



Shavuot, Day Two
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Why Attending Religious Services May Well Save Your Life
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Imagine if God came down to earth embodied in human form, wearing clothes, interacting with other human beings--if God were a person who lived among us. That is of course the premise of Christianity. That is also the premise of the film *Oh, God!*, a comedy starring George Burns as God, and John Denver as his prophet, that came out in 1977. The climax of the movie is a trial scene in which God, in the form of George Burns, takes the stand, and tries to prove to a skeptical judge and a skeptical packed courthouse that God exists. He does some truly amazing card tricks. That gets everybody's attention. He then disappears, becoming invisible, all the while still talking to the judge and the packed courthouse. That really get their attention. But it's what he says at the very end of his invisible soliloquy that stayed with Rabbi William Lebeau, the dean of JTS's rabbinical school, 20 years later. In my senior practical rabbinics seminar, Rabbi Lebeau predicted that at various points throughout our careers people would ask us, we would ask ourselves, is this whole religious project worth it? He said the best answer he knows comes from George Burns' line at the end of *Oh, God!* "It works."

It works. Religion is effective at helping us survive and thrive, especially when the going gets tough.

I was thinking of George Burns' line this week when I came upon a fascinating study done by the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard, directed by Tyler VanderWeele. The context for the study is that well before the pandemic our nation had been struggling with what Princeton economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton called "deaths of despair"—deaths caused by suicide, drug use, and alcohol poisoning. Despair in our heartland is up. Suicidal behavior,

either actual suicide or drug or alcohol abuse, is up, especially for white men and women without a college degree. Life expectancy in the United States is down.

Tyler VanderWeele and his colleagues wanted to examine how does this trend of deaths of despair intersect with professional health care workers? Health care workers are in an especially demanding, intense profession. To what extent are doctors, nurses, and health care professionals vulnerable to deaths of despair?

The study examined over 100,000 health care professionals—66,492 women from the Nurses' Health Study and 43,141 men from the Health Professionals Follow-Up Study—for twenty years. The studies focused on a single question: *was attending religious services at least once a week associated with a lower likelihood of death due to suicide, drug overdose or alcohol?*

Here is what the study found. Women who attended religious services at least once a week were *68% less likely* to die by suicide, drug overdose, or alcohol, than women who never attended religious services. Or put differently. Women who *never attend* religious services were *68% more likely* to die a death of despair.

For the men, those who attended religious services at least once a week were *33% less likely* to die by suicide, drug overdose or alcohol. Or put differently: Men who *never attend* religious services were *33% more likely* to die a death of despair.

I was emailing with a friend about this study, and he properly pointed out an ambiguity in the study. Is what is going on here correlation or causation? As he put it: “Are those who attend religious services inherently more stable, centered and able to cope with the challenges of life than those who do not”—that is, correlation. Or, “does the community and teachings encountered in religious life equip people to better meet these challenges”—that is, causation.

The academic community can debate this question. But either way, this study supports George Burns' point in *Oh, God!* It works. Attending religious services helps people survive and thrive, whether they *came* to services strong and centered, or they *became* strong and centered at services. Why is that?

These studies were performed before the pandemic. But the pandemic makes so clear why it is that attending religious services regularly can save our lives.

Regular service attendance connects us to people, community, love. Before the pandemic, there was an epidemic of loneliness in America. Almost half of adult Americans report feeling alone and lonely, spending their nights alone watching tv, drinking, smoking, feeling unloved and uncared for. That loneliness epidemic only got worse in the pandemic.

Attending religious services, even virtually, is the perfect antidote to loneliness, because these services connect you to people who care about you. They call you. What can we do for you? What can we get you? How can we help you? That happens at Temple Emanuel every day. Recently Aliza got a hand-written thank you note from an 87-year old widow as follows:

Dear Rabbi Aliza:

I understand, through one of your volunteers, that you are the person coordinating needs of Temple members with volunteers.

I was one of the recipients and want to let you know how much I appreciated the sanitizing wipes, spray, and Purell that was left at my door.

Thank you for all you do.

Please accept the enclosed check to use for your worthy cause.

An 87-year old widow is giving *us* tzedakah because she *received* love and caring. It works.

Attending religious services also helps us make meaning out of our suffering. *How do we make meaning out of our suffering?* There are no magic words or brilliant insights that can

explain it away. But attending religious services helps us make meaning out of our suffering *because we work through our suffering, together*. You are not alone in your suffering. Your suffering is shared by everybody. *Your* suffering is *our* suffering, the common lot of frail humanity.

My rabbi growing up in Denver was a wonderful man named Rabbi Daniel Goldberger. At his retirement dinner, one woman told her story about why she chose to spend decades praying every Shabbat morning with this rabbi. She shared that she was the only survivor in her family. All her family members had perished in the Shoah. She wanted to know why. She asked theologians. She asked professors. She asked clergy. She heard all kinds of explanations. God is dead. God is hiding God's face. God is searching for humanity. God contracts so that we have freedom to act. None of these explanations helped. One day, she went to see a young Rabbi Goldberger when he had just gotten to the congregation. Meeting with him in his study, she shared her story of unspeakable loss, and her questions. Why? Why? When she was done, he said nothing. For a long while, only silence. Her question unanswered hung in the air. At last, he said only one thing. He said: May I give you a hug? She said yes. He got up from behind his desk, he gave her a hug. Reflecting on that moment many years later, she said that hug brought her back not only to Judaism, but to life.

Attending religious services is that hug. It works. We make meaning out of our suffering when we do it together.

And attending religious services gives us one more crucial thing we need: an energy that inclines us towards *action*, towards doing *something* that will make the world a little bit better.

There was a second semester senior at Penn named Hadassah Raskas. She was loving her life at Penn, her friends, her studies, her extracurriculars, looking forward to the culmination of her college career, when all the sudden, in March, it just ended. No last semester of college.

No time for closure. No long good bye. No good bye at all. Quite abruptly, she found herself back home in Silver Spring, Maryland, waking up in her high school bedroom.

She feels the disruption. What happened to her year, to her life, to everybody's year, to everybody's life?

She sees need. Food insecurity. Empty store shelves. Panic buying. Job loss. Deep fear.

She sees opportunity. There are all these 18 to 22 year olds who were not able to finish their year at college. They are at home, with time on their hands.

Hadassah was deeply connected to Penn Hillel. She observed Shabbat seriously. She attended services regularly. Hadassah and her friends turn to one another and say: what can we do about it? Out of this was born a website called Coronaconnects.org. It is simple, taking less than one minute to complete. It matches people who need help, with people who want to help, and it does so nationally. A lifetime of attending religious services shaped her by instilling in her an orientation to act: what can I do now, what can we do now, to make this world better?

How do we deal with deaths of despair? The antidote to deaths of despair are lives of hope. Lives of hope don't just happen. Lives of hope take work. Lives of hope are nurtured by communities of people, by shared struggle, by shared dreaming, by collective meaning making, by doing things you believe in with people you love. Lives of hope are nurtured *right here*, every week, every day, every morning, every evening, until the end of time, virtually until it is safe to be together in person. See you in shul. Shabbat shalom.