

Friends throughout the world,

This is an extraordinary moment for the world, when a virus is sweeping across humanity, bringing it to its knees in a way that the world hasn't known to quite this extent for 100 years. And who knows whether this new technology of allowing us to be close mentally, yet physically distant, was not created for just such a moment as this? The Jewish way when facing difficulty [Chosh b'roso ya'aso Torah]. "If you have a headache, study Torah." The world today has a headache, so let's study Torah together.

For the next few minutes, let's just drift into an altogether different world, the world of Hashem's word, and let's study this week's parsha together. Let me begin this way: It is said that the Alter Rebbe, (the first Rebbe of Lubavitch, Rebbe Shneur Zalman of Liadi) once said to his disciples, "One must live with the times." The disciples were puzzled as to precisely what he meant, because surely that's exactly what Judaism isn't supposed to be. Judaism is timeless. It doesn't change from generation to generation or from year to year. So what on earth did the Rebbe mean when he said one must live with the times? Well, eventually they turned to the Rebbe's brother, Rabbi Yehudah Leib who explained, "You know what the Rebbe meant when he said one must live with the times? He meant one must live with *parshat hashavua*, with the weekly parsha." Somehow or other, that must be the time zone in which you live.

In other words, we have to live in the intersection between the timely and the time-less, between what is happening now and what God said to us over 3,000 years ago. Somehow there will be an answer to our question now in the word of God then. But how on earth can that be true this year, this week, as the Coronavirus sweeps the world, bringing humanity to its current position? We read the double parsha of Vayakhel and Pekudei, which is about building the Mishkan, the first house of God, the precursor of the Temple and the synagogue.

Yet through Britain and many other parts of the world on this Shabbat, synagogues will be closed. This is something unprecedented. Even during the height of the Second World War, synagogues remained open. Our world has always included our communal gatherings, in our synagogues across the world.

The word *vayakhel* itself comes from the same root as *kehillah*, meaning community. And yet, just when we most want and need community, we are being deprived of it by social distancing, by self-isolation, by quarantine. And it feels not so much like the parshiyot of Vayakhel-Pekudei as the parshiyot of Tazria-Metzora, where we read, *badad yeishev mi'chut lamachaneh moshavo*, "He shall dwell alone in self-imposed isolation outside the camp." (Vayikra 13:46) In New York, in London, in cities where we are normally a thriving community, today we feel almost like the beginning of Megillat Eichah, which we read on erev Tisha B'Av. *Eichah yashva vadad ha'ir rabai am* "The city that was once so thronged with people, today seems alone." (Eichah 1:1)

So what on earth is the relevant message in our parsha, when the parsha is about shul and community, on an extraordinary week when shuls are closed and communities have been disbanded? The answer I think is extraordinary. It is as if this parsha were written specifically for us here, now. Let me explain.

If you have a look at the beginning of the parsha of Vayakhel, you will see that Moshe Rabbeinu assembled the people to instruct them to build the Mishkan, the Sanctuary, the Tabernacle. But before he goes on to the details of how to do that, he tells us something else. He gives them a command to keep Shabbat.

Now, why would Moshe Rabbeinu need to tell the Israelites to keep Shabbat at this point? He had already explained Shabbat to them at Mara, when the miraculous *manna* first came and he gave them laws not to collect *manna* on Shabbat, but instead to collect a double portion in advance. They learned about Shabbat a second time as it is the 4th of the 10 commandments, given by God Himself to the people at Mount Sinai.

Then they were told a third time in last week's parsha of Ki-Tissa, which contained the command of Shabbat. They've learned this three times. They know about Shabbat. So why is Moshe Rabbeinu telling them this week, in Parshat Vayakhel, before talking about building the Mishkan, why now does he repeat the commandment of keeping Shabbat?

Well, the conventional explanation, and it is of course authoritative. Rashi, for instance, brings it, is that this passage shows us that Shabbat takes priority over the building of the Mishkan. And this is fundamentally true. All creative activities which were needed to build and maintain the Mishkan were forbidden on Shabbat.

But this year, specifically this year, we can see that the passage has another meaning all together. And this is what the meaning is:

Through Moshe, these two instructions from Hashem had a clear message for us. Hashem was saying, "I am going to give the Jewish people two sanctuaries, not one. The first is the Mishkan, a sanctuary in space, in place, and the second is Shabbat, a sanctuary in time." Why do we need both? Because we have a principle in Judaism. Before God ever brings a sickness to the world, [*Hikdim Hakadosh Baruch Hu lerefua lemakah*] He brings the cure.

God knew that the day would come when Jews might suffer exile and dispersion. They would be scattered to the winds, to the ends of the earth. They would no longer be able to come together. In a Mishkan or a Mikdash, in a Temple in Jerusalem, they would no longer have Jerusalem, that would no longer have a land, that would no longer have a home. And says, God, "Even so, however dispersed you are, you will still have a sanctuary. But it'll be a different sanctuary. It will exist not in space, but in time. The sanctuary is called Shabbat.

"It will happen not because you are together physically in one place, but spiritually you'll be together at the same time." And so it happened, uniquely Jews. No other people has ever experienced anything like this, were dispersed around the world and yet they saw themselves and were seen by others as one people. They're the world's first global people, 2000 years before the word 'globalisation' had even been coined.

How did it happen? After all they had none of the attributes of the people. They weren't living in the same place. They weren't living under the same conditions. They weren't living within the same culture. What connected Rashi in Christian France with the Rambam in the Muslim city of Fosta just outside Cairo? Well, connected the Jews of Spain with the Jews of Russia. I mean these are different cultures, languages, circumstances, fate. What brought them together? What forged them as one people?

The answer is they said the same prayers, at the same time, all facing towards the same spot, Jerusalem. They observed the same festivals, kept the same laws, honoured the same days. They were a community in time, not in space. And that was why God gave them Shabbat, the sanctuary in time, even before He gave them the Mishkan, the sanctuary in space.

Now this is a broad and abstract idea, but does it have halachic implications? The answer is, it does. And specifically for this Shabbat for all of you who are not able to go to shul this Shabbat. Here is the sugiya in Brachot, (daf 7b-8a)

It goes like this.

א"ל רבי יצחק לרב נחמן מ"ט לא אתי מר לבי כנישתא לצלויי אמר ליה לא יכילנא א"ל לכנפי למר עשרה וליצלי אמר ליה 'טריחא לי מלתא ולימא ליה מר לשלוחא דצבורא בעידנא דמצלי צבורא ליתי ולודעיה למר א"ל מאי כולי האי א"ל דאמר ר' יוחנן משום ר"ש בן יוחי מאי דכתיב ואני תפלתי לך ה' עת רצון אימתי עת רצון בשעה שהצבור מתפללין

[*Amar le Rabbi Yitzchak l'Rav Nachman*]

Rabbi Yitzchak said to Rabbi Nachman, "Why don't you come to shul to daven?" Rabbi Nachman explained, "It's hard, I'm unwell, I can't do it..." et cetera, et cetera. Rabbi Yitzchak says to him, Do me a favour. If you can't come to shul, speak to the chazzan, shaliach tzibbur, let him come and tell you exactly what time the community is going to be davening. He was advising that if Rebbe Nachman needed to daven alone at home, he should still be davening at the same time as the community.

Rebbe Nachman said to Rabbi Yitzchak, "What are you talking about? Why should it make a difference what time I daven?" Rabbi Yitzchak gave him the quote that Rabbi Yochanan said, in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai: What did David Hamelech mean when he said in Psalm 19, *Ve'ani tefillati lecha Hashem et ratzon* "Let my prayer to you God be at a time of favour"? Said Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. What exactly is 'a time of favour'? Answered Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. *B'sha'a shehatzibbur mitpallelim*, "The time when the community are davening." In other words, even if you're at home, even if you are not able, like Rabbi Nachman was unable, to get to shul, please try to daven at the same time as the community because there is a concept of *community in time*, as well as a *community in place*.

And Rav Soloveitchik z'l explains the Gemara, saying that there is virtue in an individual making the effort to pray when the community is praying. *Ve'afilu im mitpalel b'beito*, Even if he's davening at home, because if he davens at the time that the community is davening, his prayer is joined to that of the community, and it is counted as if he were praying in a community. I won't go now into the detail of his nuance there, but he quotes that Gemara and the view of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, that the time of favour is the time when the community prays.

David Hamelech only says, *et ratzon*, 'a time of favour'. He doesn't talk at all about a community praying. But it seems to me that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai is basing his interpretation on the principle set out at the beginning of Vayakhel that there can be a *community in time* as well as in place. And therefore, if for some terrible reason we are not able to go to Shul this Shabbat, then by praying at the time that the community prays, our prayer is joined to theirs and we become *k'ish echad b'lev echad*, all of us together, like one person with one heart.

Now, heaven knows that this is not ideal. This is *bedieved*, not *lehatchilah*, this is something you only do if you have no alternative. But let me repeat. *Hikdim Hakadosh Baruch Hu lerefua lemakah*, God gives us the cure before the disease. He gives us the consolation before the crisis. And it is *davkah* here in the parsha of Vayakhel that Hashem already provides the answer before we even had the question. The question that we have this year specifically: how do we pray as a community when because of disease, because of contagion, because of risk of life, we can't actually pray as a community? And the answer is that Vayakhel teaches us that there is such a thing as a community in time, even if we can't gather it together in a place. And the way to do it is to daven when others are praying, and our voices will combine as they wing their way to heaven.

That is the Dvar Torah I wanted to share with you, which is something we could only get through this intersection of the timely and the time-less, that specifics of this year and the eternity of parshat Vayakhel-Pekudei, exactly as the Alter Rebbe said, "Bring those both into alignment and there will be some new revelation."

Now, secondly, very simply, how do we cope with this? What kind of *Shabbos* are we going to make? The short answer is the best question you can ask when bad things happen: what does this make possible that I couldn't have done before or that I wouldn't have done before? So what becomes possible if we are forced to stay at home this Shabbat that we might not have done otherwise? Let me suggest five things:

Number one, if you're at home with children, spend more time with them, learning the parsha together, learning anything together, but especially sharing thoughts about the parsha. And if you need a resource to do so, please, look at the family edition of *Covenant & Conversation*, which we created specifically for that.

Number two, we always tend towards rushing our prayers in shul. But this week, please remember, we don't have to rush our prayers. We can take our time. Take any single prayer. And just really, really study it. Let it sink into your mind, savour it, feel the rhythms, the vividness you feel. I think the ones we tend to rush through are the most beautiful of all, namely the great prayers and psalms of *Pesukei dezimra*. And if you really, really want a Psalm written for this particular moment in the history of the world, just look at the piece that stands as a prelude to *Pesukei dezimra*, it begins with *Mizmor shiur chanukat habayit leDavid*, Psalm 30, where David Hamelech is exposed to illness and feels his health is at great risk and he prays to Hashem and Hashem answers him. It's a very powerful piece of poetry. And I urge you to read that or read any of the Psalms. Take your time to daven slowly because you really have that time this particular Shabbat.

Number three, if you want any specific prayers to give you strength through depression, through illness, through crisis, through heaven knows what, the single greatest resource in the entire world literature of prayer is Sefer Tehillim, the Book of Psalms. And I do recommend you sometime during this period when we do have to undergo isolation, sit and read Psalms, find the psalms that speak to you because there are many different types of psalms. But you will discover that David Hamelech is able from the depths of his soul, [*mima'amkim*], to somehow cry to Hashem and feel Hashem stretching out a hand to him and lifting him out from the pit.

This is powerful poetry. I personally have found the book of Psalms a form of *refua*, a form of healing in its own right and there are many, many, many others who have done the same.

Number four. If you're just on your own, look at your bookshelves and read one of the commentaries to the chumash that you haven't read before. Again, often we find ourselves under too much pressure of time. Take any, whatever is the chumash on your shelf and just learn the commentaries this week. And you will find that it will give you depth that you didn't have before.

And finally my fifth request. This is not just an advice, it's my request. Find somebody you know, a neighbour, a member of your community who may be very, very isolated or alone. And before Shabbat just phone them up and say 'Shabbat Shalom'. You never know what it can do for somebody to feel that you are thinking about them.

So those are the five things. And if you ever need any further educational resources, we've got lots of them on our website, lots of them on the internet altogether. But if you want the ones on our website, key in rabbisacks.org/education, and I hope you'll find something of interest to you. So those are five things you might do.

And finally, what might we learn as Jews, as individuals, as a people, as a humanity from this experience of a kind that only happens at most once in a hundred years?

I think we should learn the following things, three things. Number one, the 'we' of global solidarity, which is my translation for *brit bnei noach*, the Noachide covenant that God made with all of us. I don't know any moment in my lifetime when the whole world faced the same problem at the same time. At the outset we were thinking, "There it is, happening to someone else somewhere else. It's happening over there, half a world away in China." But within weeks it had covered the whole globe and here we are, all suffering and we're all worrying. This is telling us that we are connected to one another. We have these gossamer strands of empathy and sympathy and responsibility. And I hope when all this is over, we will feel more strongly that we are a single human family.

Number two, I hope we will learn the 'we' of humility. We have thought of ourselves as affluent, free, and technologically advanced beyond the dreams of any previous generations. We suffered from hubris. And what has happened? A tiny microscopic organism, a virus has brought all of humanity to its knees. A Midrash says, "Why was man created last of all the acts of creation? Well, to teach us if he is worthy, if we are worthy, all of creation was made for us. But if we are unworthy, we will be told, even a gnat," (or if I can put it another way, even a virus) "preceded us in the order of creation."

I think we should have a new sense of humility in the face of nature. I think we should recognise our vulnerability as we hadn't before. And I hope and pray that this will lead us and the nations of the world to take climate change more seriously and to limit all the activities that are doing so much damage to the world now and in the future. So the 'we' of solidarity, the 'we' of humility.

And finally, the 'we' of facing a crisis together. The Torah tells us in Parshat Masei that somebody who killed somebody accidentally and is found guilty of manslaughter, is shielded

in one of the cities of refuge. And that person has to stay there until the death of the High Priest, the Kohen Gadol. There's an obvious question. What on earth has the death of the High Priest got to do with anything? The Gemara in Makot has various answers, but the Rambam gives a completely different answer in Book Three, chapter 40 of *The Guide for the Perplexed* and he says very simply this. When the High Priest who was a major public figure dies, everyone is in a state of grief. And when these collective grief individual animosities get forgotten so that nobody, not even the members of the family of the victim, are going to try and kill the manslaughter because we are all facing a bigger, collective grief.

I suppose the Rambam is saying in his philosophical terminology roughly what Chazal meant when they said *tzarat rabim chatzi nechama*. If many people are suffering, that is half of a consolation. When we are all suffering the same fears, the same exclusion, the same social distancing, every other little animosity becomes minor and trivial in comparison, and all the rifts and differences between us suddenly seem to be the trifling things they are.

And I hope we will come through this whole experience realising that there are bigger things than the things that have divided us so badly in recent years, whether individually or collectively. The Rambam is telling us collective grief, collective danger, banishes some of the negative individual emotions that we are prone to at easier and safer times.

All of this is tied up in four words that define our experience on Pesach at the Seder table. The Mishna asks itself, asks us, a very simple question. How do you tell the story of the going out of Egypt? And it answers in four words:

"Matchil beganut umesayim beshevach". You begin with the bad news, but you end with the good news. And that is for me the clear definition of what it is to tell a story the Jewish way. We don't deny the bad news, we don't ignore it, but we say that's only the beginning and the end is going to be an ending of hope.

Yes, we begin with the bread of affliction and bitter herbs of slavery. But as we go on, we drink the four cups of wine each, a further stage on the road to redemption, and we end with a glorious song, Chad Gadya whose last first verse is one of the most moving I know. All the more moving because it is a young children's song. *Ve-ata Ha-Kadosh Baruch Hu ve-shachat le-mal'ach ha-mavet* "God will come and end the Angel of Death." May that be true for us. Bimheira b'yameinu.

Shabbat Shalom.