

Bitachon: Trusting God during a Pandemic

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Traditional Jews often write two Hebrew letters, *bet-hay*, at the top of any document. That's an acronym standing for, *b'ezrat ha-Shem*, "God willing." Many will pepper their conversations with the same phrase, for example: "I'm looking forward to seeing you at Temple, God willing." From a traditionally religious point of view, the implication is that no plan will come to fruition without God's help. For all of us, whatever our theology, it's a statement of uncertainty. We can plan, but we cannot know what our future holds.

When I was younger, I would respond to an invitation: "I'll be there!" Since then, life has thrown me curve balls, as it does everyone. Now, I may be equally eager to anticipate a future event, but I'm far less cavalier. My response these days: "I plan to be there." Or even, "I'll be there, God willing."

We live in days of tremendous uncertainty. I'm a planner, and I feel like I have a pretty good idea of what we're planning to do at Temple through next Thursday. Usually, I look at my calendar to tell you what we'll be doing two years from next Thursday.

Uncertainty at the Temple, of course, is the least of most people's worries. Our health comes first. Economic dislocation is frightening. A stock market reversal has been front and center, upending budgets and retirement plans. And how much worse for those with no money to invest in stocks and bonds! Millions of Americans, and more of the human family around the world, must be concerned about their job security in a suddenly threatened global economy.

And for the most vulnerable among us: What if Coronavirus whips through Our House, the shelter for the working homeless with which our congregation is so connected. If schools can't reopen any time soon—and who even knows what "soon" means in this situation—will children who rely on free and reduced breakfast and lunch at school go hungry? Will their parents have to give up their jobs because they have to stay home to supervise children who would otherwise be in school? Lest we imagine these concerns to be remote, we have fellow congregants facing these very concerns.

If my sermon is beginning to increase, rather than to assuage, your anxiety, please stay tuned. Our Jewish tradition offers much more than those two words, "God willing," as we face uncertainty. Indeed, Judaism teaches us to live with a sense of security—in Hebrew, *bitachon*. We are enjoined to do everything we can

to help ourselves in a difficult situation. Having done what we can, our sages offer us hope, based on experience and faith, that we will be O.K. No, we cannot guarantee the outcome, but we can live with trust in God's help, come what may.

First: Let's all do what we can do to keep ourselves and our community safe and healthy. The highest value in Judaism is *pikuach nefesh*, saving a life, clarifying our decision to suspend in-person, communal worship and programs. We must all avoid group gatherings. Those who are older, medically fragile, or both, must even stay away from the grocery store. Let somebody else do your shopping. Grocery stores offer services by which you can order your groceries online and then pick them up without ever getting out of your car. If you need somebody to teach you how to do that, or make the pickup, please call the Temple, and I will match you with a volunteer. Able to volunteer? Please send me an email.

Now, permit me to offer three thoughts from our tradition about how we might approach this difficult and uncertain time with a sense of security and trust:

1. In this week's Torah portion, Moses finds himself in an untenable situation. After dealing with the Golden Calf crisis, God commands Moses to continue leading the people toward the Promised Land. Moses sees that as an impossible task. Frustrated, he accuses God of giving him insufficient information to complete the task. Moses insists on actually seeing God. Even Moses, God's most faithful servant, needs in-person reassurance that everything will work out well.ⁱ

God responds: “[Y]ou cannot see my face, for a human being cannot see Me and live...See, there is a place near Me. Station yourself on the rock, and, as My presence passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock and shield you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take My hand away and you will see My back...”ⁱⁱ Our sages are troubled by the suggestion that God has all these body parts. Some suggest that the Torah is offering us a metaphor: We can see God's back—that is, we can see what God has already done. We cannot see God's face—that is, what the future will bring.ⁱⁱⁱ

Moses learns the lesson: Life is uncertain, but God will always be with him. Now, he proceeds to lead the people to the border of the Promised Land. Let us, like Moses, endure this uncertain time with the faith that God is with us, come what may.

2. “A Jewish folktale relates that King Solomon was once presented with a ‘magic’ ring inscribed with the words, *gam zeh ya'avur*, ‘This, too, shall pass.’ In his wisdom, Solomon realized that, even as these words kept

him grounded in jubilant times, they also provided him with tremendous comfort when he was troubled. This virus and its ever-widening impact could endure for some time. However, let us find a measure of comfort in the knowledge that, as with the greatest tragedies in our people's past and world history, this virus, too, will pass.^{iv}

3. Last week, we read from the Torah that the menorah in the ancient Temple was to be fueled by “clear oil of olives, beaten for the light.” Of course, olive oil is typically rendered by pressing olives, not beating them. Along with the ancient midrash^v, Rabbi Aryeh Leifert writes that, like those olives in the ancient Temple, “[t]he Jews have been physically and emotionally beaten for centuries.”^{vi}

Despite all those beatings, we are commanded to be “a light among nations.” Jews have responded to persecution by heeding oft-repeated words of Torah, remembering the stranger, for we have been treated like strangers, time and again.

During this crisis, too, we may feel beaten—not specifically as Jews, in this case, but as members of the human family. This epidemic and its ever-widening impact will offer us countless opportunities to offer *chesed*, lovingkindness, to the people in the lives and community, especially the most vulnerable among us. We would never choose to face disease and financial dislocation, nor social distancing that could be isolating. We may feel powerless to change the situation. But we can be kind. We can be giving. We can think of who needs us most, and whom we are most able to help. And we can reach out our hands and our hearts.

Let us strive to be faithful like Moses, pushing onwards, even in uncertainty. Let us seek to be wise like Solomon, dispatching despair by reminding ourselves, “This, too, shall pass.” And, at this time when we may feel beaten down, let us emulate our persecuted ancestors: Even in our darkest moments, we can shed light upon the world.

Amen.

ⁱ Exodus 33:12-16.

ⁱⁱ Exodus 33:19-23.

ⁱⁱⁱ See, for example, Chatam Sofer on Torah, *Ki Tisa* 38.

^{iv} Central Conference of American Rabbis Responds to the COVID-19 Pandemic, March 12, 2020. I wrote the first draft of this statement, including the original version of the paragraph here. The statement, including this paragraph, was edited by Rabbi Ron Segal.

^v *Shemot Rabbah*.

^{vi} Aryeh A. Leifert, "WalkingTorah: Parashat Tetzaveh (Exodus 27:20-30:10), *The Times of Israel*, February 16, 2016.