



*Parshat Vayikra*  
**March 28, 2020 / 3 Nissan 5780**  
**Blind Faith**  
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It was 2012. I was standing on the sidewalk of Emek Refaim holding a blindfold, ready to begin the simulation.

I put the blindfold on, feeling excited for the challenge. I was determined to be the best temporarily blind person ever. But as the darkness set in, I was surprised by how quickly my excitement fizzled in the face of anxiety. Without the ability to see, I was paralyzed by fear. Even the classmate posted next to me, whose job it was to protect me and prevent me from stumbling, didn't relieve my anxiety. I slid my feet along the sidewalk slowly, checking for bumps and trying to feel my way along the path. In the end, though I was determined to be the best temporarily blind person ever, the only award I could have received that day was "most anxious".

In many ways, living with the threat of Coronavirus feels like we're back on that sidewalk in Jerusalem. We're all flying blind. We can't see who has Coronavirus or know for sure if we are a vector. We can't see where germs may be lurking or where it's safe to touch. We can't be sure which activities are safe and which could expose us unnecessarily. We can't see how quickly the virus has spread; all we've got to hang onto are the endless news reports filled with terrifying data. We can't know how long this will last or what the economic impact will be. There is so much we cannot see. And yet, our challenge is to keep walking.

This is not a simulation. This is real. We are walking through uncharted territory.

This is where our spiritual work begins. Let me tell you a story.

It was 1999. Adina Tal, a well-known Israeli director, had just accepted an offer to lead a workshop for deaf blind performers. At the time she had never worked with the deaf blind community. She didn't even know anyone who was deaf or blind. As she described on the TED stage, "what did I know about deaf blind people? Nothing, really nothing. I know a little bit about theatre, theatre is the art of communication between the actors and between the actors and the audience." But Adina quickly discovered that she loved working with the deaf blind community. This love eventually led her to found the Na Lagaat center, a performing arts venue which exclusively features deaf and blind performers.

There was a way in which opening the Na Lagaat center was a dayeinu moment. It was enough. It was enough that there was now a theater company which showcased the talents of a community which can be overlooked. When they received positive reviews like "deaf, blind, and brilliant," Adina felt she had achieved her mission. But then, there were the other comments. People would say things like "Uch, have you seen these actors, deaf and blind? It is so sad" and "did you see this young and beautiful actress...she can't even see herself in the mirror...we have to be so grateful...that we can see."

Those kinds of comments Adina could not bear. She decided that she needed to do more.

So she did. She and her partners created a restaurant within the center. It was performance art at its best. Diners would arrive and order in the light. Then, escorted by blind waiters, they would be ushered into a pitch-black dining room where they would eat their meals in complete darkness. Without the use of sight, they would be challenged to experience the world as a blind person might. The hope was that diners would experience more than limited

sight. They hope was that diners would discover how rich it can be to experience the world through taste and through smell. And people do. Since 2007, people have been visiting the Na Lagaat restaurant for the experience. It's like that old saying: when one door closes, another door opens. In this case, when you close your eyes, sometimes you can see in a whole different way.

This is our challenge for today. Yes, we're living in a world without sight. We are living in a world with lots of unknowns. Can we use this time of darkness to connect with our other senses?

This week, most of my work has been relegated to Zoom. At first, I felt really frustrated. Zoom is not the same as meeting in person. You are staring at a screen for hours. You have to wait to be connected. The audio can be hard to hear and you have to be careful about choosing an order because when people speak at the same time, you can't understand a thing. It would have been really easy to spend the week in a space of frustration about all of the ways I couldn't engage.

Instead, I chose to take the Na Lagaat approach. With all of the challenges of virtual communication, what could I see and learn that I wouldn't see and learn otherwise?

Quickly, I discovered that virtual communication has a lot to offer. Because people can't talk over each other, it means that all of us listened more deeply in our meetings than we do in the same space. Because of the delays and the difficulties of the technology, people didn't interrupt meetings to make silly jokes or to whisper to their friends (or maybe they just wrote a message in the chat box where I couldn't see it.) After a week on Zoom, I'm thinking we should meet there more often!

There's more.

It's true that we are walking through this world without a clear picture of what is unfolding around us. But it is equally true that we have been walking through this world without a clear picture of what we are capable of. Can we refocus on what we can do to make a difference?

In the last two weeks, we did something that we never imagined would be possible. Within a few days, we transformed from a synagogue that lives at 385 Ward Street, to a synagogue that exists beyond walls. Every day, twice a day, we tune in. Hundreds of us. All lifting our hearts and our prayers towards the One who knows all. We have become a community who prays around tv screens and ipads, a community who shares prayer with loved ones around the country, and whose prayers keep us centered and grounded.

We've learned how to transcend walls. In the last two weeks, almost three hundred Temple Emanuel members have stepped forward to support our community. Together we've placed hundreds upon hundreds of calls. We've made grocery runs, dropped off hearing-aid batteries, filled prescriptions, and supported one another in moments of uncertainty. Young adults have offered to help teens with their Hebrew. Social work interns have offered their support for free. Doctors have offered their expertise. What's just so interesting is that we started this project to respond to needs in the community. We never realized that one of our most central needs is to be of service to one another. What a blessing that we can fill this need so powerfully now.

In Hebrew, the word for blind people is העורים. As we say in the morning, ברוך אתה ה', blessed are you God who opens the eyes of the blind, פוקח עורים. But as you know, the word עורים sounds the same as the word used to describe the Israelites in the bible, העברים. Those who

cross boundaries. In other words, the places where we cannot see just teach us how to transcend boundaries so that we can enter the Holy Land.

Life in the time of COVID-19 is all about blind faith. I'm not suggesting that we should believe without truly understanding. But I am suggesting that we should have blind faith—faith that we can find a way through even when we can't see it now. We are not just blind, we are Ivrin. We are a people who make it through challenges and walk together to the Promised Land.