

A note from Rabbi Seth as we enter Shabbat

April 17, 2020

Dear ones,

I hope that you all had really lovely Passover holidays. It's been really sweet for me over the past week to get little updates from many of you about your holiday: hearing how your Zoom Seder with your family went, hearing how you're still eating the abundance of matza brei that you made, and how you got 3 inches of snow in mid-April (ok, that one was me...). For a lot of us, we entered Passover with a sense of confusion and anticipatory loss: we knew that the holiday would not be how we wanted it or expected it to be. But in the end, I think many of us found some hidden blessings in the increased intimacy with our loved ones with whom we got to do Seder with, or whatever rituals or foods we ate that marked Passover's integration into our lives. All this as we began to figure out how online learning would look as we entered the second half of the semester.

Over the last week, I've been especially struck by the shift that has taken place with school work. As Maud wrote in her email a couple of weeks ago, if you are with your family, only now might they be understanding how much work you actually do at school. And you are probably finding yourself spending much more time inside than you are used to. I've also been hearing that workloads actually feel like they have gotten more intense. And in response, perhaps you've been bingeing shows on Netflix or finding other digital ways to connect, so you're spending lots of time in front of a screen. And perhaps you're feeling intense loss: because you can no longer see your friends in person, because you no longer have the freedom to move around as you want, perhaps because you have lost someone dear to you because of covid. Or maybe you're just feeling bored. You might be feeling, understandably, more overloaded with more conflicting emotions than you might have imagined.

In this week's Torah reading, Parshat Shemini, there is a strange and honestly incomprehensible passage. Nadav and Avihu, the two sons of Aaron the high priest, run into the Tabernacle (the place in the Israelite camp where sacrifices were made and where God would hang out with the Israelites). They carry a "strange fire," and they are consumed by fire that shoots out from the altar, dying immediately. Commentators over the centuries have tried to explain why they die, saying they were drunk, that they were spiritually unprepared, and many, many other things. Even in the Torah text, Moses tries to explain what happened to his brother, Aaron. But none of the words help. In response to Moses' words, the Torah says, "And Aaron was silent." It's perhaps the loudest silence that appears in the Bible, reflecting Aaron's grief and loss.

At a time when we're surrounded by expert voices online, on tv, and on the radio, telling us exactly what we should do in the current crisis, I feel so aware of how much noise there is. How many voices are trying to explain things to us. And so I wonder if perhaps what we need now is just a little silence. Perhaps the silence of Aaron, who kept quiet in

the face of his loss. But perhaps the silence that the ancient rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel had in mind when he said. "All my days I have grown up among the wise, and I have found nothing better for my body than silence" (Pirkei Avot 1:17). A silence that allows us to find some rest, to quiet our minds, to just be for a little while.

So as we enter Shabbat this weekend, I want to invite all of us into a little quiet. If we're able, to turn off our phones, computers, tv's, and radios just for a little bit. To create space in our hearts and minds to connect with inner stillness.

We are all affected by the covid pandemic in different ways, but some of us have lost people with whom we are very close. Next week the chaplains will be hosting an online grief support group. A daily message will go out next week, but if you would like more information or just want to talk, please do reach out to me.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Seth