

## Combating Pandemic Fatigue

### *Shabbat Vayishlach 5781*

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As Thanksgiving approached, Governor Hutchinson and leaders of our State Department of Health worried about what they called “pandemic fatigue.” Their specific concern was that Arkansans had tired of all that we must do to avoid becoming infected—not just wearing masks, but above all, refraining from gathering in person and in close proximity with family and friends outside our households.

The Governor was right to be concerned. Our hospitals are overburdened, with the record number of Arkansans hospitalized with Covid-19 broken almost daily. While beds may be available, particularly here in Little Rock, a nursing shortage which has long plagued Arkansas and the nation is now critical. Even where staffing is sufficient, our health care workers are burned out and badly stressed, a serious situation described in detail by health care workers in our congregation to me privately and to our Covid Response Task Force. The Governor’s fears seem to have been well placed: Yesterday’s crushing report of new infections seem to indicate that, tired of restricting themselves, too many Arkansans gathered indoors with family and friends on Thanksgiving.

I am not, however, the Governor of Arkansas, and I’m not speaking this evening to all the citizens of our State. Instead, I’m the Rabbi of Congregation B’nai Israel. I perceive that our members are **not** suffering from the kind of fatigue the Governor described. For Thanksgiving, our families gathered in small numbers, in their own homes. They dropped off food on porches of their relatives and friends. Or they donned warm clothes and executed carefully distanced outdoor celebrations. Our Religious School’s seventh and eighth grade class baked pies and delivered them to the doors of many of our older, more isolated congregants, similar to a *mitzvah* that Janet Korenblat and Caring & Sharing plan to fulfill with Chanukah dinners.

Still, many of us suffer from a different kind of pandemic fatigue, well described by my friend Lisa Goldstein, a Jewish educator and cantorial soloist, who wrote to her congregation this morning: “My friends, I’m sure you’ve noticed that I’ve been struggling a bit lately during services. Struggling musically, struggling sometimes even with the words. The longer the pandemic lingers, the harder I’m finding it to concentrate. And I suspect I’m not alone. Each of us is struggling in our own unique ways.”<sup>1</sup> Like Lisa, we at Congregation B’nai Israel

have not let our pandemic fatigue lead us to behave irresponsibly in ways that court infection; but like Lisa, we're fatigued and strained all the same.

We are tired of being cooped up at home, desperately in need of a change of scenery. We joke, but we're not really laughing, as we recall "ancient days" when we could sit down in a restaurant—or, more profoundly, give and receive a hug. Our congregation is thriving during this crisis, but only thanks to herculean efforts on the part of volunteers and donors, not to mention all of you who have given our online services and programs a chance and stuck with us every Shabbat and for Religious School. Still, we long to gather in the foyer before services, enjoying Trudy's welcome at the door, Rita's appetizers, and Meg's challah, along with conversations uninhibited by masks and social distancing. I miss Sunday mornings on the Children's Library stairs with our students and faculty. Our telephones and Zoom screens have become our lifelines to human contact, but who among us hasn't cursed or groaned as we've contemplated yet another hour on Zoom? We are behaving as carefully as the Governor asks, or more so, but we do suffer from "pandemic fatigue." Vaccines on the horizon give us hope that this pandemic **will** end; still, we know that, almost nine months in, we have many months to go—including Chanukah, Purim; and, for a second consecutive year, Passover.

Our Jewish history is a helpful precedent for an extended period of waiting for life to get better. Admittedly, most of us not have experienced pandemic losses comparable to centuries of persecution, exile, and genocide. Moreover, with the exception of the immigrants among us, few in our congregation have actually lived that difficult Jewish history. Still, we embrace that history as our own, and we recount it regularly. We know that, for nearly two millennia, our people did not live as they wished, or where they wished. While we yet await messianic redemption, the centuries of woe have blessedly come to an end for the overwhelming majority of our people—in Israel, in the United States and Canada, and in other corners of the free world. We may take comfort in recalling that the prayers of generations have largely been answered. Our prayers for an end to our current predicament will similarly be fulfilled, likely in 2021.

In this week's Torah portion, Jacob faces a moment in his life even more trying than our pandemic fatigue. He is returning home some two decades after deceiving his father Isaac into bestowing on him the blessing intended for his brother Esau, prompting Esau to threaten to kill him. Now, Jacob will see Esau again, and his brother is approaching with legions, some 400 men. Preparing for the next day, Jacob secures his family across the river—and then, he is left alone with his fears. Just then, Torah tells us, "a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn."<sup>ii</sup> Jacob is injured, but he prevails, ultimately receiving a blessing from the

“man”—more likely an angel, according to our sages—and he is renamed Israel, a name that the angel describes as denoting that “you have struggled with God and with human beings and have prevailed.”<sup>iii</sup>

Rabbi Michael Dolgin shares a medieval commentary by Rabbi David Kimchi: “They struggled until the dawn as a hint that light is coming after the darkness. Trouble is compared to night and darkness, therefore the angel came to him at night and wrestled with him until the dawn, as a hint that he will have spirit and rescue which is like light after the darkness.” Rabbi Dolgin explains: “R[abbi] Kimchi knew that we need signs that we can overcome the challenges we face; that in difficult situations, we must respond with strength, spirit, and faith: three elements that signify the Jewish people’s approach to life.”<sup>iv</sup>

And so, like Jacob and like generations of our people before us, we live through a difficult period now, sometimes as black as night. We struggle, and we prevail: We will not let our pandemic fatigue lead us to unacceptable risk to our own health or that of our family or community. Let us also have faith: Just as we celebrate—*am Yisrael chai!* the people of Israel lives!—a time will come when we shall proclaim: We have endured this pandemic and even our fatigue. We yet live. We have prevailed.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Lisa J. Goldstein, R.J.E., email message to Temple Chai, San Antonio, Texas, December 4, 2020.

<sup>ii</sup> Genesis 32:25.

<sup>iii</sup> Genesis 32:29.

<sup>iv</sup> Rabbi Michael Dolgin, “When Do We Know We’ve Completed the Struggle?” [When Do We Know We’ve Completed the Struggle? | Reform Judaism](#).