

Yom Kippur Morning 5781  
We Are Here  
Rabbi Betsy Forester

On March 28, *Wall Street Journal* columnist Peggy Noonan wrote of what has become a classic kind of pandemic moment. Sick herself, she went on an errand to her local bank. “We’re all tipping 20s in Manhattan, and I ran low,” she wrote. I wondered, if you have a fever, and your doctor thinks you may have COVID-19, whom are you tipping?” This was just two weeks before New York City had become the epicenter of the novel coronavirus. In any case, to the bank she had gone, in what she described as “full regalia--N95 mask, sanitary gloves, high-necked coat and scarf.” Then came the classic encounter, recounted by Noonan in these words:

“As I walked home I passed by the 90th Street Pharmacy, looked in the shining windows, and saw Hamidou and Barbara at the counter. I felt so grateful for them. I knocked on the glass, they looked, and I drew myself up and threw them a full, formal military salute. At exactly that moment, I thought: *Oh no, the mask, the gloves, they won’t recognize me!* But they did, immediately, and we laughed and applauded each other.”

And then Noonan added: “How fiercely we love people we don’t know we love.”

I have thought often about that line, “how fiercely we love people we don’t know we love.” I think about it when I see your faces on Zoom, when I call a doctor’s office, when I wave to the neighbor who helped me move into my apartment. People we barely know constantly remind us how we are connected to this world. At Beth Israel Center, filling the sanctuary with our entire community on this day normally serves as a dependable reminder of who we are and who we came from. The need to withhold our presence from one another is irritating and sad.

A rabbi I know (Carl Perkins) tells the story of a friend of his, a rabbi in Miami. The Miami rabbi’s shul was renovating their building. A concern arose regarding the newly designed *bimah*. Apparently, the builders knew that a synagogue needs a preaching platform but didn’t understand how a *bimah* is used. The *bimah* they had designed was too small. The Rabbi was called in to go over what was needed.

So the rabbi explained that we read from the Torah on the *bimah*. “When the Torah is read,” he said, “we call up one person, but that person isn’t actually trained to read the

Torah, so we generally have someone else there alongside them who actually does the reading.” “Sooooo, that makes two,” said the builder, “and it seems to me that we have room for that.”

But of course the rabbi wasn't finished. “Well, yes, but there's also a person standing over there.” “What's the person standing there for?” asked the builder. “Well, this person here, who is reading, might make a mistake, so we need someone there to follow along and correct the reader when that happens.”

“I see,” said the builder, “you call someone up here, but that person can't read, so you get an expert but they aren't that good either, so you have another person over there to double check the expert.”

“Right,” the rabbi said.

“I think there's enough room for that here. I don't see the problem.”

“Well, I'm not quite done,” said the rabbi. “There's another person on the other side of the reading table.”

“What does that other person do?” asked the builder.

“Well, the Rabbi answered, “this person over here may not catch all the mistakes made by the Torah reader, so we need another person up here just in case.”

“Let me see if I have this,” said the builder. “You call someone up to the Torah, but that person can't read, so you bring another person--an expert--but the expert is going to make mistakes, so you put a guard there, but the guard isn't really good enough, so you put another guard on the other side?” Exactly, said the Rabbi, and also, after the first person is called up, they stay up here when the next person is called up, and I'm over there, and sometimes an officer or another person will sit with me, or on the other side, over there. And the way you have designed this, some of us will fall off the *bimah*, so we need you to make it bigger,” said the rabbi, with a straight face.

“Okay. I will do that. But there is something I certainly did do right,” said the builder.

“What's that?” asked the Rabbi.

“I designed six classrooms for you, and God knows, the way you people read, you sure need those classrooms!”

It is a funny story. It lands strangely now, though, doesn't it? We can picture the characters. We have the same routines and cast of characters here at Beth Israel Center. Except that we don't, not now. We are functioning with a bare-bones crew. Our sanctuary has cables exposed and cameras poised in case we need to leave this tent. In this tent, there is no *bimah*. There is no parade of people to open the *Aron*. We have Torah scrolls, but there is no *aron* here. But what we really miss are the people--all of our Beth Israel Center family together, as a community. We have grown so accustomed to seeing each other's faces on this sacred day that we hardly realized how much one another's presence means to us. We never imagined suddenly being cut off from all the people who help us become who we are. We never imagined how much we would miss the ordinary people who remind us where we fit in.

How we miss the tangential people in our lives who, it turns out, are not as tangential to our sense of well being as we had thought. “How fiercely we love people we don't know we love.”

New data from Brandeis University give evidence of the Jewish isolation people are feeling regardless of how often, or by what platform, they are engaging in online religious programming such as Shabbat services. 85 percent of those who take full advantage of online Jewish connection find it meaningful enough that they want to continue it even after the pandemic. However--and here's the rub--they still say, overwhelmingly, that they feel less connected than before. Whatever experiences Jewish organizations like ours are providing, we simply are not capable of making up for the deficit of informal, in-person, casual interaction--simply sharing space with other people, smiling with visible mouths, saying “Shabbat shalom.”

In the Talmud (Taanit 9a), we find an interpretation of the commandment to give one tenth of one's earnings--called “tithing.” There, Rabbi Yochanan encounters the child of his close companion, Reish Lakish. Rabbi Yochanan asks the boy to tell him what he'd learned that day, and the boy recites the commandment: “*Aser ta'aser*,” meaning ‘A tithe you shall tithe.’” The boy then confesses that he does not know what the verse is trying to say, and Rabbi Yochanan gives a surprising answer: “Take a tithe from your earnings, so that you will become wealthy.” The boy, confused, asks, “How can it be that giving one tenth of our earnings increases our wealth? Instead of answering the question, Rabbi Yochanan tells the boy to go and test the theory. But the boy is afraid. “How can I do that? God commands us to tithe,” he says, and are we not prohibited

from testing God (Deut. 6:16)?" Rabbi Yochanan tells the boy that tithing is the one place where we are allowed to test God's *mitzvot*, and the narrator goes on to explain that when we give, God pours out blessing from the windows of heaven, far more than we need--"ad b'li dai." None of this seems to be meant literally. Rabbi Yochanan is a realist. He knows that when we give, we no longer have what we gave. The Talmud leaves it to us to deduce the homiletical point. I suggest that it comes to teach us that when we participate in society, the breadth of our encounters and our sense of having been part of the functioning of our community fill us with a sense of satisfaction, vitality, and purpose. For us, now, with our opportunities for encounter so diminished, it is easy to understand that we feel a loss of our own vital presence in the world. We long for the sense of identity and purpose we felt before the regular interactions to which we were accustomed were overturned.

And, how we miss friends and relatives we have gone far too long without hugging--at brides, weddings, bar mitzvahs, funerals, and shiva homes; without the people we love spending time with, unmasked, in close quarters, maybe sharing a dessert or laughing over a beer. I have not seen my parents since last October. My husband Scott and I visited our daughter Rena in Israel last January. Who knows when we'll be able to see them in person again? Without the usual outlets of visits with friends and family and the normal separations for school and work, even families that have everyone home are suffering from abnormal closeness, which brings its own frustrations.

The only way through this is through it, and I am so grateful that this community has chosen to go through it together. However lonely we may yet feel, knowing that our members are davening, visiting, calling, apple picking, boating, schmoozing, walking, learning, and planning together brings a steady drip of hope and solace at this dark time. Knowing that our membership renewals and new memberships far exceed national norms makes me proud to be part of such a vibrant, caring community, with people who are in it for the long haul because we share something precious.

In a few minutes we will recite *Yizkor*. It is an opportunity for all of us to focus our hearts on those relationships that were fierce with love and those relationships that left us wanting or hurt, all carried in memory now that those people are gone from us in this world. This will be our third *Yizkor* during the pandemic but only our first on *yom tov*. We are all grieving, even those of us who do not recite *Yizkor* for specific relatives. I'm glad that this time, we have the opportunity to invite the sanctity of this day to hold us in God's ever-flowing, loving embrace.

Our *Yizkor* box is here, with the *aliyah* cards of our beloved members whom we have buried since last *Yom Kippur*: Sam Onheiber, Herman Goldstein, and Lois Frank. We miss you. We are not the same since you are gone. We are grateful for how you loved us and how you helped make this synagogue a sacred home.

Let's remember something. We are still here, and this is very real. From home to home, we are doing this together. Just a few years ago, no one could have imagined that we could pull off *Yom Kippur* like we are doing. At a recent Ritual Committee meeting, anticipating this day, Leslie Greenspan adjured us rather fiercely to remember that we are all *here*, whether at home or in this tent. I hope that you all know that your presence is felt. It is because you are wherever you are, that we who are here are in this tent right now.

And that's what it's all about-- knowing that what connects us to one another really matters. Our tradition teaches that "love is as fierce as death." May we be blessed to feel in our hearts how fiercely we are linked to one another.