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Loving Feelings Must Generate Loving Actions

We've been living with social-distancing and self-isolating for close to seven weeks now, with no definite sense of how this will change and evolve or when. At Temple Beth El, our last in-person prayer service was held on Monday March 16th after which time it became clear that we could no longer physically congregate together. As is the case with many houses of worship, we transitioned to Zoom services which do a great deal to help people feel less isolated from their community, but, of course, cannot duplicate an in-person communal experience despite the wonders of technology. There's an intangible quality involved in congregating in-person in a shared space. Humans are social beings and there is a great deal of complexity and nuance in most everything we do.

Gathering for prayer can be a very powerful experience on different levels. It can express our affirmation of community, a general sharing of values, a social expression of mutual support, and a communal effort to cultivate our spiritual selves. There are many different kinds of prayer experiences. Prayer is primarily comprised of words, but when those words are sung, this affects what the words convey. The melody itself becomes part of the prayer – the non-verbal part that modifies the verbal component by the emotion and mood the melody fosters. How words are sung and the kind of melody used makes a difference. The combination of people's voices plays an important role also, of course. The feeling behind the words on the part of the participants is fundamental. That component of feeling is immeasurable. The more one is able to place oneself into the words of a song or prayer, to enter it as fully as possible, the more it will transport the person who is singing or praying. In addition it has the byproduct of affecting those who share the prayer space with us. Our relationship to prayer and our ability to enter a prayer may vacillate from moment to moment. It is something that we cultivate through a lifetime of experience. Prayer is not meant to be a spectator sport, but something that touches our souls in addition to offering comfort and strength.

Now, however, in this period of social-distancing, some of those elements of public prayer are absent, but, fortunately, we still can gather virtually. The need for community and mutual support is crucial in this time. It's a time for us to recognize what fortifies us and to

cultivate our inner resources, count our blessings, and plumb our spiritual traditions for the wisdom and support they offer us. It's a time for us to strive to be our best selves.

In my own tradition, a central element of that endeavor is the study of spiritual texts, many of which are structured as commentaries around the successive weekly readings through the Five Books of Moses (the Torah) which we complete during the course of each year. This *Shabbat* (Sabbath) i.e. today, we are reading chapters sixteen through twenty of the book of Leviticus. In the center of this reading we find some of the best known verses in the Torah. Leviticus 19:18 is the well known "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" and Leviticus 19:34 supplements this with "You shall love the stranger as yourself." These are obviously always fundamental tenets and speak vitally to today's needs. These verses prescribe not only feelings, but also actions. What does it mean to love your neighbor as yourself or to love the stranger as yourself? Loving feelings have to also generate loving actions; otherwise they have much less impact in the world. In the context of the coronavirus pandemic, part of loving actions means maintaining social-distancing, doing what we can to protect others from being infected, staying informed as to what are the safest ways of behaving in this current situation, supporting others emotionally by calling and staying in touch, letting people know that we are thinking about them, being present (even from a distance) for others. The sound of a caring voice can be very comforting, letting others know that they matter to us.

This is a time that for many of us is a time of life and death. It's a time to appreciate those who risk their lives to provide vital services to the community. It's a very sobering time that should make us ever more aware of what really matters in our lives. It should help us clarify what are values are and what they should be. This is a time that should make us aware of both the strengths and the weaknesses of our society and, hopefully, foster a resolve to build on the strengths and overcome the weaknesses. Times of crisis emphasize the vital importance of community and of loving our neighbors and the stranger as ourselves. This is clearly such a time. Wishing you all health, resilience, patience, and love.