



Unflattening Time

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A few months ago, when I would send an e-mail to the congregation, I would get scores of bounce-backs – out-of-office replies like, “Thank you for your e-mail, I’m travelling for business and will get back to you as soon as I can.” Or, “I’m on vacation. I’ll be offline with limited access to e-mail. If you need something, call someone else.”

I sent an e-mail last week and received exactly one bounce-back. What does it mean for our days (and nights) that while most of us are home, almost none of us are “out of office?” What is the impact of waking up every day in the same place with the same limited range of options before us, plugged in 24/7 on the same screens, and no clear end in sight?

I don’t know about you, but every morning my kids wake up and ask: What day is it? Monday, Tuesday, whoknowsday? As days turn to weeks turn to months, there’s a blurring that has set in between work and home, between days and weeks. As one WBUR listener put it: “Every day is a Monday, every day is a week.” Something is happening: As we are flattening the curve, we are also flattening time.

If we are blessed to be healthy at this time filled with so much pain and suffering, this is a first-world problem of the highest order. But that does not mean it’s not a problem.

It is a seasonal problem: The Spring season filled with celebration is suddenly more of the same. No proms to plan; graduations that had a whole day set aside to sit seat-to-seat and shoulder-to-shoulder with hundreds, or thousands, of kvelling parents and grandparents in the hot sun to watch our graduates walk across the podium and receive their diploma and handshake (handshake!) are suddenly strictly virtual affairs. Where will we be for graduation? The same place we are every morning, noon, and night.

It is a social problem: Like in the story of Rip Van Winkle who takes a nap one day and awakens to find himself stuck in a whole new world, it can sometimes feel like we woke up as unwilling cast-members on one of those extreme reality shows where they isolate everyone on separate islands and run experiments on how much isolation – or for some of us, family interaction – a human being can possibly tolerate.

How many hours a day can we stare at our colleagues and friends in Brady-Bunch boxes on a screen? How small can our world get before we start to break?

And it is a spiritual problem: So many vibrant and beautiful moments we and our children had been looking forward to are now gone.

For all our resilience and positive plan Bs, it is starting to sink in that these are not just postponed but gone. Trips abroad that may or may not happen sometime but will not be this trip at this time, sports seasons either on the field or in the stands, plays and concerts, projects and productions, school step-ups, sleepaway summer camp, even just going to the mall on a Sunday afternoon.

All those highlight moments that form the valleys and peaks of our days – the ones we looked ahead to in our calendars when we needed an extra boost – removed. And suddenly next Tuesday is not the big Play we had been counting down the days toward anymore; it is just Tuesday.

Do you remember that old movie Groundhog Day? My family and I have taken to weekly showings of classic movies. And so I thought, with an ironic chuckle, that it would be fun to share that one with my kids. I remembered Groundhog Day as a laughter-filled romp through what would happen if you found yourself waking up in the same place, with the same people, stuck to the same block in the same town, knowing that no matter what you did, you would be waking up in that same place again the next day.

I had completely forgotten the pathos at the heart of the film. I had forgotten the way it not only asks, what if you had the same day to do all over again, but what happens when you are stuck somewhere you do not want to be and you cannot change it? What happens when days bleed into days into more days?

What happens – at first – is dark. Bill Murray is not just frustrated and funny. He is filled with existential angst, ennui, and anger. He spends a good part of a minutes-long movie montage finding creative ways to try to end his life.

I think I forgot all that because, when I first saw the movie, that part was so totally unrelatable. After all, if we had nothing but time, we would like to think we would get to the place he ultimately does – of finding meaningful ways to spend that time – much faster. We would savor every moment, learn more, do more, give more, celebrate more. But as it turns out, it is much harder to unflatten time than it would appear.

Our rabbis tell an unflattering story about the wise King Solomon, who finds himself, in his gilded cage, bored and melancholy. He comes up with a quest for his advisors to find him a ring with miraculous power. “If a person is happy and puts it on,” he says, “that person will become sad. But someone who is sad will become happy.”

According to some versions of the story, King Solomon did not actually think such a ring existed, but he wanted to have a little fun with his advisors, who immediately fanned out across the kingdom searching high and low. No matter where they searched, no one had ever heard of such a thing.

Finally, as the sun was setting on the final day, the last searcher was walking back toward the King’s palace, dejected, when a boy crossed his path. Out of habit, he asked, “Do you know of a ring with the miraculous power that if a person is happy and puts on this ring, it will be sobering, but if a sad person puts on the ring it will result in joy?”

“Not only do I know of it,” the boy said, “but my grandfather gave it to me just last week on my 13th birthday.” The boy showed the advisor, who immediately took him to King Solomon. The King took one look at the ring and cried, “You have brought me the most precious truth.” He read aloud the inscription: “*Gam Zeh Ya’avor*” – “this too shall pass.”

When our calendar reads, “Every day is Monday, every day is a week,” as far as the eye can see, how do we unflatten time? With this ancient wisdom. When we feel the angst and pain of this moment: this too shall pass. When we cannot see the horizon: this too shall pass.

Recently, I came across an article about a 100-year-old letter. Dated January 30, 1920, it details a decision to close a California high school in the face of the resurgent influenza epidemic. It lays out strict social distancing – students could only visit teachers one at a time – and that students will take on “correspondence work,” last century’s version of a virtual school day.

Jill Cunningham, who discovered the letter in her home, said, “This is my high school... and these are my relatives...The world has done this before, and we have come through it.” *Gam Zeh Ya’avor*.

But the opposite is also true: the days we have now, they too will pass. The joy of today, of Eleanor’s amazing bat mitzvah, is so exceedingly precious because, from across the country you, family and friends, chose to gather: relatives waking up at 6:30AM to log in from California, friends writing notes and sending blessings, Temple Emanuel members joining in prayer so that even though we cannot celebrate in person today, you are here.

The pandemic could have turned today into an ordinary day. But Eleanor, you chose to fill this moment with holiness, bringing Temple Emanuel home and home to Temple Emanuel. Because of you, today we unflatten time. We can do that for big moments like today, and for small moments in each of our days.

This week, on yet another in a seemingly endless series of Zoom calls, one of the participants shared that she cannot remember a time before the pandemic that she and her kids and husband shared the same table. Suddenly her life is a constant stream of *cook, set, clear, clean* for breakfast; *cook, set, clear, clean* for lunch; *cook, set, clear, clean* for dinner; then get up the next day to do it again.

But there is this: Three meals a day they sit and share. Three meals a day they talk and laugh. Three meals a day the ordinary becomes extraordinary. “When this is over,” she said, “we will enthusiastically go back to our full and busy lives – my daughter back to college, my son back to high school sports, my husband and I back to the office. And I want so badly for this pandemic to end, I feel guilty even thinking this, let alone saying it out loud, but I do not want a fast-forward button. The bad will go. But the good will, too. So I am lifting what there is, right now.”

As the meeting concluded, I went upstairs to pull out from my jewelry box a ring my family gave me for a birthday that was longer ago than I care to remember, and I put it back on. It reads: “*Gam Zeh Ya’avor.*”

How do we unflatten time? By making the choice in both pain and promise to lift this moment, because *Gam Zeh Ya’avor*. This too shall pass.

Shabbat Shalom.