

Shabbat shalom. In parsha Tzav, in the third aliyah, we read the instructions for a particular kind of sacrifice called the *Zevach haShlamim*, which is often translated as the "Peace Sacrifice." It also might be translated as the "Sacrifice of Wholeness." This sacrifice can be a free will offering, a thanksgiving offering, or an offering in fulfillment of a vow.

When I read about this offering, for the first time I felt a little bit sorry that we no longer do sacrifices. I sort of imagined myself vowing that if my family, my friends, and all of our Riverdale Temple community made it through this pandemic intact, I would bring a sacrifice to the Temple in Jerusalem. Then I imagined myself making that sacrifice on some sunny day in the future, an offering of thanksgiving for us all having come through safely.

*Halevai!* If only! Because the truth is that the virus has already affected our congregation. I continue to pray with all my might that we will be spared as much as possible.

This Shabbat is Shabbat HaGadol, the Great Shabbat, which is always the Shabbat before Passover. Shabbat HaGadol is one of the two Shabbatot on which the rabbi traditionally gave a sermon. The point of giving a sermon on this Shabbat was to remind everybody to rid their homes of *chametz* before Passover.

Yesterday we had a little class on Passover, and I pointed out that the prohibition of certain foods during the holiday of Passover echoed the prohibition of other foods, non-kosher foods, at all times in Judaism. To me, it seemed a symbol of the many things we are prohibited from doing in Judaism. From stealing and lying to working on Shabbat, there are a great many things that are forbidden. While nobody keeps all of the commandments, we do keep some. And we do our best to avoid *chametz* on Passover, at least avoiding bread and eating matzah. By doing so, we are recommitting to Judaism, to the quest for holiness that our religion demands.

Not everyone in our class agreed. But whatever *chametz* means, we are still about to plunge into the maelstrom of Passover. Whether you usually clean for Passover or not, whether you rid your house of *chametz* or not, whether you go to a seder or host a seder or have no seder, Passover will be here on Wednesday night. And this Passover, as many have said, will be different from all other Passovers.

Some people will be having online seders. Some will have s'darim with only their immediate family. Some will be having seders by themselves. As we always strive to come to terms with the meaning of the Exodus from Egypt and with the meaning of Passover itself, so too this year will we be striving to understand what it means to celebrate Passover in the middle of a quarantine.

More than one congregant has asked me if this is some kind of punishment from Gd. More than one person has noted the irony of Passover being 'cancelled' due to a plague. More than one person has asked about the religious meaning of the situation in which we find ourselves.

I do not believe that this is any kind of plague from Gd, or punishment in any

way. Pharaoh was punished because he would not let the Hebrew slaves go. If we could remove the virus from our midst by letting people go, we would. Yet I do believe that this is, perversely, an opportunity that has been forced upon us. We have the opportunity to check in with our fellow congregants, friends, neighbors, people with whom we have not spoken for a long time. We have an opportunity to pray for health, for healing, for a vaccine, in a tremendously powerful and meaningful way.

We have many opportunities to help those in most need of help. There are donations we can make to people who have lost their jobs, donations or even just expressions of gratitude to medical workers and all those on the front lines. But to me, the most powerful opportunity is to seize joy in the midst of sorrow and fear.

Passover is a time when we are grateful for the redemption that took place when we were freed from slavery. It also looks forward to the redemption that we have yet to see. We love Passover, not only because it is the time of our freedom, but because it is also a time of family and food, two of the most important things in Judaism. Our opportunity and our challenge is to celebrate, to be joyful, even without the feast, even if we cannot be with family and friends. All of us are under tremendous stress at this time. Some of us are terribly sad because of the loss of family and friends. Nonetheless, we must be joyful.

Even if you will spend Passover night alone, set the table with your beautiful Passover tablecloth and dishes. Wear your finest clothes. And do your best, your very best, to be positive, to be joyful, to be free of worry and stress on this special night. We were slaves, and now we are free. We are confined to our homes, but we will go out again. We are afraid, but Gd is on our side.

You may ask how we can be joyful at a time like this. I don't know. In fact, we cannot be. But we must be. If we have lost friends or family, we must be joyful (and they would want us to be). If we are frightened, we must be joyful. If we are terribly stressed by the situation, and miserable about the truncated Passover we will be experiencing, even then, we must be joyful.

Rabbi Nachman of Bretzlav said "Joy is not incidental to your spiritual quest. It is a vital part of it." At this terrible time, despite the external situation, we must celebrate our holiday in any way we can. This is our challenge, and this is our opportunity. Our religion has supported us through worse than this. When this is past (soon, Gd willing), and we look back at this time, we will not laugh, but we will be deeply moved at how we were able, amidst the worst of it, to feel the blessing of Gd's love.

I wish everyone a beautiful, meaningful, and holy Passover, and a restorative Shabbat of health and peace.