

Friends,

I am reaching out to you - the beloved, dispersed, Yale Jewish community of students, alumni, parents, and friends - because in these trying days we need one another so profoundly.

Like all of you, at Slifka Center we have been racing to keep pace with the acceleration of the novel coronavirus. One can hardly believe that only ten days have passed since President Salovey's announcement that classes would move online for the two weeks following spring break. A mere four days later - *less than one week ago* - we received news of the first confirmed COVID-19 case at Yale, and with it, the transformation of the entire spring semester into a distance-learning experience. In the past few days the timeline of social distancing has dilated in harrowing ways: we are now told to think in a time-frame of [twelve to eighteen months](#). Perhaps President Salovey had this in mind when, in [yesterday's moving message](#) to the community, he reminded us that Yale shut down for almost two years during the American Revolution.

Just last week our concern for the Yale Jewish community had been spatial: how will we create community and share Jewish wisdom online? How will we gather when students are hundreds and thousands miles away from one another, and from Slifka Center? We share a single center, and we all take our bearings by it.

This week, our concerns are temporal: what are *today's* numbers? *Next week* will the trendlines look fundamentally different? Will weddings scheduled for *August* be cancelled? What will our society look like when it emerges from weeks, or *months*, of standstill? The practice of social distancing creates its own temporal isolation: the timelines that matter most are often the most private. How many days remain in a loved one's two-week quarantine? How many weeks of unemployment benefits will cover next month's bills? How many months will it be until I see my parents, children, or friends who live in a different city?

The very structure of time has changed. We no longer inhabit the cyclical time of mythology, nor the monotonic progress of modernity. Time opens up before us as formlessness and void. We struggle to find our way, bereft of our quotidian way-points of commutes and Sunday outings, and deprived of the seasonal markers of commencements and conferences. Earlier this week, a rabbinic colleague of mine couldn't remember which day's liturgy to recite because Monday and Tuesday had become indistinguishable; last night my five-year old said as he sat down to dinner, "What are we having for lunch" because the day's structure of school and activities has evaporated. And, largest of all: the haunting specter of the opposite of progress - the world's impoverishment and slide into chaos - looms.

Strikingly, and poignantly, this Shabbat's particular Torah readings speaks to our very moment - to the foundational need for shared, predictable time to secure human dignity. In preparation for the Tuesday's new moon, the final astronomical event before Passover, Jewish communities across the world will read the first half of Exodus 12, which opens with God's words, "This new moon shall be your beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year to you." Any narrative, including the deliverance of the Jewish people from Egypt, is built on the framework of a communal calendar. It is in the capacity to name time, to mark time - and, critically, to share time - that the Jewish people became more than a dispersed collection of individuals in Egypt. There is something fundamentally redemptive about achieving a shared structure of time.

The Jewish slice of social media is currently rife with questions about whether, and how, Jews will observe the coming Passover. Should the holiday be postponed for a month, in the spirit of the Bible's "second-chance" Passover? What are best practices for seders over Zoom? Do the strict dietary laws bend in a time where food supply chains have become precarious? The understandable sentiment behind it all - there could hardly be anything less convenient than Passover during a pandemic.

My aim is to suggest that Passover presents the alternative we so desperately need to the (dis)order of time that threatens to engulf us. On the night of the Exodus, the very event we reenact in our seders, households took refuge in their homes because - and the haunting assonance to the present-day is nearly unbearable - of the invisible, deadly force that rages outside. The circumstances could hardly be more prescient - and that same full moon that shone over the Israelite homes will shine over ours in a few weeks, united and separated by millennia of order created by the uninterrupted observance of the seder itself. The tension between Passover and our fearful present is not coincidence, but essence; not practicality, but perspective.

Thousands of years ago, the new moon that followed the spring equinox inaugurated a new order of time - one that brought the Israelite people together in freedom. As we prepare for this new moon, we join them, and every generation of Jews who has observed the rites of Passover since. From the Jews stationed as a garrison on the Egyptian island of [Elephantine in 419 BCE](#), who asked the High Priest in Jerusalem for guidance in observing Passover, to the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto who [observed the seder](#) during the first hours of the German liquidation - we stand in an unbroken chain of Jews who have raised up the sacred order of shared time against the chaos of their own times. If Passover means one thing this year, it is that the shared bonds of meaning and purpose that stretch across oceans and generations have the power to elevate us above the confusion and isolation of our moment.

Perhaps this is why the Torah moves immediately from the calendar to a picture of households coming together in celebration over a shared meal. Immediately following on the

establishment of the calendar, the Torah says that the Passover sacrifice should be consumed by families, which is qualified in a critical manner: the division into households is not ultimate. "If a family does not need an entire animal, they share the meal with a neighboring household." The boundaries between homes and families can - and must - dissolve when need is located on one side and resources on the other. Many of us have, even in this confounding time, much more than we need - and many of us need much more than we have. Sharing time and sharing food are of a type: both are living expressions of our solidarity and recognition of our shared destiny.

Here, again, Yale's beautiful, dispersed Jewish community provides a timely exemplar. Liam Elkind '21 has [coordinated over 1,000 volunteers](#) to assist the elderly and vulnerable in New York - precisely those who cannot cross the thresholds of their own homes.

May we, our families, and our communities be blessed - first and foremost with health, with safety, and with the material resources we need to live the coming months with hope and dignity. And may we be strengthened by the knowledge of those who have come before us - those whom we were blessed to know and those whom we never met - to reach across our thresholds and stitch our communities together one relationship at a time, to help those we have met and those we have not yet met. May we live the hard-won lessons of our brave ancestors in this difficult hour, and leave an example to provide strength and inspiration to our descendants.

With wishes for a Shabbat of peace and - more important than everything else - my most sincere invitation to your outreach for conversation, for community, and for every kind of support.

Yours in community,

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