

Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove, Ph.D. “The Next Right Thing”

Even rabbis, lest you think otherwise, turn to rabbis for support. And if there was ever a week that rabbis were in need of support, counsel, and guidance, this past week was the one. Through the good services of the New York Board of Rabbis, the other day I participated in a clergy-only Zoom meeting to speak openly about the challenges my colleagues and I were facing as we tended to the pastoral needs of our respective communities.

Not everyone on the call was a congregational rabbi. There were teachers, educators, chaplains, and administrators; their stories varied depending on the community served. One rabbi, the chaplain to Rikers Island jail, described the weighty choices being made in our correctional facilities as to whether to keep inmates in isolation or to allow them to interact with other inmates and risk exposure. Another rabbi, the chief chaplain in a local psychiatric facility, described the isolation of the patients and the debates taking place as to whether or not clergy and mental health professionals should provide psychosocial support in this time of social distancing – a damned if you do, damned if you don't choice. My congregational colleagues shared stories of couples deciding whether to postpone a wedding, families seeking counsel as to whether to reschedule long planned bnei mitzvah or if it is preferred to have a circumcision right away in the hospital or wait until the eighth day and risk exposure. One colleague told of a particularly acrimonious divorce in his community, in which the civil settlement between the parties required that the get, the Jewish divorce document, be executed within a certain time frame, a time frame now rendered impossible, because in order to execute a get, you must have multiple witnesses in the same room. In every instance, my colleagues were being asked what should be done. So many individual stories, not to mention real-time management decisions to stay open or not, to hold services or not, to make budget or staff freezes or not. Our problems varied, but our state of mind was alike. So many decisions, each one of great consequence, each one with multiple stakeholders holding different opinions, each one needing to be made on the spot – a firehose of decisions showing no sign of letting up. We were all worn down, we were all fatigued. I am not sure if the call solved anything, but it was certainly therapeutic, if for no other reason, than to know that the pressures I faced in my rabbinate this past week were not unique to me. Decision fatigue is a burden I do not shoulder alone.

This morning I want to speak to you about the COVID-19 pandemic not as a health care professional; my expertise is no more or less than any other non-medical professional. I want to speak from the perspective of a pastor and reflect on but one of the many effects this public health crisis is having on all of our psyches, individually and collectively.

I recently read an article by John Tierney about a study conducted by two Israeli researchers, Jonathan Leva of Stanford and Shai Danziger of Ben Gurion University, entitled “Extraneous Factors in Judicial Decisions.” To make a long article short, the researchers evaluated the decisions made by a parole board in the Israeli prison system. What Leva and Danziger

discovered was that whether a prisoner was paroled or not had nothing to do with the prisoner's ethnic background, the crimes they had committed or the sentences they had received. After analyzing over 1,100 decisions over the course of a year, they discovered that the greatest predictor in outcome was the time of day in which the parole board heard the case. Prisoners who appeared early in the morning were paroled seventy percent of the time; those who appeared late in the day, less than ten percent of the time. If your case was heard just before lunch, your odds were far worse than after lunch. The paper received quite a bit of press at the time. On the one hand, it revealed the disquieting truth that the dispensation of justice can be contingent on levels of rest or glucose, but it was also affirming, in that it documented something about the human condition that we all know intuitively to be true, namely, that our ability to make decisions is like a muscle. And that decision-making muscle, like any muscle, can become fatigued, can become strained, can give out on us, which is why we need to treat it well, with care, with rest, and with caution.

As I read about decision fatigue, I began to think of an endless number of examples, in my life and all around, that substantiated the idea. I thought of a doctoral advisor of mine about whom I realized after my first semester in graduate school that I should only speak to him in the first half of the day, because I could ask him the same question in the morning and in the afternoon, and no different than the Israeli judges, he would give me a totally different answer. I think of my father, who once shared with me that he far prefers speaking to me on Sunday night when the pressures of Shabbat are behind me, to Thursday night when I am frantically trying to finish my sermon. I think of Moses, who while leading the Israelites through the desert, was reprimanded by his father-in-law Jethro for seeking to adjudicate all the cases brought before him. "What you are doing is not right, you will wear yourself out," Jethro tells Moses. It wasn't right for Moses and it wasn't right for Israel who risked being led by a leader unable to call balls and strikes. What if, I wondered, decision fatigue is a psychological explanation of the riddle of Pharaoh's hardened heart? To let Israel go would be to capitulate to Moses; to keep the Israelites enslaved would be to endure more plagues – a dilemma that would paralyze anyone, even a Pharaoh. Decision fatigue explains why in taxonomy of sacrifices in this week's Torah reading, there is an entire chapter on the various offerings for intentional and unintentional sins. Leviticus was well aware that nobody goes very far in life without a misstep in judgment. No doubt decision fatigue was behind Adam and Eve's ill-fated choice to eat of the fruit of the garden; no doubt decision fatigue is behind every ill-advised decision made after 2:00 AM since the beginning of time. As my physician once told me, it is not the calories in the wine you drink that are the problem, it is the calories of the ice cream you consume after you have the wine, after your judgement is impaired, that are the problem. The effects of decision fatigue are everywhere in our lives: the effects of the mental exhaustion wrought by the task of making decisions –weighing the pluses and minuses of any course of action and having to make an imperfect choice in a short time – the consequences of which both we and others will have to live with.

It is that feeling, on steroids, which is how I believe we all feel right now. I can only speak to the pressures of being a rabbi; I cannot claim to speak with authority about other fields and walks of life. But I have spent much of the week hearing the stories of many members of the community. It is always hard in the business world to juggle the variables that go into management decisions, but those variables have now multiplied and turned erratic and rapid in ways members of our community have not seen in their lifetimes. Not just whether to buy or sell, but how to maintain a company remotely. How to treat employees when retirement plans have been materially impaired, and the looming question of when a management team deems it safe or still unsafe to reopen – weighing the relative risks of lost business versus employee health. What about the medical professionals debating the allocation of precious resources, including the most precious resource of all – themselves – towards patient care? At what point should someone be admitted to the hospital, be intubated or not? What about in our personal lives? Go to work or stay home? See a parent or friend in need, if doing so puts us at personal risk? Give birth without a partner present or give birth outside a hospital system where a partner can be present, but the mother could be at risk if there's a complication? And so on and on and on. Financial professionals, medical professionals, educators, delivery men, and doormen – there is system overload for everyone, especially when we are working full speed 24/7 with no end in sight.

How I wish, more than you know, that I had the answer – that this would be the part of the sermon where I untie the knot and explain how we should all move forward. But I don't have the answer. All I can do, the best I can do, at least, what I am trying to do is – as in my call earlier in the week with my colleagues – to give voice to some of my anxieties, which may be some of your anxieties, which may just help us all realize that we are not as alone as we may think we are. And perhaps, if we all allow for the fact that each one of us, in our respective lanes, is just doing our level best to make the wisest decisions we can, based on the limited information and limited time we have – well, maybe we will all be that much more patient, more forgiving, more communicative, and more trusting of ourselves and of others. None of us can do it alone; we all need to have confidence that our colleagues and friends are operating with the best of intentions; and we can't relitigate their judgment at the very moment that a cascade of new decisions are waiting to be made. It is not easy in the present environment, but we need to find ways to let that decision-making muscle rest and replenish – through sleep, with exercise, by whatever means possible – so that we will make the next decision we are asked to make with as sound judgement as possible

These last weeks have taught me much; most of all, they have taught me how little I know and how little we all know about the future. But I am getting the sense that this sprint is turning into a marathon, or possibly a marathon at the pace of a sprint. And if that is the case, and if we intend to see this through, then we must build up the necessary emotional reserves and spiritual resources to go the distance. To mix my metaphors, we all need to acknowledge that in this fight we are all punching way above our weight. None of us holds the answers. So let's work together, with humility, with courage, with trust, and with confidence, seeking to do the next right thing, and then the next

and then the next, until one day, please God, we will look back at this time saying it too has passed – a string of imperfect decisions that led us out of the wilderness and back to the perfectly imperfect lives to which we so long to return.