

It is May 1st. And we can tell that we are finally fully enveloped by spring. We can tell by the flowers in the Brooklyn Botanic Gardens. By our collective descent into allergy season. And by the extreme contrast between now and this past winter. This was a hard and cold winter. In one of the coldest weeks in February, my family lost power and so our heat went out for a day and then we lost hot water for three days. Now, we have it easy compared to many, for sure. But it was cold and it also had a lasting impact.

Later that week, I was thinking about whether my family is prepared for a more significant catastrophe or crisis. I wondered - What if there's a natural disaster? What if the grid goes down? Are we prepared? And the answer, of course, was: no. So I started reading some prepper style articles. A prepper is someone who is always preparing for a major, even world-altering, crisis. Think bunkers and canned food and hunting knives. So we don't have a bunker, but I did make some purchases that week. I bought a fairly hefty solar powered energy bank - it does not work - 8 gallons of water, some MRE's - or meals ready to eat. And I stocked up on our first aid supplies. Because obviously in this catastrophe, I become a doctor.

Now, there's nothing wrong with having those things - some are even a good idea, but I noticed when I was tucking them away, that I wasn't feeling any better or more prepared. So I tucked that feeling away, too.

Then, this week, I read this piece called "The Prepper Delusion," by Kit Dillon. Dillon talks about how many times he has had to flee from disasters - and it is many - and he writes: "What I've learned across every one of these close calls . . . is that what keeps us safe isn't the stuff we pack or stockpile; it's the community we build before calamity strikes. At a time when Americans are increasingly isolated from one another, he says, we must see our ties with our neighbors as essential preparation for the future ahead." He critiques how most prepper theories "share tips for surviving extreme situations, (most) often alone." Why? "Because one of the tenets of this mode of preparation is that in any emergency, 'other people' are (considered) a threat."

He corrects this notion, saying: "when the water is rising or the wildfire is spreading, you will need to make crucial decisions with rapidly changing information. . . . More often than not, he recalled, making those decisions "means relying on the people around you."

My love for my new skeletool aside, this is the wisdom we need most right now. Because the waters *are* rising and we do receive rapidly changing information and our stuff will not save us, but our commitments to one another, our relationships with our neighbors, coming to trust each other, our learning how to count on each other - that might.

This week alone, we have watched the waters rising menacingly. On Monday, this administration fired the entire National Science Board, further dismantling the guidance our country receives toward sound science policy. On Tuesday, right here in Park Slope during a co-op meeting, a person stood before a huge crowd and announced that America has a Jewish supremacy problem - a deeply antisemitic statement which went uncontested for far too long in that meeting, while two Jewish men were viciously attacked in London amidst rising

antisemitism. On Wednesday, the Supreme Court decimated the Voting Rights Act, which is an enormous blow to the voice of Black and brown voters, a dismantling of key protections won during the Civil Rights era, and a threat to the future of free and fair elections in this country. And this week, every single day, immigrant families were torn apart as a policy of mass deportation spreads through our country like wildfire, leaving a wake of destruction and suffering in its path. Our immigrant neighbors are terrified, retreating from public life and being kidnapped by ICE, being taken to countries they've never known. Our neighbors are disappearing. Are we not in the midst of an escalating crisis for humanity? What will we reach for? How do we prepare?

Enter the wisdom of parshat Emor. In this parsha, we get a full run down of sacred Jewish time according to Torah. God tells Moses to tell the people: These are My fixed times *asher tik'r'u otam mikra'ei kodesh* - that you shall proclaim as sacred occasions.

Beginning with Shabbat, we learn the primary ancient rituals of our festivals and holy days. And there is something amazing about these rituals. They are the most powerful signals of how a people might be sustained as time unfolds. They ask us: How do you fill a life with the things that help us survive, help us thrive. Through times of joy, through suffering, through change, even through crisis.

The phrase used for talking about these holidays is "*mikra'ei kodesh*," holy callings, *likro* meaning to call out. But the commentator, Sforno, teaches: The meaning of the words מקראי קודש (mo'adei) is: "days of assembling" - not calling out - but calling together. Days for the people to assemble, to gather, for their sacred undertakings." Before we even know what to do when we get there, that's where it all begins. In a year of time, Torah pushes us toward each other again and again and again. Neighbors out in the street, or the field, or the clearing, meeting each other face to face, to create something greater together. This is how holiness begins.

Each holiday we read about offers some exquisite detail of what we do once we're together: the shofar, the fasting, the counting, the matzah. But every single one of them is flavored by our first verse, with *mikra'ei kodesh*, with gathering together with others.

When we get to Sukkot in the text, we're told: *Pri eitz hadar kapot t'marim*, You shall take the product of *hadar* trees, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before Adonai your God. This is the shaking of the lulav and etrog.

We're told to go outside, to touch growing things, to interact with nature. There's a popular retort on social media in which someone will write to another person: "You need to go touch grass." It's often meant as a snarky response to someone who seems to be dangerously isolated. But that is some deep truth there, some Sukkot truth. Not to retreat into the introspection of ritual, but to go outside and literally touch the grasses, to be with others, to engage in something real.

These sacred rituals of Emor give us a map for living connected to other people and to this world instead of isolating ourselves, disappearing into the virtual world, or adopting an every man for himself, suspicious-of-others posture that pretends to be able to protect us.

Last night, you may know this, but Rabbi Timoner and I and a whole beautiful gaggle of CBE congregants gathered in the street outside 26 Federal Plaza. Because in that building, our immigrant neighbors, kidnapped from their jobs, their homes, playgrounds, hospitals, and schools, are being detained, held in inhumane conditions, separated from their devastated families, their children, and spirited away before they even get to talk to a lawyer. We gathered there as Jews, to reject the cruelty of this system of mass deportation. We, a people who have been the stranger in many lands throughout history, we who are taught to love the stranger as ourselves, we gathered there in love, to protect our neighbors. It was a *mikra'ei kodesh*. A holy gathering. We went out in the park, surrounded by trees and grasses, we touched nature, we sang, we prayed, but before we did anything - we simply gathered. Because if we can learn how to count on each other, if we can know that we can trust each other, if we can share strategy and courage and values, then we can face the crises before us and even potentially overcome them.

Our friend, Reverend Juan Carlos Ruiz - who we gather with every Tuesday for a vigil outside of the Metropolitan Detention Center, for the more than 200 ICE detainees held in *that* building including his own congregants - he joined us at this rally, spoke there, and was arrested with us. He risked his freedom with the Jews who stand by him and know that the only way we get out of this is by choosing each other, because, as Kit Dillon wrote, "our ties with our neighbors are **essential** preparation for the future ahead."

This is why we gather to Shine the Light every Thursday, why we are so fiercely committed to our family at Antioch Baptist Church. Why we are building a growing network between CBE members who live near each other - which is a pilot program that we have just begun, but keep your eye out for this - it's coming to your block, too. This is why we choose to turn outward even when we are struggling inward as the Jewish people. Because Torah reminds us *tikr'u otam mik'ra'ei kodesh* - what makes time and space *kodesh*, holy, is how we proactively weave ourselves together with others and refuse the idea that hunkering down alone is what will save us.

At the end of the prepper article, Dillon quotes Chris Elliot, a military veteran who wrote the book "Resilient Citizens," saying: True preparedness requires us to "Expand your home beyond just the four walls. Learn what others have to offer and recognize what brings us together and what we hold in common." This is the wisdom of our *mikra'ei kodesh*.

Last night, while sitting in the street blocking traffic, we sang words from a bit earlier in the Book of Leviticus: *Lo ta'amod al dam reyecha* - I will not stand by the blood of my neighbor. I will not stand idly by. We may be in crisis right now, there may be calamity ahead. But neighbors are bound to each other if we choose to be. And in those *mikra'ei kodesh*, we have a path forward together, accountable to one another, stronger for our relationships, and prepared for what is

now and whatever is to come. May we keep building toward that vision of safety and love and community. And there, in that gathering place, may we find that bound together, no one of us is alone.