

Another New Normal: Life After Pandemic

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By most signs, the pandemic in the United States is nearing its end. Mask restrictions are loosening; distance requirements are easing. We are again gathering with loved ones, friends, and community. We are embracing those closest to us. **CSZ is OPEN ON SHABBAT MORNINGS** for services. For those of us vaccinated, we are beginning a new normal ... Okay, *another* new normal.

Anytime we transition to a new normal, we carry with us the gained wisdom and the ongoing anxieties that existed before. We also prepare to acquire additional knowledge and wisdom; we grow excited to encounter new joys; we look ahead to meeting new people or to meeting people anew.

Sometimes we also transition to a new normal with greater fear and trepidation. When in our Torah portion this week, *Parashat Shelach Lecha*, Moses sent forth the twelve spies to scout the Land of Israel, ten of the scouts carried with them their low self-esteem, weakened faith, and distrust of Moses and their fellow Israelites like 500 pound packs on their shoulders. When those ten scouts returned, they easily convinced most of our ancestors that conquering the Promised Land was out of their reach. The new normal they created for themselves was a forty-year period of wandering and wondering. Anxiety and faithlessness abounded.

We too – all of us – are confronted with a new normal. We hold the power to decide not necessarily what comes next, but how we receive and accept what comes next.

Personally, I enter this new normal with tremendous joy and powerful hope. I believe that the future is bright for Congregation Shaarey Zedek. I believe that what is to come will hold blessing for the United States, for American Jewry, and for Israel. I am excited about seeing family, friends, and community *in person*. I am excited to go out to eat and maybe to share an evening of friendship and, yes, whiskey, at a local watering hole. I am simply excited for a new normal!

Of course, I bring to this new normal acquired wisdom and inspired faith, along with a bit of accumulated anxiety. So as I prepare to begin this new normal, here are a few of the lessons I plan to bring carry with me. **Please share with me your acquired wisdom and even accumulated anxiety** so that we can journey forward together in fellowship.

- **Blowing Out Birthday Candles.** I do not know the origin of the custom of inviting someone to spray saliva all over a large cake and then passing said cake out to friends and family. This is a custom I need not carry over into the new normal.
- **Handshakes, Hugging, and Kissing.**
 - Physical touch is essential to human life. At the same time, even before Covid-19, handshakes were probably a foolish greeting. Do you know what germs lurk on other people's hands?!! Similarly, I would like to suggest that as a community we reconsider the prevalence of hugging and kissing. Yes, they are spreaders of germs. I wonder too about the value of *tzniyut* (modesty), and of reserving the intimate act of bodies touching bodies for only the closest of family members.

- In my opinion, handshakes should be yesterday's news and left in the trashcan of history. Hugging and kissing: that one is harder to let go of but deserves consideration anew.
- I do not know of any scientific evidence of infection spreading through elbow bumps or even fist bumps. As we have from time to time in the past, let us try to utilize these greetings in place of the handshake.
- **Masks in Public.** When we gather with people we know are vaccinated, healthy, and at low risk, we should keep our masks in our pockets, purses, or the car; we should enjoy each other's smiles. However, when we are unsure of those surrounding us – such as at the grocery store – and when we are with someone who is sniffing or sneezing, then why not mask up? It really is a low-burden effort with maximum return. No one wants a cold and definitely no one wants the flu (whose vaccine, by the way, has a lower efficacy rate than the vaccine for Covid-19). If you see me at Meijer or Grove Kosher Market, I will be the one in the mask. And if you are unvaccinated or immunocompromised, please be honest with yourself and with us: wear a mask. Preserving life is a *mitzvah!*
- **Handwashing.** I will never again wash my hands without singing the entire alphabet all the way through, including “Now I know my ABCs. Next time won't you sing with me?” It is just good hygiene that Jews have been practicing for thousands of years (well, the handwashing; not singing the English alphabet). Especially if we are about to eat bread, we can wash our hands; say the blessing of *n'tilat yedayim*; and then recite *motzi*. Hygiene, *halachah*, and gratitude all in one!
- **Coming to Shul.**
 - It's wonderful. Simply wonderful. To be with other people in song, in joy, and in blessing in a sanctuary built for 1,000 people is soul-nourishing and life-sustaining. I highly recommend it.
 - I am also ready to distance our community and myself from the use of technology on Shabbat. Yes, sometimes it is necessary to stay home and, when that is the case, I am delighted that we can “virtually” welcome you into the sanctuary. However, I am way past ready to remove the laptops from in front of the clergy on the *bimah*, and to switch to fixed cameras mounted at a distance out of general eyesight. The less technology on Shabbat the better it is for everyone.
- **Hakafot.**
 - Parading the Torah scroll among the congregation is a long-standing tradition of the Jewish people. In this way, people can show respect to the Torah scroll by reaching out, touching it, and kissing it.
 - Um, perhaps, however, touching and kissing is not the safest activity even when the pandemic has passed! While according to Jewish Law the Torah scroll cannot transmit impurity, the Torah mantle most certainly can transmit virus when people are touching and kissing it. When the highest value of Torah is protecting life, perhaps showing respect for the Torah by engaging in an act that threatens life is not actually showing respect for the Torah. For the time being, I do not see us rushing to return to this custom.
- **Kissing the Mezuzah.** See Hakafot.

- **Shabbat dinners.** In a home in which everyone is vaccinated and at low risk for complications, inviting others into your home who are also vaccinated and at low risk for complications is an act that, like going to shul, is soul-nourishing and life-sustaining. When my entire house is vaccinated, I so look forward to hosting Shabbat dinners again!

- **Shiva Houses.**
 - Perhaps the greatest secondary casualty of the pandemic is the pause on Jewish mourning customs. When we lose loved ones, we want even more to surround ourselves with those whom we love! However, opening one's home also means potential exposure to the unvaccinated as well as the immunocompromised.
 - *We should* return to holding *shiva* in our homes. However, meal times should be for family only. Snacks should not be placed out for visitors and visitors should pay respects to the mourners and then leave. There is no need to stick around, grazing and schmoozing with friends like the *shiva* house is a party! It is a very high *mitzvah* (commandment) to visit those in mourning. Unless you are family or best of friends, keep your visit brief or just come for *minyán*. Additionally, for now at least, the ideal *shiva minyanim* are held outside or, in the event of inclement weather or the threat of inclement weather, on Zoom.

Many of us have already begun our new normal. Some of us, like my family, are on the verge of the new normal (many children are still not able to receive the vaccine). And some of us, for a variety of reasons, are simply not yet ready to even conceive of the new normal, let alone enter it. Let us move forward with respect for every person, honoring that we never know all that exists in a person's home or in a person's heart. Let us refrain from judgments and criticisms. Let us give others the benefit of the doubt, and assume that they are making the best decisions for their households. Let us be sure to be honest and upfront with others about our own vaccination status and health (e.g., if you are sick). And finally, let us as a community communicate, so that indeed we can journey forward together in fellowship.

Please share with me your acquired wisdom and even accumulated anxiety! I look forward to hearing from you!

From my family to yours, Shabbat shalom!