

RABBI'S MESSAGE

A Moment in Mitzrayim

As we enter the Passover season, this year, there is little on anybody's mind other than the virus that has affected our lives. We are about to celebrate our freedom as a people; yet most of us are not feeling very free right now. In order to keep ourselves and others safe, we are confined by social distancing. The restaurants, theaters, gyms, sporting events and other places where we normally gather are closed. Even houses of worship, like Temple Beth Torah, are not meeting in our usual places. We are, for the most part, stuck at home, limiting all physical contact with others.

This is not our first experience with confining limitations. Over 3000 years ago, we were enslaved, and then freed, from the land called Egypt. In Hebrew, Egypt is "*Mitzrayim*," which also translates to "narrow places." Egypt, during the time when Hebrews were slaves, was quite narrow, and not just in geography. It was a time and a place of narrow-mindedness and fear, when people could be considered property and a Pharaoh could impose a death sentence on babies. After hundreds of years of confinement, the Torah teaches that G-D redeemed us from bondage as we were freed from slavery to begin our journey to the Promised Land.

Today, our lives are narrow again. We are confined, but not oppressed. We are limited, but we can go beyond our limitations. As much as we are isolated from others, we are almost unlimited because technology helps us find ways of connecting. We've had people "attend" Friday night Shabbat services who ordinarily are unable to come due to distance, driving issues or other limitations. And of course, some may feel left out because they are not yet comfortable with the technology. We must find ways around the limitations to be together even while we are safe in our own homes.

It's also a time to remember the difference between narrow spaces and narrow minds. Tyrants, like Pharaoh, are not the only enemies of freedom. We have seen in our lifetime acts of heroism and acts of selfishness that remind us how to follow the most basic precepts of Torah. Multiple places in Torah, including the Holiness Code (Leviticus 19) we are commanded to "love your neighbor as yourself" and "treat the stranger living among you as a native, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Even when isolated in our homes, we must remember the needs of others. We saw this dramatically when our community suffered from Hurricane Harvey. People went out of their way to help those in need, whether it was with physical labor or monetary contributions. With today's virus, we must be protective of others with our *physical* distance, while striving to remain close enough to care. Rather than pushing into a supermarket line to grab that last roll of toilet paper, we must graciously allow generous space that honors other people's needs. Rather than pushing competitive agendas and denigrating other viewpoints, we must find ways to unify toward common goals.

It is tradition to prepare for Passover by cleaning out our homes of all *chametz*, or products that contain leavening that causes bread to rise. The rabbis compared *chametz* to the ego; what causes bread to rise is a metaphor for how people are susceptible to puffing up our own egos, our own viewpoints, our own sense of right. This year's Passover might be the cleanest ever. As we wash our hands over and over again, perhaps we can also concentrate on washing away attitudes that limit our ability to treat others the way we wish to be treated. As we open our doors for Elijah, let's open our hearts to a unified way to share the world.

And the narrow places we inhabit will open up to freedom.

L'shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon