

## **Storytellers of Today ages 35-64**

### **First place, *One is not the loneliest number*, By Lynne Elkes, age 52**

Sometime in the middle of January 2020 I became aware of a health crisis brewing in a far off province in China. I shared with my students the methods used by officials there to contain the alarming expansion of the deadly virus, now finally named as COVID-19. The empty streets of Wuhan province haunted me as I went about my normal life: making summer vacation plans at the beach, my daughter's upcoming high school graduation, and her move to college, leaving me on my own for the first time in 28 years.

There was no sense of impending doom as the travails in China were literally a world away. And then March arrived and with it the quick closure of my university, pivot to virtual teaching, and then the eventual closure of all public facilities and organizations.

The loss of knowing one could freely attend a meeting, a religious service, a gym, or go out to eat was not an easy concept to grasp. I think it took a while before the idea of "stay home" really took full force. Then, as our elders started dying in great numbers the reality took hold.

The isolation was liberating at first! No rushing in traffic to commute to work, no need to dress up, the joy of cooking, and taking long walks with my daughter. Yet, this exhilaration was short lived. Being cut off physically from my Baltimore community of friends, colleagues, and the rituals of life that I had taken for granted, plunged me and many others into a state of despair. The fear and endless horizon of this deadly disease with no cure seeped unknowingly into my outlook.

The Baltimore community, and specifically the Jewish community, went into overdrive to meet the needs of all of us. Food for the hungry, medical care for the sick, and most importantly, pivoting quickly to provide emotional solace, religious connection, and a modern way to maintain the ties that bind.

As Passover approached in early April, I received a robocall from an Orthodox rabbi begging people to not gather for seder. I am not Orthodox but was truly grateful for the care and concern that was evident in the call; the exhortation to stay safe, to stay healthy, and yet to celebrate and enjoy the retelling of the Exodus story. It brought home for me that no matter our beliefs, or how we choose to believe or even observe our faith, that we as a Baltimore community of Jews is connected at our core. I felt part of a larger entity and that, even if I was not part of this particular rabbi's congregation, even if in normal times my way of life is unacceptable to many of my fellow Jews, that we are one. Anachnu Echad.

No one was going to look after us, care as much about us, as our own Jewish community. No one was going to work so hard to make those who live alone feel less lonely and isolated, be cautious but caring, effective in surreal times. How blessed are we as Jews to put cha'i, life, before anything else.

Now in the summer of 2020, seven months removed from the first whispers of a global pandemic that has changed the landscape of the world I once knew, I am buoyed by the knowledge that no matter the length of this crisis or its severity, I am not alone. My daughter, soon to be 350 miles away from me, will not be alone. This is all due to the simple fact that we are Jews, and no matter where we are, if we embrace the spark that drives us to survive and thrive, we have lived up to the expectations our community demands and expects of us. In turn, we can depend on our community to coalesce, show strength, and face the future, as uncertain as it is, with a shared purpose. Anachnu Echad.

## Second place, *Kaddish, Above and Beyond*, By Kenneth Friedman, age 47

My life changed forever on February 25, 2020, Rosh Chodesh Adar, 5780. My role model, my advisor, my mentor, Norman Friedman, Nissan Reuven ben Shammai, AKA, Dad, passed away. I soon learned the healing effect of the gift to gather among my People to say the eternal words of the Kaddish:

יִתְגַּדֵּל וְיִתְקַדֵּשׁ שְׁמֵהּ רַבָּא

בְּעֶלְמָא דִּי בְּרָא כְרַעוּתָהּ

May His great name be exalted and sanctified!

In the world in which He created according to His will!

The Jewish customs of shiva and shloshim brought an unexpected level of nechama, of deep psychological comfort. Greeting the faces and voices of longtime friends and family who knew my dad, we heard stories of simple truth and emunah pashuta, basic faith, about the man that played the lead role in my life until now. Hearing these loyal people answer Amen to our words exalting and sanctifying God somehow placed a salve on our wounded hearts.

Suddenly a fog washed over our community like much of the world with novel coronavirus, and quarantine. The shul to which I turned to hear the stirring, responsive words of Amen and Yehay Shemay Rabah, would be forced to shutter its doors to all.

Suddenly this salve for my pain was just out of reach.

Certainly, I considered the terrible pain of others unable to host a proper shiva, but the wound in my heart opened wider, my soul once again disconnecting and torn from the corporeal. I searched the enduring words of Kaddish, and within found my answer.

לְעֵלָא מִן כָּל בְּרַכְתָּא

וְשִׁירָתָא וְתַשְׁבְּחָתָא וְנַחֲמָתָא

דְּאֲמִירָן בְּעֶלְמָא

Blessed is He, above and beyond all the blessings, songs, praise, and consolation that are uttered in the world.

In this time in which I was unable to utter the metaphysical words of kaddish, connecting my soul to my dad's and ultimately to God, I understood that there were deeper connections to achieve. This new reality, like any when viewed from a particular angle, was a blessing.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe wrote in September, 1971 that, "When it happens that a situation arises in which it is impossible for a Jew to actually carry out the will of God despite his self-sacrifice, this stimulates in him a deep spiritual pain that pervades him to the very core of his soul, bringing him to a deeper connection with God, His Torah and mitzvot, and his Jewishness, the likes of which he could never have attained without this painful experience."

לְעֵלָא מִן כָּל בְּרַכְתָּא

Above and Beyond.

I turned to my Rabbi, who quoted the words of the Aruch Hashulchan: והתפלית: אע"פ שאמירת הקדיש והתפלות: מועילות להאבות, מכל מקום אין אלו העיקר, אלא העיקר הוא שהבנים ילכו באורח מישור, כי בזה הם מזכים... "Even though saying Kaddish and prayers assists our ancestors, it is not the most important thing for them. The most important thing is that their children live upright lives."

I reflected upon my life, as my increasing age lends itself, and learned that my community involvement, my leadership where I am able, my charity, and above and beyond all, teaching my children the lessons of my father, will fulfill these words of the Aruch Hashulchan.

And then after these weeks, the day would come when ten of my neighbors could gather for prayer in our backyard, and according to government laws. This was a day of consolation as a yearlong mourner.

Within just days would come the bar mitzvah of my precious son, my father's only grandson. As my son wrapped his arm for the first time with the priceless tefillin of my father and joined the unbroken chain of generations of both his family, and his People, my heart, my soul swelled.

Above and Beyond.

These are the lessons of Our People. These are the lessons carried l'dor va'dor, from generation to generation. This is Torah M'Sinai, the lessons of the Revelation of Sinai. While Torah is supernatural, it is in our mortal world. It is in our lessons, our examples of lives lived upright, from parent to child, from generation to generation.

Above and Beyond.

### **Honorable Mentions**

#### ***Silver Linings, By Debra Weinberg, age 60***

Silver Linings: When this is all over

When this is all over, we will know what it means to be a community

- ❖ We will know the importance of connecting, when we couldn't gather.
- ❖ Family and friends will make it a practice to reach out to call one another...and organizations and synagogues will continue to call their members to ask, how are you doing?
- ❖ We will have learned how important caring for something or someone is for own sense of wellbeing.

When this all over we will no longer take hugs for granted

- ❖ Families will stay together, or perhaps we will have realized that it is healthier for some to be apart.
- ❖ We will listen to our bodies and strive to take better care.
- ❖ We will listen deeply to those who have suffered a

#### ***The Magic of Music with a bicep curl, By CG Polirer, age 35***

Covid-19 has been a time for me to be home with my twin girls currently 2.5 years old. Busy with online college work, I had a hard time dealing with many hours entertaining the girls and finding time for myself. I had put off working out for a long time. No real reason just hadn't exercised in years. A friend of mine back home in Michigan is a personal trainer and she used this time to provide group workouts via Zoom. I saw her posts on Facebook and one day I decided to try her class. Each day after her live class took place, I received an email with that day's work out. I pushed it off a week, collecting the workouts in my inbox but providing excuses why I shouldn't exercise that day. Until one day, I decided to put the class on while the girls were around. It took maneuvering and a lot of redirection, but they joined in, in their own way. My day is not complete without a workout. I have gone from nothing to exercising 5-6 days a week. Naomi, the fitness instructor is a household name now. The

girls have found toys of their own to use as weights and like to show off pictures to send to Naomi each day. On days, when I decide to exercise on my own, they request her on their own—getting their shoes and socks for me to put on.

This may not be the kindness one had in mind, but my overall health is better. I am proud of how I used this time and the gift that Naomi brings every day to my email box. I communicate with her daily on what I liked and what I didn't enjoy. I have learned that the power of music and exercise is truly magical. And my girls and I look forward to our daily exercise, creating memories each bicep curl at a time.

### **Coronavirus, By Jennifer Miller, age 44**

(The first letter of each line spells the title)

Close the doors, empty the hallways, now we begin

Orders of isolation, frequent consternation, our restless minds spin

Reading the numbers, wearing the mask

Over and over, more questions to ask

Needing to be hugged, missing an embrace

All we see now is the top of the face

Virus of the world, we want to know why

it can weaken, it can kill, and even silently pass by

Realize that life is all about today

Uncover new experiences that in memories will stay

See the good, and know that this too shall pass someday.

### **My 2020 Journey, By Batya Moses, age 62**

*COVID SYNDROME*

*I've had nothing to say, not even on my blog. In March COVID-19 abruptly muted my voice, tucked me into my apartment, removed the spice from my palate. I'm voluntarily sequestered, safe among my weary possessions, washing hands and sanitizing doorknobs. My clutter has clutter; cobwebs shroud my thoughts.*

COVID Syndrome: long bouts confined to home overcast with isolation and withdrawal. I avoid the news. I followed it like everyone else when lockdown first started mid-March. I shed tears over the

daily death reports. Today's reporting, ever increasing rates of infection and misinformation, cause my spirit to plummet. Too many souls departed this earth. So tragic, such a loss. Pain is anesthesia if allowed in.

I don't go out. Hardly at all. I have health considerations and care for an elderly parent. Community volunteers, "angels", shopped for me at first. I ordered in groceries and stocked up on staples. Now, in July, I go the kosher market about every 2 to 3 weeks. Nowhere else to go other than dropping off Mom's groceries, my car sits idle for days at a time. Taking out the trash became an exciting activity.

Long-term unemployment prepared me well for this new status. For over two years I've sat in front of my computer scanning job openings, sending out applications, waiting for incoming email to affirm I am wanted, desirable, and skilled enough —though I know my worth. Unemployment benefits ran dry a long time ago. Some COVID relief benefits elude me because I did not lose a job *because* of the pandemic. Fewer companies have openings during the lockdown. Still, I practice a tedious routine: tweak the resume, craft a cover letter, send the application, brainstorm with my job counselor. Wash, rinse, repeat.

Savings nearly depleted and no spare money to spend, I pinch pennies assiduously. Some charities provided gift cards. It feels bad to be so needy. The economy will not flourish from my paltry purchases alone.

Depression, my longstanding companion, clouds my vision, saps my strength. The toxic-to-me heat that my body cannot tolerate poisons any desire to step outside. Exercise? Not a priority though it might help. I'm complacent to drift. It's a crummy attitude, but I'm being honest, and that's inherent to the Syndrome. Otherwise, I don't want to set foot outside; it's too darned hot.

I've already slept through a Wednesday, seeing 6:30 on my clock and thinking, "Aw rats, up early again," before going to the bathroom and returning to bed not realizing it was 6:30 *p.m.* not 6:30 *a.m.*! The days melt into each other. Thank G-d for Shabbos, the anchor of my week!

My data use soars. Yay internet! One bright spot: Zoom classes light my days. I've learned so much! Ravelry, the online knitting community, provides me with hours of creative imagery. Elsewhere politics, not science, muddies discussions and public opinion flares with condemnation, sarcasm, and impatience. Trained in public health, I share scientific information, writing opinions countering the falsehoods. Otherwise intelligent people spout such nonsense and conspiracies that I wonder if I'm living in a different universe. People believe what they want to see.

Strangely, I'm content.

"I'm the happiest depressed person I know," I quip. It's true. I have faith that we will get through this dreadful time, bruised but stronger. I've witnessed incredible acts of kindness in my community and in the world. I witness the hand of G-d in stories of recovery, marriages and births, selfless acts, and scientific discoveries. I can still laugh, say a kind word, and help a friend.

Everyone knows someone who perished or sickened. Everyone hopes and prays for release. We're sensitized to the suffering of others in a personal way. COVID-19 brought us together out of the confines of our communities and around the world. *"Together apart" is more than a motto.*

I know effective treatments will be forthcoming soon, the economy will recover, and factionalism reigns whatever political party prevails. Public discord will espouse new causes. This experience is a

milestone in history like none before. Global in its extent, coronavirus brought us together as a world community, erasing some borders and emphasizing our mutual humanity. At least, I hope so.

I know that I will get a job.

Living through the pandemic carves character. Living *after* the pandemic depends upon what we've absorbed about our roles in the world. Living in my own skin requires I nurture that spark of *Good* bequeathed to my soul.

My voice may have been muted, eyes clouded, and thoughts clogged with cobwebs, but it's transitory. I have hope for the future and faith in G-d. I will emerge from my apartment eventually, more contemplative and patient.

I will survive COVID Syndrome. *I have something to say.*

***My 2020 Journey (which should only happen once in my life), By Timothy Ratajczak, age 59***

They say hindsight is 20/20 - which under normal circumstances means that something makes more sense after it has already passed. In the current 2020, we don't understand it now and I'm reasonably sure it will not seem logical in the future.

From a personal perspective, 2020 will be the year I discovered how much younger I look in a face mask. It's cheaper than Botox, and I can now safely encounter old friends without having to explain multiple chins or a lack of dental hygiene. I can go for days without shaving, and the money I'm saving on razor blades will allow me to vacation in the Caribbean — as soon as it reopens. For lack of a haircut, my coiffure at the moment would make any of the Patriarchs proud. And I can rant and rave in public like one of the Prophets and no one will pay any attention.

For years, people begged me to cover my face like a Hasidic bride so as not to upset their children. In 2020, they got their wish. Thanks to COVID-19, my own mother doesn't recognize me. How smart is this virus anyway? Smart enough to infect me in a baseball stadium, but not smart enough to attack Mrs. Rifken while she's shopping at Sam's Club? Personally, I rather like the idea of venturing out masked in public. I can fantasize about robbing a bank or better yet, I can pretend to be a doctor — only not my doctor because I would never want someone like me as a patient.

And which type of mask should I be wearing in 2020? My healthcare provider (she's too expensive to be called a nurse) told me that a cloth mask will protect others by keeping my droplets to myself. I am not normally in the business of sharing my droplets with anyone — even loved ones — so I thought it was a superfluous recommendation. And what type of cloth? Heaven help the man whose wife won't wear any mask that wasn't created by a chic Italian design house. My neighbor doesn't go outside without a gas mask, but since he grew up on a Kibbutz near Gaza, one is inclined to overlook his paranoia. On the other hand, Rabbi Hertsgaard refuses to wear any mask unless it is certified Kosher.



And what about social distancing? Even before 2020, I was never comfortable shaking hands or backslapping — depending on which way I was looking. Even in the best of times, poor old Mrs. Zembeck could never say hello without getting spittle on me. Now I don't worry so much. Mr. Drobnik's breath doesn't seem so bad anymore, and for once his wife Zelda isn't talking too loud. Certain members of my family have been social distancing from each other since time immemorial — or at least since my sister married a man who refuses to apologize for insulting my grandmother's latkes. Now we schedule all of our arguments on Zoom. Aunt Henny's recent funeral was a notable and peaceful exception. It was a dignified affair that was streamed on YouTube. Her son Bernard gave a beautiful eulogy, but the Rabbi's benediction kept getting interrupted by Sprite commercials.

In 2020, I found out I wasn't essential. My ex-wife told me this for years, but who knew she was right? Not every job can be done remotely. You try building an aircraft carrier in your living room. My dentist Dr. Gershwin is proposing to clean my teeth via email. And based on the job he does in person, it won't make a bit of difference. Yes, I can drive part-time for Uber — but only if I agree to stay in my house. For someone of my driving skills, this is perhaps for the best.

Regarding the social issues of 2020, whatever it is I'm accused of, I automatically plead guilty. I have already started a Twitter campaign to denounce myself for things I said, might have said, should have said or could possibly say in the foreseeable future. It was all my fault, and I'm sorry already. Personally, I think it was my sister Letty who got all the privileges (and still does), but my mother insists that I'm the ungrateful one. "Think of the man next door," she always told me as a child. "He's worse off than you." But that was impossible to verify because we lived in a remote part of Wyoming and our nearest neighbor could only be located via satellite.

Has talking about my 2020 journey made me feel any better? Are you asking? No one listens to me anyway. In a year from now, perhaps there will be clarity — but only if 2021 ends up being worse.

### ***Keeping Our Community Connections Strong while Defeating you, Coronavirus, By Ilana Meiller, age 40s***

I do not know your origin. Rumors spread rapidly that you derived from different sources in Wuhan, China. Surprisingly, a persistent myth is that scientists intentionally created you in a lab. While the world is still trying to solve the mystery of where you came from, what I am certain of is that you are a dangerous enemy that wreak havoc in various aspects of our lives. Nevertheless, I refuse to allow you to paralyze me with fear, as staying connected with the Baltimore Jewish community helps me manage the stress that you cause us indeed.

How dare you show chutzpah and disrupt my peaceful life? You also are meshuga (insane) to alter my daily routines and predictable tasks. Surely, you force me to walk around town hiding my smile behind a mask, and to constantly remind myself "stop, do not get close to people", that is a sad fact. In

addition to all these inconveniences, I sit quietly in my home reminiscing about the in-person interactions I enjoyed with others in the past.

I do not hold a grudge against you even though you pose a threat to my existence. On the contrary, you encourage me to adapt to my “new normal” with creativity, strength, and determination. As the stay-at-home restrictions are lifted, I visit local markets and stores as well as greet some familiar faces with messages of hope. Similarly, you motivated me to become close friends with Zoom; video chats and phone calls also enable my relationships with neighbors and acquaintances to continue to bloom. Undoubtedly, our expression of care towards each other binds us together during this crisis.

The Baltimore Jewish organizations and publications support the fight against you by providing me with information and entertainment via magazines and digital technology. Jmore and the Baltimore Jewish Times, for example, inspire me with fascinating news and stories of individuals who currently volunteer and perform act of kindness and generosity. Likewise, the Baltimore Zionist District, The Associated, and Friends of the Israel Defense Forces lead virtual educational programs and events, which build a strong link between the Jews in Baltimore and the State of Israel. Thanks to these dedicated organizations, you did not preclude me from celebrating Israel’s Independence Day or paying my respects to Israel’s fallen soldiers and victims of terror during the yearly Yom Hazikaron ceremony.

Etz Chaim Center for Jewish Learning is another organization that fosters spiritual and social connectedness, and conducts online classes and activities while your presence persists. For instance, Etz Chaim Center presented renowned speakers and kumsitzs or sing-alongs, which proved to be extremely entertaining. Additionally, classes on Jewish spirituality, mindfulness, and meditation, among others, offer me the opportunity to reflect on my blessings with prayers and gratitude to G-d. Lastly, maintaining a positive mindset brings me a sense of courage to hold you at bay in these uncertain times.

You fuel my desire to regard my bond with the community with optimism. Despite you being an obstacle in our path, we shall overcome you together. One day, we will wake up from this nightmare of having known you and discover that you are finally gone. I will celebrate your departure with excitement, and realize that while you will remain a lingering memory, the Baltimore Jewish community will forever be strong, united, and alive. L’chaim!

### **2020: Facing the Beast, By Maggie Brace, age 59**

A strange comfort enshrouds this cosmic joke.

Resplendent in comfy clothes, we wile away the hours, cheek to jowl with each other.

At first, suspiciously circling our respective turfs like crest displaying grouse creating shiny bowers, we’ve now settled into an unheralded synchronicity.

We hold tight as best we can to far flung kin with voice and fond memory.

Still finding time for recreational pursuits, we nod and wave, while performing perfectly choreographed elusive maneuvers away from pleasantries exchanging neighbors.

Meal times find us cheerfully comparing news and tidbits, only to have us filter off to our disparate zones, keen to keep our thinly tethered employment.

Tele-visits seem so natural now, how did society not seek its ease before?

Taking comfort in the humor we can glean from social media or zoom time, our friendships are saved



from floundering by commiseration and solid foundations.  
No allure from the old watering holes and haunts, fear strikes a discordant avoidance of social gatherings.  
Strolls about the garden reveal hidden gems and miraculous beauty.  
Surplus time for reflection, hobbies, and learning creates an additional layer to our psyche.  
Our community joins as one united front to repulse this elusive beast.

***Coronavirus Pandemic essay, By Judith Landman, age 45***

I am a preschool teacher who like many others have had to valiantly learn the whole new world of zoom. Coronavirus did not stop us from trying to maintain connection with our students! I saw this firsthand with me and my class, and with my own children and their teachers. One community that I would like to publicly thank and appreciate is the committed and enthusiastic group of teachers and Rabbis, principals and preschool directors, and IT people who trained all of the aforementioned people. They fielded myriads of phone calls and e-mails during our lockdown learning time. The patience and support as they virtually held our hands cheerleading us on to continue doing the most noble profession in the world must be applauded!

Another community that is part of this group and really the other partner in it, is the parent body. I wrote the poem below in honor of my parents, during the "thick of things," and I share this recognition with all the other overwhelmed and frazzled yet steadfast parents across the world who did the very best they could do in the most trying of times. I thank you for all your efforts on behalf of your child's education!

And finally, it goes without saying a hero's award needs to be given to the medical community. The constant danger they put themselves in to care for another human being, to insure life at all costs, is something indeed to marvel at. A parent who is a resident showed up in scrubs to pick up her sons, and boy was that a visual that re-framed EVERYTHING and made me appreciate even more the perseverance of doctors, nurses, anesthesiologists, and so on.

Pick-Packet

You picked up your sons packet still dressed in blue.

Your dedication to humanity is your true hue.

Your scrubs proclaim your self-sacrifice to so many

It's our turn now to say thank you and to your family

You picked up your sons packet on the way to another

Your dedication to your children is something to admire

Your demeanor and attitude so evident in your step

It's our turn now to join hands and clap

You picked up your sons packet in the middle of the night  
Your dedication for education is not something to slight  
Your energy despite fatigue mess and stress are an inspiration  
It's our turn now to express our admiration

You picked up your sons packet at the end of the week  
You're taking care of so much on very little sleep  
You have little ones and big ones entrusted in your care  
It's our turn now to applaud our fanfare

You were sick! And someone still picked up the packet!  
You got better, donated plasma, and someone still picked up the packet!  
Your desire to live and desire to do despite everything you've been through!  
It's our turn now to thank G-d and be amazed by you!

You opened up your packet in anticipation of what's to come  
Your little hands taking out each paper and then some  
Some papers some stickers and even a prize!  
Your eyes shine bright and your mouth smiles wide  
For you know it's your Morah (teacher) who loves and misses you so  
Packed up these packets- a word you don't even know!

Harken! My dear student, my parent, my friend  
I pray for the day I can see you again  
And give you this packet in your very own ungloved hands  
But for now, take it and maybe you'll find  
Something else you can't touch but it's right there inside.  
A piece of my heart carrying this Pekel (Yiddish for package)

With prayers for you for me and for all the world's People.

With love always,

Morah 😊

***Manifest Destiny, By David Katz, age 47***

A thousand + million people  
 A billion different dreams  
 Cascading across the conscience of my Manifest Destiny  
 Angst drowning in milk and flakes  
 Artificially flavored dreams  
 For a fleeting moment my meticulous planning  
 A xanthous sky creates a strange glow on the land  
 Jesus yawns  
 Atheists breathe in noxious gases  
 A collective sigh and smile the people make  
 "He is not human," the cherubs cried out  
 (Meticulous planning)  
 "Up against the wall! Now!"  
 Dreams vs. nightmares  
 Where is your sanity? Lost in the fog?  
 Damn it, where did you go?!

Here kitty kitty, come to daddy  
 (Meticulous planning)  
 It wasn't supposed to happen like this  
 Life was mine  
 I should have prospered  
 Made beautiful babies to carry my name into infinity  
 I should not be bound to wooden stake for all to mock  
 A million + billion dreams  
 Day and night they won't shut up  
 Psychic white noise, domineering spirits  
 (Meticulous planning)  
 I followed the rainbow to the end  
 But the barren desert stretched forever and ever  
 I almost died of thirst  
 I never dreamed this would it would end like this  
 Dreams! Fantasies! Plans!  
 Worthless  
 Meticulous worthless plans  
 Abandoned by friends  
 Thrown on a bloody alter by dad  
 3 days and two nights I slept  
 Into the cave they sent me

(Meticulous planning)  
That worked out  
I am lionized forever  
Everybody knows my name  
I am now a part of a million + billion dreams  
Dreamt by a billion + million people  
Over two thousand years  
Meticulous plans  
I guess something went right  
He conquered the world of life  
All I did was conquered the world of Job  
(Meticulous planning)  
Lost in space and legends  
Go figure

***The World Through the Eyes of Covid, By Sharon Cohen, age 55***

When I look at my Facebook feed and see wild animals walking down main street and nature flourishing. When I see neighbors volunteering to go grocery shopping or run errands for strangers. When I see people with and without disabilities spending endless hours sewing masks to donate to the less fortunate. When I see celebrities creating free online events to help the masses pass time and forget for a while the horror the world faces. When I see small children posting happy events that they participate in during their lock down. When I see the government trying to help those without employment. When I see private companies extending deadlines, freezing payments, reaching out to those in need. When I see children reaching out on zoom to try to play with and engage my daughter with autism. When I see my son trying to learn and better himself instead of just lying in bed playing Xbox. When you reach out a hand for help and feel a hand reaching back. When our whole world has turned into a faceless, isolation and you receive a phone call from a stranger just to see if you are okay. When someone puts their life on the line so I can receive groceries. When my non technical piano teacher figures out zoom so that my kids can still have piano lessons. When my friends set up a non-COVID Facebook page to give everyone a place to retreat. When black lives matter is more than just words, it is real people risking their lives to show that we support all our brothers and sisters no matter what color, what religion. When my daughter's school creates a huge care box filled with toys to let her know that they are thinking about her. When nurses, doctors, EMT's, firefighters, risk their lives and the lives of their families everyday to help. When I see all the amazing, dedicated, selfless people in the world and the renewing of nature, I know that HaShem exists and in His way He is showing us that we as a people, as a race, as human beings, WE CAN SURVIVE THIS. We as a community can survive COVID if we embody all the goodness we see in the selfless people who perform acts of kindness everyday. Wear a mask, social distance wash your hands... the life you save may be someone you love. We are all in this together. Be Human, Be Kind, Be Part of the Solution!! Do not look at the glass as being half empty or half full... Be grateful you have a glass and something to drink!!

**By Laura Brown, age 55**

On December 31, 2019 I was at the medical center at Walter Reed. David, my boyfriend for two years was having an infusion. David and I met at the Costco in Hanover, MD where he worked. He had the courage to ask me out at the Member Services desk after I completed a transaction. We have been together every since. Eight months after we started dating David was diagnosed with cancer. We started out 2018 at Walter Reed with him having a full bone marrow transplant.

David was acting a bit strange after the infusion, more so than usual, but my family was in town, it was the holidays, and there was a lot going on.

"We need to go to my house so I can cook these greens," David said.

"David, we have more than enough food for tonight's dinner why are you insisting on cooking these greens? It's okay if we do not have them, no one will be angry or upset with you, " I said.

"Laura, can we just go to my house please? I need to get this done."

"Okay, David, not a problem. Let's go."

We get to his home, and he puts the greens that he just purchased from the Glen Burnie Walmart on the counter in his kitchen.

I go into his bedroom where I keep my house shoes so I can help him with the greens.

"Laura! What are you doing!"

"Getting my shoes. David are you okay? You are acting so weird."

"I'm fine."

A few minutes later David put on his favorite Smokey Robinson album.

"Let's dance," he says.

"What about the greens?" I ask.

"That can wait."

We start dancing. It's nice. Then David starts to go down to the floor. I think he is falling due to his second consecutive day of infusion and the fact he has been acting so strange.

"David what's wrong? Are you okay?"

He's down on the floor, on one knee. He pulls a small box out of his pocket, looks up at me with tears in his eyes and says, "Laura, I love you with all of my heart, will you become my wife?"

I just stare at him for a few seconds before I am able to process what he has just asked me.

"Yes!"

At 55 years old, I am engaged to be married for the first time in my life. We went to my home where we announced our engagement to my family. 2019 ended on a high note.

David and I wanted to get married in 2020, he was 66, a widower and there was no need to wait any longer. We worked together and had completed our planning and had several contracts signed by the end of February.

We were so excited! Everything was falling right into place, including a special 80th birthday celebration for my dad. 2020 was going to be a year of celebrations!

We had no idea about COVID 19. The news reports about a disease in China and then Italy were disturbing. We were concerned, but had no idea what was coming. Then everything shut down here in the United States. It was a complete shock.

Two weeks after everything was closed we received a call, that my uncle, my father's brother had died of COVID 19. Ninety minutes later we received another call, one of our cousins died of COVID 19. I could not even process that two of my relatives, one who I had just been on Facebook with a few days ago were dead.

We then learned my mother's brother was in the hospital on a ventilator and he had COVID 19. We had just spoken to him a week prior.

We did not know what to do for weeks, but we post phoned and then cancelled my father's celebration. We struggled with what to do about our wedding, finally, we were forced to reschedule to a 2021 date we did not truly want, because the venue refused to give us a refund.

Finally, we decided to keep our original date, August 1, 2020 and get married in my fiancé's backyard with a very small number of family and friends. We had a plan and were moving forward.

Over the next weeks, I lost two additional family members. The pain just hit me again. Then three days before our wedding we lost my mom's brother. He had been doing so much better, but took a turn for the worse. He died due to complications of COVID 19 after a 115 day fight, 40 of those days on a ventilator.

Our hearts are broken again. David and I get married tomorrow and start a new life together. 2020 will be better for us tomorrow.

### ***Aunts and Uncles, By Phil Setren***

Who was that masked man?' I asked my little brother, standing in front of the Deli selling chocolate bars for the synagogue fund-raising drive. " It feels like everyone in Baltimore knows Mom and Dad, so they think they know us?" I remember how it confused me as a shy little boy, coming from such a



large Baltimore family. But we sold the second most chocolate bars of any family at Beth Israel, and we won the bicycle!

I didn't know all of the family member names, but I knew their warm and worn eyes, always ready to pinch our cheeks and ask if we wanted a chocolate top cookie. Tete Mira seemed to have a pocket full of them, when she came to see me fail at soccer. And Tete Berta and Uncle Leon always passed me sugar candies, after applauding me so politely in the JCC plays.

I suppose it was then, when I started learning lines for plays, that I tried to learn their names and figure out who was who, as it seemed right to say hello if I saw them.

And then, one rainy afternoon when Grandpop was telling the miraculous story of escaping the Nazi's when Mom was only two, a series of facts were revealed that I was expected to understand as I was almost Bar Mitzvah age. The fact that I have two large families in Baltimore. One of blood relatives, but also a large extended family of holocaust survivors who we decided to call Aunt and Uncle, as so many of theirs had perished in the camps. And we are a community that is here for each other. I was then told who was on the boat with Mom and my grandparents, with only the clothing on their back, heading to safety in America. In the serbo-croat/ Yugoslav language, 'Mora' means water. So, grandma picked Baltimore as she imagined being closer to her sister across the water. Such a beautiful simplicity in a corrupt and complicated world, and every old country coffee cup and picture held this kind of resilience in my community.

So as the big day of my Bar Mitzvah arrived, I looked across the congregation from the bimah and I noticed the tearful wonder from the family that was experiencing this miracle with me. That my mother had survived the holocaust, married and had healthy children who would get to this age and be free to have a bar mitzvah. And between my moments of gawky immaturity, I realized every person shaking my hand was welcoming me into their adult community. Would I live up to the respect I had for them? On Saturday evenings, many of my grandparents extended family played cards, and I would sleep over so I could watch the magic of the expressions. Switching languages from Hebrew to Ladino Spanish to Yiddish to Serbo Croat, I could understand most words from their facial expressions. I am certain to have pursued a communications/media arts career because of these card parties and the communication challenges. When a tattooed number peeked from the sleeve of a gentleman sitting next to grandpa, I would watch this man's power and his towering dignity. And at bedtime, when grandpa told me this man's escape story, he likened his friends to one of the colorful quilts grandma made. Weaved with so many different colors, and the diversity of people was the like pattern. And we learn from each other the rules of life, some difficult... some cruel.... some helpful to always remember, and others full of the horror we need to learn from and let go of.

SO, when 2020 blew its winds and threatened to crack the spine of my Baltimore community, I traveled across the ocean to be with my community for every moment of this lockdown. Largely with Mom in the house, and brother and sister in our 'safety bubble', every phone call and socially distant moment has been precious.

Why. Because every day another clue of who I am is revealed to me. Through an old chochka, or a black and white picture, or a story I've heard repeated so many times, I can recite it's comma's. And I don't mind. Because although my community are wearing masks, we know who we are.

### ***Unmasked, By Elisa Shevitz, age 55***

I thought the roaring 2020's would be more fun.

The community of a single person living on her own in New York City during a pandemic consists mostly of FaceTimes and Zooms. When I do mask up and leave my apartment to get mail or empty trash, I'm treated to brief sightings and socially distanced waves from neighbors and doormen. The familiar owners of the bodega across the street look incognito in their masks and gloves behind new plastic dividers, but I can tell they are happy to see customers buying groceries and coveted paper towels. I'm anxious about taking public transportation so I haven't ventured farther than a few block radius.

My social life instantly changed from drinking in the sites and experiences of my city to virtual calls and cocktails. Lacy dresses and fancy shoes in my closet are sad and bored. I'm between jobs so shouldn't be shopping for clothes and can't go anywhere anyway, but I do seem to be buying masks and hand cream in bulk online. I've begun to meet friends in my "bubble" on my rooftop or a bench overlooking the East River.

A local pub, Finnegan's Wake, is my go-to haven whenever I crave the best fresh turkey club sandwich on toasted rye (without the middle bread) and a dry martini with olives and a twist. It's literally a place where everyone knows your name. Boarded-up windows gave no indication of it ever reopening and my heart hurt for its owners, bartenders and regulars. Restaurants here have yet to allow indoor dining, but the day we entered the phase when outdoor dining was allowed, I walked by my pub and experienced a mirage! Tables were set up under canopies along the side of the building and waiters were bustling to and fro. I said hello to my favorite bartender but he didn't recognize me until he heard my voice when I asked for a turkey club to go. While waiting for the order, a tall guy walking his dog flirted with me from six feet away while also wearing a mask and sunglasses, so it was quite mysterious. Odd times.

My Baltimore childhood meant crab cakes after Hebrew school! I miss my family in Charm City terribly, and am beyond thankful that they are okay. At first, I believed not going home to visit was my way of keeping them safe from me and the onetime epicenter of the horrid covid-19 virus, but now Maryland has been added to the quarantine list so we will be indefinitely kept apart. Knowing that I can't hug them in the near future is heartbreaking. My sister and I are fortunate that our triumvirate of parents is thriving and healthy. The biggest problem is staring at my father's nose or my mother's chin during a FaceTime call because the phone isn't positioned correctly! My stepfather is the most technical -- he arranges the zooms so we can share much-needed giggles during group chats.

I've always been slightly neurotic, but now the germophobes are the cool kids. It's frustrating to try to convince my Dad to not go out every day, but he has his strict weekly schedule: Mondays at Trader Joe's to get this, Tuesdays at Whole Foods to get that, etc. I beg him to condense his shopping trips, but guilt trips don't work. Thankfully he wears a mask and believes in the godliness of Purell. My Mom and Stepfather (additional Dad) take walks and scenic drives also, but mostly follow the rules. I fret about my sister's well being because she's a teacher. Newly single and happily not quarantined with the person with whom she's been trying to separate, it gives me comfort that my immediate family sees each other in person.

I didn't realize how crazy I've been feeling every minute of every day until this past week when a friend drove me to her idyllic home in Connecticut one hour away. I stopped washing my hands 800 times a day, and took a break from the daily terror of touching elevator buttons and doorknobs in Manhattan. It was a breath of fresh air to hang outside and laugh with friends mask-free, while also taking a mini-break from constant newsfeeds.

New York City has been my beloved home for many moons, yet for the first time ever I've been questioning my future here. Protesters and violence are literally and figuratively all around. My career has been in the theatre, travel, publishing industries ... what now? My exciting city is angry, hot, scared. Parties have turned from social to political.

This pandemic has unmasked innermost feelings by giving me too much time to think. What is next for all of us?