

The Things that Carried Us Through

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BCC-JCG

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A moment of levity:

When he was twenty-five, Jesus had been away from home for about 10 years, working and preaching. For the last couple of those years, he'd been trying to keep an eye out for Joseph, because he wanted to ask him questions about his youth. But, so far, they'd both moved around so much that he hadn't caught up with him.

One day, in the hottest part of the day, he was sitting in the shade under a tree when an old man sat down next to him. [This was pre-COVID, so no worries]. The old man had a wool cap over his eyes, a bushy beard, and a gravelly voice. The old man asked him what he was up to.

Jesus told him that he was searching for his father. The old man replied, "That's a coincidence, because I'm searching for my son!"

Jesus said his father was a carpenter. The old man said that he, himself, was a master carpenter.

Jesus mentioned that he wasn't his father's biological son, but that his father had been a kind man who had raised him from his childhood. The old man said, "Another coincidence! My son isn't my natural son, but I taught him everything I know."

Jesus said, "My father's name is Joseph." The old man replied, "Really? In your language, that's my name as well!"

Jesus looked wonderingly into the old man's eyes, and said softly, "Father?" The old man replied, "Pinocchio!?"

My friends,

Years ago, my mother would quote to me from a book called "The Things They Carried," by Tim O'Brien, about American soldiers in Vietnam and the physical and emotional things they carried with them — and what it was that supported them— as they sojourned through that extraordinarily complex setting and time.

I don't need to tell you that this has been a tough era that we have been going through. Since the start of the lockdown, I have been thinking a lot about — and asking others about— what it is that helped to carry many of them — many of us — through these last 6 months of the pandemic, through to the present moment— and what we might draw on, consciously, as we move forward into a time that will likely be marked by even more unknowns.

I'd love to hear what has been helping you through this time. Maybe as we look at this together, we can think about what will help us going forward; we can think about what we might want to put in place in a conscious way in the days ahead. Comments at the BCC-JCG website are always welcome!

It seems to me that each us has experienced the Covid lockdown and the restrictions of this era in slightly different ways.

For some, this has been a time marked by serious, terrifying illness —your own illness, or a loved one's — and for some who have recuperated from having had Coronavirus (or "graduated" as they say at one of the nursing homes I serve), the after-effects of the illness have persisted, long beyond the end of one's actual illness.

For so many people, this has been an era marked by deep grief and loss. Some have had to bear the death of a loved one, and some have had to bear lack of contact and connection with loved ones at the very end of life. How tragic this has been for anyone who has had to endure such grief and such loss.

For others, who were sequestered away from family and friends, this was a period of deep isolation. Contact by FaceTime and zoom is wonderful technology — but sometimes it feels grossly inadequate.

There is such thing as "skin hunger," where we long for the connection that can come only from physical touch, even if that contact merely consists of a hug or a hand placed on an arm. Lacking this kind of connection with someone we trust, with someone who cares about us, can leave us feeling lonely and hungry.

But for some people, being alone has not been the issue. For those sequestered at home with loved ones, especially with kids, there may have been way too much together-time. Having to home-school small children or having to share a home office space with a spouse or a partner may have been really trying. And we won't even mention what it's like for those who have teenagers home full-time, physically cut off from their friends. If only for a little peace and quiet!

When I started to poll folks about what helped them get through this time, I came up with some interesting information. The things I heard about fell into some broad categories, and these may help us think about what we want to put in place in our own lives — not only in case, God forbid, there is a surge of the Coronavirus in the fall and it leads to another lock-down. We also may want to think about what it is that supports us in life — what supports our bodies, what supports our souls (and our sanity!) and what we would like to have in place, as we move forward.

We are taught in Judaism that *shmirat haguf*, caring for the body, is an important value in life, as is *shmirat hanefesh*, caring for the soul— and we are taught that we need to take care of ourselves in a conscious way, as if we are “taking God by the hand” and being partners with the mysterious Source of All Life in sustaining ourselves and in sustaining creation.

So what are some of the things we have turned to help us get through this time?

Many of us turned to news, seeking out facts and more facts and yet more facts about the pandemic, hoping that if only we were armed with information, it might help us keep the disease at bay. My own thinking is that it is important to be armed with information —and true facts — but perhaps we have to be careful about overload that might plunge us into despair.

Some people turned to prayer;

For others, it was sheer dogged perseverance they turned to, putting one foot in front of the other—or in dealing with zoom, having the patience to sit for one hour more, and one hour more after that...

One of the items on the list of what helped carry folks through was the solace they got from contact with family and friends. This included those of us who had to make our peace with contact with loved ones only from afar. Ah, for the comfort of a warm loving embrace — which, for many of us, is in some ways a thing of memory... But connection is one of the deepest of human needs, and it certainly behooves us to honor that particular need and make sure we can connect at least in some way with those whom we care about.

Interestingly, contact with pets also came high on this list. It fascinates me that spending time with animals that are dear to us — whether in play, or snuggling, or caring for them — turned out to be a major reliever of stress and a source of support for many people. Perhaps you know that the number of pet adoptions soared during these past few months.

It made me wonder that perhaps the skin hunger some people feel does not need to be satisfied by contact only with human beings; animal companionship can also be a source of deep enough connection to meet that need.

Having a sense of purpose was also high on the list, whether this purpose came from one's work or from doing a kindness for someone else — and it did not seem to matter whether the recipient of this kindness was known to us or if we were providing assistance in a more anonymous way. For some of us, knowing that we are needed is a powerful motivator. Interestingly, the number of people volunteering for local food pantries increased dramatically during this time — and in my neighborhood, we were encouraged to put a teddy bear in the window, so kids could count them while they were out for a walk.

Learning something new was also high on this list. So many people have plugged into regular zoom classes daily, or learned new skills from youtube videos or from other sources — and the sense of acquiring new knowledge or skills proved to be inspiring.

It also kept us oriented in this disorienting time. My 90-year-old mother, for example, knew it was Tues. at 2 PM —because she was looking forward to her class in Israeli poetry and literature.

For some, it was art, and beauty, music, inspiration of the sublime that helped carry them through. I know one person who was intent on fitting in making some art each day, and another who needed to look at on-line museum tours on a regular basis, and yet another who, with her husband, had a discipline of choosing a different poem to read to each other every day, often over a bowl of ice cream —which of course also brings in the thought of needing some delight and some comfort built into our routines.

Most of us needed to build in some comfort, whether in the form of comfort food, comfortable clothing, or listening to beloved and comforting music or reading comforting books.

We also needed ways to get out our impatience or even our rage—and amazingly, this pandemic inspired some interesting new forms of activity and new terms like "rage baking."

This era was also marked by collective expressions of rage at systemic inequality — inequality "baked into our society" which led to even more devastating impacts of the virus on certain communities. For the folks involved with the Black Lives Matter movement, having a sense of purpose and a sense of agency—believing that one can change the situation one finds oneself in—were powerful driving forces in helping carry people through this time.

Exercise was another item that made it onto the list for many people I polled. Exercise of course is another way of managing and releasing challenging feelings — and it's part of the whole constellation of efforts to take good care of the body, including daily exercise and also eating a good diet and trying to get sufficient rest.

Caring for the soul has been important for so many people. This involved prayer for some individuals, and for others it focused on a daily or a weekly practice of meditation or of yoga.

And humor also made it high on the list of what has carried folks through. I think of the many silly memes that traveled around on the internet, especially during the first days and weeks of the lockdown. I especially loved the meme of commemorative 2020 jewelry which came with a picture of earrings in the shape of tiny rolls of toilet paper, and the image of a man sitting on the floor by his cats, pointing with a ruler to a white board on the wall; the caption read "Day 6 of the lockdown: Dad teaches the cats about the coronavirus." There was also an image of a man in a hoodie and earphones staring at his phone, standing in the bathroom holding onto the shower curtain rod over his head, clearly in an image that echoed traveling on public transportation, with a caption that read "Experts recommend keeping your daily rituals, even while working from home."

And then there was the whole category of contact with nature as an important support for our bodies and our souls. Whether by walking or running or swimming in some beautiful natural setting, or looking at beautiful pictures of nature on the internet, or planting seeds and tending to them as they sprouted so they could be planted in a garden, there is no doubt that nature can help to soothe whatever is going on inside of us — and can keep us grounded.

On a personal note, one of the things that has been important for me has been planning and planting and tending to my garden. Early in the spring, I carefully planted seeds indoors, with joyous anticipation of the time when I could transfer seedlings to my garden, and then day by day I watched over them as tender sprouts emerged and then grew --and grew, and grew -- into my jungle of a garden.

And then there has been the harvest, which has sustained me spiritually and emotionally as well as physically. As I wrote in a recent "Elul Earth Etude," a piece published on the web focusing on spirituality and Judaism and the environment, through this process of planting seeds, I felt I was planting hope and optimism and trust in a good future.

In a recent article in the New Yorker magazine, I came across this quote by Sue Stuart-Smith, a British psychiatrist, writing about the therapeutic power of gardening: "When we sow a seed, we plant a narrative of future possibility."

I would encourage you to consider not only what has helped carry you through this time but also what helps you feel optimism, what can help you create a narrative of future possibility. This is foundational to our tending carefully to the soul, which is as important to our well-being as caring for the body.

In the coming year may we all remember to take good care of our bodies — *shmirat haguf*, --and take good care of our souls — *shmirat hanefesh*.

In the coming year, may we bring into our lives those resources that will help us feel supported and sustained, truly acting as partners with the Source of All Life in sustaining ourselves and in sustaining creation.

And let us say Amen.