



Parshat Vayakhel/Pekude — Shabbat Hachodesh
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Your Finest Hour
by Rabbi Wesley Gardenswartz
Temple Emanuel, Newton, MA

Mazal Tov Lily on your Bat Mitzvah! And mazal tov to your parents, David and Melissa, to your sisters, Tove and Emma, to your grandmother Lee. Lee, we are so happy that you now live at Evans Park, so close to our shul. And mazal tov to your aunt and uncle, Jessica and John, and to your cousins, Hannah, Noah and Olivia. This is not the day that any of us would have envisioned, but it is a deeply beautiful and meaningful Bat Mitzvah in its own way.

Which leads to the obvious question: what is the meaning that we are supposed to make of the fact that your Bat Mitzvah Lily has coincided with a pandemic? Years from now, you will be able to tell your children, grandchildren and great grandchildren that your Bat Mitzvah took place just when the world was contending with Covid-19. What is the meaning we are to make, what is the meaning *you* are to make, of this fact?

There was a great rabbi named Joseph Soloveitchik. He was such a great rabbi you did not even need to say his whole name. People just called him the Rav, and everyone knew it meant Joseph Soloveitchik. Kind of like you don't need to say LeBron James, you can just say LeBron. Anyway, the Rav wrote this important essay called *Shlihut*, which means mission or calling. The Rav taught that the fact that you live *when* you live, *where* you live, *in the circumstances that you live*, the fact that you live in *your time and your place* and not somebody else's time and place, means that you were born with a personal mission to make your time and place better. God created you with a mission to make *your world, your time, your place better*. The Rav observes that the Torah uses the exact same word, *malakh*, to apply to human

messengers and to heavenly angels. Often in the Torah you never know whether a being described as a *malakh* is a human being or a heavenly angel, or both. But the Rav points out a crucial difference between the human *malakh* and the heavenly *malakh*. The heavenly *malakh* does not have a choice, does not have free will. The heavenly angel does their cherubic thing on high, that is just how they are wired. But we human beings have the ability to say yes or no to our mission.

Though it seems like a lifetime ago, in reality it was less than two weeks ago when we confronted just this question in Megilat Ester. Would Ester say yes or no to her mission? Her very name, Ester, means hidden. What was hidden was the fact that she was a Jew. There she is, in the palace, safe from the extermination decree that endangered the rest of her people. At first she wants to say no to her mission. She tells her uncle Mordecai I really can't. Then Mordecai says something that is so important. He says to her: who knows, maybe you are right here, right now, for just such a time as this. *Mi yodea im la' eit kazot higaat l' malchut*, who knows if it was not precisely to help in this dark time that you are where you are right now.

We say yes to our mission not when it's easy. Not when it's effortless. But when it's hard. When it demands sacrifice.

But it is precisely when it is hard, when it demands sacrifice, when times are darkest that our mission shines most brightly. In a famous speech he gave during the dark hours of World War II, Winston Churchill called this turning our darkest hour into our finest hour.

How do we do that? And Lily, as a Bat Mitzvah, how might you think about achieving your finest hour?

For some of us, we don't have to think too hard about this question. Life just comes at us. The doctors, nurses, and health care professionals throughout the country treating patients

who have Covid-19. We don't even have words adequate to thank them. They were already healing the sick, which was already abundantly praiseworthy. But now they are treating those with the Coronavirus in ways which jeopardize their own health and safety. As you all know, some health care workers throughout our nation have become infected by their patients, and still there are courageous healers who throw themselves into this sacred and urgent and frightening work. For the doctors, nurses and health care professionals on the front lines of this epic struggle, this is their finest hour. They are living their mission.

But what about the rest of us? What if our mission, what if our calling, is not in the healing professions? What if we are 13? What if we are a concerned teenager or college kid home suddenly from school? What if we are in Newton just raising our family, trying to get through the day, doing our best to work remotely from home, trying to figure out how to master the technologies that can connect us virtually, trying to help our children learn remotely, trying to not go stir-crazy when largely confined to the privacy of our homes, all the while missing our routines, missing the people we usually see, missing the life and culture that are painfully absent. In this surreal world, how do we find our mission?

The bad news is that there is a lot of need out there.

The good news is that there is a lot of opportunity for us to help, for us to make a real difference. Can we find our own version of Alfredo's?

Alfredo's is an Italian restaurant in Lynn that has been serving up pizza to the local community for years. When the schools in Lynn shuttered due to the coronavirus, the owners of Alfredo's immediately offered to provide free pizzas to the community. If you are now home from school, wondering what are you going to feed your kids for lunch, you can go to Alfredo's

and pick up a free pizza. The restaurant is not asking for any donations. They just want to give back, and this is how they are doing it.

Alfredo's is owned by a couple named Thaer and Sara Demaidi, who were asked: why are you doing this? They said: "With the schools closing a lot of people are now at home, staying with their kids, which also means lost wages. So we wanted to give back to our community and help out. We decided the best way to do that was by providing free lunch to our community."

Thaer and Sara Demaidi embody the teaching of the Rav. Where is Alfredo's? In Lynn. When is Alfredo's? Now, in the midst of the Coronavirus pandemic. What is Alfredo's? Thaer and Sara Demaidi make pizza, really good pizza. What is the need of the world around Alfredo's? There is a need for food. Check. There is a need for kindness. Check. There is a need for building community when everybody is in their homes. Check. There is a need for grace and love at a time of fear. Check.

Who knows if not for just this time Thaer and Sara Demaidi were gifted with the blessing of running a community pizzeria? Who knows if not for just this time were Thaer and Sara Demaidi were gifted with the blessing of a generous heart? Alfredo's has served countless fine pizzas over the years, but who could argue that this is Alfredo's finest hour.

Thaer and Sara make great pizza, and they generously give it away. What do we do?

Everybody has their own gift to give, a gift that this broken world desperately needs.

What will you do now to make this *your* finest hour?

Shabbat shalom.