

The World as It Is
Shabbat HaGadol 5780

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I begin tonight with a confession: I don't do moderation. I talk too much. I eat too much. If a behavior must be avoided, I don't address that by seeking a middle path, but by complete abstinence. I don't drink alcohol or smoke cigarettes at all, ever. One exception: I'm an expert at moderation when it comes to exercise. I use the elliptical, thirty minutes a day, Monday through Friday, no more, no less.

That routine was disrupted when Governor Hutchinson rightly closed gyms to prevent the spread of Coronavirus. I switched to walking. The exercise isn't as vigorous as the elliptical, so I do it twice as long, an hour a day. Since I'm not walking in the rain, I go out every day that the weather allows.

I'm grateful not to have faced the devastation that confronts millions of Americans during this pandemic. To date, I have remained healthy. Work requires more creativity, and often more hours, than before the crisis, but I'm thankful for that, and for remaining fully compensated, which I don't take for granted. Yes, I'm living with countless inconveniences, like everybody, but I'm finding blessings in at least some of those: cooking at home, often with Robert. And I actually watched a series on Netflix, *The Crown*. *Unorthodox* is next.

But the walks are the best. I have always loved springtime, and there's the most magnificent quartet of large hydrangea trees, all fully in bloom, on O Street, along my route. Often, I find myself struggling to reconcile the visible natural world, so pointedly alive this time of year, with the invisible natural world, so toxic to our lives now.

The very best moment of any of these daily walks came earlier this week. I tell this story with permission: My walk takes me past several congregants' homes, but I hadn't run into any until the day that I was walking up the street where Jennifer and Steve Ronnel live with their family. Steve was outside with his father, Lee. As many of you know, Lee has dementia, and his activities have been most limited for some months now. He's moving slowly, using a walker. Nevertheless, Steve and Lee were walking to the end of the street to have a look at the magnificent tulips in bloom at the corner.

In this most difficult moment in America, and in Lee's own personal life and the life of his family, Steve and Lee together created a beautiful moment.

Judaism offers blessings for everything. One that may be unfamiliar is the blessing for seeing something particularly stunning in nature, be that a uniquely handsome person or a magnificent landscape. The words of that blessing, though, don't express that purpose as obviously as they might: *Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha-olam sh'kacha lo b'olamo*, "Blessed are You, Adonai our God, for this is how it is in the world."

While the blessing is intended to recognize beauty, its words suggest acceptance. We praise God for making the world as it is—with the bitter and the sweet, the devastating pandemic and the unwelcome opportunity for personal growth, the debilitating illness and the drive to continue appreciating life, the loss of life-sustaining employment and the personal reinvention that may emerge. The horrors of dementia and the beauty of the tulips.

Passover, which begins this Wednesday evening, asks us to do exactly that.

Matzah is known to most of us as "the bread of freedom." Yes, it's true: Torah tells us that our ancestors had no time to let the bread rise as they were escaping Egyptian bondage.ⁱ Paradoxically, though, matzah is also "the bread of affliction, the poor bread, which our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt."ⁱⁱ After all, slaves aren't given time for the luxury of giving their bread the time to rise.

When I ask people, "What does the matzah represent," the answer is almost always the same: I hear the story about leaving Egypt in haste. I almost never hear the quotation we read each year at Seder, "the poor bread." Perhaps that's because we wish to accentuate the positive. I wonder, though, if it's a reluctance to accept the world as it is, warts and all.

The Seder ritual is full of such symbols. We eat the bitter herb together with the sweet *charoset*, reminding us that one must taste the bitterness of bondage before finding sweetness in liberation. We behold a roasted egg, symbol of the Jerusalem Temple, burned to the ground with a fire so hot that even its stones walls exploded. That destroyed Temple may mean little to most of us, since we're not eager to reestablish animal sacrifices or to ignite a global conflagration by tearing down holy mosques to rebuild our own shrine. The Temple in ruins, though, is Judaism's symbol for the reality that we live in an imperfect, unredeemed world. The world as it is, as God created it, is filled with poverty and injustice—even slavery, with human beings trafficked like commodities for free labor or worse, for unwilling prostitution. And God knows, this unredeemed world today includes a devastating pandemic and the hardships of mass unemployment that accompany it.

Our Seder also invites us to open the door to Elijah—that is, to the prospect of redemption, of a better world to come. A custom that many of us have adopted

is not to fill Elijah's cup in advance, but to ask every participant at the Seder to fill that cup, symbolizing our collective responsibility to bring redemption. This year, we'll have to do that in much smaller groups or even virtually, but the symbolism remains powerful. We can make the world better, even in this difficult time.

Beginning next week, whether Governor Hutchinson has declared a shelter-in-place order or not, we will be live streaming services from homes, my home and a musician's home each week. Yes, we will miss the inspiration of bringing our Sanctuary into our homes. More importantly, though, we will better protect ourselves from the virus and model the most important step that everybody can take to stay well: Stay home.

Paradoxically, another step we're taking does require some of us to leave home. Thousands of Little Rock families are in need of emergency food assistance at this terrible time. Our City, in cooperation with the Clinton Foundation, has a project to deliver meals to sites throughout the city. Janet Korenblat has arranged for a vehicle from IK Electric to be available and has offered to lead our volunteer effort, which the city has arranged with every possible safeguard, including restricting volunteers to those 18-64 years of age. Please let Janet or me know if you are able to help, any weekday, 4-7pm.

I do not know why this world is as it is, with all its beauty and splendor, with all its cruelty and devastation. I do know that we must all do our part to enhance the service and caring, to soften the meanness and suffering. And even during these most difficult days and weeks that will stretch into months and perhaps even years, let us praise God for creating the world as it is.

Amen.ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Exodus 12:39.

ⁱⁱ The Passover Haggadah.

ⁱⁱⁱ Anthem: *Sh'kacha lo b'olamo*, by Alan Goodis.