

NOTE TO TVO COMMUNITY ABOUT THE PANDEMIC
March 13, 2020 Erev Shabbat Ki Tissa 5780

From Rabbi Brian Walt

Dear Friends,

What a challenging and difficult week this has been for all of us! Before Shabbat begins, I am writing to reach out to all of you in love and compassion. Let us all take time this Shabbat to appreciate the blessing of being part of TVO, a very special sacred community that gives us strength and wisdom at difficult times.

In this letter, I want to briefly share some feelings and thoughts in response to the global pandemic, starting with a personal story that passed through my mind as I struggled to sleep one night this week. When my daughter, Galya, was a young kid she had a sweet thing she would often say, "Abba, Imma, Galya, ALL TOGETHER!" She said this with such enthusiasm and excitement whenever she wanted us all to do something. "Abba, Imma, Galya, all together!" It was her heartfelt, pure expression of our natural human desire to be together. As human beings we are social and love to connect with one another.

This week we have all come to learn a different truth from our global and national public health experts and leaders - may they all be blessed in every way! They have taught us that even though human beings are naturally social, at this moment social distance from one another is the only way for us to slow down the dangers that the pandemic poses to all of us. Making sure that we create distance so as to slow down the spread of the virus is an act that could save countless human lives. In Jewish terms, creating social distance at this moment is an act of pikuah nefesh - an act of saving lives, a mitzvah that our tradition insists supersedes all other mitzvot. It is this reality that has led to the cancellation of so many events and gatherings that are part of our lives. I am sure every one of us has been affected in our own lives by this urgent need of the moment. And, as you know, it led the leadership of the synagogue - may they also be blessed in every way! - to cancel a very important and wonderful weekend with Cantor Abbe Lyons that was scheduled for this Shabbat.

As difficult as it is, it is important for every one of us, that for this period of time we avoid gathering with others in person and find other ways of being in touch with one another, be it by phone or internet. This is our religious/ethical responsibility to one another.

Judaism is all about nurturing loving connection with others and gathering together in community to celebrate shabbat, holidays, prayer and much, much more. There are certain important prayers that can't be said without a minyan. Right now, we are called to be with one another in a different way. Right now, our love for one another and for all human beings in our country and on this planet, calls on us to limit social gatherings of all kinds.

This will change our lives in many different ways. I was really looking forward to my visit to Ithaca in two weeks time but at this time creating gatherings of people, even for religious services, could endanger lives. Therefore, my visit to Ithaca is cancelled and instead will set up video calls offering services, Torah study, adult education and time for conversation during the weekend March 27-29 that I was planning to be with you in person. In addition, I plan to offer a short weekday morning prayer service starting this coming week. I am also open to any suggestions you may have.

For this period of time, let us see the challenge of social distancing as a sacred, religious responsibility - a mitzvah, an act of pikuach nefesh. Social distancing is a temporary means to cope with a global threat to human life.

Lastly, the memory of Galya's lovely wish that we all be together came to mind the night after I listened to a NPR podcast with Chris Lyden in which the presenters pointed out that the spiritual challenge of the pandemic is that we are all deeply interconnected. What happens in China or France or Algeria affects us here and what we do here affects everyone all over the world. This is the truth that we proclaim each day in the shma. Our actions impact the lives of people all over the globe. The deepest truth is that we are all in it together. To universalize Galya's sweet saying: The people in China, in America, in Korea and all the other countries of the world, all together! What we do here affects others far away from us. Let us hear the call of this moment as a call to responsibility, to justice and love for all human beings and for all life. Let us hear the call of the moment to be a call to environmental justice and responsibility. Let us hear it as the call of the Shma to be witnesses to the interconnectedness of all and to our responsibility to act accordingly!

I wish you all a peaceful and joyful Shabbat.

*Shabbat Shalom and much love to you all,
Rabbi Brian*