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Vision

“Stay home-stay safe. #SocialDistancing. E-bay bidding wars on hand sanitizer. Eerily silent neighborhoods, offices, shopping malls...*synagogues*. Purim weekend 2020, our world became unrecognizable. Jewish communal life shifted into a fusion of virtual and global connection while clergy and lay leadership pivoted as fast as the changing landscape around us. Identifying and meeting the unique needs of this new dynamic Jewish community became vitally relevant to leadership and transition through this liminal, unprecedented time.

Snapshots of “the Before Time” — like our Shabbat Purim Extravaganza with our religious school; all of us dressed in crazy costumes and singing together — echo as distant memory. That weekend we brought a very special young man with autism to the Torah as a Bar Mitzvah. It was a creative, magical, and inspiring moment that I held that close to my heart as one by one, upcoming b’nai mitzvah postponed. I was so happy that we made his moment happen just days before the shut-down. Purim night, my parody troupe performed our original spiel yESTHERday with our live congregant band. Elbow bumps abounded and folks began to keep their distance. It was our last in person community gathering for seventeen months.

We jumped into a new world, and I jumped into b’nai mitzvah pivots that continue to adapt as COVID-19 shifts. Repeatedly I spoke with each b’nai mitzvah family: *“I know you are worried; we are worried too; and- we will make it through this together. I cannot yet tell you what your bar/bat mitzvah will look like, but I can tell you it will be meaningful and special and beautiful. I will be with you every step of the way and we will make sure you feel amazing and*

connected to Judaism, to your family and your heritage; to God.” Between monthly maintenance sessions for postponed B’nai Mitzvah to re-envisioning service choreography to allow for maximum safety and inclusion of family and friends; my clergy team, tutors, and I helped our students keep their studies current, served as an outlet for our teens to process the overwhelming changes happening in their daily lives because of COVID-19 and kept them and their families connected to their Jewish lives.

Maintaining these types of sacred connections remained my mission. At our first zoom staff meeting that week I suggested we create a buddy system. I wanted all of us to stay connected with one another and feel linked as a team even though we were isolated in our homes. Morning check in rotations ensued and we forged even stronger bonds as we moved through lockdown focusing on congregant care, and ours as well, together.

Our clergy, staff and lay leadership created a massive outreach initiative making daily phone calls to our congregants. Every synagogue member received a phone call once a month—sometimes more if they needed it. These conversations became a lifeline for connection. Treasured moments from this time stand out, like the call with the wife of a beloved member just before he passed away. She told me that every time they came to shul, or watched the livestream, as was now the norm, he would close his eyes and pray out loud along with me. She said my voice helped him to pray and encouraged me to give him a call. Although I only reached his voicemail, I sang *Misheberach*. Because of COVID, I could not be with them for *vidui*. After his death his daughter told me that she would play my voicemail and various YouTube videos of me at services for him, sharing that while they were on “he heard and would open up his eyes.”

Early in the shut-down I came across these words, “*in the time of social distancing, music brings us together.*” Using Jewish music as a vehicle for spiritual growth, connection and

transformation has always been at the heart of my cantorate and this new world we were living in demanded creative musical innovation. Navigating COVID-19 proved an exceptional challenge to this task, as public singing is a virus super-spreader. I established morning melodies; a once-a-week five-minute Facebook live feature of me singing a simple liturgical setting or niggun connected to a weekly inspirational message. I joined the American Conference of Cantors in our international “watch party” campaign, offering *Blessings for Nighttime*. With our in-person concert series on hold, I put together my first virtual concert, *Israel: Songs of Remembrance and Celebration* in honor of *Yom Hazikaron* and *Yom Hatz'm'ut*.

It was imperative for me to continue our participatory musical culture. A congregant and I co-created a year-long virtual coffee-house series. Each month we featured well known Jewish and secular folk songs, connecting with a holiday theme, or sharing our favorite tunes. Our community choir, *Shir HaEsh*, continued our bi-monthly rehearsals pivoting to Zoom. I led everyone in song with individuals on mute and then we would unmute and discuss the liturgy and its musical settings. The conversations we shared gave folks a sense of renewed connection to music and to each other and became holy time. Volunteer congregants who were experts in technology and editing produced high holy day choir videos for us. Throughout the *chagim* the videos served as a foundation to help folks settle into the day's thematic liturgy as a grounding preparation for prayer. Purim served as the one-year mark for us when all in person activity ceased. Employing my technological skills, I brought kids and adults of all ages together for our first ever multi-generational talent show via Zoom and Facebook Live. I wove the story of Purim and Megillah reading through comedy, instrumentalists, singers, and storytellers.

COVID-19 created drastic changes within synagogue life. We are all at once more intimately, broadly, and even globally connected. Living in extended limbo requires gentle

sensitivity, gymnastic flexibility, and a vigilant awareness of “*Dah Lifnei Mi Atah Omeid: know before Whom you stand.*” Rabbi Eliezer’s words from the Talmud are a technical reminder that we stand before God during prayer. Equally, these words command us to attune ourselves to our community. This kind of understanding requires close partnership between clergy, lay leaders and congregants. Our sacred listening ears must be razor sharp. Recognizing that our reach extends far beyond buildings and members is essential. Jewish communal life is now accessible through the touch of a button. We have opened our arms to an international Jewish community. At the same time, we also face “zoom burnout.” Folks want to experience sacred presence with one another beyond the screen in a safe environment. Open communication and dialogue, resilient flexibility, together with continual technological education and utilization of proven scientific safety precautions will help craft hybrid and dynamic Jewish communal life that is both intimate and global. Above all, we must cultivate a center of *emunah*-faith. We learn from Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel that “*faith is sensitiveness to what transcends nature, knowledge, and will, awareness of the ultimate...holy dimension in all reality. Even when the upper stairs are beyond our sight, we constantly rise toward the distant goal.*” Whether we imagine God as embodied ruler, divine energy, cosmic presence or conscience, or nothing at all, a center of faith will guide us through those “*upper stairs that are beyond our sight.*” Faith will direct us through the unknown future that COVID-19 brings to us as Jews seeking community. Heschel also expounds, “*prayer is song...music is a reaching out toward a realm that lies just beyond [our] grasp.*” Fusing music and faith into my leadership are core fundamentals as I look toward the hybrid and vibrant new normal that we are shaping together.