

Tifereth Israel March 13 · 🌐

Tifereth Israel Clergy shares A Thought Before Shabbat

At Purim Monday night, just four days ago, we read the verse, "Lay'hudim hayta orah v'simcha v'sason viykar" - that after Esther and Mordechai averted Haman's wicked plot, "the Jews enjoyed light and gladness, happiness, and honor" (Esther 8:16). We recite this verse every Saturday night before Havdalah, not as a historical reminder but as a prayer for the week ahead. Though the end of Shabbat brings with it sadness and darkness, we still hope that the week ahead will be filled with gladness and joy.

It seems that, even before Shabbat is set to begin, we are entering into a dark and difficult period, one filled with fear and anxiety. At a time when we need the strength and support of our community the most, we won't be able to gather physically in one common space. On the heels of the joy that Purim brought to Jewish communities around the world, we now wait anxiously for the time that light, gladness, happiness, and togetherness return to us and to the entire world.

It was with great pain that we decided to suspend our in-person gatherings. It goes against our every instinct as Jewish clergy, and even to us feels drastic. Yet, in these strange times that have turned us all into amateur epidemiologists we recognize that by making this bold move now, we may literally be saving lives. We find some light and gladness in these dark times by knowing we are fulfilling our tradition's most important commandment: pikuach nefesh (saving lives). Even if we as individuals or families might likely be OK if we contracted the virus, we can fulfill this mitzvah by refusing to become unwitting vectors for the disease any time we shook hands with an immune suppressed stranger or hugged one of our elders. If there's the slightest chance that we can save even one life, it will have been worth it.

We will be taking many of our services, classes, and meetings online, and we'll publicize ways for you to stay connected. At the same time, Judaism is a tradition rich in rituals for the home. Even if it's not your normal practice, these rituals can provide meaning, structure, and calm in the face of big changes. Light Shabbat candles and have a nice dinner with your loved ones tonight. Study the Torah portion at home, or look for Torah online (JTS, Hadar, and Sefaria are great places to start). Check out Cantor Chomsky's amazing archive of MP3's, ranging from Shabbat services to Seder songs. Give tzedakah to a local food bank. Say the Shema with your kids before you go to bed. Judaism was never meant to be constrained to the synagogue building, anyway.

Still, we recognize that these changes are dramatic and add to the growing sense of unease and anxiety we all feel. It is an added tircha d'tzibura — a "burden upon the community" — to be unable to gain spiritual strength from one another's presence, and to have to figure out new technology and new ways of being in touch. Much of this burden is placed on our members who are already most isolated and in need of connection, who will be feeling more cut off than before given these measures.

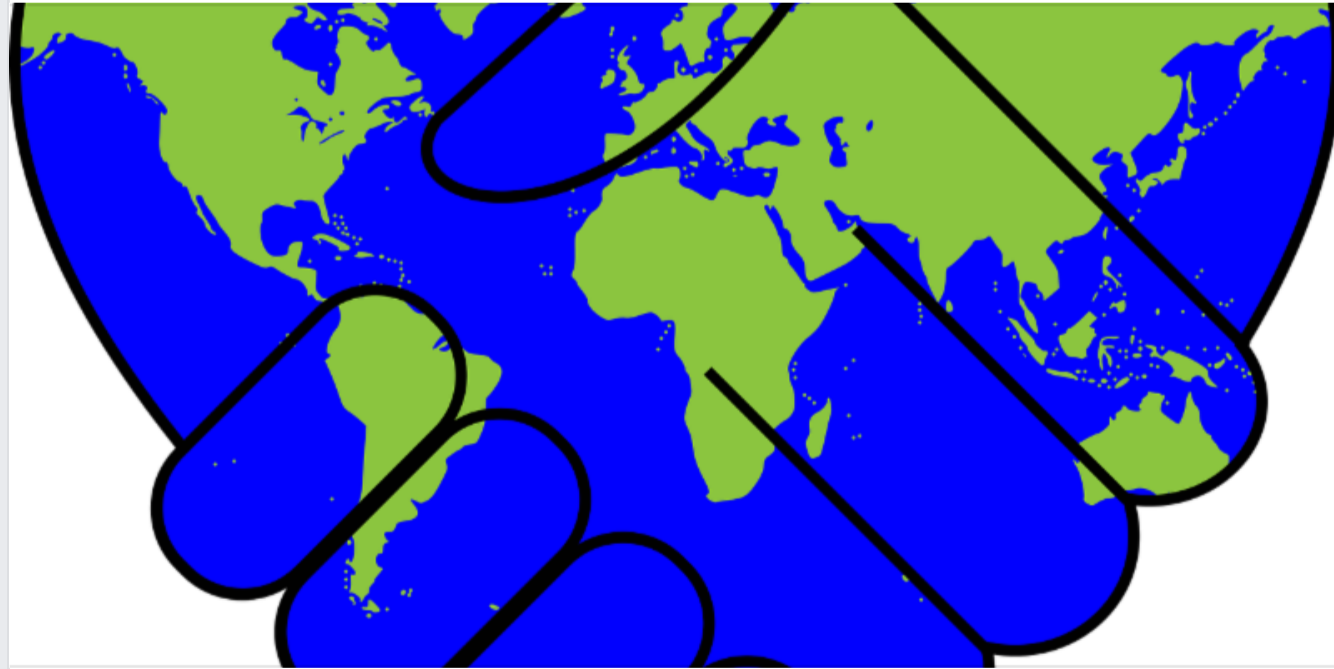
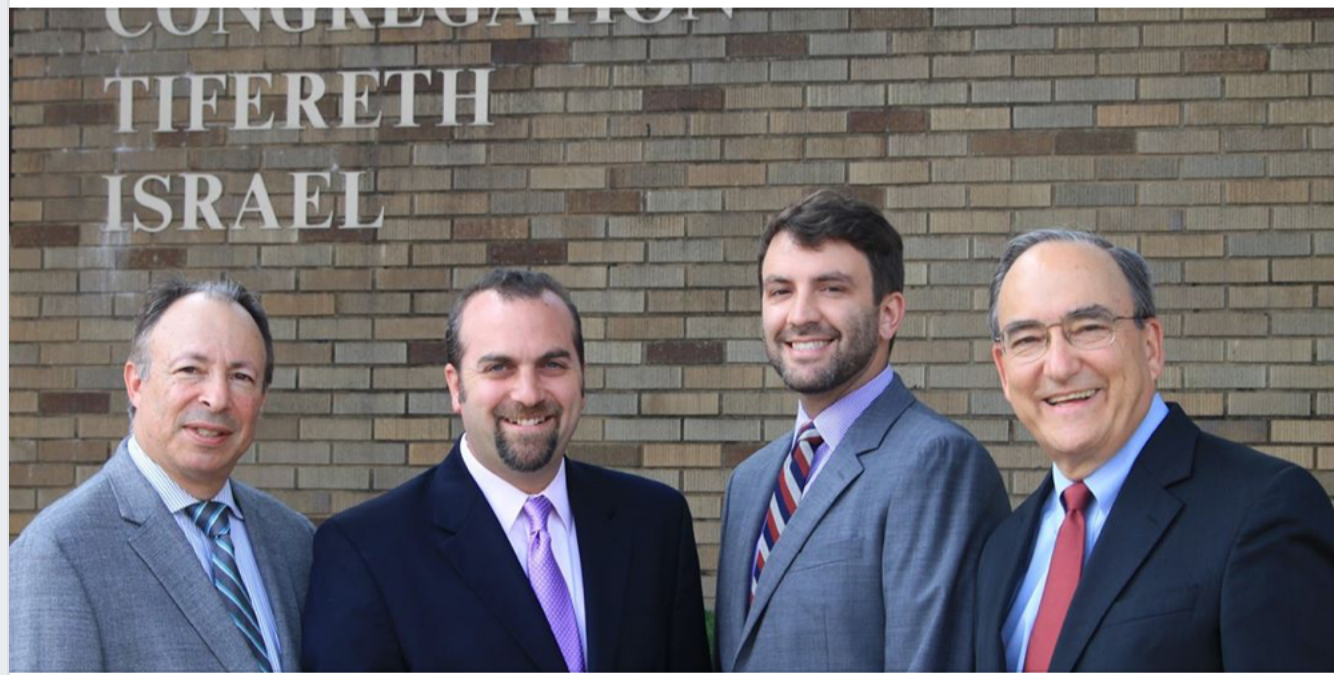
It's on all of us: clergy, staff, lay leadership, and every single congregant, to take some of that burden on ourselves as best we can. Now more than ever we need to be reaching out to those in need, to be checking in on friends, family, neighbors, even acquaintances.

It feels like we've had an international moment of havdalah — of separation. We are moving into uncharted territory, leaving behind a past that looks calm and restful from our current vantage point. But the ritual of Havdalah isn't just a way to separate from Shabbat. It's also our attempt to bring sanctity and holiness to the secular workweek. Our task ahead is to maintain holiness, meaning, and connection in the these turbulent times. May we all find strength and blessings from God and from each other in the weeks ahead.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Hillel Skolnik, Rabbi Alex Braver, Cantor Jack Chomsky, and Rabbi Harold Berman

PS ... Once we have information ready, we will send out a list of what interactive formats we will be using for each program.



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