

**For Such a Time as This:  
Annual Report to the Congregation  
by Rabbi Michael Feshbach**

**Annual Meeting of the Congregation  
The Hebrew Congregation of St Thomas**

**June 7, 2020**

My teacher, one-time boss, colleague and friend, Rabbi Ambassador David Saperstein, used to say that, when you could not think of a title for a sermon or remarks, you could always use: “For Such a Time as This!” Well, I’m not sure I’ve ever encountered a better time... to use that title!

I continue to believe that the most important part of communal life is a sense of connection, and our relationships with one another. If we have not had a chance to spend quality time together, one on one or in small groups, please, please be in touch. I would like to be with any and all of you, for coffee, breakfast, lunch, or in any other setting!

To Dorothy Isaacs, daughter of the congregation and descendant of its founders and leaders, it has been an honor to work with you, and I hope that despite the challenges of content and distance alike, you have found fulfillment in this role. To the Board of Trustees, the leaders, and the members of this congregation both full-time on island and here for part of the year, thank you all for your role, past and continuing, in preserving this unique and special community. To Marilyn Blackhall, who takes care to think through the needs of newcomers and in unexpectedly returning to a role she played once before,

thank you for stepping forward, and I look forward to working closely with you as well.

Friends, I think you many not have a full sense of how hard our staff team works, or how far they go above and beyond usual expectations of a job. Stella Minion, our Administrator, and Agnes Rampino, our Docent and Gift Shop Manager, are diligent, dedicated partners, who have been working hard from home these past weeks, and whose energy and devotion sustain us all. Michael Fuertes has been taking care of our buildings even during this time. And Brook Robin has, to my knowledge, almost never said no when asked to help in any form of logistical support. Their devotion is an inspiration.

For Jews in the Diaspora, this week brings us Parashat B'ha'a lot'cha, the third portion in the Book of Numbers. And it is there, in Chapter 9, that a group of Israelites approach Moses. They were, for reasons of physical concerns, unable to participate in the Passover offering in its proper time and place. Distraught, they ask Moses what can be done for them. Stumped, Moses consults with God, the CDC of his day, and gets an answer. Figure out a way, he relays to them, when you can gather safely. Adapt, adjust, do it differently that year.

This has been a year of adjustment, and accommodation, and doing things in a new way. It has been a time of fear, and loss, and loneliness. We have seen closures, departures, and death. At the same time, there have been

been some silver linings, and opportunities, and growth, and new ways of connecting with one another.

First, though, I want to recall what life was like in another era of history. I want to remember the months before this past March.

Last year was the *first* set of High Holy Days since I have been with you which unfolded without a major disruption. (Certainly next year's will be different, in some as yet unknown fashion.) The fall holidays happened with a wonderful Cantor in place, with no major storm, no loss of power, and no life-threatening emergencies in the family of our clergy team. It was, finally, a taste of the way things are supposed to be!

We were blessed for much of this past year with a robust music program: the ongoing presence of Gylcrhis Sprauve, the emergence of Luba Dolgopolsky as a new and soon to be almost weekly Cantorial Soloist, Talia's continued appearances on her return to the island... and a wonderful experience with Student Cantor, Ella Gladstone Martin, who was with us for the High Holy Days, and, until her personal visits were interrupted by the pandemic, on a monthly basis after that. Even so, and from her home in Toronto, she has helped with a Friday night service in May, the evening and morning Festival services of Shavuot, and she led a Saturday morning service and study session last week on the delayed date of our middle son's (entirely online) graduation from college. I hope that she had as good an experience with us as we did with her, and I was grateful for her presence and partnership this year.

While mentioning personal events, I will also add how grateful I was for the love and support of this congregation and community following the loss of my father this past October. To return here for a very crowded – remember when we could do that – and caring service in our home for the last night of shiva was deeply meaningful to me. Thank you all, for your presence and... well, in some traditions, food is love, so thank you for the Meal of Condolence as well.

I remember, from this past year, an amazing Interfaith Thanksgiving Service, an overflowing attendance for our annual MLK Shabbat, a Beatles Purim where I hurt my side from laughing so hard... and cutting edge Tuesday evening classes in roaming locations, of mostly high quality, and, for us, a very high attendance.

And then a funny thing happened on the way to Pesach... Or, perhaps, it is not that funny at all.

Some of you, here with us today, may, if you are... mature enough... may remember World War Two. For me, clearly, what we are going through right now is the most... impactful, disruptive, world-changing historic event of my lifetime. More than 9/11, more than Vietnam. It is confusing, in a way, because after the 2017 hurricanes the scenery around us *looked* more upside down than it does now, and, clearly, we were far away from full recovery from that. But this... this is world-wide, more deadly, and filled with far deeper levels of uncertainty than even the strongest of storms.

Our first decision – difficult, gut-wrenching, and controversial at the time – was to close down the building even while some ships were coming and tourists were still here. Within days that decision looked prescient, and inevitable; the cruises were cancelled, the hotels closed, and the flights empty. We persisted, for a few weeks, with services in our beloved Sanctuary, finally, in mid-March, the last two times we did so, with only me, Luba or Talia, Gylchris, my family members, a camera crew to launch our first streamed services.

All of you are making your own adjustments, and acting to protect yourselves as best you can. You are juggling medical practices, tourist-dependent businesses, work in education or telecommunication or other fields. You are doing what you can from home, caring for children or worried about elderly family members. It is an unprecedented, highly stressful, and surreal situation.

I am very proud what we have offered in this challenging time, through our congregation. Our services have been not only uninterrupted; they have expanded. Our classes and learning continue. We have provided online forums and held meetings and rethought many aspects of what we offer, and how we serve.

In terms of our reach: Erev Shabbat services on Zoom have typically drawn between 18-28 individual participant connections, some of which have 2-3 people. But in addition to that, we also simultaneously link to Facebook

Live, streaming services that way. Between my page and the synagogue one, those postings average dozens of comments, and between 250-350 views per service. Last Friday's service has, so far, 414 views. As one small sample, in one recent service, and only listing the people who proactively posted their locations, we had participation from St. Thomas, St. John, Puerto Rico, several different places in Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Virginia, Washington DC, Maryland, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, the New York City area, Toronto, Buffalo, Connecticut, Michigan, Ohio, St. Louis, Denver, Phoenix, Las Vegas, and Seattle. We have been joined by folks from Australia and Israel.

(As an interesting aside: there are now three people who are joining us regularly who otherwise attend modern Orthodox synagogues. They have expressed having their eyes opened and been touched by what we do! We are, in our willingness to use technology to connect with one another, able to offer something during this crisis that a very traditional synagogue is not.)

For Shabbat morning services and Torah study, we are averaging an attendance of 18 on Zoom, and many, many more views for the service part, which is streamed on Facebook. Our in person Saturday morning offerings drew 3-6 people. Similarly, for Pesach morning and Shavuot, those services drew between 12 and 22 on Zoom... services which would have had 6-8 participants in person.

Other than missing my son's graduation, I was heart-broken to pass on an in person Seder this year. But, broadcasting the first part from my family

table (and pre-recording the after-the seder part with Ella; I have no idea if anyone viewed that!), we had over 90 Zoom connections, which, given the families at the other end, probably meant we had 140 or so participants.

Classes have relocated to Zoom, and our Tuesday evening class, a 14-week marathon set to conclude this coming week, has continued, with new participants from the mainland as well. And a Forum I participated in with the Maimonides Medical Society of Western New York, on Jewish Ethics at a Time of Pandemic, received very positive reactions, and had 50 participants as well.

This is a different world. It is exhausting for all of us – and this is not just anecdotal. That sense of being drained by online experiences is borne out by physiological and psychological studies alike. But there are some ways in which we are connecting, and reaching one another, that are benefits, and blessings, and will reshape how we work, and how we communicate, long after the pandemic is behind us.

We have no idea, of course, what the coming months will bring. The uncertainty of it all, the inability to make real plans or just say, hey, I can handle this now that I can get my mind and my calendar around it, that is its own source of stress. The economics for us, for our families, for the island, for our communities, for our congregation are sure to be challenging for some time to come.

We had made a decision, even before the pandemic, that we could no longer afford a full, monthly Student Cantor program. While I am thrilled that

Luba Dolgopolsky will be stepping up her role as Cantorial Soloist beginning sometime in August, we did also hire a Student Cantor, Laynie Zell, for the High Holy Days only. Whether our services are entirely online and she joins us from New York, or we bring her in and just the clergy stream from the Sanctuary, or we are back to normal... it is too early to say what will happen in that regard. We are planning for contingencies, and working on several different scenarios at once.

I believe, strongly, that whatever happens, streaming Friday night services is with us to stay, although once back in the Sanctuary it will be a bit interactive, and more broadcast-like, for those on the other end, as it were. And I am not sure that we should not continue Shabbat morning services and study by Zoom even after we are back in person on Friday nights.

What I do know, with certainty, is that this time has presented to us a challenge in terms of our sense of space, and the power of place. I miss our Sanctuary, and the precious legacy and historic mandate we have to preserve it and see that it continues to prosper. We are that building. And, yet, as we have learned anew if we did already know it, we are also, and never have been, *only* that. We are, ultimately, here for the impact we have on each others' lives, and, indeed, the impact we have on our community and our world.

In this regard I save the last shout out of my remarks to both my wife Julie Novick, and to Suzi Grbinich. It was Julie who prodded me, in the middle of putting together a whole assemblage of Zoom links, reminding me



that after the hurricanes we worked not just for our internal community, but in service to the island as well. That led to a conversation with Alan Friedman, and then to My Brother's Workshop. I had already given, to MBW, a substantial contribution from my discretionary fund, to support their work at the outset of the pandemic. But Julie reminded me that we could do more.

So we reached out, and asked what they needed most. Turns out, the answer was... drivers, mid-week, mid-day, to help deliver the meals they were cooking, for those in need, who could not or should not venture out to pick the meals up themselves.

My friends, I can tell you that, on an island with no real addresses, inadequate signs, and atrociously terrible direction-giving, this has been a real challenge. Frankly, what we do here would make excellent strategic advice to any country worried about being invaded. And there were times, doing these deliveries of meals, that I had to circle back to MBW, and ask someone else's help with a delivery.

But I made most of my route. And what I mostly have to say, to all of you, and in gratitude to Suzi, who immediately said yes when I asked her to coordinate our volunteers in conjunction with MBW... this matters. My Brothers' Workshop has told us that, through our efforts – which also provided many members of the larger community a chance to do something – we *doubled* the number of volunteer drivers they had at their disposal during this past month.

I mentioned food, in passing, a few times earlier in these remarks. I end with a note about food, community, the economy, social justice, and our future, all at once. It is a quote from, I believe, the Talmud, an ancient insight that: “*in ein kemach, ein Torah*. If there is no food, if there is no flour, if there is no bread, if there is no sustenance, there is no religious life. There is no community. There is no congregation. There is no life!”

In delivery of meals, and in consistency of support, through tough times and through abundance, we have been partners with one another...in *kemach*, and in Torah.

May we continue in that tradition, in the weeks and months and years and... centuries to come.