

Kol Nidre, 5781

In the late 60s, that's "0-0-60," of the Common Era, as Jerusalem was being besieged by the army of the Roman Empire, a Rabbi named Yochanan ben Zakkai climbed into a casket. His students carried him out of the city gates, past the Zealots and the Roman guards who assumed they were on their way to a burial.

Once out, and very much alive, Rabbi Yochanan went to the Roman general Vespasian, addressing him as Emperor, to request permission to establish a center of Jewish learning in Yavneh, in the Gallile. He understood the need to transplant the center of Torah scholarship from Jerusalem to another location after its impending destruction.

First, Vespasian was angry; he considered it an insult to be addressed as emperor when he was merely a general, but as they were speaking, word came that the emperor, Nero, had died, and Vespasian was now, in fact, emperor. He was so impressed with Rabbi Yochanan's wisdom that he offered him "three wishes." Rabbi Yochanan's major request was that the city of Yavneh and its scholars be spared, to which Vespasian agreed.

A question that's often asked is, "Why didn't Rabbi Yochanan ask Vespasian to spare Jerusalem?" and it's a good question. But Rabbi Yochanan pretty much knew that a request like that would be denied, and he'd be back at square one. The following year, in 70 CE, Jerusalem and the Second Temple were destroyed, and the people exiled, but Judaism continued to flourish in both the Diaspora and the Land of Israel.

Rabbi Yochanan, a disciple of our great sage Hillel—of Hillel and Shammai fame—instituted reforms to the way Judaism was being practiced that according to my teacher, Rabbi Len Levin, were significantly more radical than any reforms since. Every generation thinks it invented sex, drugs and rock and roll—ok, my generation invented rock and roll—and reforms to Judaism and Jewish practice over the past few centuries pale by comparison.

My purpose, however, isn't to talk so much about reforms and innovation as it is to talk about what Rabbi Yochanan might be thinking about our lives today. Could he have imagined we'd be joining together for High Holiday and Shabbat services over airwaves no one can see? And that *halachah*, and Jewish observance and practice would have to be adapted to a time of pandemic? Maybe, and maybe

not, but the Mishna and the Talmud both discuss things like whether or not someone standing outside the synagogue's window or in another part of the room can count in the minyan.

As Kohellet, Ecclesiastes, said, *ayn hadash tachat haShemesh*, "there's nothing new under the sun." He's right. *ChaZaL*, Our Sages of Blessed Memory, had their struggles. Without the *Beit haMikdash*, the central place of worship, Judaism had to adapt, and the synagogue and home observances came into being.

Just as Jewish scholarship flourished in Yavneh and other areas during the first millennium, so too now, in a third millennium, Judaism is flourishing. The magic of the internet means we can be together, even if we're each in our little Brady Bunch or Hollywood Squares squares. We can interact, and as you saw, we have been able to honor people with aliyot and English readings, although I'll admit the ark openings would have been a bit of a challenge.

The destruction of the Second Temple, like our current Covid-19 situation, were disasters of immense magnitude, and each brought forth blessing. As I said, the destruction gave rise to rabbinic Judaism, or we probably wouldn't be here today. The death toll because of the pandemic is staggering, world-wide and here in the US. Just about everyone has been touched and affected by it.

We have lost friends and loved ones, colleagues and family members. Millions who contracted this virus are now living with significant aftereffects; possible blood clots, pain, difficulty breathing, and who knows what else. It will be months, if not longer, before we can feel safe going out without facemasks, gathering with others and doing the things we took for granted just six months ago.

We know from history, *gam zoo ya'avor*, "this too shall pass," but not without a lot of heartache and difficulty. So where's the blessing in all of this? Many people have said that they've developed a new appreciation for things that they never thought about before. Many families grew closer together as kids came home from colleges; adult children, often with their own children, fled the city for the safety of parents in the suburbs. For better or worse, people started baking and cooking more, and carbon emissions from fewer cars on the road because of people working from home, dropped significantly.

No, it's not all positive. Being quarantined at home for many people, especially children, means living with abuse, in unsafe conditions, and without the support and respite they might have received at work

or school. Tensions came to a head with the killings of black people by white police officers, and peaceful protests often turned to riots.

The pandemic brought out the best and the worst in us. Just as Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai knew that it wouldn't be reasonable to ask Vespasian to spare Jerusalem, it's not reasonable to pray to God to stop the pandemic, to rush an effective vaccine to market, or to stop people from getting sick and dying. It is, however, reasonable and appropriate to ask God for the strength and compassion we need to move forward. To see the silver lining in the clouds, for the wisdom to become our best selves in a most difficult time, and for the ability to learn from and create meaning from the challenges life brings us and work towards a better tomorrow.