

EDITOR'S NOTE

ISSACHAR IN LOCKDOWN

Whether suffering or scared, ill or isolated, lamenting or lonely, there can be no one in this world, which seems far smaller and interconnected than ever before, who is not seeking solace or sense in this time of coronavirus. By design, a quarterly print journal is not the best-suited medium to respond in real time to unprecedented and tragic events, especially not those on the scale of the current crisis. As a self-styled “journal of Orthodox Jewish thought,” *TRADITION* does best when taking in the long arc of issues affecting our community, religious practice, and spiritual life. It is hard to be thoughtful, at least with confidence that one’s musings might have enduring worth on the printed page, when we are trapped in a maze with no clear sense where the exit can be found or when it will be reached.

Nevertheless, at this writing in the midst of the Passover of COVID, what might we say about ourselves as individuals and as a community? Even those of us housed with family members are undergoing prolonged isolation from friends and colleagues, teachers and students, rabbis and congregants, workplaces and synagogues, with no end in sight. Assuming we are, please God, among the healthy sheltering in place, how are we making the most of our “time enough at last”? Has this challenge led to increased acts of kindness, bonding with family (if we are fortunate to be together), Torah study, and other spiritually and intellectually profitable pursuits?

In Jacob’s blessing to his descendants, Issachar is presented metaphorically as “a strong-boned donkey, couching amidst the hearths. He saw the homestead was goodly, and the land was delightful; and he put his shoulder to the burden, and became a toiling servant” (Genesis 49:14-15). Rashi, following Genesis Rabba (99:9), introduces the well-known imagery of Issachar as the scholar, bearing the yoke of Torah. A natural “home-body,” he does not travel to distant ports as does brother Zebulun, but hunkers down at hearth and home (following Alter’s translation). We are led to believe that a *talmid hakham’s* personality is well-suited to isolation, especially if spent in the company of a sufficient supply of books. I recall R. Abba Bronspigel’s observation that the comparison to a donkey is most apt. When the yoke is removed from his neck, the beast does not bolt, but usually remains in place. A scholar continues his or her study even when released of a formal burden and responsibility.

TRADITION

The servant toils even in his hours of leisure, also serving (and learning) as he only stands and waits. The tribe's latter blessing from the mouth of Moses, "Rejoice... Issachar in thy tents" (Deuteronomy 33:18), is of course understood as the joy experienced by the learner toiling in "quarantine" in the tents of Torah study.

And to what have we been witness from within our fortresses of solitude? Impressive resilience and spiritual and cultural creativity. Distanced from our synagogues and study halls, the Jewish community worldwide, from Hollywood to hardcore Hasidim, and, it must be said, across the entire denominational spectrum, has found new ways to sustain and create virtual communities, opportunities for Torah study and Jewish engagement, and ways to strengthen much-needed solitary prayer when we are socially distant from *minyan* and *tzibbur*.

With impressive (and unexpected) signal to noise ratio the Internet has proven itself to be no mere lifeboat amidst this coronavirus storm, but the world's largest yeshiva. To be clear: Today's Issachars need not toil only in ersatz Zoom *batei midrash ve-keneset*. Ultimately study must be translated to action, and the myriad demands of charity, kindness, and life-saving remind us that not all our efforts can or should be purely cerebral.

Yes, some may be correctly concerned about slippery slopes hiding behind the exigent leniencies issued during these difficult times, especially concerning the use of electronics and other technologies on Shabbat and Yom Tov. Yet, there can be no doubt that the same heroic spiritual and halakhic leadership which has distinguished itself in creative and remarkable ways throughout the crisis until now will guide us as we reenter the world to a "new normal."

The journey back will not be easy, nor will it be wholly joyous, as it seems, God save us, there will be nary one among us unaffected by loss or some degree of ruin. For this we must both lament and simultaneously commit ourselves to comfort and sustain. The biblical story of the flood should serve as a cautionary tale as we each leave our own protective, quarantined arks. Reentry to a ravaged world is rarely smooth for the survivors. One suspects that when the accursed virus leaves us, as we pray it will, the world will have been changed in ways that are hard for us to foresee from within the ark. The challenge to those who will help rebuild the transformed world is: How will we have changed? What lessons learned through the struggles of suffering, loss, and isolation—and the creativity and inspiration generated in response from within our closed homes—will we take with us to help rebuild and heal? How will we have been changed, individually and communally, for the better?

Jeffrey Saks

As in the midrashic interpretation of Moses' request to see God's face and understand His ways, we are usually only able to decipher meaning of great events when pondered in hindsight, rarely when we look at them "face on" (*Yalkut Shimoni* to Exodus 33:23). Indeed, one of Rabbi Soloveitchik's most enduring teachings is that the very attempt to divine God's ways, especially in interpreting human suffering, often only produces spiritual distraction. (These reservations notwithstanding, during these difficult days of illness and isolation we have been publishing frequent content on **TraditionOnline.org** which we hope offers insight and guidance.)

TRADITION's editors send our best wishes for good health and complete recovery to our community of readers and subscribers, along with all others who are suffering. We are all Issachars now. If we are healthy enough to make use of this time, may the merits accrued through our actions now serve to stay the plague and bring healing to our world.

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