

Self-Care and Community

Kol Nidrei 2020

Rabbi David J Fine, PhD

How did two Jews survive the Titanic, an old Soviet joke goes. Because they were talking. Natan Sharansky, the most famous of Soviet Jewish dissidents, tells that joke in his just published autobiography. He says it was his favorite antisemitic Soviet joke when he was growing up. “Whatever the joke’s originator had intended or known about Jews,” Sharansky writes, “it captured something deeply Jewish. Here’s one of our eternal survival skills: we have been passionately arguing with each other, in good times and bad, for better and worse, for 3,900 years” (p. 67).

It reminds me of the famous joke about the Jew who is marooned on an island so he builds two synagogues. One is the one he will attend, and the other is the one he won’t step foot in. Even when we are alone we are still somehow together.

We have all experienced different degrees of aloneness over the past half year since the outbreak of covid-19. And here, for those of you present at Spring Lake Day Camp, we seemed to have built our own synagogue on a deserted island. This is the one we are going to, whereas the one on Grove Street is the one we are not setting foot in. For now.

What the jokes about arguing really tell us is that Jewish culture understands that we need each other. That we need community.

I am so very proud of this community and how we have figured out how to come together, both virtually and safely in person. We quickly figured out how to use Zoom, where we have maintained our regular Shabbat service every week since we closed the synagogue. We have come together for prayer and learning, for business and socializing. I don’t envy my colleagues a hundred years ago who had to manage the Spanish Flu without the benefit of the internet!

While we have learned to spend more time at home and by ourselves, we have also come to appreciate so much more the importance of being together. Synagogues across the country are facing a crisis as the tangentially affiliated are holding off on paying dues, driven by both financial pressures and the sense that the synagogue cannot offer as much as it had before the pandemic. But we are as busy as ever. I could go on and on about the extraordinary amount of work that Howard Schreiber, David Cox and our Board of Directors and each member of our staff and our volunteers have committed to in planning the many details that have gone into these high holiday services. We are all in their debt. I am also incredibly grateful to those who answered our call, and those who will, to add contributions towards our high holiday expenses. We are here, in person and online, because of the strength of the bonds that make our Temple Israel and Jewish Community Center the wonderful community and family that it is. I pray that synagogues will be able to hold on during this plague that has hit us so that we will be able to open our real doors again when that time comes, hopefully soon.

One thing I learned from reading the biologist Edward O. Wilson’s book, *The Social Conquest of the Earth*, that I discussed on Sunday, is that we are indeed social animals. What causes all animals to become social, Wilson teaches, is when there is a nest to protect, a home. Communities exist so that we can work together to maintain a home. These days of covid-19, when we have spent so much time in our own homes, we need the broader community to help keep us sane, to help keep us grounded, to help us stay comfortable in our homes.

Conservative Judaism's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards released a beautiful responsum this week by its chairman, Rabbi Elliot Dorff, entitled "Loneliness, Family and Community During the Pandemic." I was privileged to be among the Committee members who approved the paper unanimously, putting it "on the books," so to speak, of our Torah. One of the areas that Rabbi Dorff writes about is the pressure that the pandemic has put on family life, as well as the increase in tensions and even, tragically, family violence. But "even emotionally healthy families," he writes, "need some time apart from each other. Many are thinking and maybe even saying to the members of their family, 'I love you, but I don't want to be with you 24/7.' This is true for elementary school age children, all the more so for middle school and high school students, and for many adults as well." Because his words are so pertinent, and so current, I want to share with you the conclusions, the legal rulings. I am happy to send the full paper to anyone who would like to read it:

1. The Jewish legal duty to take care of oneself emotionally and psychologically is no less imperative than the Jewish legal duty to protect oneself physically. Although we all need some time alone, Judaism recognizes the inherent social nature of us as human beings. Therefore, during the pandemic, when we cannot congregate in groups large and small in the ways we usually do, preserving our mental health requires us to reach out electronically and in other safe ways to connect with others, both for our own sake and for theirs.

2. Even those who normally do not use electronic devices on Shabbat or Yom Tov are legally obliged to use them if that is necessary to rescue themselves from a deep depression or suicidal thoughts.

3. Families who find themselves sequestered together with little or no opportunity to interact with others should recognize and name the new pressures that that situation puts on family relationships and conscientiously take steps to reduce those pressures in order to retain good relations and avoid family violence.

4. Normally fulfilling the Jewish legal duty to visit the sick is best done in person, but that is not safe during the pandemic, and hence ill people feel even more isolated now than they would under normal circumstances. This makes that duty even more needed and more imperative to fulfill during the pandemic. Jews should make extra efforts to visit the sick remotely during this time so that ill people isolated from their family and friends can retain their sanity, their sense of belonging to a community, and their will to do what is necessary to get well.

5. The Jewish tradition asserts that people are inherently social and need community, both emotionally and practically. Therefore, although synagogues and other Jewish institutions must first and foremost obey the advice of medical authorities to ensure the physical safety of their members, staff, and visitors, they also have a duty to do what they can to interact with their members and continue the work of their sacred missions of religion, education, and social service. This duty to carry out their usual activities as much as possible now is not only to assure their

continued existence after the pandemic passes, but also to accomplish their communal bonding functions and live up to the many commandments that their very missions enable the Jewish community to fulfill. Both of these are needed now more than ever.

The pressures that the pandemic has put on our emotional lives are acute. We accept these pressures in order to keep us safe from the physical dangers. We lost two members of our congregation to covid-19, and a number of beloved relatives including parents of members. I buried many covid-19 losses. We have gone through a very difficult time. Early on when everything was closed and Alla and I sat at dinner with our children I said to them that this was like living in a war, except that there is no war. Rabbi Dorff's Torah is that we must take care of ourselves and our loved ones. We do that by cherishing their love, and reaching out to those around us through community. We are social animals.

Rabbi Dorff cites a number of classic rabbinic sources on the importance of community, like the famous saying of Hillel in Pirkei Avot: אל תפרוש מן הציבור "Do not separate from the community." Why is community so important? Minimally, he argues, because we need connections to others. "We all need our individual space from time to time," he writes, "and some of us need private time and space more than others. Extended time alone, though, is unhealthy for us. Probably the most graphic proof of this assertion occurs in the prison environment, where short of execution or torture, the harshest penalty is solitary confinement." Thinking of the torture that solitary confinement is, I would like to return to Natan Sharansky. Sharansky was arrested by the KGB in 1977 and spent nine years in prison, much of the time in solitary confinement. He has been speaking to Jewish audiences through Zoom and other media since covid-19 broke out about how he learned to survive then, and how we can survive now. He filmed a video in Hebrew that went viral through Israeli and social media around Passover. "I know something about loneliness and confinement," he says with a twinkle in his eye. He writes about this in his autobiography which he co-wrote with the historian Gil Troy. The book is titled: *Never Alone: Prison, Politics and My People*.

Let me share this wonderful passage from Sharansky's book:

A punishment cell is a small, dark, cold place where there is no one to speak to, nothing to read, nothing to touch, and almost nothing to eat. Soviet law decreed that no prisoner should be left in the *kartser* for more than fifteen days in a row. Any longer was considered too dangerous to the individual's psyche.

But when the KGB wanted to break a political prisoner, there were no limits. They could keep you in for fifteen days and another fifteen and another fifteen. My longest stretch was 130 days in a row. And I spent 405 days in punishment cells in total.

My aim while inside was to survive mentally and physically while refusing to surrender. So I played chess in my head. I played one game after another, thousands of games. The good news is I always won. In each game, I would identify with one side and try to beat my opponent. I would check all the options that might work for me and consider which ones were reasonable for my opponent.

When the game was finished, I turned the board around in my head and became my opponent. Now I was trying to follow the rival

strategy. Each time, I realized there were more and more opportunities for both sides. I had more than enough time to test each possibility. After all, I was not in a hurry—the longer, the better (p. 439).

Behind his humor and intelligence, we find a truth that the way to survive being alone is to imagine companionship. Much like the joke about the Jew who builds two synagogues on his deserted island. That's why Sharansky called his book *Never Alone*. And he really knows what being alone is like.

In his talks about surviving the loneliness of the pandemic, Sharansky gives five tips. In his words:

First, remember that you are a soldier in a bigger struggle, and you have an important role to play in determining whether we win or lose.

Second, don't try controlling what you can't control—focus on what you can control. You cannot control when this craziness will finish, but, in the meantime, you can take on ambitious plans to challenge yourself. Learn a new language. Read that thick book. Clean your closets—or finally build a new one. Don't let corona bring you to despair.

Third, don't stop laughing at yourself and the world—it puts everything in proportion.

Fourth, use your hobbies, like I used chess. This is your time to enjoy life.

Fifth, always remember that you are part of something bigger than yourself (pp. 442-443).

We are all part of something bigger, and that is the community that gives us purpose. I am so grateful for all of you for making a community for us. We will get through this together. Let us have an easy fast and be sealed in the Book of Life.