

It all seemed so insignificant. A mere footnote in the news whilst our attention was elsewhere. In December 2019, a pneumonia outbreak was reported in Wuhan, China. On 31 December 2019, whilst we were marking BREXIT, the outbreak was traced to a novel strain of coronavirus, which was given the interim name 2019-nCoV by the World Health Organization. This virus, unseen to the naked eye, is having an unimaginable impact throughout the world.

As we know this virus has led to countries being paralysed, flights being grounded, concerns about the ability of hospitals to cope with the anticipated patient numbers and the requirement for social distancing measures we should all be taking to reduce social interaction between people in order to reduce its transmission.

Whilst the virus was slowly but surely making its way across the world, different countries have adopted increasingly strict measures to try and tackle the worsening situation. On Monday of this week, 16<sup>th</sup> March 2020 (20<sup>th</sup> Adar 5780) the government stated that “all non-essential contact should be avoided”. As you will see from the letter from Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, the United Synagogue have taken a totally unprecedented step and, as the Chief Rabbi writes: *“we have a Halachic imperative to suspend all activity at all of our Synagogues until further notice. This includes on-site and off-site prayer services, educational, cultural and social meetings and activities for all ages. The Dayanim and I will now be praying all weekday, Shabbat and YomTov services by ourselves at home.”*

We are told that ‘Me’shenichnas Adar Marbim B’simcha’ – from the beginning of Adar we increase our joy and yet we have this challenge – isolating us from our Shuls, our communities and in some instances our families. How can we be happy?

The parshiot of last week, Ki Tisa, and of this week, Vayakhel-Pekudei are particularly relevant. Last week we learnt about the plague that struck the people. This week we learn about Shabbat and the construction of the Mishkan. The Mishkan that was to be our place of service to Hashem. The Mishkan was replaced by the Beit Hamikdash, the Temple, in Yerushalayim which, following the destruction is now represented by our Synagogues- our synagogues which are now closed and empty.

Dayan Posen shlita this week pointed out that there is a famous principle of our Rabbis that if we don’t appreciate what we have then Hashem will take it away from us. Initially we were told to not shake hands, then we were told to adopt social distancing and finally our Shul and others have been closed for the foreseeable future. Surely our response must be to demonstrate our Ahavat Yisrael, love of our fellow Jew, our love of our Shul and our desire to connect to Hashem. Yes, it is important to react on a physical level but we also need to react on a spiritual one.

Rabbi Yosef Kanevsky in Los Angeles wrote a few days ago that *“ One of the brand new terms that has entered our daily conversation is “social distancing.” It is shorthand, as we know very well, for the practical physical precautions that we all must take in order to protect ourselves and others. But I’d humbly suggest that we use the term itself sparingly, if at all. Language is a powerful shaper of thinking. And the very last thing we need right now, is a mindset of mutual distancing.*

*We actually need to be thinking in the exact opposite way: Every hand that we don't shake must become a phone call that we place. Every embrace that we avoid must become a verbal expression of warmth and concern. Every inch and every foot that we physically place between ourselves and another, must become a thought as to how we might be of help to that other, should the need arise.*

*It is obvious that "distancing," if misplaced or misunderstood, will take its toll not only upon our community's strength and resiliency, but upon the very integrity and meaning of our spiritual commitment. And who knows if it was for this time that we have committed ourselves to walk in Hashem's ways."*

With instructions and medical advice changing almost hourly we are reminded that so much of what is happening is out of our control. What is in our hands is our tefillah, our learning Torah and ma'asim tovim, our good deeds. The Rabbis teach that "ha-kol bi'yedei shamayim chutz me'yirat shamayim" (only the fear of heaven is in man's hands). It is challenging, but now is the time when we need to focus on our emunah and bitachon, our faith and trust in Hashem, and do whatever we can to deepen our general connection to Him.

"Va'yomer im shamo'a tishma le'kol Hashem elokecha," Hashem tells us that if we will diligently listen to His voice, "ve'ha-yashar be'ainav ta'aseh ve'ha-azanta ve'shamarta kol chukav," and we do what is just in His eyes and observe His commandments, "kol ha-machalah asher samti Be'Mitzrayim lo asim alecha," then any of the diseases that Hashem places on Mitzrayim He will not place upon you, "ki ani Hashem rofecha," because, He says, "I am Hashem, your healer. (Shemot 15:26)

None of us anticipated the events of the last few days. We are all living with uncertainty and a feeling of vulnerability. If you do feel that you would appreciate a chat then we are here for you and for each other.

The current Government restrictions and the collapse of the financial markets may well cause significant financial need. If you need any help then you can speak to me in total confidence. All such requests will be dealt with discreetly. Arrangements for financial assistance are being made across the communities in Edgware. With Pesach approaching, if you can do so, please donate as generously as possible to the Kimche De'Pischa appeal.

Please can we all look out for and notice neighbours or friends who may be alone and would appreciate a friendly call or an offer of help.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov teaches us to be grateful for everything, after all everything is a gift from Hashem. We may not understand or appreciate it now but in the fullness of time things will become clear. At this difficult time, we are reminded to appreciate the many gifts in our life and also to value community and Kehilla. In the short time that Ruth and I have been part of this amazing community we have felt the warmth and strength of the community and know that we will all pull together and grow from these challenges. Remember we are all here for each other and we should keep in contact.

I hope that we will be able to have regular shiurim and other programmes 'on-line' so that we can still connect with one another and share news and views even if it is not on Shabbat. Details will be circulated as soon as possible.

May it be the will of our Father in Heaven that in the merit of our fervent prayers, mitzvot, Torah study, and unity, that all of us and the entire world merit salvation and a complete recovery.