Good Evening, Good Yontif and Shabbat Shalom

To begin, I would like to take us back to a time just before the pandemic radically changed our lives. I don’t know about you, but I distinctly remember this past winter for a variety of reasons. News of the virus had already really begun to spread, pardon the pun, in February. I had just returned from the Bat Mitzvah of the daughter of colleagues and friends in Chicago, when we started to have conversations about our plans if the virus spread. Now keep in mind, at that point in time, qualitative and substantive information was in short supply. We knew the virus was a risk, but it was still mostly on the West Coast. There was little guidance from the state or the county, so went forward with the plans to hold our Purimspiel and Purim carnival as well. We were still determined to be open to some degree as we even held a modified in-person Bat Mitzvah and a funeral for a beloved past president, Carl Radin. These were some the last times we would gather together in person in our building.

On the lighter side, I even remember my last haircut, pre-pandemic on March 11th. I figured, good to get it cut, but not too short as I should be able to get another trim in a few weeks. I wouldn’t see a barber or stylist again for months. I started to look like and feel like Cousin ITT from the Addams Family.

The virus spread. More people became sick. And with the virus spreading like wildfire in NYC and in Rockland. Because of this, RTR and the world around us shut down.

All of this is part of the greater story so many of you are familiar with. But there is another story, my story, or really my family’s story, not everyone knows. As the pandemic spread, my father-in-law, Meir, came down with Covid-19. Now he is a man who exercises regularly, eats healthy and takes good care of himself. He is not a man who gets sick very often. But then he began to show symptoms like a serious cough and lethargy. He was not feeling well, but we were not too concerned. Then he started having difficulty breathing. Bear in mind, the medical community was making up treatments for the virus on the fly at that time. There were no standard ways of handling covid and everything was experimental. Then he was hospitalized, and Joy and I had the difficult conversation that if he was to be put on a ventilator, Joy would need to go to Atlanta. But we were hopeful that this would not be an issue.

We make plans, God laughs. On March 30th, we received word that my father-in-law had in fact, been intubated and sedated. Joy was on the next flight to Atlanta out of Westchester on the 31st which left at six in the morning. Neither of us slept the night before as Joy was busy packing and the fear was overwhelming. I don’t even really recall the drive to the airport as I was not fully awake until the drive back as we didn’t want to risk an uber because of Covid.

My father-in-law spent nearly seven weeks in the hospital, including a full week under sedation while on the ventilator. He lost something like thirty pounds on a frame that was not equipped to lose that much weight. Every day was filled with stress and worry and struggles with those taking care of him as the right hand often did not know what the left was doing. Thank goodness for Joy’s medical background as she was persistent and able to navigate so many pitfalls in modern medicine. A blessing so many others do not have. Joy was with her mother for nearly seven weeks in Atlanta.

While I remained in Rockland with three kids who were just about to start the adventure of virtual learning including our youngest in kindergarten, the wrong age for virtual learning. On top of all of this, I was also working with lay leadership, Cantor, Brad, and a staff team trying to figure out what it would mean for an all virtual congregation, something they don’t teach you in rabbinic school.

Now comes the point of confession. It was too much. I started to engage in, what I referred to as, bare minimum rabbi’ing. The stress of keeping food in the house with empty grocery stores, keeping my kids engaged at school, keeping everyone safe, healthy, clean and fed, while in loneliness and isolation was more than I could handle emotionally and spiritually. Yet, I also recognize my blessings. I have a job. I had income, and my spouse, my partner, was just a facetime, text or phone call away. I can’t even imagine those who struggled and persevered without these means of support. I am in awe of each and every one of them.

Thankfully, my father-in-law did recover and he was eventually discharged. Joy returned home, and we began our modified lives anew. Though the story they rarely talk about is how devastating the virus is to many who survive it. The effects linger for months. It is not just about the mortality numbers. It is also about those who will need continued care even after they are discharged.

But back to my story. To some degree, I am still recovering from the trauma of just trying to keep it all together for those nearly seven weeks. But I am also grateful. I am grateful to my clergy partner in Cantor Neff, who was struggling with many of the same challenges, who stepped in and took over so many of the responsibilities when I simply could not. I am grateful to the RTR team who asked, what can we do to help. And I am grateful to our lay leadership for their understanding and support.

I am also grateful to so many of you who reached out during this time with a kind word or an offer of help. I won’t mention anyone’s names, lest I leave anyone out or embarrass anyone, but thank you to those of you who dropped off food, especially given our challenging allergy situation in our house. To those of you who dropped off groceries and PPEs. Your words and demonstrations of support, helped us get through one of the most challenging times in our life in recent memory.

Why do I mention all of this? I mention it because my story is one of a myriad of stories of kindness and support, of love and generosity. This is what it means to be a part of a congregation, of a community, of a family.

This is why we continue to call and reach out, even if we cannot stop by in person. This is why we continue to offer assistance in whatever way we can. This is why we send notes of love and concern. For being a part of a congregation is more than just about observing Jewish tradition and heritage, it is also about being connected.

To borrow from the famous American writer Thomas Paine, “there are the times that try peoples’ souls.” These are also the times that are challenging what it means to be a congregation. Already beset by the great recession of the early 2000s, the demographic changes in the county, and now this pandemic, the world is changing. And we do not know what the future of RTR will look like, if we are being honest.

We are in a transformative moment. As Zach Bodner wrote for the Forward[[1]](#footnote-1) in an article entitled: “It’s time to update our operating system” – “We are experiencing what Rabbi Benay Lappe calls a “sociological crash” – which is when someone’s worldview is challenged by new realities. When this happens, people can react in one of three ways: They can build walls and push away the new views, they can drop the old and embrace the new, or they can innovate to combine the two.

This brings us to Jewish Peoplehood 4.0.

In order for our operating system to stay meaningful and relevant, it must evolve. But what and who defines Jewish Peoplehood 4.0?

The actualization of this next era involves thinking deeply about our relationship to Jewish rituals and Halakha, to Zionism and to peoplehood. It will demand that we find ways to engage other types of Jews and non-Jews as well. It will require us to weave the old and the new, the Israeli and the American, the secular and the religious, the big institution and the small start-up.

For us to architect the Jewish future, we need to embrace the Jewish past, while listening to those in the present who are voting with their feet. Jewish peoplehood has always embraced changes that allowed it to survive—and thrive—through transformational moments in our history.”

And this is where we need your help. One day, hopefully speedily and soon, this pandemic will pass either because of more effective treatments or because of a safe and effective vaccine. Life will slowly return to what many are calling a ‘new normal’ but what I prefer to call a ‘different normal.’ What the world will look like is still being shaped.

Already people are engaging in new and different ways and not just because of the virtual nature of engagement, but also because of the variety and opportunities of engagement. For those who want to be a part of a congregation, they now have the option of not only choosing one across town, but one across the country or across the world. We now have people joining us regularly for worship while living in places like California, Montana, Israel, Texas, and Maryland. Now admittedly, most of them are either my family or Cantor’s family, but how cool is that?!

The essence of virtual means more accessibility for many in new ways, but it also is limiting for some as well. Without WiFi or devices, it makes it all the more difficult for some to connect, which we at RTR are very much aware of, but also struggling with how to counteract.

But it also means that for those who view in-person as the only authentic way to feel connected, it provides an opportunity to disengage. And lest we forget our poor students who are so zoomed out through school, how much more time do they really want to spend on a screen that doesn’t involve Minecraft?

There are no easy answers. The truth is, Judaism, Jews and Jewish communities have always been surprisingly resilient and innovative, especially in challenging times. I’ll be speaking more about this tomorrow, or truth be told, as the sermon was already recorded, I already spoke about this tomorrow. Only in times like these would such a phrase make sense.

But resilience and innovation are the foundations for what we are going to have to do. We made the pivot out of necessity and opportunity to become a new congregation out of two legacy communities. And we pivoted once again because of the limitations and challenges wrought by a worldwide pandemic.

And I am sure, we will have to pivot once again after this pandemic ends into some version of Judaism 4.0. But the key to this is all of you. We need you to continue to be engaged. We need you to continue to lean in. We need you to continue to support our journey as a congregation, just as we continue to support each other emotionally, spiritually, and in some cases, economically.

I know that I would not have made it through the months of April and May without the support of the RTR community. Those trying months have changed how I view myself and how I view my rabbinate. And I know so many of you have similar tales of challenge, some of which will be shared as part of testimonies at the end of each of our streamed services. So please keep an eye out for them.

We are here tonight as a congregation and as a larger extended family to offer up our prayers and bear our souls not just because that is what tradition demands of us, but also because we have hope, even if these transformational times are scary and overwhelming.

As my colleague and friend Rabbi Amanda Greene[[2]](#footnote-2) spoke about several High Holy days ago, “Our American society has taught us about hope in sappy movies and cheesy hallmark cards. Hope becomes a sort of cheerfulness, a confidence that things will turn out for the best, that they will at least get better.   We are surrounded with this kind of hope from our earliest age.  Every story we read ends “and they all lived happily ever after.”  Every movie we watch ties up all conflict with a pretty bow — Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, even the Ugly Duckling.  We hear the language of hope all the time, “I hope my train is on time,” “I hope to get a promotion, “I hope to find comfort.” If I hope for something, it will come true.

Jewish hope is different.  Our hope, Jewish hope is much more difficult than hallmark hope. It is not a hope that guarantees happy endings.  It is not a hope that makes everything better.  Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught: “Hope is a conviction, rooted in trust…an ability to soar above the darkness that overshadows the divine.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Our job then is to defy the darkness.  When the moon is fully covered, as it is on this very evening, and when we can see no light, we continue to hope.  This is no Walt Disney dreamland. It is not even a naive illusion. Jewish hope means that even when things are grim and even when it feels as though tomorrow will be worse than today, we continue to hang on.”

Let us continue to hang on together as we work to reimagine what our future will look like. Let us continue to hope, to pray, and to dream, even as we continue to live in the fear of this pandemic. Let us continue to be there for each other for the only way we will come out on the other side, is because of the connections and support that we are lucky to both receive and provide.

We may not know what the future will bring. But we do know that today is filled with love, encouragement, engagement, connection and meaning even with all that is going on in the world. And perhaps, for tonight at least, that is enough.

Tomorrow we will have more work to do, but today, I, for one, am grateful, to be in such a kind, supportive and loving community with all of you. L’shana Tova and Shabbat Shalom

1. https://forward.com/scribe/454130/jewish-peoplehood-40-its-time-to-update-our-operating-system/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.chicagosinai.org/worship/sermons/the-real-kind-of-hope#\_ftn2 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Heschel,*Israel and Echo of Eternity*, 94 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)