltime teachers, all while guiding your children through their rapidly changing mental health needs, and at the exact same time you had to transition to working from home while maintaining a fulltime job with more than fulltime demands. This was more than many of us could bare and yet you had to for the sake of the children. And what about those who live alone? At times the isolation was more than could be borne, desperately waiting to see family and friends, your lifelines. Week after week seeing a quarantine just be pushed further and further back. Single, married, alone, without children, there was not one segment of our country that didn't feel the pressure of the pandemic.

Two years ago, during the holidays, I quoted my father's last lesson to me, "That life is unbelievably complicated, yet utterly beautiful." I still maintain that to be true, but I will admit, life in a pandemic, at times, pushed that to the limit. Life for many, if not all, of us these last 18 months has been hard, and sad, but I would dare any of you to not only find moments of beauty and joy. I cried with you during great tragedy this past year, but I also cried during moments of great beauty. When I started officiating at weddings again, I cried. All the weddings that I had scheduled were delayed and delayed and delayed again, and then like the sun peeking through

dark clouds at the end of a storm, a wedding here, a baby-naming there, it was like seeing life returning to a desolate field, and I cried at its beauty. It was the testament that the worlds of Ecclesiastes, “that everything is utter futility” is just not true.

But I know that many of us feel very deeply those words, that everything is futile. I know that because you have expressed it. You have expressed it in how we are seeing COVID cases rise again. We thought we were on the other side and now we aren't so sure. Despite every precaution we are taking, as early as this afternoon, I had no idea if I would be delivering it to congregants in front of me as well as to those at home, or would we be doing services for an empty sanctuary and just a few cameras like last year? “People make plans and God just laughs.”

I had a student this past year, in the wake of a grandfather's death, ask me why God created COVID? It broke my heart. Some students excelled during remote learning, others crumbled, this student crumbled and it was compounded by the loss of his grandfather with whom he was very close. “Why did God create COVID?” He might as well have added on why do bad things happen to good people, or why is there crime or evil and hatred in the world, why are there people like Nazis or things like mosquitos?

Where is God in the world when the world seems darkest? Where is God's power? For us as Jews, it's in community. I am filled with so much pride in our community as we came together to support one another. The Board of Trustees and other volunteers making calls to every single congregant on a regular basis to make sure they were okay. The Caregivers Committee holding Zoom meetings to let people vent about what they are going through and sharing techniques for making it through and holding it together. The same for Religious School Parents. How about all the volunteers driving supplies and groceries to those who were sick or too frail to go out shopping during the worst moments of the pandemic? How about how our educator, Matt Vogel, led an incredible shift within the entire religious school program to enable in person school at Eagles Landing Day Camp, and a big thank you to Ruth Ann Weiss and Barry Wasserman, congregants of ours and owners of the camp, who opened their doors wide to us and enabled many of our students their first human to human interaction with people who weren't their immediate family. What about Jay Goldberg and his team of volunteers who said, “what about the vulnerable who need our help to get food, because nobody can even think about getting a job or a home when they're starving?” They started making bagged lunches for Elijah's Promise and to this day have made more than 34,000 lunches and I'm sure I'm short changing that by a few hundred if not more. Food changes lives and if you want to help support this, just ask me how or send a donation to the Temple and ear mark it for “Lunches for Elijah's Promise.” Right now we are talking about turning it into a permanent fund of the temple so that we will be able to perpetually feed those who need it. What about our Community Development Corporation and the hundreds of thousands of diapers they gave out this pass year with lines going around the corner that forced them to rethink how they distribute diapers to make it more efficient? They can tell you how this pandemic changed lives by showing you the tremendous increased demand. They felt it. But what about that utterly beautiful day we had in our parking lot when we had the AECDC giving out diapers, JFS giving out food from their food bank, Elijah's Promise Food truck giving out lunches and the Health Department giving out vaccines. All in our parking lot! And there are so many other moments that I simply don't have the time to mention. Where is God's power in times of trouble? Look around the room, and you will see it.

Even in the darkest of times, even when the only thing that feels certain is the uncertainty around us, we Jews are supposed to hold onto hope and help bring light to a dark world. If my

professors at HUC-JIR taught me anything, it's that as Jews we are resilient, we embrace change and evolution, we give hope to others, and the limits of what we can do when we are in sacred community is limited only by our imagination. Why do we say "*chazak, chazak, v'nitchazeik*" whenever we finish studying a book of the Torah? "Strength, strength and let us be strengthened?" Because education leads to change and life is change, life is growth and Torah study leads to meaningful growth. Everything we did this year, everything I listed, all of it came from our belief that this is what God wants of us as Jews in this world. And all of it has brought us closer to being an even stronger community because it strengthens the resilience each one of us needed. Yes, as we stand here on the forefront of a new year, we are absolutely aware that we have completely no idea what 5782 has in store for us, but as Jews we say, *chazak, chazak, v'nitchazeik*, may we also move forward in strength together, sometimes holding others in our community up and sometimes letting them hold us up when needed, but always together and always as one.

Amen v'amen.