

Rabbi Adler is a Rosh Yeshiva at RIETS.  
Dr. Adler is Executive Director of Park Avenue  
Psychotherapy Associates, Clifton, NJ.



## ISH U'VEISO: NAVIGATING COVID-19 AS A FAMILY

Editor's Note: To help families navigate the COVID crisis, we posed a series of questions to Rabbi Elchanan Adler and his wife Dr. Miriam Adler.

**Please share with our readers some perspectives about the challenges of the last many months. What were the greatest opportunities for growth? Where did people struggle?**

**Rabbi and Dr. Adler:** These last months have been fraught with enormous challenges for virtually everyone. These challenges have impacted almost every facet of our lives — physical, emotional, psychological, financial and spiritual. They have taxed us as individuals and as a community.

It is important to bear in mind that *nisyonos* — personal tests and challenges — are part of the human condition. As Ramchal writes in the first chapter of *Mesilas Yesharim*:

כי כל ענייני העולם בין לטוב בין לרע הנה הם נסיונות לאדם.

*All of life's circumstances, both good and bad, pose unique spiritual challenges.*

What is true in the spiritual arena is true in other realms as well.

Our world is in a constant state of flux. Similarly, our life circumstances are ever-changing, with many moving parts that we must navigate. It is understandable to yearn for a state of total serenity; Chazal attribute this aspiration to Yaakov Avinu (*bikesh Yaakov leishev b'shalva*, Rashi, Bereishis 37:2). However, such a wish is rarely actualized. As Ramchal notes further in that same chapter, life in *olam hazeh* is replete with frustrations and disappointments, making it virtually impossible for anyone to feel 100 percent content and at peace.

Challenges are an integral part of life, and they serve as an impetus for growth. By definition, growth comes from living in a state of discomfort, and then persevering despite limitations. This is a principle that figures prominently in *sifrei musar* and is also supported by psychological research focusing on the science of resilience. There is even a barometer known as AQ (adversity quotient) that is used to measure a person's ability to deal with adversity in life. People who are successful in adapting to new situations develop a sense of maturity, competence, and self-mastery.

This perspective — that growth through struggle is what life is all about — should inform the way we think about the current pandemic. While COVID-19 blindsided us

in a manner unlike anything we've experienced before, we are all familiar with stress and struggle. We can remind ourselves that it is precisely in those situations where we **struggle** the most that we can also **grow** the most. Even as we should feel pained by the suffering that has been brought on by COVID-19, we can still welcome the opportunities for growth that have been granted to us.

**Rabbi Adler:** There is an existential element to the many challenges created by the pandemic. The mere existence of an invisible force that has exacted such an enormous toll, and which the world has yet to come to grips with, is a humbling reality that should be a wakeup call for humanity at large and for every thinking individual. It should remind us of our own mortality, help us appreciate the fragility of life, and shatter the illusion that we are masters of our own destiny. As believing Jews, such sentiments should prompt us to engage in *cheshbon hanefesh*, in consonance with the spiritual prescription described eloquently by the Rambam at the beginning of *Hilchos Taanis*.

As simple as this sounds in the abstract, it can be extremely difficult to implement in practice. Like many ideals we embrace intellectually, there is often a huge disconnect between our cognitive knowledge and our day to day conduct. This phenomenon can be described in numerous ways — from the language of musar (“*yetzer hara*,” *lev* versus *mo'ach*, etc.), to psychological parlance (“cognitive dissonance”), to other frames of reference. But whatever the terminology, we all intuitively recognize how quickly we can become distracted from following up on our most genuine convictions.

In conversations with talmidim, I have discovered that one of the greatest impediments to self-reflection is a feeling of resignation and despair. Whenever the typical routine of our daily lives is abruptly uprooted, it is easy to wonder whether anything is truly “worth the effort.” Rather than motivating us to think deeper and do better, a loss of structure can have the opposite effect — causing us to shut down and become zombie-like in our new situation. This, in turn, makes us vulnerable to acting out impulsively in ways that are counterproductive and inconsistent with our core values.

A case in point: many people whose connection to *tefila* was defined by consistent minyan attendance began to lose their “*geshmak*” for davening once they were suddenly forced to daven alone at home for weeks on end. Some of these people started to skip davening entirely.

The same pattern can occur in other aspects of our religious life. Once the threads that hold the religious experience together become loose, the entire value system that underlies the experience is threatened. Sadly, there is ample anecdotal evidence illustrating this trend.

I believe the most effective way to avoid such pitfalls, and what I have advised talmidim, is to first reaffirm to ourselves what our most cherished values are, and then consciously reorient them to the new circumstances. Besides preventing us from “slipping,” this may even help us discover a new and creative way to enhance our *avodas Hashem*. In the case of *tefila*, davening without a minyan can sometimes elicit greater *kavana* than davening in shul, where we feel the need to keep pace with the chazan. This type of experience

allows us to pay closer attention to the individual words of the *tefila*. [*Sifrei Chasidus* describe such a phenomenon via an “out of the box” interpretation of Hashem’s instructions to Noach, “*bo el hateivah*.” Taken in context, Noach was commanded to enter the ark, which would provide him safe haven from the raging waters of the mabul. In Chassidic thought, the lesson is that to achieve purity in davening we must allow ourselves to become enveloped by each and every word (*teivah* also means word) of davening, shielding us from the temptations of the outside world.] The new appreciation for the language of *tefila* can hopefully continue even upon returning to shul.

The same approach can be applied to other aspects of our lives. Whenever a familiar context has been removed or altered — whether it involves *talmud Torah*, *chessed* activities, or any other experience — rather than giving up, we should consciously seek out methods to adapt our values to the changing landscape.

But even as we do so, we need to be honest and patient with ourselves. The new circumstances will not always be a “good fit” with what we genuinely crave, and even our most creative efforts can fall short. In such instances, we should trust that the time will come when we will return to the “old normal.” Bearing in mind the axiom of Chazal חשב אדם לעשות מצוה ונאנס ולא עשה — עשה מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו עשה — one who intended to perform a mitzva but was prevented by circumstance from doing it, the pasuk credits him as if he had performed it (*Berachos* 6a) — we should draw solace and inspiration from our very yearning.

People who successfully implement these strategies are likely to

experience feelings of empowerment. It is genuinely rewarding to creatively “hold on” to our cherished values under new and difficult circumstances. Even when our best efforts meet with less than perfect results, the struggle itself serves to reinforce our inner connection to these values, enabling us to feel a renewed appreciation of the convictions we had previously taken for granted.

**Dr. Adler:** One of my favorite approaches for handling life stress is to ask: “What strengths do I bring to the table? What do I already know to be true about myself that can help me handle this challenge with grace?” Tapping into our strengths is energizing and empowering. Too often, we berate ourselves about our difficulties and failings, neglecting to appreciate G-d-given talents that we can use to our advantage. Of course, the drawback of building on our strengths is that we may not bother to stretch ourselves. Simply shrugging off difficult tasks or expectations as “not my forte” thwarts growth. It is also meaningful to engage in honest introspection related to our weaknesses. We shouldn’t be afraid to ask ourselves, “What weaknesses can I strengthen? What gaps exist in my skill set, and how can I fix them?” For optimal coping, it is vital to celebrate at least one strength, while simultaneously working on improving upon at least one weakness.

On a personal note, I can tell you a little about myself. The current pandemic led to many months of being in limbo — not knowing what school, work, yom tov and shul schedules would be at play from week to week. Since I am not super-structured in my personality, and don’t mind “going with the

flow,” this limbo state didn’t bother me that much. To the contrary, it felt somewhat liberating to have a good excuse for not knowing our plans or having to conform to a rigid schedule. Flexibility and spontaneity are a personal strength, and this was an opportunity to relish that ... to thank Hashem for the ability to be relaxed and *b’simcha* even without set activities. On the other hand, if I would have let myself completely surrender to that natural sentiment without setting up approximate meal

“What strengths do I bring to the table? What do I already know to be true about myself that can help me handle this challenge with grace?”

times, family times and school/work times, and without any attempt to have a “Plan A,” “Plan B” or “Plan C,” those around me would lose out on the emotional safety that order and structure brings.

COVID-19 offered me, and those like me, an opportunity to develop “muscles” for creating internal and external structure when no such framework was being artificially foisted on us. People who are naturally more organized had the opposite opportunities available to them. They could lean on their organizational strengths, and be appreciative of having been blessed with them, and at the same time recognize the ripe opportunity for flexing their weaker “go with the flow” and “be present in the moment” muscles.

**On Shabbos, many of the social opportunities (kiddushim, shared meals, playdates) have been severely curtailed. Shabbos has become more family-centered than before. What advice would you give to make Shabbos meaningful and something that families can look forward to each week?**

**Rabbi Adler:** Shabbos should definitely be the highlight of the week! There is a mitzvah *midivrei kabbalah* of *oneg Shabbos*. “*Oneg*,” which means enjoyment, has many halachic manifestations, such as: enjoying delicious foods, taking a Shabbos stroll or a Shabbos nap (*sheina B’Shabbos ta’anug*), and, most important, learning Torah. In the paragraph of *Retzei* recited in *Birkas Hamazon* on Shabbos, we express a wish that we be spared negativity and aggravation that can interfere with our wholesome Shabbos rest — שלא תהא צרה ויגון ואנחה ביום מנוחתנו. This is the image of *Shabbos kodesh* that must remain paramount in our minds, whatever our particular life circumstances.

Undoubtedly, entertaining Shabbos guests can enhance *oneg Shabbos*. Over the years, our family has hosted many guests at our Shabbos table, including families who were new to the community and singles who appreciated an invitation. As beautiful as shared meals can be, however, socializing with friends and neighbors should not define the essence of our Shabbos experience. It is noteworthy that it is in the context of Yom Tov, rather than of Shabbos, that our *mesorah* seems to place emphasis on sharing our celebration with others, especially the disadvantaged. Indeed,

the *melacha* of *hotzaa'h*, which prohibits transferring of objects between halachic domains, applies only to Shabbos but not to Yom Tov. Even the laws of *techumin*, which restrict our movements on Shabbos as well as on Yom Tov, are, according to many authorities, of greater magnitude on Shabbos than on Yom Tov (see the sources cited in the index to the Frankel edition Rambam, *Hilchos Shabbos*, Perek 27). All of this suggests that our primary focus of Shabbos should be on our own family. While we can still make efforts to reach out to others in safe and appropriate ways, the COVID-19 reality has forced us to make our Shabbos experience more family centered.

**Rabbi and Dr. Adler:** One of the best ways to enhance a family's Shabbos experience is to focus on the spiritual atmosphere at the Shabbos seudah. While we might appreciate the fact that Shabbos provides a respite from the stresses of the week, we don't want our Shabbos meal to begin in the manner amusingly depicted by Rabbi Paysach Krohn in his story about the preschooler who, as "Shabbos Abba," begins to reenact Kiddush for his class with an audible sigh, followed by: "Oy did I have a tough week...*Yom Hashishi*..."

Setting the right tone for the Shabbos seudah means, of course, infusing the table conversation with Torah content. However, this isn't as easy as

simply opening a sefer and reading a Dvar Torah. For those of us with kids, it isn't even just about showing interest in their parsha sheets and artwork (though of course we should). Furthermore, even though we may learn regularly, and even with exceptional resources for divrei Torah (like "*Torah To Go*") at our disposal, creating a Shabbos table atmosphere that is both enjoyable and spiritually uplifting requires a serious investment of time and energy. In families whose members span different life stages, intellectual abilities, personal styles and interests, it is important to be conscious of which parsha messages will be most meaningful. That often means selecting sources before Shabbos and making purposeful choices. Similarly, it is important to engage everyone at the table. This can be done by posing thoughtful questions, inviting comments, encouraging lively debate, and making space for others to share spin-off ideas and related *meforshim*.

More important than the exact content we discuss is ensuring that the family is "engaged" in the Torah conversation and has positive associations with the experience. We should aim to see our kids' eyes light up and observe the wheels of their minds turning. Depending on the background and interests of the audience, it may be appropriate for a Shabbos table discussion to make occasional reference to current events or to sports

in order to reinforce a relevant Torah-based message. However, discussions of politics — whether American or Israeli, local, national or international — would be ill advised, as it is usually trivial and almost always divisive (especially in the contemporary political climate), detracting from a wholesome Shabbos spirit. Needless to say, any form of lashon hara or gossip has no place at the Shabbos table (or at any other place or time).

One of the ways we have enhanced our table over the years has been through parsha riddles with answers corresponding to every letter of the aleph beis. These work for adults as well as children, as the difficulty level varies from question to question. We have fun with these almost every Shabbos! There are also books that are designed to spur discussion at the table. Each chapter contains a nuanced halachic dilemma, allowing everyone at the table to tackle the question and explain his/her reasoning as to what the halacha should be. Afterwards, these responses can be compared to the one given in the book. These kinds of conversations generate lively discussion, making halacha come alive in real life scenarios.

Individuals can also tailor the Shabbos table dynamics to their personal interests. I (Rabbi Adler), have an interest in the meaning and origin of Shabbos zemiros. Occasionally our family "learns" a zemer before singing



it — which adds a lot of meaning. I (Dr. Adler) grew up in a very musical family with many siblings and have beautiful memories of all of us singing in harmony, sometimes singing the same zemer to more than one melody. Music adds another dimension to Shabbos and is good for our *neshamos* as well.

Another nice practice is to learn a section of a larger work every week at the table. We are reviewing a few halachos of Shabbos now, usually before bentching. I (Dr. Adler) have a vivid memory from the first Shabbos I spent at my in-laws, where everyone (all of us already adults) read and explained a Mishna at the end of the meal. In recent years, my father a”h would read from sefarim on *emuna* and had many printouts of divrei Torah so that those children or grandchildren who didn’t have something already prepared could find a thought to their liking.

On a lighter note, experimenting with different foods and table décor can be a good outlet for creative energy and talent. In our current COVID situation, we can focus even more on what is really important — the experience of trying new things and sharing it with each other — without worrying about whether the end product is “guest worthy.” With the extra time we had when school and camp were cancelled, our kids enjoyed preparing different foods and getting complimented on them. Family Shabbos food isn’t about how it tastes, as much as it is about the shared meaning and intention behind it. Letting each child choose something to prepare is another way to create positive “hype” and set Shabbos apart from the other days of the week.

**Dr. Adler:** As a psychologist, I’ll add

a development-related comment. Sometimes, parents worry that their table is a bit boring or chaotic. At times they really do need help creating a framework for the *seuda* — incorporating some of the elements above to give the meal more structure. Very often, however, part of the issue is based on unrealistic expectations. Some cheerful disorder is a normal part of life with young children. Kids shouldn’t feel like the table is a prison where they have to sit quietly like a soldier or risk getting glared at. Healthy energy is good! Some parents mistakenly believe that if they were doing everything “right,” their children would be sitting placidly, like perfectly behaved angels. I think that Hashem wants us to look at our children as “*malachim*” even when they spill the soup, giggle during divrei Torah and kick each other under the table. Kids should feel our love and pride in being their parents and enjoying time with them even when they are doing their “thing” and being kids. We shouldn’t be feeling down on ourselves or our children when our family doesn’t sit or listen perfectly. At some ages kids need to have the freedom to go back and forth from their own activities to the table, and to have some parts of the meal be more adolescent or adult oriented and some parts more “youth targeted.” When our kids were younger, we would sometimes harness their energy by spontaneously starting a game of musical chairs with Shabbos songs, between courses. [We are beyond that stage now, but we hope to eventually enjoy that again with grandchildren Be”H.] Taking walks, playing games after the meal, reading stories or special chapter books aloud, having Shabbos parties or adult treats and just enjoying our families in a more

present, slower paced manner are all ways to make Shabbos special during these times, and always.

In social psychology, there is a wealth of literature about the concept of “bias.” We often see people and events through our own perspectives. Once we wear biased glasses, everything is filtered through them. In family life we can use that concept to our advantage. We should consciously begin Shabbos with a positive bias toward our spouse, our children and our family as a whole. No matter our family’s level of parsha proficiency, their table manners or interest in helping, we should train ourselves to view them with an *ayin tova*. Our bias should be that we are blessed with the best family ever! We should work on feeling like kings and queens sitting with our royal family. Having that perspective will positively affect our mood, and in turn will affect how we react to our loved ones and their foibles. Believing we are lucky to have “the best family ever” is a win-win bias. Like a self-fulfilling prophecy it can help to create that reality!

**For those who now work from home, what are some ways to create boundaries between their personal and professional lives? What about someone who has been spending more time davening and learning at home?**

**Dr. Adler:** Working at home, and the fluidity it allows, can often enhance family dynamics. I found it convenient to put in a load of laundry or prepare dinner in the 15-minute increments I sometimes had between clients. I, and many of my friends, were also able to rearrange our schedules so that our lunchbreaks

coincided with our children's during their "home schooling" days. Many friends appreciated the fact that their husbands no longer had tiring commutes to work and were now more available for homework and household chores. Other couples found time to take a midday walk together or to reach out to each other more easily for support during daily stressors. At the same time, the fluid lines between work and home can make it difficult to have undivided family time. If we can squeeze in a chore or quick conversation in between work tasks, we might also be tempted to squeeze in some work-related emails during homework and dinner.

The home/work balance is a dance whose steps are complicated even during non-COVID times. Sometimes it can be extremely helpful to make an important work-related phone call in the evening hours. On the other hand, making that "one" phone call can also become a slippery slope that never ends. In general, studies show that people who have clear "down time," free from any work-related expectations, fare better emotionally. Interestingly, one study showed that 60 percent of employees reported an improved work-life balance during the pandemic. Most of them apparently had less family time prior to the pandemic and were now feeling more connected.

One of the boundaries I try to create for myself is to have some hours that I don't do work related tasks, even if I could technically "squeeze it in." There is a certain peace and regrouping that comes from having no work expectations on one's head. [That is part of the beauty of Shabbos, when we are to imagine that all of our work has been completed.] Recently, I

have also started doing work mostly at one specific desk. This is another well-supported technique for making a mental delineation between work and home life, even within our homes. Sitting down at the work desk turns on "work mode" expectations, and moving away from the desk helps us to switch back into "personal life mode." Leaving work phones and laptops off outside of work hours, or at least turning off notifications, is another good strategy.

## When we bifurcate the different areas of our lives — professional and family, shul and work, religious and secular — we can lose sight of the overarching purpose that unifies these different realms.

**Rabbi Adler:** As someone whose profession is to teach Torah, my experience may differ from those who work in other fields. BH, I feel blessed that my profession is one that is close to my heart and close to the hearts of everyone in my family. I am also fortunate to have a study in my home that is stacked with sefarim and a large dining room table, which serve as excellent places to learn and prepare shiurim. My wife and children have always done their utmost to respect my "talmud Torah" space at home at all hours of day or night, so the "transition" to working from home was not overly challenging per se. What I missed, however, was the chance to interact in real time with my colleagues and talmidim at Yeshiva, as there is a unique atmosphere and

rhythm to the beis medrash and the shiur room that cannot be replicated at home or via zoom. In speaking to talmidim, I became acutely aware of the challenges that they faced learning and attending shiur remotely.

For many people, especially those in non-chinuch professions, I imagine that the transition to working at home is far more complicated. Add to that the many months that shuls were closed, when our homes had to substitute for batei knesses and batei midrash, and the need for setting appropriate boundaries between all these arenas becomes a real imperative.

I believe that while firm boundaries are essential in the practical realm, our mindset should be one of integration. When we bifurcate the different areas of our lives — professional and family, shul and work, religious and secular — we can lose sight of the overarching purpose that unifies these different realms. As Jews, we aspire to infuse *kedusha* in all that we do — in the spirit of *b'chol derachecha da'ehu* (know Him in all of your ways, Mishlei 3:6) and *kol pa'al Hashem l'ma'anehu* (Hashem made everything for a purpose, Mishlei 16:4). Ultimately, the goal of all our endeavors should be to be "*makedeish shem shamayim*" — and this motto should inform and guide every aspect of our lives.

While davening and learning at home deprived us of *tefila be'tzibur* and *talmud Torah be'rabim*, the "silver lining" was an opportunity to infuse a dimension of *kedusha* into our homes and elevate them, to a certain degree, into a *mikdash me'at*. This spirit of *kedusha* can then more readily spill over to all aspects of home life. In a similar vein, when we work from home (while setting appropriate practical boundaries), we are less

likely to become workaholics and lose sight of the value and beauty of family.

The wholesomeness that comes with living an integrated life makes us role models for our children, who observe us integrating our *avodas hatefila* with our *avodas ha'parnasa* — grabbing a siddur to daven mincha in between clients, or setting aside time to “do the daf” or to be *maavir sidra* during a lunch break. Additionally, every profession can be infused with a spiritual dimension that may also serve as an instructive model for our children. Children will naturally take pride in seeing their parents’ work ethic alongside their love for family. Aspects of our specific professions can become valuable chinuch tools to impart important values to our children — whether in terms of how the parents utilize their specific talents to help people and/or society, how they work hard to provide the family with its basic needs, or how they interact with employers, employees, or co-workers.

Finally, knowing that our family’s “eyes” are on us as we work from home can also increase our personal level of *yiras Shamayim*, helping us to more readily internalize the fact that Hashem’s eyes are also always on us. This heightened awareness can impel us to behave on a higher ethical standard.

Of course, as idealistic as all of this sounds, the ability to focus on work or on davening in the midst of our kids’ brawl, a broken appliance, or whatever other household distraction may be demanding our attention, remains a significant challenge. Obviously, having a dedicated work and/or davening space and dedicated work and/or davening times are therefore essential. I would like to address one point relating to “dress

code” when working or davening at home. Regarding davening, the halacha mandates appropriate attire in consonance with the pasuk *hichon likras Elokecha Yisrael* (prepare to meet Hashem, Israel, Amos 4:12). Obviously, that halacha does not differentiate between davening in shul and davening at home.

However, with regard to work, we might be tempted to think that while it is important to present ourselves properly while in the presence of others, such is unnecessary when working from home. I’ve heard comical stories about people doing Zoom meetings with suit jackets on top and pajamas below the eye level of the screen. While it is amusing to visualize, something about this picture doesn’t feel right. Even if we can “get away with” dressing down, it would not seem to be in our best interests to do so. The Gemara in *Shabbos* (113a) tells us that R. Yochanan would refer to his clothing as “*mechabdusi*” — the things that provide me with dignity. Therefore, there is value to adhering to a dress code even when working from home. How we dress, even in the privacy of our homes, is a reflection of our *tzelem Elokim* and reinforces our sense of inner dignity. Even if we are working in our own home and no one sees us for the entire day, the image that we see when we look at ourselves in the mirror subconsciously sets the stage for how we think and behave. Especially at a time when there is less external structure, it becomes more essential to create visual cues for ourselves that convey a message of focus, mental clarity and productivity. Over these past months, I have encouraged talmidim to dress for learning at home just as they would in a packed beis midrash.

## **What are some of the lessons from the crisis that will help us long after the pandemic is over?**

**Rabbi Adler:** There are many lasting lessons that we should draw from this pandemic. And it is certainly not too early to start contemplating these lessons. However, given that the crisis has yet to pass and the long-term impact it will have on individuals and society are unknown, we will need to engage in continuous soul-searching and ongoing introspection as a fuller picture emerges. Hence, the following impressions are tentative in nature, and are presented not in the spirit of “*kablu daati*” — an absolute directive — but in the spirit of “*yishma chacham ve'yosef lekach*” — a means to provoke further thought and reflection.

The Gemara at the end of *Makos* describes how the entire corpus of the *taryag* (613) mitzvos rests on a few core principles. The Gemara identifies several personalities from Tanach, each of whom sought to distill the essence of *taryag* into the shortest possible list of bedrock principles. The last personality mentioned is the Navi Chavakuk (2:4), who subsumed everything under the postulate of *v'tzadik be'emunaso yichyeh* — a tzadik lives with his faith.

My strong intuition is that the lasting lessons from this pandemic all revolve around *emuna* (faith).

First, *emuna* means a recognition that what happens in the world — and especially when it is manifest on a global scale — is an expression of Hashem’s will. Although most occurrences in the world can be traced to identifiable causes, a *maamin* (believer) understands that the ultimate “mover and shaker” is the

*Borei Olam* (Creator of the Universe). From this perspective, the particular role that a province in China had in inflicting this horrific virus into our world is beside the point. There should be no doubt in our minds that a pandemic of such global proportions is part of Hashem's plan for the world.

For palpable *emuna* to penetrate our beings, we must leave aside the theological quandary regarding how to reconcile divine pre-determination with human free will and accountability — an issue tackled by the Rambam and others. Rather, we should reinforce to ourselves that COVID-19 is a manifestation of Hashem's master plan, and that it has an ultimate purpose.

That is not to imply that we should claim to know *kavshei de'rachmana* — Hashem's hidden reasons for why He unleashed this *mageifa* upon the world at this historical juncture. In the absence of a *navi* who is privy to such information, such speculation can be a distraction from engaging in genuine introspection. Even within the realm of introspection, we should avoid glib pronouncements that presume to explain COVID-19 as a “punishment” for specific moral lapses — be they within the frum world or within greater society (i.e. technology, excessive materialism, reduced standards of modesty etc.). Certainly, we must constantly seek out ways to address personal and communal shortcomings. However, strident proclamations and self-righteous finger-pointing — especially when the finger is pointed at others — will often ring hollow and breed cynicism. Moreover, singling out certain failings over others may misdirect people to search in the “wrong” places. To be effective, *tochacha* needs to

be administered with wisdom and compassion. As Chazal teach us (*Yevamos* 65b):

כשם שמצוה לומר דבר הנשמע כך מצוה שלא לומר דבר שאינו נשמע.

*Just as there is a mitzvah to say something (in a manner of rebuke) that will be followed, so too, there is a mitzvah to refrain from saying something that will not be followed.*

The source for the mitzvah of *emuna* (which the Rambam and many of the *monei hamitzvos* count as an independent mitzvah) is the pasuk *Anochi Hashem Elokecha*. In codifying this mitzvah, the *Semak* (R. Yitzchak Mi'Curbeil) comments that it requires us not only to acknowledge Hashem's existence as Creator but also to affirm His role as a redeemer — to believe that just as He redeemed us from Mitzrayim, so will He redeem us as well in the future *geula*. This aspect of the mitzvah of *anochi* should also be reinforced in the wake of this pandemic. In truth, it should be relatively easy for a Jew who possesses some familiarity with pesukim in Tanach and/or *maamarei Chazal* that deal with elements of the messianic process, and who has a basic appreciation of the totality of Jewish history and the state of the world today, to discern that the world is being readied for such an eventuality. If the gedolim of pre-war Europe such as the Chofetz Chaim could “intuit” the imminent coming of Moshiach based on their assessment of their world situation, how much more we who have the benefit of hindsight to see all of the subsequent historical developments for Klal Yisrael from then until our very day. This “*geula* mindset” is further heightened when we consider the incredible rate of technological advances in our world,

where things that are considered “routine” were in the realm of science fiction a few short decades ago. [While the constraints of space do not allow elaboration, I think that this observation can be embraced by Jews across the hashkafic spectrum.]

The Ramchal writes in *Daas Tevunos* that Hashem orchestrates events in the world as part of His way of leading it to its state of *tikun*. He refers to this process as “*hanhagas hayichud*.” In a less mystical formulation, R. Yitzchak Meltzen (*Siddur HaGera, Ishei Yisrael*), commenting on the pasuk “*boneh Yerushalayim Hashem*” (Hashem is building Yerushalayim, Tehillim 147:2) recited in *pesukei de'zimra*, explains that the use of present tense — *boneh* (He builds) — rather than *yivneh* (He will build) — suggests that all that occurs in the course of history paves the way for the ultimate redemption. From this perspective, we can remind ourselves, whenever we express our longing for Moshiach, that the pandemic and all its fallout is a critical link in the divinely orchestrated chain of events that will ultimately usher in the *geula*.

The concept of *emuna* is closely related to that of *bitachon*. The precise nature of the relationship between these two concepts have been explained by the meforshim in various ways. For our purposes, let us adopt the following formulation: *emuna* is faith, while *bitachon* is trust. Because a pandemic is a scary reality, it is important that we strengthen not only our belief that Hashem is in charge, but also our sense of *bitachon* in Hashem — trusting in Him and in His ability to protect us from harm.

The pandemic “hit home” for us right after Purim, At the time, I shared with talmidim an insight of the Maharal on

the pasuk in Megilas Esther, which describes the agenda of Haman HaRasha who drew lots with the intent *l'humam ul'abdam* (to confound them and to destroy them 9:24). The word *l'abdam* — which means to obliterate them — is understandable. But what is the meaning of *l'humam*? The Maharal explains that while *le'abdam* relates to the *guf* (the physical body), *l'humam* relates to the *nefesh*, and connotes a sense of being distraught and panicky. When the lots that Haman cast in Nisan settled on a date 11 months later in Adar, Haman's agenda assumed a dual purpose: to annihilate the Jewish people in Adar, and to throw them into a state of panic for all of the intervening months. When facing a pandemic of this magnitude, we need to maintain our calm and avoid falling into a state of panic. **This can be done through strengthening our *bitachon*.** This is something that we can begin to work on now and hopefully continue to strengthen ourselves in, even when this crisis lifts.

In sync with the messages of *emuna* and *bitachon*, we should reinforce our appreciation for the gift of life that we are granted by Hashem each and every day. As we acknowledge in the bracha of Modim: “*al chayenu hamesurim beyadecha ve'al nishmoseinu hapekudos lach*” — for our lives that are placed in Your hands and for our souls that are entrusted to You. Related to this, we should remind ourselves of the premium that the Torah places on human life and, by extension, the significance of

the mitzvah of *v'nishmartem me'od l'nafshoseichem* — you shall greatly guard your lives. R. Moshe Rivkash, in his glosses to *Shulchan Aruch* (known as *Be'er HaGolah*), writes (in his last comments to *Choshen Mishpat*) a remarkable insight into this mitzvah. He explains that since Hashem gives us life in order that we can serve Him, that by being lax in the mitzva of *v'nishmartem* we are betraying His trust and showing ingratitude. Even though taking precautions can feel annoying and cumbersome, we must constantly remind ourselves that by adopting strict standards and protocols we are fulfilling an important mitzvah and demonstrating that we, too, treasure the gift of human life.

Over these past months, the Jewish community throughout the world has suffered the loss of countless individuals, amongst them towering Gedolei Torah, outstanding Jewish leaders and inspiring role models. Many of these losses were brought on or exacerbated by COVID, and in all of the instances, the pandemic prevented the niftarim from being granted the *kavod acharon* (final respects) in a manner that they deserved and would have otherwise received. Some of these losses hit close to home for our yeshiva, including: Rabbi Hy Arbesfeld z”l, Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z”l, and his wife Mindy z”l, Saadya Ehrenpreis z”l. In the larger Orthodox Jewish community, they include: the Novominsker Rebbe z”l and Rav Zalman Nechemia Goldberg z”l.

These words are being penned at the completion of shiva for Rav Dovid Feinstein zt”l (who I had a personal connection with since childhood), and Rabbi Jonathan Sacks zt”l. The loss of these extraordinary individuals, and that of many others not listed here, leaves a palpable void for the Jewish community. As we look back at this dark COVID-filled period, it behooves us to reflect on their respective legacies and do our utmost to emulate their noble qualities.

**Dr. Adler:** In the long run, difficult experiences are character building. Resilience appears to be one of the most important traits we can develop if we want to lead productive and fulfilling lives. If we can grow from our experiences during this period, we will be on a positive trajectory to help us through future challenges as well. My kids have already begun comforting themselves that the “Corona lockdown” will be a “real story” to tell their own children, *iy”H*, as parents themselves. In reality, it is also a story we can retell to ourselves for our own *chizuk*! Soon we will be able to say to ourselves — we got through **that**... and if we got through **that**, we can get through anything!

The pandemic also helped bring into focus what is really important in life — having an opportunity to be alive (literally), spending quality time with family, and living a Torah-infused life even without the benefit of external structure and supports. Our task is to remain in touch with these messages even as life begins to return to normal.



Find more shiurim and articles from Rabbi Adler at <https://www.yutorah.org/rabbi-elchanan-adler>