

Monday of this past week, many of us took to the great outdoors to witness a cosmic wonder - the rare event of a solar eclipse. Some of us set up chairs in Prospect Park, or stood right outside our apartments, some of us drove hours to be in the path of totality. We held special glasses to our eyes, we tipped our chins upward, there were looks of awe, piercing quiet, or exclamations of: it looks like a shiny yellow banana! Well, that's a lot of what I heard because I went to my daughter's school to help them see the eclipse without burning their retinas out.

But, really, the event itself was quite amazing, and not just for the celestial grandeur, the crescent sun, or its eerie shadows. But it was also quite amazing to not just look up, but also around. It was like every person you saw in that two hour period was stopping, gazing, taking part. Strangers smiled at each other, exchanged knowing looks, asked: did you see it? It felt somehow like we were all in this thing, which was bigger than any of us, together.

Dr. Kate Russo, author, psychologist, and self-proclaimed eclipse chaser, wrote of her first ever eclipse: "it was the most awe-inspiring nature event I had ever seen . . . and for the first time, I understood that we are all connected as human beings through time and place." All connected as human beings. It seemed to have this impact on us, too.

And it wasn't just the eclipse itself that contributed to this feeling. In the days leading up to the eclipse, people posted warnings on social media about how to prevent eye injury, how to avoid fake glasses, and stories of people reminding their Uber driver not to look at the sun with their bare eyes. And there were, equally, posts of encouragement, and conversations between strangers, to go out and make sure to experience it, to not miss this, to be part of this story. We were rooting for each other, worrying about each other. The eclipse seemed to surface our most basic human inclinations: to want to take care of and protect each other and to want each other to experience joy and meaning. It reminded us that we're all connected as human beings, vulnerable, eager, hopeful, fragile in a vast universe.

And while an eclipse might manifest these truths for an afternoon or even a week, here at CBE, you've been manifesting these truths continuously, enduringly, and as part of the fabric of who this community is, not in a flash of light, but as an illuminating body of compassionate care. Tonight is Chesed Shabbat, on which we honor our Chesed Team: those who have gone to great lengths to take care of and concern yourselves with other CBE members - often strangers - who were grieving or suffering or had family members who were sick. And those who showed up as community for joyful new beginnings and celebrations, too. Rooting for each other. Worrying about each other.

And Chesed Shabbat equally honors those of us, myself included, who have asked for, or given in to, support when we needed it most. Because while it may be our most basic human instincts to want to care for each other in our most difficult moments, and to celebrate with each other in our highest heights, it is equally our human instinct to retreat when we are suffering and demure when we are celebrating. We learn somewhere along the way that it's embarrassing to need help, to be a burden, or to appear vulnerable, and so we hide away. But if you are a person who

accepted the loving care of a Chesed Team member, that is an act of great courage that is the foundation for a community of great humanity.

Chesed Shabbat is, in fact, a chance for us to lift up a holy equation. A covenant, really, that we will be a community that reaches out with compassionate support, and we will be a community that willingly receives and accepts support when we need it. For this is the essence of what it means to **be** in sacred community with one another.

Our tradition has what to say about this holy equation, this covenant of care, and it comes in Torah this week, in parshat Tazria, of all icky places.

We read this week about what happens when a person within a community gets sick. And not with a cold. And not with stubbed toe, but in a way that breaks them, maybe even reshapes them. When a person presents with the disease called tza'arat - which is both clearly ubiquitous in Torah times - I mean there are two entire Torah portions about it - and is **also** cause for alarm, the person goes to the Priest. The Priest assesses them. Touches them. Sees them in their pain. If the disease is contagious or potentially so, the Priest isolates the person so that no one else gets sick, but also stays present in their life. He revisits them in seven days to see how the person's healing is coming. How is their body, how is their soul? We can critique this model as insensitive or isolating or judgmental, but it's also clear that the Priest - the spiritual caretaker of their day - walks with the one who is anxious, hurting, suffering, and lonely, and gives him his attention above all others, and clear calm instructions on what to do in a really unknowable moment.

So we have some version of the caretaker. The one who puts their hand in the air and says: I can help. Now we don't have Priests today, but Torah reminds us that we, the people, are called *mamlechet Kohanim*, a kingdom of Priests, each able to step into the role of the Chesed Team member, ready to walk with anyone who needs it. To be that side of the holy equation.

So what of the other side?

The text says this: *v'hatzaru'a*, the one with tza'arat, *b'gadav y'hiyu f'rumim*, they will tear their clothing, bare their head, and cover their upper lip. *V'tame tame yikra*: and they will call out impure impure!, identifying themselves.

So what's happening here? On the face of it, this sounds a little terrible. You're already in pain, but now you have to amplify that you have this sickness? Is this about shame? Is this about stigma? Some commentaries say it's simply to warn others to stay away from you so they don't catch what you have. Which is a little antithetical to what we're talking about here. But what's actually happening?

First, the *tzaru'a*, this suffering person, tears their clothing. The commentator Chizkuni teaches that this mimics the act of a mourner. So the community should see past their physical sickness

and notice their grief, their broken heart, their anxiety, their loneliness, their isolation, and see them not as pariah, but just as person. For us today, this is insight to the mourner herself.

Second, the *tzaru'a* covers their mouth. Many commentators say this is about contagion, but consider that act. We know better than most generations, thanks to Dr. Fauci, that wearing a mask is an act of wanting to protect your neighbors. And so the *tzaru'a* is seen not just as vulnerable, but also as taking care of the others in the community.

And finally, the person cries out "Impure Impure!" Just at the moment they might want to disappear, our tradition urges the *tzaru'a* to wear this life moment on the outside - whether they are mourner or ill - so that others may know. So that in their knowing, others may care. If there had been a fear that by doing so, the community would negatively react, would alienate, would banish, no way would this be our tradition's guidance. Instead, a person calls out to a person, and an empathy is expected to grow there.

A holy and courageous equation is proposed, and a solution comes into being. The Priest/caretaker and the *tzaru'a*/mourner/suffering one create a sacred unit of a community that matters.

Long ago, when the rabbis determined the laws around saying Kaddish Yatom, the Mourner's Kaddish, they knew the same truths that we do today. That when we have a loss, when we are in deep grief, our inclination is to retreat and think: no one could possibly understand my pain or make it better. And so in their wisdom, the rabbis required a minyan at Kaddish. Traditionally, the mourner **cannot** say Kaddish without welcoming people into their hardest moment and the congregation is legally **obligated** to show up and respond to the mourner's words. A halachah of not-aloneness.

In equal wisdom, you, members of the CBE Chesed Team, and you receivers of care, have entered into the same covenant, the same equation, the same acts of humanity, trust, and love. And you know, and we know, as the rabbis did, that part of being in that equation, is also knowing that our roles in it are fluid.

That at some point, we will all have the chance to be the caretaking Priest, and at some point, no matter what we do, we will be the *tzaru'a*. Grief, illness, a loved one suffering, anxious unknowns - we can't opt out of these in this life. So we try to make the ground fertile for moving between these roles. These life moments are the great equalizers, reminding us we are, in fact, all connected. As it was under the waning rays of the sun, we are all in this thing, which is bigger than any of us, together.

So permit me, please, to offer you blessing for the sacred and foundational work that you do, on both sides of the equation.

If you are a member of the CBE Chesed Team or if you are a person who has received care from the CBE Chesed Team, and of course if you are both of those, we invite you to please rise by your seats:

BLESSING:

You, who have turned an ancient human instinct to care for each other into reality here in this community, blessed is the work of your hands.

You, who have opened yourself to receive the loving care of a fellow member in your time of need, blessed is the work of your heart.

Blessed are each of you for every email sent, for every phone call made, for every logistical infrastructure figured out and executed with loving precision. Blessed are you for every ingredient you added to a bowl of soup that would feed someone else's family and warm their bodies, for every doctor's appointment you escorted to and errand that you ran. Blessed are you for every shiva minyan you attended, every condolence you offered, every problem you solved, every challah you delivered. Blessed are you for every body that you washed with *kavod* and care in their transition from life to death. Blessed are you through your kind voices, and your gentle hands. How you have cared for the sick and the grieving, friend and stranger and made this community more connected and more whole.

And blessed are you who opened your home to strangers when your heart was longing for your loved one. Blessed are you for saying yes to the soup, yes to the meal, yes to the accompaniment to doctor, grocery, or pharmacy. Blessed are you who have taught us in this place how to ask for help and receive it with dignity and beauty and honor. Blessed are you who have taught us how to soften to each other's offers of care. Blessed are you for each time you let someone walk with you through your or your loved ones transitions and unknowns. How you have cared for the soul of our community, by allowing friend and stranger in, and so making this community more connected and more whole.

May we all follow your leads, may we learn from your commitments. May we raise our hands like yours, may we embrace and be embraced like you have. May our community continue to be strengthened by your deeds. And may you continue to heal and bring healing, be strong and be strengthened, through this work as we move forward, in it, together. Amen.