

# Mussar in a Time of Crisis

By Rabbi Amy Eilberg

## The Pandemic as a Teacher

I have long been intrigued by a strange and fascinating pair of verses in the Biblical book of Ecclesiastes: “A good name is better than fragrant oil, and the day of death than the day of birth. It is better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of feasting; for that is the end of every human being, and a living person should take it to heart.” (Ecclesiastes 7:1-2)

A good name is better than perfumed massage oil? For sure. But the day of death than the day of birth? The day a baby is born is full of joy, hope and possibility, while the day of death - sadness and loss! I am sure I don't know anyone who prefers a *shiva* house to a house of joy. How could the Biblical writer say such a thing? “For that is the end of every human being, and a living person should take it to heart.” In short, he says, you learn more at a *shiva* house, because there you are confronted by the most basic fact of human existence — your own mortality. Taking in that fact, rather than instinctively pushing it away, can make you a wiser person. It can, paradoxically, make your life more vibrant and joyful.

### Learning from the Pandemic: Our Mortality

Earlier in my career I served as a hospice chaplain. I loved the work for many reasons, including the one that Kohelet suggests here. Being in the presence of death (near a person who is gravely ill or with someone who has recently suffered a grievous loss) changes one's perspective on life. Every day I encountered a powerful sense of the fragility and preciousness of life that naturally arises in the presence of death. I witnessed how often gratitude and kindness became natural responses to confrontation with the ultimate. I still miss that work.

I am drawn back to those memories in this time of pandemic, during which many profound spiritual issues come to the fore. In fact, we have before us the whole panoply of fundamental challenges of human existence and meaning-making, as we struggle to keep ourselves safe, healthy, and balanced.

I dearly hope that no one reading this essay - and none of our loved ones - will die of this virus. But in all likelihood, some of us will get sick, hopefully in a gentle and manageable way. But we all know that COVID-19 can be lethal. So our many daily concerns about life during the pandemic — from the trivial (will I find the kind of toilet paper I like?) to the profound (worrying about loved ones who are medically or economically vulnerable) — are intrinsically connected to our heightened awareness of our mortality. We cannot escape this consciousness, and it is terrifying.

I normally wouldn't go around reminding people of something that is painful for them to hear. Except that listening deeply to the life's most fundamental realities can be a rich source of wisdom.

# Mussar in a Time of Crisis

So, too, with the other spiritual challenges that face us at this frightening time. Mussar practice encourages us to look squarely at difficult challenges that our lives bring us. Very frequently, it is those difficulties that offer us the greatest opportunities for growth. By the same logic, this time of pandemic — as painful as it is in so many ways — provides us with abundant possibilities for deepening our spiritual lives.

I am definitively not saying that the coronavirus is a blessing. I believe it would be insensitive in the extreme to say such a thing — especially to a person in the midst of their suffering. But for those of us who are well (if isolated, frightened, frazzled, bored, lonely and whatever else we feel on a daily basis), we have choices as to how to orient ourselves toward this new and undesired set of trials. We did not choose this pandemic, nor did we want it. But this is where we are. We can choose to turn away from the learnings that this time may bring, or we may — at whatever timing is right for us — take these lessons to heart.

This approach is very much in keeping with the concept of “*hitlamdut*,” or self-reflective learning, as taught by the great 20<sup>th</sup> century Mussar master, Rav Shlomo Wolbe (1914-2005). “*Hitlamdut*,” as described by Rabbi David Jaffe in the Institute for Jewish Spirituality’s *Tikkun Middot Project Curriculum*, “is the practice of cultivating a stance of non-judgmental curiosity toward our experiences and making what we learn deeply impact our lives. The *mitlamed/et* adopts the stance of a learner, constantly asking, ‘what is happening right now? How can I learn from this and how does this relate to my life?’” (p. 12) As Alan Morinis said on a recent webinar, “The Mussar student asks, ‘Where can I grow here?’ How do I become a finer human being in this situation?’”

*Hitlamdut* suggests that we may rise to the spiritual opportunity of this moment, carefully and non-judgmentally observing which issues arise for us with most salience at this time and embracing the learnings that may emerge. As such, the pandemic, like all experiences in our lives, can become a teacher for us.

## Learning from the Pandemic: *Savlanut*

Our teacher Alan Morinis has pointed out the centrality of the issue of *bitachon*, or trust, in these times. I would like to focus on another *middah* that arises as a challenge in these days — that is *savlanut*, or patience/forbearance.

In common Israeli Hebrew, the word “*savlanut*” refers to patience in the temporal sense. A person pushing ahead in line (a ubiquitous phenomenon in Israel) may be met with a characteristic Mediterranean gesture connoting, “Wait! Be patient!” Or perhaps the less gentle, “Can’t you see that there are others waiting in line ahead of you?”

# Mussar in a Time of Crisis

Working with irritability about wasted time is part of the practice of *savlanut*, but there is something more. I like to think of the root meaning of the word in Hebrew, connoting the physical carrying of a heavy burden, as in the “*sabal*,” the porter, who might carry my luggage through an airport. The approximate English word for this trait might be the antiquated “forbearance.” The concept comes to life, though, in the description of forty-eight ways to “acquire Torah” in Avot 6:6: “*nosei b’ol im chavero*,” carrying a burden along with another.

In ordinary times, this trait refers to the recurrent experience of noticing someone else’s limitations. (I remember when my kids were little, they would exclaim, “S/he is so annoying!”) Truly, everyone is “annoying” sometimes, most of all me. Yet the path of spiritual growth invites us to look inward, to bring our attention to the flash of irritation inside us, to learn about what this experience touches in us, and to choose a thoughtful and helpful response.

Just as importantly, even in ordinary times we encounter countless “annoying” things in the course of a day, some of them temporal (“WHY is my computer so slow?”), and some more qualitative (“Will this road construction ever be finished?” Or, “What is the matter with young people these days?”). In this sense, the trait of *savlanut*, or the quality of bearing a burden, directs us to examine our instinct to respond with reflexive negativity to undesired circumstances in our lives. Over the course of a lifetime of practice, the goal is to grow in our ability to respond to difficult situations with curiosity, generosity, and equanimity, rather than with irritability and judgment.

In our present circumstances, this is a truly rich trait to explore. This entire experience is extremely annoying! We are afraid, and our ordinary and trusted patterns of life are upended. We are severely limited in where we can go and with whom. Going to the grocery store can be a maddening experience, as we continually encounter empty shelves and shortages of just the ingredients we need to cook a special dinner. We desperately do not want things to be this way. We want our normal lives back.

But we do not have that choice. It would be possible for us to spend the coming weeks raging at our misfortune (shared, of course, with the entire world). But in doing so, we would be cultivating a restless, reactive and judgmental mind. A better alternative is to use these daily challenges as opportunities to cultivate our capacity to bear life’s disappointments, large and small — now and when this crisis is past. We can spend this time strengthening our ability to respond to the day’s realities with equanimity and sensitivity to those around us. In this way, we can live more fully in response to the command, “Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2), both during the pandemic and beyond.

# Mussar in a Time of Crisis

There is another dimension to “*nosei b’ol im haveru*” during the pandemic. In most places in the United States, as I write, nearly all “shelter-in-place” orders are essentially voluntary. There are no soldiers or police standing at our doorstep to challenge our decision to leave our home. And yet most people, if news reports are accurate, are obeying the orders. Why?

In this sense, “*nosei b’ol*” is an expression of social solidarity, of prioritizing the needs of others around us over our own. If I were a young person with no medical vulnerabilities, I might well reason that there is little risk for me in hanging out with friends or going to public places for fun. Thinking only of the danger to myself, there would be no reason for me to accept the severe limitations announced by the officials in my town or state.

But in honoring the rules of “social distancing,” people, for the most part, are choosing not to risk being vectors of infection that could cause illness in others more vulnerable than themselves. True, there is a level of self-interest here: none of us will be free of the risk of illness until all of us are protected from it. But that may feel like an abstraction when a friend calls and invites us out. Rather, what stops us is the sense of desiring what is good for others as well as ourselves, willingness, as it were, to bear other’s burdens of vulnerability as well as our own.

The “shelter in place” orders, then, evoke a collective expression of altruism, or concern for the common good. Most of us are making decisions with the needs of the more vulnerable in mind, carrying their burdens along with them by choosing not to visit, offering to deliver groceries to their doorstep, and performing so many other acts of *hesed*/kindness. (Sadly, our society’s commitment to carry the burdens of the vulnerable is not necessarily applied to the poor, the unhoused, the incarcerated, or immigrants living and working in the United States at this time. This is yet another way in which the pandemic can be a teacher: showing us who is left behind in the supposed successful landscape of America — if we are willing to listen and learn.)

Practicing *savlanut* is a bit like weight training. I practice lifting a small weight and tolerating the discomfort in my muscles. If I practice consistently, then over time, I become able to bear heavier burdens. Whereas once a small irritation might be intolerable, I become more able (at least some of the time) to endure more difficult trials.

Honestly, I am a person who is invested in getting just the ingredients I want at the grocery store. I am frankly a bit surprised that this situation has evoked more *savlanut* in me than I might have expected. Yes, the long empty shelves where the toilet paper should be evokes a reaction in me. But when I can’t find just the right pasta, vegetable, or cleaning product that I wanted, I find myself bearing the disappointment and turning my attention to how hard the staff at the store are working. I begin to notice these low-paid workers are exposing themselves to risk all day long in order to keep the shelves stocked amidst a community full of people frightened of not having what they need. I wonder whether they are doing so out of economic need, or out of

# Mussar in a Time of Crisis

care for their customers, or some combination of the two. In reflecting on their reality in this way, I find myself regarding them with more *kavod*/honor than I generally do in ordinary times.

## Learning from the Pandemic: *Hesed*/lovingkindness

That was a tiny example of how the pandemic — with its attendant circumstances of scarcity, uncertainty and fear — can turn our attention to the lovingkindness needed by others and by ourselves.

I have long noticed what seemed to be the natural flow of kindness and compassion at funerals and *shiva* homes. Sometimes when the loss has been particularly tragic, I observe that people are exquisitely kind to one another at the *shiva* minyan. People give up their seats for others who need them more. Visitors approach the immediate mourners with exquisite care and concern. Comforters even reach out to comfort one another, knowing that they have all suffered a grievous loss.

After such an experience, I sometimes find myself asking, “Why can’t we be that kind all the time?”

Again, I think the answer is that death evokes the awareness that all of us suffer the same affliction of mortality. All of us will someday lose loved ones and all of us will someday die. Somehow when death has crossed our path, we are reminded of this fundamental reality in our own lives and the lives of everyone around us. This clear-eyed awareness stimulates kindness and compassion: I know the burden that the other carries, for it is just like my own. I know what I need, and I naturally want to give it to others as well.

So, too, I see a tremendous flow of kindness during these days of living with the threat of the coronavirus. Last week on a walk, a young woman and her child walked toward me in the opposite direction. When the woman saw me, she moved her child a bit farther away from me so that there would be space between us when we passed each other. The look on her face suggested that she had not moved to protect herself and her daughter from what I might carry, but to protect me — a perfect stranger.

Standing in line at the grocery store, some people are tense and frustrated, of course. But cashiers have been telling me that people are generally patient and kind. Many lean toward them and ask if they are taking care of themselves, implicitly expressing gratitude for the risk they are incurring by providing us with our groceries.

On a larger scale, synagogues around the U.S. (presumably, around the world), have roared into action, creating *hesed* outreach plans on a massive scale. In many synagogues, volunteers are

# Mussar in a Time of Crisis

assigned to call people who live alone or may be vulnerable. Others do grocery shopping for multiple families and deliver to the doorsteps of their friends and neighbors, sparing others the exposure to the virus at the store. Still others, the young and tech-savvy, reach out to help seniors — or the less technologically literate — to quickly learn the skills they need to stay in touch with family, friends and community in our strange and limited circumstances.

Occasionally I hear someone — often a rabbi— aching over their powerlessness, saying, “I can’t do anything!” By this they mean that they wish to God they could control who will become ill and who will not. It is true — we cannot turn back the course of the virus. That is a power that we do not have. But I try to persuade such good-hearted people that they are doing a lot with their prayers, their calls, their deliveries, and so many other acts of *hesed*, large and small.

Rav Shlomo Wolbe comments on the remarkable verse in the Psalms, “The world is built of your love.” (Psalms 89:2) He continues with this remarkable insight: “Every act of *hesed*, even a small one, is an actual act of building and creation, enlivening the spirit of the downtrodden and the broken-hearted.” (Rav Shlomo Wolbe, *Alei Shur*, vol. 2, p. 198) By this logic, as a community, as a human family, we are creating world upon world of love and connection, even as the virus hovers among us.

And lest we think we are doing “nothing” when we are not performing discrete actions, Rav Wolbe takes his understanding of kindness to a minute and profound level, building on early Rabbinic texts.

When the Blessed Holy One created humanity in the divine image, God did not only give of God’s glory to humanity, adorning us with qualities of intellect and soul, but created us in the divine image, in the sense that God also gave us the power of the “radiant face.” In the radiance of the human face is hidden a treasure of blessing and mercy. . . . From the quality of the “radiant face” a concrete behavior flows. That is the quality of Shammai the Elder, who said, “Receive every person with a kind face.” (Avot 1:15) “Kind face” is the act of radiating the face. This is a great thing. What the Rabbis called “giving peace” is no mere rhetorical flourish. One who offers a kind face to another literally “gives” peace to the other. For this reason, Rabbi Matia ben Harash said, “Be the first to give [the greeting of] ‘Shalom’ to every person.” (Avot 4:20) [*Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 200]

In short, Rav Wolbe expands the earlier Rabbinic teaching about greeting everyone with a kind expression (“*b’sever panim yafot*”) into an extraordinary spiritual teaching. We know that the Divine “face” is radiant, as in the second line of the Priestly Blessing, “*Ya’er Hashem panav eilech viy’huneka*,” “May God’s face bring you light and show you grace.”

# Mussar in a Time of Crisis

(Numbers 6:25) Since we humans are created in the image of God, he reasons, we too have the power of the “radiant face.”

This means that our face has great power. Our facial expression may invoke feelings of shame, unworthiness, and invisibility in someone we address or ignore. So, too, our face may radiate the power of kindness — encouraging another to feel valued, connected, and loved. To take this teaching seriously would be to practice inwardly checking in with our face many times a day, sensing whether we are conveying aloofness, judgment or self-importance, or, on the other hand, welcome, respect, and embrace. Our face can radiate the divine qualities of kindness, compassion, and generosity — or not. Which will we choose?

In these days of living with corona in the air, I have seen many more radiant faces than usual. The way that people smile at one another as we pass each other taking our walks around the neighborhood, greeting one another and respecting each other’s space. The way that people light up when they see one another on the steady stream of zoom calls, conveying our deep desire for connection, and our genuine joy in seeing others. People are, I think, radiating their compassionate awareness that we are all in this together — all of us, the human family all around the world, facing a deadly and invisible foe. We non-medical people do not have the power to eradicate the virus. But we can bring light to others who cross our path, who share this journey with us. We can radiate light to the whole human family.

This morning I attended a webinar in which an inspired peace activist shared his personal practice in these days. He said that he makes a point of asking himself each day: “Who do you want to be when the virus has passed? How will you have changed?” So, too, he dares to dream that human society has the chance to transform itself as well as we move through this ordeal together. Might we continue to be kinder with one another even after the threat of the virus is gone? Might we grow accustomed to reaching out to the vulnerable more often? Could we spend more time expressing our concern for those that society has too often considered less valuable?

This dream for transformation, both personal and collective, lies at the heart of Mussar practice. While the times in which we live often leave us frightened, scattered, and confused, it also offers the opportunity for transformation. In this sense, the pandemic can be a powerful teacher, to the extent that we are willing to open to learning.

I close with a poem that expresses the dream of collective transformation.

# Mussar in a Time of Crisis

And the People Stayed Home  
By Kitty O'Meara

*And the people stayed home. And read books, and listened, and rested, and exercised, and made art, and played games, and learned new ways of being, and were still. And listened more deeply. Some meditated, some prayed, some danced. Some met their shadows. And the people began to think differently.*

*And the people healed. And, in the absence of people living in ignorant, dangerous, mindless, and heartless ways, the earth began to heal.*

*And when the danger passed, and the people joined together again, they grieved their losses, and made new choices, and dreamed new images, and created new ways to live and heal the earth fully, as they had been healed.*

<https://www.irishcentral.com/culture/irish-american-teachers-poem-covid19-outbreak>

*Kein yehi ratson/may it be so.*