

# Congregation Beth Sholom

**A SPECIAL MESSAGE from Edward Gelber, M.D. March 23, 2020**

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My expertise as a medical doctor is primarily in the realm of psychiatry, not infectious disease or epidemiology, but I can see that there are two opposite ways our society could have approached the Covid-19 epidemic. Our present approach has been to limit the spread of the virus through social distancing measures that cause our social and economic life to come to a near standstill relative to where they were a month ago. The other approach, which we have decided not to take, would be to conduct business as usual on the theory that most people recover just fine from a Covid-19 infection, and let those who are afraid for their safety protect themselves as they see fit, by isolating themselves, or wearing masks, etc. We've chosen a path that assertively protects most peoples' health, to the detriment of our economy and our social life, in the short term. The winners are the medically vulnerable, such as older and a priori sicker people who are much more likely to die from an infection, and those who care about that cohort.

On a practical and personal level, we still need to answer the question of how to manage ourselves during this time of enforced limitations. Let's look at what Judaism requires of us and how that can fit into our daily routine under sheltering in place. We're required to take care of our health, and to study. Speaking for myself, I made the decision to temporarily leave my home in New York City where the epidemic was running rampant to spend some time in a more pastoral setting with my mom, your rabbi, at her home, in a town where there was a lower infection rate. I bought myself a bike and put the 7-minute workout app on my phone to stay fit during the long indoor days. I started looking at Jewish websites such as Aish HaTorah to continue my connection with Judaism at a time when I couldn't attend my weekly classes or go to shul. And one of my friends started a weekly group videochat so we could stay in touch. We have to be creative and adapt to our circumstances, and we can even see it as a good opportunity to work on ourselves, our inner goals and our relationships. For example, if you are living with an addiction, what better time to look for an on-line videoconference recovery meeting?

But some people look at the economic fallout of our social distancing policies--the fallen stock market, the unemployment, the closed business, the drastic reduction of public life, and seem to conflate this man-made situation, which is well under our control, with the biological effects of the epidemic. And they panic as if we were facing a civilizational collapse. Much to the contrary, we should congratulate ourselves on sacrificing our short term social and economic welfare for the health and safety of a medically vulnerable minority among us--the old and the sick. Our social distancing policies are the sign of a morally healthy civilization. Respect for the sanctity of life is a core Jewish value that has radiated out from the Torah to permeate American culture, and we should be thankful and proud to live in this country with its Jewish-inspired values. And these social-distancing policies are buying us time to find a technological solution, be it a vaccine, a cure, better treatment, or more time to manufacture needed equipment like ventilators and hospital facilities. Soon enough our medical scientists will have better medical interventions for us to use, and then we can relax our social distancing policies, and the economic and social changes that some people are so overly afraid of will mostly revert back to the way they were before, although, I expect with some changes we don't fully foresee. Perhaps there will be a refocusing away from material success and more towards personal growth and relationships.

Dr. Gelber is the son of Rabbi Peggy de Prophetis and practices in New York