



Parshat Emor
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Bigger
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I realized I had a problem last Friday when I was doing our weekly shopping for Shabbat at Whole Foods—when I saw, and could not resist buying, this large package of 16 toilet paper rolls that we definitely do not need.

One of the glories of the Whole Foods where I shop is that often they have large packages of toilet paper available, one per customer. I go there once a week, and whenever they happen to have the toilet paper available, I buy it. The lockdown has been 8 weeks. Five of those 8 weeks they have had toilet paper. Which means that in the past two months I have bought 80 rolls of toilet paper. That's enough toilet paper. It's just Shira, Sam and me. We are good. We don't need another roll.

But last Friday, I stood there, with yet another package of toilet paper, beckoning, available for purchase. Then a civil war ensued within me at the toilet paper stand:

We don't need it.

Buy it. Buy it.

We have enough.

Scarcity. Scarcity. You don't want to run out of toilet paper.

We're not going to run out of toilet paper. And if we do run out, we'll buy more.

Run out of toilet paper????!! OMG, OMG, what if we run out of toilet paper, and there is no more to buy. It would be a disaster! I can forestall that disaster if I buy this toilet paper, now.

Something in me, deep, visceral, inexplicable, irresistible, felt triggered. I don't have any other way to explain it. I felt compelled to buy toilet paper I knew rationally we did not need. When I came home with the groceries, Shira takes one look at yet one more massive package of toilet paper and says: *what is with the toilet paper?* Can I get my husband back? *What's with you and the toilet paper?* There was no good answer to her question other than the fact that I have internalized the trauma of this season.

The dictionary definition of trauma is *a deeply distressing or disturbing experience*. The lockdown surely fits that definition.

It is traumatic to be largely confined to our home for eight weeks and counting. Traumatic to hear about the loss of lives and livelihoods. Traumatic to hear about the sacrifices of health care heroes and front-line workers. If you are a student, it is traumatic to have had your school year end the way it did; traumatic to not see your friends; traumatic to not do your activities; traumatic to have no graduation, no closure. If you are graduating from college or grad school, it is traumatic to enter this job market. It is traumatic if you are a parent to have your kids home all day long. For those who have lost loved ones, it is traumatic to do a small private funeral, to have no shiva where people can comfort you in person, no ability to attend daily minyan in the Gann Chapel. For the couples who were looking forward to getting married this summer, it is traumatic to have the most special day of your lives disrupted.

What do we do with our trauma?

The Torah teaches us that we have agency about what we do with our trauma.

The Israelites' trauma could have made them negative. Could have turned them into haters. The Torah goes out of its way to tell us *not to* hate the Egyptians. Nothing good comes from giving in to our dark side.

Instead, convert your emotion into positive energy. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. Therefore, be kind to the vulnerable and the oppressed. Convert your trauma into empathy.

Our trauma can make us smaller.

Or our trauma can make us bigger.

What does it do for us?

One of the silver linings of this pandemic is John Krasinski's show *Some Good News*. I particularly loved episode 3. He was dealing with the loss of baseball. It's spring. It's time to go to Fenway. It's time to be hopeful for the Red Sox new season. It's time to hear the crack of the bat. But alas no baseball. What do we do about it? How can the loss of something we love make us bigger?

On episode 3 John Krasinski arranges to have five healthcare workers who work at the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, in the Covid unit, take a private Duck Tour to Fenway. There they are, on the duck boat, wearing their face masks. One woman shares that she does not see her husband and children because she does not want to risk infecting them. When John Krasinski says, we can never pay you back for that, she shrugs that off and says I am just doing my job. The duck boat takes them to Fenway Park, which is otherwise empty and waiting for them. These five masked health care workers walk onto the pitcher's mound, and on the huge billboard above center field Mayor Marty Walsh appears and applauds them; then Governor Baker and his wife appear and applaud them; and then the entire Red Sox team, players and coaches, appear and applaud them. Krasinski, and special guest star David Ortiz, announced that these five health care workers would receive lifetime season passes to Fenway. But Krasinski is not done. That is just these five health care workers. What about all the other health

care workers? Krasinski shares that he had reached out to AT&T and asked if AT &T would consider giving all health care workers in America free cellphone service *for one month*. AT&T said no. We will give all health care workers in America free cellphone service *for three months*.

Since watching the episode, I have been marinating on what it teaches us. Of course it is inspiring. Heartwarming. Who doesn't like seeing five courageous health care workers appropriately applauded; who doesn't like all courageous health care workers getting free cell service for three months? But what is the message to all the rest of us who are not health care workers?

I think the message is that in a dark time, in a pandemic, there is a special opportunity to be the light. When we show up in the darkness of a pandemic every day with constancy, decency, humility, and generosity, we bring light. That makes us bigger. And we don't have to be a health care hero to be that light.

There are three very special people who regularly come into our building during the lockdown. All three role model how trauma makes us bigger.

Two of them are David Beckman and Brian Lefsky, two volunteers who are experts in technology. When the lockdown happened, they both pivoted from technology experts in general to livestream experts in particular because our synagogue needed livestreaming expertise to be relevant and alive in a lockdown. They got smart quickly in livestreaming and made it possible from the first moment of the lockdown. This tandem supports our every service and every program, with a smile. Thursday morning before 7:00 am? They are on the job, making sure the Bat Mitzvah family can take their Aliyah from their kitchen and stream it into the Chapel. The second night seder? They left their own home, their own family, their own seder, to make sure that Elias and Michelle were able to stream their songs to our community. Every

daily service, every morning, every evening, every Friday night, every Shabbat morning, every special class or program, they make sure that our prayers and Torah can be seen and heard. They don't get paid. They do this every day as a labor of love. They are light in the darkness. The trauma of this season makes them bigger.

The only other person who comes every week, multiple times a week, is Zerihun, our facilities staffer, who comes to clean, to take out the garbage, to disinfect every surface and every door knob. Masked and gloved, he wipes and cleans and disinfects, and he is always smiling. Always humble. Always curious. Always asking us how *we* are doing. I asked him where he gets the strength to show up every day and clean all our surfaces with a smile. He is a man of faith, tuned in to his own church's virtual services and classes. He is light in the darkness. The trauma of this season makes him bigger.

This is a season of trauma. No one is immune. We are all traumatized. The question is does the trauma we have experienced, the trauma we feel, make us smaller or bigger?

The bad news is that there is a lot of darkness. The good news is that all of us can be a source of light.

May each of us figure out how to show up every day with constancy, decency, humility, energy, generosity, so that the trauma of this season makes you, makes us, makes our world, bigger. Shabbat shalom.