



Parshat Tazria-Metzora — Rosh Chodesh

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More is More

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There is a very poor neighborhood in Cape Town, South Africa that is regularly terrorized by two rival street gangs. These gangs literally kill each other and extort, harass, and intimidate townspeople. Police could not stop the violence. Preachers, pastors, counselors, star soccer players could not stop the violence. You know what did stop the violence? The Coronavirus.

When the Coronavirus pandemic hit, these rival gangs made a peace treaty and agreed to come together to help their neighbors. One law enforcement officer observed that both gangs excel at distribution, but now instead of distributing illegal drugs, in fatal competition with one another, they are joining forces to distribute life-saving food and medicine. The treaty, and helping their neighbors, has held up for over three weeks. Interviewed by CBS News, members of both gangs shared that they like being the good guys.

That is one lovely unintended effect of the Coronavirus. People who had hated each other are acting towards one another with greater decency, peace and menschlikeit.

Unfortunately, there is also another unintended effect of the Coronavirus. People who had loved each other, who had shared a marriage, a home, a family, are increasingly acting towards one another with less decency, less peace, and less menschlikeit. One aspect of the pandemic is the spike in divorce. As the virus has spread from country to country, as the lockdown has spread from country to country, a concomitant spike in divorce has also spread.

In China, in Turkey, in New York City, a familiar pattern is emerging. Spouses under prolonged quarantine get on each other's nerves. The universe is too claustrophobic. There is not enough space to breathe. The little annoyances start to seem big.

In China, as soon as the restrictions were eased, on the first day that courts were open for business again, the clerks who processed divorce applications were so busy they literally did not have time to get a drink of water. Couples lining up for divorce papers stretched out as far as the clerk's eyes could see.

In Turkey, a notable divorce attorney observed that from January to March, the number of people calling his office requesting a divorce has increased four times—a four hundred percent increase in three months.

Divorce fever induced by the pandemic is happening in America as well. A divorce attorney in Manhattan reported getting a call *in the middle of the night* from a friend. “Is everything okay? It's the middle of the night! What's going on?”

“I want to file for divorce now.”

“Now? It's the middle of the night. Why now?”

“Life is too short. We have all learned that nobody lives forever, and nobody knows what tomorrow will bring. The shadow of mortality hangs over us all. After spending all these weeks together, I only now realize, three children later, that I married the wrong man. We have nothing in common except our children. I don't want to spend the rest of my life with the wrong partner. I do know it's the middle of the night. And I am sorry I called and woke you up. But this is urgent. I need you to know that the minute the courts are open again, please file for a divorce.”

This story is admittedly extreme. But it reveals a dilemma that is not extreme, namely this: *Whatever was in our home life before Coronavirus, whatever relationship complexity existed before, there is a lot more of it now.*

If you lived alone before Coronavirus, there is *a lot* more aloneness after Coronavirus. If you sometimes enjoyed your alone time, and sometimes felt loneliness, before Coronavirus, what happens when you have days on end, weeks on end, now going onto months, of being alone. More aloneness is harder.

If you are married, there is a lot more time with your spouse after Coronavirus. Like all day, every day. That is a lot.

In marriage sometimes less is more. You go off to your day. I go off to my day. We'll reconnect at the end of the day. The pause that refreshes.

But less is more is no longer on the menu. The only item on the menu is more. How can more be more? How can more time together be a good thing?

If you are parents of school-aged children, you see your children a lot more every day.

How do we make more of more time?

Adult children come back home to live with their parents—years after they left. One friend observed that my dishwasher and washing machine have not worked so hard in a decade.

How do we make more of more time?

In his classic *Catch-67*, Micah Goodman argues against what he calls binaries: there is either peace, or there is war. He invites us to think about increasing peace, or shrinking the conflict, taking steps that may well not bring total euphoric peace, but make the world incrementally better. Increase peace. Shrink conflict. Make your world a little better.

Channeling Micah's Torah, I want to ask you to think about four simple questions.

1. What do you do that your family loves?
2. How can you do *more* of it?
3. What do you do that drives your family crazy?
4. How can you do *less* of it?

How can we increase the peace, doing more of what people in our family like, and how can we shrink the conflict, doing less of what people in our family do not like?

We want to avoid being so stressed that we call some attorney in the middle of the night and say I can't handle it anymore. We are in the midst of this lockdown, so there is no time like the present for changing our game to make our family life happier and healthier. The small things in life are usually the big things, anyway. In week 6 of the lockdown, the small things are all that much more important.

Let me tell you about somebody who is spending far too much time in an apartment, all alone. My 92-year old father in law, Rabbi Arnold Goodman, lives in his own in his apartment in Jerusalem. Israel has been in the midst of a severe lockdown. For several weeks Israelis had been unable to go more than 100 meters away from their home, even to go grocery shopping. 100 meters is roughly 110 yards, a little more than the length of a football field. Not very far. Think about what it would be like to be confined to 110 yards of your home, day after day, week after week. My father in law tells me that the streets in Jerusalem where he lives are patrolled by police and soldiers who, if they see you on the street, will ask where you live. If your address is more than 100 meters, they will walk you back to your home and insist you stay there.

Dad, how do you get groceries? On line, assuming you can get an appointment slot, which is very hard to come by. You cannot just walk or drive to the Israeli equivalent of CVS or Whole Foods if it is not within your 100 meters.

The consequence of all this is: he has been all alone, 92 years old, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, for going on six weeks. Occasionally he gets some fresh air and walks his 100 meters back and forth, but for the most part, he is house-bound.

You might think that is a recipe for down and out. If my father in love were anxious and depressed, who could blame him?

And yet, remarkably, he is always chipper. Upbeat. Yes, he will be excited when this is over. He misses seeing his children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren. He misses walking to his daily morning minyan. He misses walking to his daily Talmud and Bible classes. He misses the freedom of being able to take a walk in the park. He misses seeing his friends.

But he is chipper and upbeat because the people who love him are doing more of what he loves. He loves to study Torah with his grandchildren. His grandchildren are studying more Torah with him. He loves talking about the day to day details of life, which is remarkable, because it never changes. But God makes a miracle, and we all have daily conversations about daily routines that never change. He loves reading articles or books or ideas. He and his family are constantly sharing ideas. Each facetime matters. Each Zoom call matters. Each phone call matters. Each outreach by a child or grandchild lets him know that while he is by himself in his apartment, he is not alone.

We all have nothing but time with the people under our roof. More time alone if you live alone. More time with your spouse if you are married. More time with your kids if you are a parent.

How do we make more into more? The little things are the big things, especially now.

What can you do more of that the people you love will love? Shabbat shalom.