



Parshat Pinchas
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Is It Possible to Be At Peace in the Middle of a Pandemic?
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Is it possible to be at peace in the middle of a pandemic?

Every morning we hear the grim statistics, how many infected, how many hospitalized, how many died. Every morning, these numbers keep growing. Is it possible to be at peace while hearing these numbers?

And while statistics convey one kind of truth, individual stories convey a deeper truth. Like the story of Charles Hiser. Charles Hiser was an 82-year old widower. He had been married to his beloved wife Shirley Mae for 43 years. When she passed, he was all alone. His main source of human connection was the Graystone Baptist Church in West Virginia. For several months, while the church was closed, he saw nobody. The only human contact he had was with his daughter who would drop off groceries and talk to him over the phone. At last his church reopened. He could not wait to get back. He chose not to wear a mask. He contracted the virus. He died. Is it possible to hear that story—the pathos of his loneliness, the urgency of his need to be with people, the tragic ending—is it possible to hear that story and somehow be at peace?

The short answer is yes, it is. But it takes some doing. Peace in a pandemic is not automatic or intuitive, but it is possible, and it is worthy and desirable, for you and your family. There is no mitzvah to be bleak and depressed during a pandemic. Being bleak and depressed does not help you or anyone else. Being strong, centered and at peace even in a pandemic would be a good thing. How do we get there?

I want to share with you two stories and a prayer.

The first story concerns Disney. The pandemic has been especially disruptive to Disney. Disney's big thing is in person gatherings at their various theme parks, but in person gatherings are obviously very dangerous.

Disney's usual moves no longer work. That is what disrupted means. What you used to do, you can no longer do.

We all feel our own version of this. We have children who live in different cities. We have parents who live in different cities. We can't fly there. They can't fly here. We are disrupted. We have kids who used to love summer camp. They lived for summer camp. But there is no summer camp. We are disrupted.

Disney is disrupted. But the story does not end there.

As many of you know, Disney did the most genius thing. It took *Hamilton*, which you could only see on stage, if you paid hundreds of dollars per ticket, and democratized it, showing it on July 4. I can't tell you how many people told me that they spent their 4th of July watching *Hamilton* and talking about its message for our nation today.

Disney was able to launch that conversation in thousands of homes and create a 4th of July celebration that was beautiful in its own way. And, at the same time, Disney was able to increase its number of subscribers in America by 74%. Disney did good and did well, role modeling that disruption need not be a death sentence. To the contrary, disruption can give birth to something new, exciting, and hopeful.

Andy Stanley puts it this way. He says we did not choose the pandemic. The pandemic chose us. But now that the pandemic has chosen us, we do have a choice in how we respond to the pandemic. Which brings us to a prayer we say every day in our *shacharit* service.

Yotzer or u'voreh choshech, God creates light and darkness. There is darkness. *The question is: can we add light? We are God's partner when we can add light to the darkness.*

We can add light to the darkness when it comes to our relationships.

My family lives in so many places. We just fell out of touch. It wasn't on purpose.

Everyone was just so busy. Now we are doing these zoom calls. I am reconnecting with people I never used to see. That adds light to the darkness.

I am getting to know my adult children in a way that I never have. That adds light to the darkness.

We can also add light to the darkness in how we choose to spend our time. *I was always commuting. Stuck in traffic.* Repurposing our time that used to be stuck behind a wheel adds light to the darkness.

I was always climbing the ladder. I missed out on so much. Reprioritizing what matters adds light to the darkness.

I was always going out, running around, chasing I don't even know what. Now I am home and learning how to find a deep peace with simplicity. Peace with simplicity adds light to the darkness.

When we add light to the darkness, the prayer goes on to add: *oseh shalom*. We create peace. Peace does not just happen. Peace happens when we add light to the darkness.

There is a woman in Israel named Melila Hellner-Eshed who is an expert in Jewish mysticism and the Zohar. She is on the faculty of Hartman. A few years ago, she lost her husband, the love of her life. They had by all accounts an exceptionally close and loving relationship, where two became one, and he passed after several years of fighting an illness.

As many of you know, Hartman is doing this virtual learning, and Melila was teaching a class on the subject of taking leave from the world. Her premise was that the gold standard for taking leave from the world is the last portion in Genesis, *vayehi*, where Jacob on his death bed summons his children. He speaks words of truth, of blessing. All the people he loves most are

gathered around his bedside. He controlled when. He controlled where. He controlled who. He controlled what was said and who heard it. She points out that in the age of the Coronavirus, this is not happening anymore. We all know this. We all know that people at the end of life often have no control. They are in hospitals or in residential homes or programs where loved ones cannot come in.

She shared texts from the Talmud and Zohar and modern Israeli poetry about the complexity of saying good-bye. But here was the main point: All of these texts—all pre-Coronavirus—suggested that we cannot control our parting from the world. That Jacob's scene is the exception, not the rule. It always has been. The Coronavirus only intensified what was true before: lack of control about how we part.

The clear upshot was: therefore the time to get it right with the people that we love is now. Don't wait until the end. Coronavirus or no Coronavirus, it is too unpredictable to wait for the end. Say what you need to say now. Do what you need to do now. Make it right now. Fix it now. While you still can.

When this very emotional class was over, I thought that Melila Hellner-Eshed embodied this prayer. She knew darkness. Personally. She had lost her own husband.

But to that darkness she added light. Without even mentioning her own loss, she inspired a whole virtual classroom to get the urgency of creating clean and healthy relationships now, in life and in living, while we still can.

Darkness comes with. Darkness is a given.

Light is a choice. Light only happens when we add it.

And when we do, we can feel peace even in a pandemic. Shabbat shalom.