

Enduring Disappointment

Shabbat Behar-Bechukotai 5780

May 15, 2020

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Earlier this week, I attended a *Brit Milah* in Southern California. No, I did not fly to L.A. Instead, I sat down on my sofa, logged into Zoom, and was immersed in joy. There, I witnessed a couple bringing their son into the Covenant of Abraham and Sarah. I had officiated at their wedding and at the dad's Bar Mitzvah and Confirmation; and I had co-officiated with the paternal grandfather—a neonatologist who is also a *mohel*, a ritual circumciser—at numerous such rituals. This *Bris* was personally meaningful to me. Still, were it not for our unwelcome predicament, I wouldn't have witnessed the ceremony. The couple is affiliated with a local congregation. Their own rabbi officiated—also via Zoom, not in their home, where only the *mohel* joined mom, dad, and baby. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and other relatives and friends were also on the Zoom. Most would have rather been present in person, but among them were some who could not have made the trip, even under “normal” circumstances.

Were the new parents disappointed not to have their own parents physically at their side? Were they sad that the rabbi could not place his hands on their baby's head to offer blessing? Yes, I suspect they were. And their rabbi doubtless felt the same, disappointed not to be in the hospital to welcome the newborn shortly after birth and in the home for the *Brit Milah*. Still, all made the best of challenging circumstances. Discordant as it sounded on the livestream, we all sang, *Siman tov umazal tov*, congratulating the newly growing family with unbridled joy.

This month, across the country, countless high school and college graduates are not celebrating as they had planned. They also lost out on the final months of their high school and college experiences, moments that cannot be recreated. Throughout this spring, long-planned *simchas*, joyous occasions, have been postponed: a beautiful wedding of a young woman who grew up in our congregation and the fiancé she met at Jacobs Camp; a Bat Mitzvah and a B'not Mitzvah, right here at Congregation B'nai Israel; milestone birthday parties, anniversary celebrations, and baby naming celebrations.

In recent weeks, young people who eagerly look forward to spending their summers at Jacobs and other camps have had to come to grips with the reality that camp isn't possible this summer. Parents, too, are disappointed—their kids are missing out on a valued experience, and scarce backup plans are available to keep kids engaged through the summer.

Just this week, parents of our own Confirmation class had to make a difficult decision. We have a fabulous class of seven students, and they are prepared. Their speeches are magnificent, and I can't wait for you to hear them. But we can't hold Confirmation as planned, in person, before our Holy Ark. Should we postpone Confirmation to a later date, with no guarantee of certainty that a large group could gather in person even in the fall? Or should we go ahead on the Eve of Shavuot, via Zoom, with this generation of the Children of Israel standing ready, albeit on screen, to receive the Torah, like their ancestors at Mount Sinai on that very day in ages past?

The parents chose May 28, however virtually. Are they disappointed? Are the confirmands? Am I? Yes, yes, and yes. I cherish the moments when I stand before the Holy Ark with each teen and their parents, sharing private words and blessing. One of the parents suggested that we set up private Zoom sessions with each of the confirmands and their parents in the hour before Confirmation, and we plan to do that. And we have a surprise or two in store for the confirmands.

In some ways, Confirmation will be better than it would have been in "normal" times. Distant family members who might not have traveled for the occasion will be able to participate. Perhaps we'll enjoy the best-attended Confirmation in years. These teens will always have a story to tell about their Confirmation; and it will be recorded for our Archives, a first for Confirmation at Congregation B'nai Israel.

Still, I don't delude myself: The missing human touch, especially Eileen's hug after the blessing. Not reading directly from the Torah scroll. Not processing down the aisle in their white robes. Even amidst the joy and uniqueness, there will be disappointment.

To be sure, none of these let-downs, from a rescheduled wedding to Confirmation via Zoom, compares to the symptoms of Covid-19. Losing one's job and financial security in the significant economic downturn brought on by the pandemic is not merely a disappointment. The sadness of missing out on camp or graduation, though, is no less real for not being tragic.

The second section of our double Torah portion this Shabbat is a lengthy list of blessings and curses, all viewed in biblical theology as gifts or punishments from God for observing religious obligations or failing to do so. We may well feel cursed at the moment, whether facing disappointment or tragedy. And even though most of us do not view this pandemic as divine retribution, we may learn meaningful lesson from this section of the Torah.

Rabbi Marla Spanjer, writing in *The Mussar Torah Commentary*, observes that misfortune is worsened or entirely created by our attitude toward our circumstances. She writes: “Some verses even state explicitly that a given curse refers exclusively to a state of mind. Examples include ‘You shall flee though none pursues’ⁱ and ‘As for those of you who survive, I will cast a faintness into their hearts...The sound of a driven leaf shall put them to flight. Fleeing as though from the sword, they shall fall though none pursues...’ⁱⁱ The impact of these curses is entirely [dependent] on attitude...Nothing physical has been taken, nor has any external situation changed; yet these are among the most painful and debilitating of curses described...’ⁱⁱⁱ

Rabbi Spanjer asks us to consider what we mean when we say *dayyeinu* at our Seder tables: “We say [‘It would have been enough’] about each one of the things God did for us as part of our redemption from Egypt, even though none of them alone would have been enough to make us a people free to live a life of Torah. Saying that each of those gifts was enough means that any of the miracles would have been enough for us to be grateful.”^{iv}

This year, Zoom Confirmation and virtual graduation will be the blessings we are able to celebrate. We would do well to acknowledge our disappointments, yes, and then to endure with content hearts. Even without some of the celebrations we had expected in this season, the blessings may be sufficient to make us grateful.

This morning, I wrote to Blair Grundfest, who was to have been married to Adam Orlansky tomorrow night, a wedding now postponed to November. She replied: “We plan on having a weekend full of self-care, yummy food, and virtual cocktail hours with friends and family. We can’t wait until the world is in a better place and we can celebrate with all of the people we love.” I quote her with permission, for which I’m grateful, because I cannot imagine a greater blessing on which to say:

Amen.

ⁱ Leviticus 26:17.

ⁱⁱ Leviticus 26:36-37.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rabbi Marla Joy Subeck Spanjer, DD, “*Histapkut—Simplicity: Recognizing Our Blessings*,” in Barry H. Block, Editor, *The Mussar Torah Commentary*, New York: CCAR Press, 2020, pp. 206-7.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 208.