

Silver Linings

The year 2020 will, undisputedly, go down as one of the most miserable years in our lifetimes. Allow me to take us all down memory lane.

The U.S. and Iran nearly went to war with each other. Our president was impeached for “abuse of power” and “obstruction of congress.” A new coronavirus, called Covid-19, is born and rapidly causes a global pandemic. Basketball legend Kobe Bryant and his daughter Gianna die in a helicopter crash. This is just January!

Political divisiveness grows. The country’s economy slows to a halt due to the spread of Covid-19. Quarantines go into effect limiting most kinds of socialization. Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd, *two more* black men, were killed in broad daylight by racists and crooked cops, respectively, sparking protests across the world for racial justice. Asian Giant Hornets, also known as “Murder Hornets” arrive in the United States. Protests turn violent across the country. A hurricane wreaks havoc in the south. Wildfires burn from Southern California all the way up to the Pacific Northwest, causing air quality to be so hazardous that experts don’t even know what the long term health ramifications might look like. As of this writing, over 5 million people in our country have been infected with coronavirus and nearly 200,000 have died from it. And just hours ago, Supreme Court Justice and champion of women’s rights, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, passed away. For many of us this is just as scary as any of the other calamities from this year. We pray for her soul, for her family, and for the soul of our nation.

Despite all of the sadness we faced this year and no matter how bleak it all seems, there are silver linings all around us.

One of my family’s favorite things to do this past spring, early in the quarantine stage, was watch John Krasinski’s “Some Good News” on YouTube each week. The famous actor opened his homemade news show by saying, “We are all going through an incredibly trying time, but, through all the anxiety, through all the confusion, all the isolation, and all the Tiger King, somehow the human spirit found a way to break through and blow us all

away.” In just a few episodes Krasinsky highlighted the good that people were doing in the early days of the pandemic. For twenty minutes each week, this show helped us to look on the bright side of humanity.

In the first episode we watch a group of friends and neighbors in Los Angeles throw a socially distanced welcome-home parade for 15-year-old Courtney Johnson, after she finished chemotherapy. Watching her wipe tears as she waves to the crowd of people lining the streets brought tears to our eyes. In other episodes Krasinsky shows the outpouring of support New Yorkers give healthcare workers as they go to work in the morning. He even puts on a virtual prom for High School seniors who missed out on this momentous event. Millions of us anxiously awaited the next episode. This is what we were craving during the initial stages of lockdown.

While some may argue that this show was just a well-intended distraction, aimed to soothe viewers from all the civil unrest and negativity in the news, I would respond that looking on the bright side and trying to search for the good in bad situations is not only necessary for our mental health, but it's also a very Jewish thing to do. Wouldn't you know it, a Jew is thought to have coined the phrase “When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.”¹

This does not mean we must have a rosy outlook in the face of all sadness and tragedy and that we ought to ignore all the heartache surrounding us. On the contrary, we all hope to have the strength to face the realities of life, to deal with them the best we can and hopefully grow in the process. But, looking for the good in any situation will lift our spirits and show us how resilient we are.

Consider the following silver linings of 2020.

Air quality, before the fires, in some of the most populated cities around the world improved drastically, from Los Angeles to Delhi. Air pollution is al-

¹ Many attribute the expression to Dale Carnegie who used it in his 1948 book “How to Stop Worrying and Start Living.” Carnegie credited Julius Rosenwald (August 12, 1862 – January 6, 1932) for giving him the phrase.

ready a global public health crisis, killing approximately seven million people each year.² Fewer motorists and less air travel helped clear up the skies and gas prices dropped significantly. I won't go so far as to suggest that this pandemic was the Earth's revenge on us for the shocking amount of greenhouse gas emissions we contribute into the environment, but I also won't deny this this was a positive impact on a global scale. Even the rabbinic sages comprehended the link between our actions and the world's health. Kohelet Rabbah teaches that at the time of creation the Eternal One said, "You are in charge of and responsible for this earth. But it is the only one you will get. So preserve and enhance it. Do not pollute or destroy it."³

Many of us have become more self-sufficient. How many of us cultivated home gardens in an effort to not frequent grocery stores as much? Bread making has also spiked leading to a shortage in yeast just a few months ago. Thank you to those in this community who have shared their sour-dough bread with my family. We have even begun to bake challah each Friday and this new custom has brought wonderful scents and happiness into our home.

Creativity has spiked this year. Whether it's picking up that instrument which has been collecting dust, or learning a new one, our creative juices are flowing. People are making their own face masks and either sharing them with friends or selling them online. And I can't recall how many new recipes we've experimented with since this all began.

Speaking of food, restaurants have donated food to hospitals for health care workers who work around the clock. Distilleries have even been making and distributing hand sanitizer.

Adult children have come home, maybe for longer than they originally wanted, but not long enough for many parents.

² According to the World Health Organization

³ Kohelet Rabbah, chapter 7

Musicians have performed free online concerts, from Nefesh Mountain to the biggest headliners. The musical Hamilton came to our television screen for a fraction of the price it would be to see it live. (It really is that good!)

Books discussing anti-racism, implicated biases, white privilege, and slavery in America, have been flying off the shelves. Folks are leaning in to learn more.

As our world has slowed to a halt, so too have our lives, both professionally and personally. Forced to spend less time producing and more time reflecting, our outlook about what matters most in life has potentially changed. For some of us this forced timeout has given us time to rethink our priorities especially as it relates to the balance of work versus self-care.

And finally, the one aspect of this dreadful pandemic which I think has had the most profound and positive impact on us is our connection with each other. We are communicating more with our friends and family via Zoom, Skype, and FaceTime. Without the ability to embrace our loved ones, and not knowing when we will see them next, more folks are utilizing this incredible technology to stay in touch, or even get back in touch with one another. We have had countless dinners and game nights with family members all over the country. There are no more excuses for not connecting. We may be physically distant from each other, but we are reaching out to stay connected. This is an essential part of being a human and this pandemic has showed us how much we take our relationships for granted.

There are silver linings even in our own Beth Israel community. Through Zoom services and classes, our friends who are homebound or living in faraway places can now participate. While not gathering physically for b'nei mitzvot or funerals and shiva minyanim is deeply upsetting, far more friends and family have been allowed the opportunity to witness these sacred moments.

While Jews from ages past have had to adapt in order to preserve our rich tradition, either due to natural or manmade causes, this might be the first time in our lives where we have been faced with such a predicament. And

look what we have been able to do. Of course, our spiritual survival cannot live on Zoom alone. However, there are now more people, on average, showing up to Shabbat services. As one of my colleagues wrote, “God listens to our voices even when they are muted.”

Our Care Committee created the Mitzvah Corp, consisting of congregants who regularly check in on synagogue members with a friendly phone call.

Our amazing professional staff has found new ways to work remotely yet still address the needs of our membership. B’nei mitzvah tutoring, pastoral counseling, Keshet classes, and everything else we do, has been reimagined and it seems to be working. On a personal note, it’s been a joy to be able to work full days and still share three meals with my family.

This search for silver linings is not intended to minimize the pain and loss many of us and our neighbors are experiencing in the moment. We all hope this year ends on a positive note with people going back to work, the eradication of Covid-19, and some real change towards racial justice, among other causes. One of the secrets to Jewish survival in the face of so much upheaval and tragedy has been our ability to see the good in the world while never losing hope that things will get better. And they will.

It is my fervent hope that all of these silver linings that we are able to recognize, both in our own lives and beyond the walls of our homes, will teach us lessons about how to create a more kind and gentler world around us and within ourselves as well. May we seek out the silver linings in the very dark clouds passing over us and create a new and better normal for ourselves and future generations.

I wish you and your loved ones a happy, healthy, and much improved 5781. Shanah Tovah.