

As the old joke goes, before I begin speaking, I'd like to say a few words. After being immersed in The Pandemic for 18 months, the last thing that I want to hear about on Yom Kippur is The Pandemic. I hope, though, that you'll forgive me and stay with me as I am about to talk about The Pandemic without really talking about The Pandemic.

Here's the key question: When danger threatens, how does our tradition respond? We have a number of stories and parables of running away or escaping danger by withdrawing from society, by going into a kind of isolation. But the stories vary widely when it comes to emerging from isolation and rejoining society.

Noah brought his family into an ark to escape a world-wide catastrophic flood. He emerged from the ark to find a world stripped of people and animals. Rather than work to rebuild the world, he promptly drank himself into a stupor and went back into his tent.

Jonah hid himself in the hold of a ship to escape God's command, emerged to chaos and had himself tossed overboard where he went into the belly of a fish, from which he emerged a seemingly changed person who obeyed God's directive. However, in the end he would still rather die than admit God was right.

In our Yom Kippur story, the Kohen Gadol went into the Holy of Holies to plead and confess on behalf of the people. Presumably, they were in danger of a negative assessment. The atonement ritual called for isolation in the most holy place – a powerful place, but a dangerous place. He emerged from the Holy of Holies unscathed, rejoicing that his entrance into the virtual cave had transformed and saved the people.

And in perhaps the most complicated story, Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai and his son Rabbi Elazar hid from the Romans, who wanted to put them to death for teaching Torah against the government. They lived in a cave studying Torah, and God supplied them with water and the fruit of a carob tree. For years, they immersed themselves in the unchanging, eternal Torah. After twelve years, the legend goes, Elijah informed them that the Emperor was dead and his decree abrogated. They emerged from the cave and saw people plowing and sowing and engaged in commerce. Bar Yohai said: "These people have abandoned Torah study for temporal life!" They were incensed that the people were going on with their lives as if the cave didn't exist.

In their intense, uncontrollable anger, their eyes were transformed into laser beams that burned up everything they looked at. Sown fields - blasted! Marketplace - destroyed! Crops ready for harvest - zap! Young people sitting and eating together - bang! The trauma of their 12 years of isolation became a pathologically destructive impulse. God said: "Stop destroying my world! Go back into your cave!" A year later, they re-emerged. Rabbi Elazar's anger continued to strike out at the world, but his father, Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, would repair each place his son struck. Nevertheless, Rabbi Shimon, like his son, was unhappy with this world, thinking that he and his son were the only two people of any worth, until they saw someone hurrying home to observe Shabbat. At that point they realized that the Jews had not abandoned Torah and Mitzvot, and their minds were settled. (Talmud Shabbat 33b).

Rabbi Shimon and his son enjoy the shelter, the comfort, and the spiritual focus of the cave. It turns out that the cave isn't a bad place to spend some time, for them, and maybe even for us. All the entertainment we might want shows up on screens all over the house, we can see friends and family on our screen and turn them off when they get annoying, we have a health club in the basement, we have regular deliveries of anything we want to eat, we can shop to our heart's

content and it shows up on the doorstep a few days or a week later. We don't have to contend with difficult coworkers who hum off-key while they work or listen to horrible music or wacky talk radio or bathe in perfume. We don't have to deal with traffic or wear office-appropriate clothing, at least not below the waist. For the record, I always wore nice pants, or at least pants, to meetings and minyan.

Emerging from the cave, we, like Rabbi Shimon and his son Rabbi Elazar, meet people with a totally different values set. They are unvaccinated and won't wear a mask, and they frighten us. If we had Bar Yohai vision, we'd cut them down with the fire shooting from our eyes to protect ourselves from their pollution. Being in a loud, crowded, place, even for an extrovert, might be uncomfortable; for an introvert, it's downright terrifying. We emerge, tentatively, and then run back inside. We decide that it's better to stay extra safe. Why take chances?

Meanwhile, a different set of people stuck in the cave chafe at the loss of personal freedom, something guaranteed by our constitution. They emerge from the cave and immediately are attacked for enjoying the freedoms that their parents and grandparents fought and died for. They see a vaccination requirement as an attack on their autonomy over controlling their bodies, much the way pro-choice woman see abortion restrictions as an attack on their right to control their bodies. So they emerge with their heat vision on full, threatening those who infringed on their liberties.

And in the crack between these two groups are the synagogues and temples and churches and mosques, trying to appeal to people based on a shared sense of God's words and a common religious practice. We try to invite both groups back, but one group won't wear a mask and the other group won't come in unless everyone is masked. We debate vaccination requirements and try to figure out how to make enough people comfortable so that we have a minyan.

I would like to be able to say that we learned the lesson that Rabbi Ya'akov Yosef of Polonne, the senior disciple of the Ba'al Shem Tov, derives from the Bar Yohai story. He writes that initially, Torah, prayer, fasting, and weeping were the only forms of Avodah, divine service, that the father/son duo recognized. Their intolerance and inability to see value in other religious practices and the fury they spewed out ratcheted up the level of anger in the world, so God sent them back to the cave until they could reemerge with greater compassion. (Toldot Yaakov Yosef, Vayetze #5 and Chayye Sarah #2)

Would that the COVID time had infused all of us with greater compassion. Instead, it created self proclaimed "Maskholes," those who proudly take it upon themselves to harass non-mask wearers and shame them into covering up. Or the other group, who don't have a cool sounding name, who harass those who are wearing masks. This is not compassion. I could stand here and preach about compassion and kindness for those who do not share your commitment to either science or the constitution, but it would be wasted breathe. So how about a more modest lesson.

Elie Wiesel said, "I've learned that suffering confers no privileges. It all depends what we do with it." So what do we learn from and do with our time suffering with the isolation and restrictions of the COVID era?

I offer a lesson from the first two lines of Ashrei that my friend and colleague Rabbi Nancy Flam derived from a lesson of Rabbi Ya'akov Yosef of Pollone - *Ashrei Yoshvei Beitekha*, happy are those who sit in your homes ... אשרי העם שככה לו. Happy are those who respond *kakha*, "so be

it,” who accept what comes. The people who are content are the ones who accept what is and don't wish it were otherwise.

It's a kind of Dayeinu lesson, in which we accept contentment from what we have, even if we don't get everything we want. It's a lesson of *lo alekha ham'lakha ligmor*, that you are not responsible for making everything perfect, as long as you do your part. It's a lesson of *hishtavut*, equanimity – balance and acceptance.

We will be most content if we learn to accept things the way they are. אשרי העם שככה לו, a Jewish spin on Reynhold Neibuhr's serenity prayer. Some things, we cannot change. We need never accept evil or abject senselessness, but we might recognize that we cannot singlehandedly change people's opinions or behavior regarding COVID. We might promote and model proper COVID behavior, but we cannot bridge the divide between the vaccinated and the anti-vaxxers.

So my lesson is simply to offer you this line from Ashrei as a way to find a point of acceptance. You simply decide, I don't like what you're doing. We have a different outlook on life. I may not want to socialize with you, but I am not going to tie my emotional life in knots worrying about the choices you are making.

My offering for you is to use the concept of אשרי העם שככה לו, “so be it,” “it is what it is,” to dial down the emotional temperature of your responses. As long as you are living out your values and doing something to bring those values to the world around you, you have done a share of the work and you should feel OK with that.

So –First, we emerge from our caves. Second, we refrain from burning each other up in all the myriad ways we can do that, on social media and beyond. Third, we take the actions we can take to slowly, safely and comfortably resume our lives before we retreated to the cave. And fourth, we embrace *Ashrei Ha'am she'kakha lo*, content are those who accept what is with equanimity.

And maybe, just maybe, if we collectively lower the emotional temperature of the societal discourse, we'll restore our ability to create broad coalitions who talk and work together for the common good. But that's a long term project, and *lo alekha ham'lakha ligmor*.

So take a breathe and let's continue the journey through Yom Kippur, together.