

Dear Agudas friends,

First and foremost, I want to express my concern for your welfare during this time of uncertainty and stress. I'm especially concerned for those who may be ill, infirm, or lacking family support. If you are in need, we may be able to help or able to guide you to the appropriate sources of assistance. Knowing our congregation, I'm confident we have at least as many members eager to help others as we have in need of help themselves. Please don't hesitate to contact us and we will do our best to match needs to offers of help.

Amidst navigating the situation, same as everyone else as best I can, I've been struggling to find a spiritual response. Everything in my Jewish experience and education teaches that we link arms and try to face adversity together, as a community. Facing a threat we pray and recite psalms with a quorum. We visit the sick. In mourning, we inundate the bereaved with kugles of love and sit side by side in shiva. Every rabbinic "If I am not for myself..." is accompanied by the admonishment, "But if I am only for myself..." Quarantine is considered a punishment for antisocial behavior (leprosy.) Banding together has been a core Jewish response throughout our history, but it is exactly the wrong strategy for weathering a pandemic. How can my heritage be a source of inspiration and reassurance in a moment of "social distancing"?

The Book of Job stands out in the biblical canon as the paradigm for individual response to calamity. Though his friends rush to comfort Job, they "weep for him at a distance." (Job 2:22) Job laments his isolation, "[God] has distanced my brethren from me, and those who know me have been estranged... my kin have failed, the formerly familiar have forgotten me." (19:13-14) God's reply is provocative. God declares that it is from afar that "the horse smells the battle" and only from a distant perch may "an eagle spy its food." (39:25, 29) Social distancing may be painful, but the lesson of Job is that it may also force us to sense the "bigger picture" and reconnect with God.

God offers solitude to Adam, but quickly realizes that humanity craves companionship. Yet ever since, momentary seclusion has characterized the heroism of our biblical forebears. Abraham walks alone, a solitary Moses communes with God forty days upon his mountain, a solo King David plucks his harp. Hasidic tradition includes hitbodedut, using seclusion as a path to breakthrough to God with unstructured prayer (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hitbodedut>) Withdrawal from society presents an opportunity to explore a personal relationship with the Holy. Paradoxically, separation may be a blessing. It grants us a chance for the hard work of reassessment and taking stock, necessary to forge even deeper, stronger bonds. Today we dwell apart, secure in the determination to ultimately rejoin and build together.

B'Yedidut (w/friendship)

Rabbi Mitchell Levine