BAY AREA
3 JCCs close, hundreds furloughed as orgs grapple with coronavirus
5 Hebrew Free Loan ‘inundated’ with $1.1 million in loan requests
6 JFCS ramps up its services to meet daunting coronavirus challenges
7 Federation galvanizes donors, expedites emergency funding
8 Volunteers step up in big way to meet community needs
9 S.F. resident ends 14-day quarantine at military base
10 Jewish doctors on the coronavirus front lines share their experiences
12 Incomes vanish as pandemic demolishes jobs
14 Coronavirus forces b’nai mitzvah ceremonies online
15 Online mourning rituals and funerals without the mourners
16 East Bay Jews’ spreadsheet raises over $140k in coronavirus response
22 A post-Kristallnacht escape by ‘the bravest person I know’
24 TRAILBLAZERS Rita Semel

CULTURE
60 New ways to share and appreciate art bloom online
60 Serendipitous timing: S.F. Jewish library launches ebook, audiobook program
61 Have your own private Jewish film festival online, at home
62 Jewish music gems to uplift your day
63 ‘Plot Against America’ is a dark reflection of these wild times

PASSOVER GREETINGS
42 Let my people know that this seder will be the first I’ve ever planned
44 How to have a meaningful seder while stuck at home
52 Virtual seders and how-to workshops around the Bay
53 Should we be shopping for Passover or the pandemic?
Happy Passover!

to the entire community and Jewish people everywhere.

Adam Jaffe and the entire staff of Jaffe-Schlossberg Insurance

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READERS CHOICE WINNER

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GABE STUTMAN | J. STAFF D

With shelter-in-place orders in effect in the Bay Area and social distancing guidelines from the federal government set to last at least through April, more than 700 employees at four local JCCs have been temporarily laid off, and other Jewish nonprofit organizations are reporting an uncertain future.

JCCs are among a host of Jewish institutions — including synagogues, preschools and various agencies — adapting to the coronavirus with virtual tools, but all are facing a potentially dire budgetary impact on operations and fundraising during the worst global pandemic in over a century.

On March 27, the Oshman Family JCC in Palo Alto, which had shuttered its campus on March 16, announced an extended closure of most programs and services and the furloughing of about 400 employees.

On March 30, three more Jewish community centers announced extended closures and temporary layoffs: the JCC of the East Bay in Berkeley, the Osher Marin JCC in San Rafael and the JCC of San Francisco — a $30 million operation with an aquatic center, gym, preschool, café and art galleries.

"Just a few short weeks ago, the JCCSF was alive with activity," CEO Marci Glazer wrote in a newsletter, announcing the furloughing of 70 percent of the center’s roughly 350 staff members, and more seasonal staff members. The suspension of in-person activities “puts the financial position of JCCSF into grave jeopardy.”

Employees will continue to receive health insurance through June 30, Glazer wrote, and about 100 people would stay on with reduced pay. “For the JCCSF to weather this crisis, we need to have organizational and financial resilience to serve you, your families and our City,” Glazer wrote, appealing to the community for donations and thanking those who had already contributed.

Earlier on March 30, JCC East Bay board president Tamara Abrams and CEO Melissa Chapman sent a community-wide email of their own, announcing the suspension of most operations and the laying off of most staff. The leaders said the closure, effective immediately, “is vital in order to preserve our ability to reopen once it is safe to do so.”

As a non-profit without public funding, we are heavily reliant on the dollars we receive from tuition — and we will no longer have that source of income," the email said.

"Today I share a sorrowful message with you," Osher Marin JCC CEO Judy Wolff-Bolton wrote in an email announcing the furloughing of the majority of the staff. “All furloughed staff are eligible for unemployment insurance," Wolff-Bolton wrote, “and will be welcomed back to work as soon as we are able to do so.” Health care benefits will continue through June.

JCCs and other revenue-generating Jewish nonprofits are experiencing some of the most immediate and acute financial effects of the coronavirus crisis. The downturn is being felt nationally.

Two weeks after mandatory shelter-in-place rules were enforced in Pennsylvania, the Kaiserman JCC outside Philadelphia furloughed its entire staff of 176 people, whose health care coverage was set to disappear. “It’s like trying to run a marathon in quicksand,” Kaiserman JCC CEO Amy Krulik said about battling the crisis. “You can’t get any traction.”

Doron Krakow, CEO of the JCC Association of North America, told JTA that he was expecting massive layoffs across JCCs nationwide, which employ about 38,000 people. “The cuts are going to be painful and deep,” he said. “They are going to go into what I would call a hunker-down mode, which means that they’ll be subject to the kind of staff reductions that we are reading about affecting other industries.”

Zack Bodner, CEO of the Oshman Family JCC, was the first executive to announce the suspension of services and furloughing of staff, which he did in a heartfelt email.

"This is the most painful message I have ever had to send,” Bodner wrote.

The Palo Alto JCC, with approximately 500 employees including contractors, is temporarily laying off 400 staff members and reducing the pay of between 75 and 100 “essential” staff during the extended closure.

“We have 10 business centers. When none of them are bringing in revenue, you understand the severity of the situation.”

— Zack Bodner, Oshman Family JCC
The Jewish Community Center in San Francisco closed on March 30 and furloughed 70 percent of its 350 employees.

Aside from preschools and a few other revenue-generating programs, most synagogues rely heavily on donations and membership dues.

Facing massive budget shortfalls, many JCC heads and other nonprofit leaders are looking for relief from community donations, grant-making Jewish agencies and federal government programs. CEOs have asked their communities for emergency donations and for JCC members to continue paying membership dues for if possible.

The S.F.-based Jewish Community Federation on March 13 announced an emergency Covid-19 task force and a corresponding fund — a response similar to one following wildfires and other crises. The Federation emailed a survey page with a webinar and a PowerPoint presentation to assist Jewish nonprofits in navigating this section of the initiative, known as the Paycheck Protection Program. The loans are geared toward keeping staff on payroll and maintaining benefits such as health care.

The maximum loan amount is $10 million, available at an interest rate of 4 percent, with the possibility of loan forgiveness if organizations meet certain requirements.

Leaders of the Palo Alto JCC, which has among its members a number of Silicon Valley executives and financial professionals, have met with experienced advisers on how to take advantage of the federal loan process. Still, “that money is not going to come for months,” Bodner said, if it comes at all. The bailout after the 2008 financial crisis, he said as an example, proved vastly insufficient for the thousands of small businesses that were hurting.

“I didn’t feel I could make a decision based on expecting that money in the immediate future,” he added.

Essential staff will stay on providing online content like personal training sessions, Zoom Shabbat for kids and other services — though at reduced salaries. And all furloughed staffers will continue to receive health care benefits, Bodner said.

When things return to normal, all of the JCCs said they plan to reinstate their workers.

“As soon as we reopen, we are bringing them back,” Bodner stressed.

Though with business models vastly different from that of JCCs, synagogues in the area are also facing tremendous economic uncertainty.

The coronavirus crisis and shelter-in-place rules have moved religious and lifecycle services — including weddings, b’nai mitzvahs and funerals — online. It has scuttled Passover plans and forced schools and day care centers to close.

Many synagogues rely on revenue generation through their preschools. Even though classes are not meeting in person, staff at some programs are trying to maintain a sense of normalcy for their students in the most unusual of circumstances.

“Everything is changing so quickly,” said Jodi Gladstone, the director of early childhood education at the Congregation Beth El Nursery School in Berkeley. “We haven’t been in school for two weeks, and that’s going to continue until May 1, or unless otherwise told.”

Teachers at Beth El have been providing video learning for the 60 or so students, ages 2 to 4. In Zoom meetings, they lead activities like yoga and story time, and have recorded videos, mentioning each student by name.

“They read stories to them, sing boker tov (‘good morning’) songs,” Gladstone said.

“We’re trying to give them a sense of continuity, even though their world has turned upside down.”

The nursery school is not charging tuition for April, May or June. Some parents have chosen to donate theirs.

Aside from preschools and a few other revenue-generating programs, most synagogues rely heavily on donations and membership dues. And those tasked with managing budgets are concerned about the economic fallout. Will membership drop? Will donors still give to capital campaigns and other urgent needs when the immediate crisis wanes?

“Everybody is pretty confident there will be less charitable giving in the aftermath of this,” said Gordon Gladstone, executive director at Congregation Sherith Israel in San Francisco.

Each week, Gladstone convenes a video chat with other nonclergy temple leaders affiliated with BATA, the Bay Area Temple Administrators, of which Gladstone is the president.

“Depending on your fiscal year, you might be very worried right now,” Gladstone said. “But nobody knows how much.”

Synagogue leaders will be looking closely at membership renewals this spring and summer, before the High Holidays. If those are at normal levels, it would be a good sign for synagogue budgets. But if renewals, and the donations that often accompany them, shrink as they did following the 2008 financial collapse, that would be a bad sign, Gladstone said.

After the 2008 recession, donations dropped precipitously as the stock market tumbled and portfolios took a hit. Synagogues had to dip into their endowments, cut staff and take out loans.

“Membership shrank and many were unprepared for how quickly it devolved,” Gladstone said. “I think this will be similar, only faster.”

Most synagogues want to do the “menschlich thing” — to hold onto their staff, many of whom have vital institutional knowledge. At the same time, “synagogue boards are fiduciaries,” Gladstone said. “They have a responsibility to be stewards of the organization.”

Local synagogues are looking to the Federation’s emergency fund, federal grants and other offerings, he said — even while understanding that they are all in the same boat and vying for the same rescue funds.

“The important thing is to investigate every opportunity,” Gladstone said. “There’s no way any nonprofit walks out of this whole.”
Dear Readers,

Just like everyone else in California, and most of the nation, we at J. are sheltering in place, even as we bring you the news about how the coronavirus pandemic is affecting our Jewish community. In today’s 19-page special report, we look at the JCCs and other Jewish organizations that have ceased operations and furloughed hundreds of employees; we highlight the extraordinary efforts being made by the Federation and other Jewish agencies to offer emergency aid; we talk to doctors and health care workers on the front lines; and we feature the stories of local volunteers who are stepping up to the plate. Reading over these pages, we couldn’t be prouder of our community.

There is a lot of talk now about social distancing. But it should really be thought of as physically distancing, and socially coming together. We are all learning new ways to keep in touch, from livestreaming Shabbat services to holding Zoom meetings to having dance parties in the street — keeping 6 feet apart, of course.

Thank you for reading J. Thank you for supporting us, your local Jewish media. Now, more than ever, we are well-positioned to serve as the primary hub for the Jewish community during an extraordinary time, and to provide a central address where we can all turn to share our stories, get up-to-date information and stay connected.

We wish you all a safe and healthy Passover.

Steve Gellman, Publisher
Sue Fishkoff, Editor

Hebrew Free Loan ‘inundated’ with $1.1 million in loan requests

GABRIEL GRESCHLER | J. STAFF

With the Bay Area already feeling the crushing economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic, Hebrew Free Loan has received approximately $1.1 million in loan requests from laid-off workers and small businesses suffering major financial setbacks.

“We’ve been inundated,” said Cindy Rogoway, executive director of HFL, which offers interest-free loans for a variety of needs. “It’s an unprecedented increase in our loan requests.”

To put it in perspective, Rogoway said, the San Francisco-based organization usually disperses around $400,000 in loans per month. During a two-day period soon after shelter-in-place went into effect, HFL received 40 requests related to coronavirus alone, totaling over $500,000.

HFL announced the special program for coronavirus-related hardship and began accepting applications on March 6. Rogoway said many of the applicants are hospitality workers, small-business owners and ride-share workers.

“People are definitely hurting,” she said. “They’re afraid for the future. You can feel their stress and fear in the language of the applications they’re filling out.”

One individual who reached out to HFL is Sam Buckwalter, 33, a host at a Japanese restaurant in San Francisco’s Mission District until he was laid off on March 14. While his restaurant promised to hire him back when it reopens, Buckwalter said he has no savings to cover his bills and $1700 monthly rent.

“It’s just been this very surreal shock,” he said. “It’s just wild. The notion I won’t have an income, I don’t know how long this is going to go on for.” Buckwalter said he’s asked his landlord to reduce his rent but hasn’t gotten a reply.

On March 19, Buckwalter requested a $20,000 loan from HFL. His application is currently under review. He has also filed for unemployment and expects to get about $450 a week.

But even with this financial help, Buckwalter says it’s likely he will have to leave San Francisco. And moving back home to Santa Cruz isn’t an option, he said, since his parents are in their mid-60s and he doesn’t want to risk exposing them to the coronavirus.

“I never expected [coronavirus] to affect so many little things in my life,” Buckwalter said. Rogoway said it’s unclear how many requests like Buckwalter’s her organization will be able to fulfill but believes it will be a “majority” of applicants.

At the same time, she said, HFL is concerned about its own cash flow as existing borrowers may not be able to make payments during the pandemic. To offset that possibility, Rogoway said she’s engaged in “a lot” of emergency fundraising.

“We need to do triage,” she said. “[We’re] trying to help people who need it most.”

Rogoway offered three ideas for people in financial straits: Cut back on any nonessential bills, avoid incurring credit card debt, and consider withdrawing money from a retirement fund. (The economic relief package being considered now by the Senate would waive the early withdrawal fee on retirement funds.)

At the state level, California’s unemployment filings have spiked. The president of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, James Bullard, recently predicted that national unemployment may reach as high as 30 percent.
JFCS ramps up its services to meet daunting coronavirus challenges

Anita Friedman thought she’d seen it all: wildfires, earthquakes, 9/11 and the brutal 2008 economic recession. But the longtime executive director of the S.F.-based Jewish Family and Children’s Services had not seen it all — not until the onset of the coronavirus pandemic of 2020, which she calls “the deepest and most profound crisis we’ve had to deal with in the last generation. This combines both a health crisis with a mental-health crisis with an economic crisis, and it affects everyone.”

Having served the local Jewish community for more than four decades, Friedman is used to responding to disasters.

In normal times, JFCS annually helps tens of thousands of homebound frail elderly, special-needs kids, at-risk teens, hungry families, Holocaust survivors and others.

With the pandemic, JFCS is facing the added burdens of social distancing, forced telecommuting and aiding an already vulnerable population under an even greater threat of falling deathly ill.

“We’re in the first-responder category,” she said of her staff, which she defined as 1,000 strong, including administrators, social workers and health care professionals (full-, part-time and independent contractors), plus an additional 2,000 or so volunteers. “We’re working with a huge amount of people who need help under different circumstances. I think it’s going to get worse here before it gets better.”

Friedman believes her staff — especially the social workers in the agency’s Seniors At Home program, who deliver meals, administer medications and provide other services — are prepared.

“Protocols are in place, and we have supplies for now,” she noted. “We had masks and gloves and gowns on hand, and so we had all our systems in place throughout the Bay Area. The combination of being prepared, of know-how, and having supplies, made it easier to respond.”

Though its main offices are in San Francisco, JFCS serves people on the Peninsula and in Marin and Sonoma counties. There is also a JFCS in the East Bay, but that is a different agency (Jewish Family & Community Services).

Friedman said some JFCS clients have tested positive for Covid-19, but are still at home. Despite the risk of infection, providers go into the homes to do their jobs.

“People who work for us are very heroic,” she said. “They understand they are saving lives. They are dedicated to taking care of people.”

Beth Berkowitz is a psychologist and director of children’s services for JFCS. She said the pandemic has posed a double-whammy: The young clients have increased levels of fear and anxiety, and the agency’s social workers are unable to help the kids and teens in person.

She said her staff has created work-arounds to normal face-to-face therapy, such as online support groups, workshops, teletherapy, writing blogs and other techniques. For details of these services, visit JFCS’ Parents Place at tinyurl.com/jfcs-pp-corona.

“It’s been a shift,” Berkowitz said. “As helping professionals, we’re getting used to this new way of life in the same way our clients are, adapting as needed, and thinking outside the box. Our clinicians are conducting therapy sessions with kids virtually, and they’re amazing.”

The need is great, she noted. “We are seeing a significant increase in anxiety among kids,” Berkowitz said, “a significant jump in depression among teenagers. You can imagine what this is like for the adolescent world. Kids who weren’t all that anxious before are anxious now. We see a lot of kids with a history of trauma. The symptoms are being exacerbated by this pandemic.”

She said her clinicians report that more than a few children are experiencing nightmares, some of them featuring zombies, which Berkowitz suspects symbolize the virus.

Friedman acknowledges that parents will need guidance on how to talk to their children about this crisis, and its impact.

“This is a generation of children who’ve never faced this kind of disruption before,” she said, noting previous generations experienced such traumas as the Great Depression, World War II and the Vietnam War. “This is the first time this generation will experience this kind of profound disruption in their lives.”

Because of the critical nature of its work, JFCS regional offices in San Mateo, Palo Alto, San Rafael and Santa Rosa (and its food banks) remain open, and no one has been laid off, though the agency’s four clinics and senior centers for adult day care have been forced to close.

Thus, all senior care services are now delivered directly to the home, with volunteers obtaining food and other essentials for homebound seniors. The agency also is offering food vouchers, as well as zero-interest loans and other forms of financial aid.

Friedman pointed out that the crisis means an emergency fundraising drive is underway. In the first two weeks, the agency had raised $3 million of its $5 million target. For details, visit tinyurl.com/jfcs-sf-update.

“We hope when this is over, it will be our community’s defining and finest hour,” Friedman said. “I found that very moving. It buoyed the spirit [to see people] donate without having to make a lot of calls and explain. People understand.”

The normally unflappable Friedman admits she is feeling challenged by the scope of the crisis.

“I am feeling strong because everyone around me is strong. This is the time people are tested. Are we able to rise to the occasion and take care of members of our community? Do we have enough strength to rise to the occasion when it affects all? The answer is yes.”

“We hope when this is over, it will be our community’s defining and finest hour.”
Federation galvanizes donors, expedites emergency funding

DAN PINE | J. STAFF

In the first weeks of the coronavirus crisis, Hebrew Free Loan received more than 100 new applications for emergency aid, totaling more than $1 million in requests. Just one problem: The agency had only $720,000 available.

So the Jewish Community Federation, with its endowment committee and donor-advised funds, stepped up and raised $1.3 million. The funds will be transferred to Hebrew Free Loan on April 3.

“Our goal has always been to move more philanthropic capital into the community,” said Tanya Shadoan, the Federation’s director of philanthropic donations and impact investment. “What’s changed is the urgency.”

The goal of raising millions for Hebrew Free Loan is part of the Federation’s broader coronavirus battle plan. Said CEO Danny Grossman, “The safety and resilience of our extraordinary Bay Area community continues to be one of our top priorities, and we look forward to coming together with our network of donors, partners and lay leaders to address the short- and long-term impact of this pandemic.”

It will take millions of dollars and all the collective will, wealth and wisdom the community can muster.

“The circumstance is radically different from three weeks ago, when we thought we were sheltering in place for a couple of weeks,” said Roxanne Cohen, the Federation’s director of community impact. “It became obvious we were looking at something persisting for many months. That caused a pivot in how every organization needs to think about this crisis.”

In March, the Federation conducted a survey of Jewish institutions. From the 85 that responded, a grim picture emerged. If the shutdown were to persist through June, those organizations could lose as much as $43 million. That translates to 80 to 90 percent of the normal revenue of JCCs, Jewish day schools and Jewish camps — scary stats for the more than 5,000 people those institutions employ.

In response, the Federation formed a coronavirus task force, chaired by S.F. philanthropist John Goldman.

The task force set two priorities, first and foremost helping vulnerable populations — including seniors, the economically disadvantaged, the unemployed, and the disabled. Funds will go to food aid, job resources, counseling, domestic violence support, and care for seniors and children.

In a show of solidarity with the broader community, as much as 20 percent of funds raised will go to nonsesterian social service agencies.

The second category is to help stabilize what is being called “the Jewish community ecosystem,” by providing aid to strapped JCCs, preschools, Jewish day schools, camps, and Jewish engagement and cultural organizations.

“Our plan is to disburse a first tranche of grants by next week,” Cohen said. “Then it will likely be in the first week of May we expect the next grants.”

Where is the money coming from? For starters, Federation Endowment Committee chair Laura Lauder pitched in with a $500,000 matching fund for the HFL grant. Philanthropists with donor-advised funds also jumped in.

“People understand deeply that this is the rainy day,” Cohen said.

“The Jewish Community Federation has truly stepped up with this partnership,” said HFL executive director Cindy Rogoway.

Despite the outpouring, Cohen understands the future is uncertain and potentially devastating. “It is entirely possible that some Jewish organizations may not make it to the other side of this,” she said. “I think it’s too early to call it, but it is a reality.”

Nevertheless, she and her colleagues have their game faces on. “This time is different from any for most of us in our lifetimes,” she noted. “Certainly I hope people will step up, trust the Federation and partner with us.”

“People understand deeply that this is the rainy day.”

—Roxanne Cohen, Jewish Community Federation

Federation from Residents of the Jewish Home & Rehab Center

Title: Community
Artist: Elizabeth Papke

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Volunteers step up in big way to meet community needs

**MAYA MIRSKY | J. STAFF**

Throughout the Bay Area, synagogues and Jewish agencies have discovered their secret power: volunteers.

From running phone banks to buying and delivering groceries, volunteers are supplementing staff efforts to help mitigate the isolation for thousands of homebound elderly and sick members during the pandemic.

“Tomorrow at noon, 1,000 pounds of produce are arriving at a volunteer’s house,” said Kathryn Winogura, director of volunteer services at Jewish Family & Community Services East Bay. She sounds a little astounded as she says it.

Food delivery is one way local Jewish organizations and synagogues are mustering volunteers to help; another is asking for people to make phone calls — offering a friendly voice can make a huge difference for anyone feeling alone.

“One thing that is so cool is the wave of all the great people that come out of the woodwork and say, ‘Give me something to do!’” Winogura said.

At San Francisco-based Jewish Family and Children’s Services, about 100 volunteers have been trained to deliver from the organization’s food pantry and to make calls to some 500 seniors.

“The response is beyond words,” said Traci Dobronravova, director of the JFCS senior care program. “This is how much people in the community have been wanting to give back.”

While organizations are finding that the outpourings of support sometimes exceed the immediate need, they are continuing to encourage people to step up. “As needs change, there will be new opportunities,” Dobronravova said.

Synagogues are also doing their part to keep vulnerable members well-stocked with food and connected to the Jewish community.

“I’d say that we made, in these two past Shabbatot, about 340 calls among us,” said Keren Smith, director of membership at Walnut Creek’s Congregation Beth Shalom.

About 25 volunteers and staff first called the older members, then extended the calls to the whole congregation to check in. “The calls have been gratefully received,” Smith said.

“People called actually would spend 15 to 20 minutes, have real conversations,” she said.

Congregation Beth Am in Los Altos Hills also has been staying in touch with members, “just to check in and see how people are doing, see how people’s sanity is,” said Rabbi Heath Waterman. Online forms have been set up so people can either request or offer assistance with grocery shopping and other tasks. The number of volunteers has exceeded the need here as elsewhere.

There’s been about a dozen requests for assistance, “but we’ve had about 30 people volunteer,” he said.

Congregation Beth Israel Judea in San Francisco has a phone bank staffed with volunteers and is also preparing seder supplies to be delivered for Passover — at the recommended social distance.

“We’ll be dropping them off at people’s doors and then leaving,” said Debra Braun, board president.

That’s also the protocol at JFCS East Bay. It’s been a “big pivot” to help people remotely and maintain the rules of no-contact social distancing, Winogura said. Volunteers who buy groceries are delivering them at the doorstep and wiping down bag handles. But it doesn’t mean all human contact has been abandoned, Winogura said.

“I’m getting reports back of people saying, ‘Yeah! We stood there and talked!’” she said.

She estimated about 35 people needed grocery deliveries, including elderly Holocaust survivors and refugee families who have no transportation. About 25 volunteers offered to help. It’s not a small commitment.

“All these people who are out shopping are doing it on their own bills,” she said.

That’s the case for Mark Rabinovitz, who has been shopping and dropping off groceries on behalf of the agency. The longtime volunteer was ready to go from the start.

“Off I went to Trader Joe’s, with a pag full of stuff!” said the Walnut Creek resident, who delivered groceries to an Afghani family newly arrived to the area.

“It was a personal donation of time and money,” he said.

Chabad of Tri-Valley, too, has found plenty of people eager to help. The call for volunteers was so successful, in fact, that Rabbi Raleigh Resnick said there were more helpers than needed in the moment. He found that out firsthand when he made a phone call last week to an elderly man.

“Rabbi, you’re the fourth phone call I got to say Shabbat Shalom!” Resnick recounted the man saying.

It’s just a sign of how the community is sticking together, community leaders agree.

“Everyone knows it’s times like these that literally bring out the best,” Resnick said.

Volunteers from Jewish Family and Children’s Services get ready to deliver groceries. (Courtesy JFCS San Francisco)

Berkeley writer’s relief effort helps restaurants, hospital workers

**MAYA MIRSKY | J. STAFF**

Berkeley writer Ayelet Waldman has found a novel way to help East Bay restaurants and hospital workers at the same time: buying food from one to give to the other.

Waldman has been crowdsourcing donations to buy meals from struggling restaurants, then delivering them to hospital emergency rooms. It’s a way to prop up local businesses that have taken a hit as people stay at home during the coronavirus pandemic, while supporting health workers on the front lines of caring for sick people.

“You want to send the ER staff something that is special, that is yummy,” she said.

The idea came to her after a few days after the ‘shelter in place’ order for Bay Area counties. She had ordered a to-go meal from Oakland’s Brown Sugar Kitchen, owned by her friend and celebrated chef Tanya Holland, and heard about an ER doctor who had been gifted a meal.

“I thought, oh, genius, so I said to Tanya, can you make 25 meals and I’ll take them over to Highland?” The impromptu gesture cost Waldman just under $600.

“The ER was incredibly grateful,” she said.

“They were so happy.”

It went over so well that Waldman and her writer husband, Michael Chabon, decided they would do it once a week. Then she had an even bigger idea.

“It occurred to me I could just scale this up, and if we started accepting donations we could do this more,” she said.

With organizational help from Jenny Schwarz of Oakland restaurant Hopscotch, Waldman has been soliciting donations first on Venmo, then on a GoFundMe page — to order from locally owned and community-oriented businesses. She started off driving the meals to Highland and Summit hospitals herself, but has had help as the idea caught on: The page had raised over $90,000 as of March 30.

Waldman also created a form for restaurants that wanted to be included on the list and was quickly overwhelmed with responses. “I’ve got hundreds,” she said.

Each $600 or so raised can pay for one round of 25 meals for the ER or ICU department. It’s not cheap. Waldman said, because the idea is not to penny-pinch.

“We don’t want to bargain, right?” she said. “The idea is we want to sustain our restaurants.”

Donate at gofundme.com/f/feeder. Restaurants can contact Waldman at ayeletw@gmail.com to be added to the list.
S.F. resident ends 14-day quarantine at military base

Hinda Gilbert says she wouldn’t recommend Travis Air Force Base as a vacation destination. And she will never again look the same way at a turkey sandwich or cookie, which were served repeatedly during her stay at the base in Fairfield.

Gilbert, 82, who recently completed a two-week quarantine at the base after her Grand Princess cruise ship became a coronavirus hotspot and national news story, described the experience as necessary and even positive at times.

“I reconciled that I would make the best of it,” said the Congregation Emanu-El member, who returned home to San Francisco March 24. “And I did. The purpose of the quarantine was to make sure that anyone who caught the virus on the ship would be kept from going into the community and spreading the disease.”

Gilbert, who was with her friend Dolores Mackinnon for the entirety of the quarantine, said she spent her time calling friends and family and watching the news. The two were part of a group of 3,500 cruise ship passengers who were quarantined at four different military bases around the country. They described their living situation as a “midlevel” hotel room with all of the basic necessities, including a refrigerator, microwave and desk.

Meals were delivered to their room three times a day. Temperatures were taken twice a day.

Her only complaint about Travis Air Force Base? “The food was horrible,” Gilbert said. “I think a lot of people were complaining.” (Others who were quarantined expressed similar opinions to the San Francisco Chronicle and USA Today.)

At least two cruise ship passengers did more than just complain about food. A Jewish Florida couple is suing Princess Cruise Lines for $1 million, alleging that the company kept the coronavirus outbreak quiet so as to not hamper profits, putting passengers and crew at risk.

Now that Gilbert is home, she says she has a lot to catch up on, including paying bills and figuring out what to do about other planned trips and whether to cancel now or wait.

Gilbert will be sheltering at home, apart from the occasional walk to the mailbox, to continue protecting herself from exposure.

One of her grandchildren, 24, who lives in Los Angeles, recently experienced symptoms she believes is coronavirus. While her condition is stable, “she has never felt this bad in her life,” Gilbert said. “There were times where she could hardly breathe.”

Gilbert said she needs to be extremely careful because she has some underlying health issues, which are known to put her at high risk of severe illness if she contracts COVID-19.

“I don’t think I would live through it,” she said.

She isn’t upset about having to stay home, though. “The irony is, being in quarantine is not that terrible,” Gilbert said. “There are things you can do. Reading. Downloading a library book. Cleaning your closet.”

Hinda Gilbert (left) and her friend Dolores Mackinnon on their way home to San Francisco after a 14-day quarantine at Travis Air Force Base in Fairfield. (Photo/Marlin Gilbert)
Jewish doctors, workers on coronavirus front lines share their experiences

GABRIEL GRESCHLER | J. STAFF

When he was growing up, Ronn Berrol of Oakland always admired Yitzhak Rabin for his strong leadership skills during periods of crisis — especially when Israel’s future prime minister was the commander of his nation’s military during the Six-Day War in 1967.

Now, that admiration has only grown stronger.

"For the first time," Berrol said last week, "I understand that pressure and the weight of the world."

Berroll, 58, is an emergency room doctor at several hospitals in the East Bay — and as such is on the front lines in the battle against the coronavirus pandemic.

That also makes him one of the thousands of health care workers in California who are at greater risk for contracting the novel coronavirus while dealing with a dwindling supply of personal protective equipment and a lack of testing kits.

There is also the fear among many of these workers that they are bringing the virus home to their families.

"It’s been like no time ever," said Berrol, who’s been a doctor for 25 years and is the emergency room medical director at Alta Bates Summit Medical Center in Oakland.

Berrol is used to dealing with crises in the emergency room, but Covid-19 has presented a unique set of challenges. Usually in times of disaster, like an earthquake, other regions of the state will divert resources to hospitals in the afflicted area. But since “every corner of the world” is dealing with coronavirus, it’s been difficult to do many things — down to protecting himself with a proper mask and gown.

"Nobody has a cavalry coming to save them," Berrol said. "There is a feeling that you can’t adequately protect yourself. Yet you have to do your job."

In addition to a lack of supplies, Berrol said testing in California is “way behind.” He’s only been able to test high-risk patients coming into the hospital, which he knows is allowing some with the virus to slip through the cracks.

"We know we’re sending Covid-19 back into the community," Berrol said. "We don’t have the resources to manage that."

"There is a feeling that you can’t adequately protect yourself. Every corner of the world is dealing with the novel coronavirus while dealing with a dwindling supply of personal protective equipment and a lack of testing kits."

"We don’t have the resources to manage that." —Ronn Berrol, East Bay emergency room doctor, and Sharon Goldfarb, dean of health sciences at the College of Marin

BAY AREA FACING THE PANDEMIC

"I’m working 16 hours a day, seven days a week. This is a crisis beyond any crisis."

—Sharon Goldfarb, dean of health sciences at the College of Marin

Berrol, who lives with his wife and two young children, to help make sure that doesn’t happen, he has changed his routine after he leaves the hospital (he is affiliated with several, including UCSF Medical Center and Zuckerberg S.F. General Hospital and Trauma Center).

Now, as soon as he gets home, he puts all his clothes in the washing machine, scrubs his hands and hops into the shower.

He also said he has considered getting a hotel room to limit possible exposure to his family.

"I’m working 16 hours a day, seven days a week. This is a crisis beyond any crisis."

—Sharon Goldfarb, dean of health sciences at the College of Marin

Like Berrol, Zier said it’s been incredibly difficult not knowing whether his patients are carrying the virus.

"Now there’s this additional layer," he said. "Has this patient been screened for Covid-19? Do I feel confident they won’t expose other [hospital] staff members?"

Zier, a member of Congregation Sherith Israel in San Francisco, said the lack of in-person community has been challenging. The temple has done a good job converting things to virtual, he said. "But I miss the community. That ability to go to services and escape things a little bit."

Some Jewish health care workers are trying to change things at the state level when it comes to the Covid-19 response.

For example, Sharon Goldfarb, dean of health sciences at the College of Marin, has jumped into action trying to convince lawmakers that nursing students who are in their final year of training — a number she says is about 14,000 in California — should be able to start working in hospitals immediately to fill the growing need for an influx of health care workers.

"This is the most serious medical crisis I have ever seen in my whole life," said Goldfarb, a nurse educator who has experienced her share of catastrophes: She worked on-site after both 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina.

Nurses currently in graduating classes in California, Goldfarb said, aren’t allowed to work at hospitals now because of the pandemic, yet they need a certain number of clinical hospital hours to acquire their licenses.

To try to change this restriction, Goldfarb first went to the California Board of Registered Nursing, a state agency that regulates the licensing of nurses. But, as of March 26, the group hadn’t budged. A petition was created on March 15 requesting that the regulatory agency soften its licensing requirements and allow nurses to start working now. It had more than 125,000 signatures at press time.

Now Goldfarb is writing letters and working with some of her students at the College of Marin to go straight to Newsom.

"I’m working 16 hours a day, seven days a week," Goldfarb said. "This is a crisis beyond any crisis."

A longtime member of Congregation Beth El in Berkeley, Goldfarb said she misses the comfort of shul right now.

"I miss going in person," she said. "The virtual [services are] something, but it’s not quite the same. Everything that gives me joy and rejuvenation from work is gone."

Despite the challenges, Goldfarb said she is keeping focused on her goal of having nursing students work as soon as possible.

"We were called to serve," she said. "Our patients need us."
It’s not the Bubonic Plague

Stanford pediatrician at cutting edge of Covid-19 research, treatment

SUE FISHKOFF | J. STAFF

As a pediatric pulmonary physician, Dr. David Cornfield treats children and teenagers, generally the population least susceptible to Covid-19. But because his clinical practice is through the Lucile Packard Children’s Hospital in Stanford, most of the patients he sees also have underlying medical conditions.

“We serve a very vulnerable population,” he said. “Children born prematurely, children with asthma, cystic fibrosis, chronic lung diseases, pulmonary hypertension. Little babies that have gone through the gauntlet, born very, very tiny and are now just beginning to walk. There is tremendous anxiety among the children, and their families.”

Cornfield works both in inpatient and outpatient at the Children’s Hospital, and in a related clinic across the street. There are about 25 clinicians in the practice, he says, and so far they have not seen many infected cases at the hospital. In the Children’s Hospital, there have been less than a handful of positive cases, and none requiring mechanical ventilation.

“Covid-19 may not be so problematic for otherwise healthy children, but we have every reason to believe it might be for these kinds of patients,” he said in an interview. “There is tremendous fear and uncertainty, which is wholly understandable.”

In addition to his clinical practice, Cornfield is a highly regarded physician scientist, engaged in multiple research projects in the field of pulmonary medicine (conditions affecting lungs and breathing), and is a professor of pulmonary pediatric medicine at Stanford and medical director of respiratory therapy at the Children’s Hospital.

He is engaged in several studies right now to develop more usable data about Covid-19, because, he says, there’s very little out there, and some of what’s been published is leading to misinformation and unnecessary fears.

For example, he points to a recent article in the New England Journal of Medicine that described how long the virus lingers on some surfaces. That information went viral, but was widely misinterpreted. “That was a very controlled, laboratory study,” he cautions. “It didn’t really focus on transmissibility. Yes, the virus can live on packages and bags, but not always in the amount that can be transmissible.

“There’s a tremendous amount of anxiety because, there’s just no data.”

To provide much-needed normative data, Cornfield is leading a Stanford study that will examine 400 schoolchildren on the Peninsula to determine the prevalence of Covid-19 in those ages 10-18. The study, conducted together with the Chan Zuckerberg Biohub, could start as early as next week.

There’s a tremendous amount of anxiety, because there’s just no data.

He is also working with a team of engineers, bioengineers and physicists to develop a remote-controlled ventilator that would reduce the risks in caring for infected patients by mitigating staff exposure. That study is bringing together experts from UC Berkeley, UCSF and Stanford, among others.

“We’re trying really hard,” he said.

One of the things he’s most concerned about is the shortage of medical professionals in areas of the country hardest hit by Covid-19, including New York City. A colleague of his who runs a major health care organization there put out an emergency appeal for physicians to come work in the city, where they are currently caring for 1,000 patients with Covid-19, more than a quarter of whom are on ventilators.

“They’re running out of doctors,” Cornfield said. “The governor has said he will accredit them within 24 hours. That usually takes 24 months. It’s unprecedented.”

Still, Cornfield cautions, the coronavirus situation can be and will be handled. By following the prudent guidelines sent out by the CDC, notably social distancing and regular, careful hand-washing, people can protect themselves and their families.

At his clinic, Cornfield and his staff follow an eight-point strategy they developed to mitigate exposure to possibly infected people. Anything elective has been canceled and almost all patient visits are conducted virtually. Person-to-person contact is limited to direct medicine, they say. They even have to delay or cancel routine appointments for chronically ill patients.

“We are concerned not just about the children themselves, but about their families and all the extended family members that accompany patients to these appointments,” he said. “We are doing our very best to mitigate exposures.”

And yes, staying 6 feet away from other people is important, and not a made-up number. Asked whether 3 feet was enough, he said no. “It does matter. Six feet is the way to go.”

So when will the much-heralded flattening of the curve take place? At the beginning of the week, Cornfield noted there was an increase in the number of cases over the weekend, but a much more modest increase than anticipated.

“The measures taken, including social distancing, sheltering in place, and, school closures, have combined, it seems, to keep case numbers down, at least for the present time,” he said. “The plan to shelter in place for several more weeks seems quite prudent.”

“People need to know this is a real danger, and it will be with us for some time. But it’s not a magical danger. You can take prudent steps to keep yourself and your family safe.”

He was in line at a CVS store recently, he said, and a woman fully 10 feet away recoiled from him. He saw that as an overreaction.

“You can still be kind, you can still find each other’s humanity. This is not the Bubonic Plague.”

Sinai Chapel’s annual ‘Wheat Fund’ takes on added significance this year

MAYA MIRSKY | J. STAFF

For more than 100 years, Sinai Memorial Chapel in San Francisco has practiced the tradition of ma‘ot chitim, or the “wheat fund.”

Sinai collects money to purchase kosher-for-Passover matzah, foodstuffs and wine for those in need, ensuring they have the necessary provisions to observe the holiday.

But this year, things are a little different.

“Ma nishtanah halailah hazeh mikol haleilot” exclaimed Sam Salkin, executive director of Sinai, offering up the first of the Four Questions before adding his own slant: “Why is this Pesach different from all other Pesachim?”

The answer is obvious, he said. Passover under the shadow of the coronavirus pandemic means everything has changed — and that means some of the grants Sinai makes are being used in different ways.

“The disruption is of the first order,” he said.

For example, the huge seder at San Quentin State Prison that Sinai funds every year won’t be held, because of social distancing. Instead, the money will be used to bring Passover over to inmates in some other way, Salkin said.

But some things are the same: Programs at the San Francisco Campus for Jewish Living and the Reutlinger Community in Danville to make their kitchens kosher for Passover will proceed as normal. And S.F.-based Jewish Family and Children’s Services will still distribute seder supplies to seniors.

“We’ve increased our grant to them [JFCS] because they’re going to be including more things in the seder sack,” Salkin said.

Total grants have increased 25 percent this year, Salkin estimated. “We’ve heard stories of greater need,” he said.

The list of beneficiaries of ma’ot chitim 2020 includes Jewish Family Services of Silicon Valley; the Veterans Home of California in Yountville; the JCC of the East Bay; the S.F. Veterans Administration Hospital; and the S.F.-based Community for Jewish Seniors, through a partnership with Chabad of Cole Valley.

“Ma’ot chitim is really to let people know that, at the celebration of the central story of our people, the Jewish community remembers everyone,” Salkin said.

For information about the Maot Chitim fund, visit tinyurl.com/sinai-maot. To support Sinai, visit sinaichapel.org and click “Donate.” To donate directly to the Maot Chitim fund, write that in the memo line of a check and send to Sinai Memorial Chapel, 1501 Divisadero St., S.F., 94115.
Incomes vanish as pandemic demolishes jobs

GABRIEL GRESCHLER | J. STAFF

Jason Herwill and his wife had finally found some stability. Toward the end of last year, the couple and their 3-year-old moved out of the motel where they had been living temporarily when Herwill found a job as a tree climber for a PG&E subcontractor, earning $1,500 to $1,700 per week. The family settled into a rental home in Grass Valley, about an hour's drive north of Sacramento.

Then, about a month ago, Herwill was told that his job was on hold. On top of that blow, his wife, Maria, who had just been hired at a day care center, was unable to continue working.

"It's very scary, the uncertainty," said Herwill, who said he has about $1,000 left in his bank account right now. "We basically have money to buy food a couple more times."

One of the most devastating social effects of the pandemic — a gargantuan loss of jobs, with 3.3 million Americans applying for unemployment benefits as of last week — has brought economic instability and anxiety to many Bay Area Jews who have been laid off or otherwise lost sources of income.

For now, all Herwill can do is wait. He’s filed for unemployment but still hasn’t heard back. He’s also waiting to hear about his request for $2,500 from Hebrew Free Loan, which recently created a program offering interest-free loans to those in the Jewish community who have taken a financial hit from the coronavirus shutdowns.

The federal stimulus package, which will deliver $1,200 to anyone making under $75,000, will definitely help, Herwill says. But he’s worried that the money will arrive much later than promised in mid-April, a concern shared by some experts.

Nearly every individual and business has been affected in some way. While synagogue services, b’nai mitzvah ceremonies and shivas have shifted online, not everyone is able to operate virtually — certainly doctors, who are risking their own health to save lives.

While there has been a greater demand for health care workers in California as the number of coronavirus cases grows, birth doulaS have been left out of the hiring surge since mid-March, when city officials in San Francisco said only one visitor would be allowed during births at hospitals.

Dina, a San Francisco resident who asked that only her first name be used, has run her own doula business since October 2018 and usually earns about $3,600 a month. She works with expectant mothers, offering support throughout the pregnancy and birth. She says she’s chosen not to offer her services virtually because she doesn’t believe it will be as valuable to her clients.

"I think it’s nice, people that have office work," Dina said. "They don't have to see them in person. [Being] a doula is completely different."

Dina’s husband, Jose, an event planner for a bar and lounge, is also out of work and has filed for unemployment. At home with their two young children, Dina says she has decided to focus on a master’s program in midwifery she’s been pursuing online through Frontier Nursing University. To complicate matters further, there’s a chance that she won’t be able to complete the program’s required clinical hours, since students aren’t allowed into hospitals right now.

"It's very much up in the air," Dina said.

One Jewish institution that has opened up hiring is the Reutlinger Community. The senior living facility in Danville currently needs to fill out its staff, according to CEO Jay Zimmer, and has decided to hire newly out-of-work housekeepers, preschool teachers and Starbucks employees.

In Oakland, artist and author Day Schildkret has had to completely change the nature of his work to make money.

Schildkret, who builds “morning altars” from natural objects, had been planning a tour this spring and summer to hold workshops and promote “Ritualizing Change,” a book about rituals and making meaning out of life’s changes. But the tour had to be canceled.

“That has left me without an income,” Schildkret said. “That was my schedule for the next five months.”

A career Jewish educator, Schildkret was executive director of Midrasha of the Tri-Valley/Tri-Cities for 12 years. In 2013, he won a Helen Diller Family Award for Excellence in Jewish Education for a program at San Rafael’s Congregation Rodef Sholom.

To supplement his lost income, Schildkret has started to conduct his workshops online. On March 29, he hosted a Sunday Zoom session for children and families on how to make nature altars. To accommodate people’s shaky financial situations, Schildkret charged a sliding scale between $18 and $54, a fraction of what it would cost in person, he said.

“Being someone who is dependent on events,” Schildkret said, “it’s a very vulnerable situation.”

Schildkret has requested $20,000 from Hebrew Free Loan, the maximum amount allowed by the program, to help pay for his bills and groceries. He remains concerned about whether his line of work is even viable right now.

“At a time where people are getting very scared and financially taxed,” he said, “are they willing to spend money on art and beauty?”

"Being someone who is dependent on events, it’s a very vulnerable situation."

—Day Schildkret

Day Schildkret, an Oakland-based author and artist. (Photo/Brooke Porter)

A shuttered nail salon on Divisadero Street in San Francisco. (Photo/ Gabriel Greschler)
Bay Area temple gift shops pick up where Judaica stores left off

LIZ HARRIS | CORRESPONDENT

With only two independent Judaica stores remaining in the Bay Area, synagogue and JCC gift shops are filling a growing need not only for tangible items, but for community, too.

Yves' Jewelry & Judaica in Berkeley closed earlier this year, citing lackluster sales, leaving Dayenu (located at the JCC of San Francisco) and Afikomen (Berkeley) as the only two remaining independent stores selling ritual and other Jewish objects.

Synagogue gift shops have been able to weather challenges — like the proliferation of big-box stores and the convenience of internet shopping — with the help of institutional support.

The coronavirus pandemic has temporarily shuttered stores, but most sisterhood-run shops inside synagogues and JCCs — each staffed by volunteers and unburdened by expenses such as rent, utilities and insurance payments — have been around for years, and plan to reopen once shelter-in-place restrictions are lifted.

Shop managers throughout the area view their purpose in the broadest sense. "It's a service to the community. It creates community," says Kim Drucker of Women of Isaiah Judaica Gift Shop in Lafayette.

Located in the Temple Isaiah building but open to anyone, it's a place where "[synagogue] members get to know each other; people come in to talk," Drucker says.

Ronna Voorsanger, buyer for the Rodef Sholom Sisterhood gift shop, says people frequently tell her they love coming in. The shop is located on the bottom floor of the Osher Marin JCC, next door to Congregation Rodef Sholom.

"We're here for the entire community," she said.

Fanny Stein, who has been involved with the shop for 20 years, says she and Voorsanger have become more than just retailers.

"People come in, they ask us questions about the holidays, how do you cook things?" she said. "And I love it when people come and ask us to read from one of the books in Hebrew."

The shop "is as big as a postage stamp," jokes Stein, "but we manage." Voorsanger has become more than just retailers.

She has recruited her daughter, Leslee Lauritzen, director of the Gan Israel Preschool, to help run the shop.

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With Passover just around the corner, the space was replete with seder plates, haggadahs and holiday cookbooks.

Unfortunately, with no warning before the JCC closure due to the coronavirus threat, "we had no opportunity to even go in and get anything out" for possible delivery, says Voorsanger. "Usually our big push is the week before Passover, so we are crossing our fingers not just for the shop but for everyone that it will reopen."

At the Temple Isaiah store, Drucker likewise had high hopes for Passover, but now is facing challenges due to the pandemic. "We're in trouble this year," she admits.

Typically, "we have a healthy bank account with money for buying. The money we make goes to the Women of Isaiah Sisterhood," which in turn supports temple youth programs. In a normal year, "we make about $8,000," says Drucker, who devotes about 20 hours a week to her duties. There are about 25 volunteers in all. This year, though, "it's hard," she said.

Linda Baraz of the B'nai Israel Jewish Center gift shop in Petaluma co-managed its Judaica shop for 20 years. Six years later, she still does all the buying, cleaning, arranging and rearranging.

The shop, located in the entryway of the small Jewish center, is open weekdays during preschool hours.

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The shop "is as big as a postage stamp," jokes Stein, "but we manage." Voorsanger has become more than just retailers.

"I'm determined to keep it going," Baraz says. "We've always had a presence in the temple."

About 15 miles to the north, the Shomrei Judaica Shop (tinyurl.com/shomrei-js) at Congregation Shomrei Torah sells Judaica during normal business hours, when office staff is available.

In the South Bay, the Congregation Shir Hadash gift shop (tinyurl.com/shgs-lg) in Los Gatos carries carefully displayed items for adults and children. Proceeds enable the sisterhood to support programs that benefit the synagogue and religious school, such as a camp scholarship program.

And at Starr-Stevens Judaica shop at Peninsula Temple Sholom in Burlingame, proceeds from sales help the sisterhood fund youth programming, camp scholarships and community trips to Israel.

Other sisterhoods also carry Judaica, some with shopping by appointment only.

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Coronavirus forces b’nai mitzvah ceremonies online

DAVID A.M. WILENSKY | J. STAFF

“At a certain point, I just let it all go. I didn’t have any expectations, so I just went with it and I didn’t feel like I missed anything.”
—Zoe Dubois, 13

“It was a little different. It was weird,” 13-year-old Reuben Friedman said of his March 19 bar mitzvah in San Francisco. He did his Torah reading from a book, rather than a Torah scroll. He was at home, instead of at his synagogue, Congregation Shaar Zahav. And it was a Thursday, rather than the planned Saturday service.

“Saturday you’re not really supposed to use screens,” Reuben said.

So they went with Thursday, one of the other traditional Torah reading days, and like so many things in the age of coronavirus, the bar mitzvah took place over the video conferencing platform Zoom.

Reuben and his family were disappointed that they had to cancel the planned ceremony. Nevertheless, they ended up with something they could be proud of.

“It was really beautiful because we had such a big disappointment and we were still able to do something and have everybody smiling back through the screen,” said Reuben’s father, Brad Friedman. “And though it was different and it was weird, it still worked.”

Zoe’s bat mitzvah — done independent of a synagogue with the leadership of a kohenet (Hebrew priestess) from the East Bay — was all planned out. A Unitarian Universalist church was rented for the ceremony, and Kohenet Riv Shapiro had borrowed a Torah and left it with the Dubois family for a couple weeks in advance of the special day.

But things started to take a turn. The family’s out-of-town guests all pulled out. And 10 days before the bat mitzvah, the church canceled all programs. So they decided to move to Zoom.

Zoe’s mother, Beth Dubois, was determined to make sure the day was still as special as possible. “We asked people if they’d be willing to still wear their same clothes that they were planning to wear for the in-person bat mitzvah,” Dubois said.

There was even a photographer. Joanne Shapiro, who was going to take the photos at the bat mitzvah, volunteered to take screenshots.

Dubois also asked people to write positive messages for Zoe on signs and hold them up after the Torah reading. “Mazel tov, Zoe! I am proud of your dedication and accomplishments,” read one. “You’re awesome,” read another.

“The sweet words, the signs were pretty amazing,” said Zoe. “I didn’t know my mom told them all to make signs, so it was a pretty amazing surprise.”

Though she was initially disappointed, Zoe said it turned out to be a positive experience. “In the end, I didn’t feel like I missed anything. I felt like it was still all on the right track,” she said. “At a certain point, I just let it all go. I didn’t have any expectations, so I just went with it and I didn’t feel like I missed anything.”

She was even able to read her Torah portion from a proper Torah scroll. “It was pretty miraculous,” Zoe said. “We already had permission to borrow it for two weeks, so we ended up with it in our house.”

Zoe refashioned fabric that was to be used in the centerpieces for the celebratory luncheon into a cover for the Torah.

And their guests read the aliyyot (portions of the week’s Torah reading) they had planned to read at the bat mitzvah from as far away as Massachusetts and Florida.

It was such a positive experience that Beth Dubois contacted J. about it. “We wanted to share it to encourage other people to go ahead with theirs,” she said. “It was really moving and exceeded our expectations.”

As for Reuben, his family is still planning to hold a proper bar mitzvah when the crisis is over. Cantor Sharon Bernstein told Reuben he could still do the weekly Torah portion he had prepared for his planned bar mitzvah, even though it will not be the correct one for whatever later date they end up with.

But that’s not good enough for Reuben.

“I could learn another,” he insisted. “I want to do it properly.”
Online mourning rituals and funerals without the mourners

DAVID A.M. WILENSKY | J. STAFF

Under ordinary circumstances, Sophi Jacobs would have traveled from her home in San Francisco to Manhattan for her father’s funeral. She would have stayed with her mother for shiva, the seven-day period during which Jewish mourners stay home and receive guests. She would have been surrounded by family and friends and her father’s longtime colleagues from New York University, where he was a law professor.

But those are not ordinary circumstances. Her father, James Jacobs, passed away on March 19. Given the pandemic now gripping the world, she felt she could not in good conscience fly to New York.

“It’s painful because every piece of me wants to go be with my mother,” she told J. while sitting shiva last month. “There’s no good choice. What if I go there and pick something up on the plane and then expose my 77-year-old mother to it? And maybe I get stuck there because there are travel restrictions, and my children are stuck here without me.”

So Jacobs stayed home. She and about 120 friends and family connected to the funeral from afar. Rabbi Angela Buchdahl of Manhattan’s Central Synagogue, a longtime family friend, officiated via Zoom.

“It looked like she was in Central Synagogue, but it was just a virtual backdrop,” Jacobs said.

Then she sat shiva. But what is shiva when most people are not leaving their homes at all? Like so many things now, it’s virtual. Jacobs friend Fraidy Aber organized a series of Zoom gatherings for her, bringing new meaning to the term “shiva call.”

“She’s a close friend, and I was hoping to surround her with that feeling of being surrounded by love and being around people who want to give you love and honor her father,” Aber said. “It felt like the only way was to try it virtually.”

In some ways, Aber said, the Zoom shiva calls can feel even more personal than in-person shiva gatherings. “In a shiva house there’s a lot of food and side conversations,” she said. “But because we were focused on this same Zoom call, it was more intimate. Everyone is in the same conversation. It was very collective.”

Jacobs feels the same way. “It’s oddly intimate,” she said. “Only one person can speak at a time, really. I thought it would be more awkward than it has been. I wish I’d been there at the funeral to hold everybody, but despite the distance it has been an intimate experience.”

Everything about mourning and caring for the dead has changed, says Sam Salkin, executive director of San Francisco’s Sinai Memorial Chapel, which is involved with Jewish funerals and burials all over the Bay Area.

“We are only doing graveside services,” he said. That means no services at Sinai’s chapels, at cemetery chapels or at synagogues.

Those graveside services are proceeding with some unusual modifications. There can be no more than 10 mourners, who must all stand 6 feet apart, and there are no chairs. Jewish mourners traditionally take turns putting a shovel-full of earth on the coffin once it is lowered into the grave — but that shovel is just one more object to sanitize, so mourners now have to take soil and toss it onto the coffin with their bare hands.

“We have two priorities with any family: kavod hamet, dignity for the deceased, and kindness for the mourners and survivors,” Salkin said. “But our highest priority right now is reduced and people are being careful. But it’s been working. ‘It’s harder for the family and it’s harder for us, but the families understand,’” Salkin said. “I think they’re grateful that we’ve left no stone unturned. It’s not how they would have imagined or liked it to be, but they’re respectful.”

He said they’re also preparing for the possibility of families losing more than one person in close succession as the pandemic worsens.

“It’s ideal for us, because my courtyard has four buildings around it, and there’s another courtyard with four buildings,” she said.

Cherkas said fellow resident Jean Myers came up with the idea, and Cherkas had called and emailed residents to encourage it.

“I can’t take credit for it,” she said.

She said there’s “healthy competition” between the two courtyards to get residents out and participating, and people are getting creative. There’s been singing in each courtyard from some inspired soloists, and one evening featured a group singalong with songs like “I’m Looking Over a Four Leaf Clover.”

Restrictions to protect residents from Covid-19 are being taken extremely seriously in the senior living space. Cherkas said if you leave the property — even for a doctor’s appointment — you are tested for symptoms of Covid-19 for a number of days after you return. Communal dining has been reduced and people are being careful. But it’s been working.

“So far we haven’t had any coronavirus,” she said. ■
East Bay Jews’ spreadsheet raises over $140k in coronavirus response — and counting

GABE STUTMAN | J. STAFF

Twenty-seven-year-old Doe Taryn remembers a moment about a decade ago, in a class on Jewish philosophy at her synagogue in Florida, that left a strong impression on her.

“The teacher posed an ethical conundrum: ‘You have a lifeboat. It can only fit so many people,’ Taryn said. ‘You have a poet, a doctor, a construction worker, a mother and a sick man. Who do you save?’

The students pondered the question.

The doctor had the training to save lives. The poet could enrich the spirit. And the mother was somebody’s entire universe.

“We all fought through the question, who are you gonna put on this boat?” she said.

‘And eventually the teacher was like, ‘Wrong!’

The right answer: ‘Everybody gets on the boat,’ she said. ‘You don’t get to leave people behind.’”

By March 16, it had surpassed $40,000 in donations. By March 30, it had distributed $141,701 in direct contributions to people affected by the coronavirus crisis.

Doe Taryn, Binya Kóatz, Elliya Cutler meet for a videoconference to discuss their mutual aid project on March 19. The project has surpassed $140,000 in direct donations to people affected by the coronavirus crisis.

“The question is, what do you have, and what can you do?”

— Binya Kóatz

I need money for transportation and groceries.” She asked for and received $250.

“I’m a full-time music student and survive off of gigs,” wrote M. in Oakland, asking for $200. “All of my gigs have been canceled these past few weeks … I appreciate anything you all can give.”

“All upcoming work lost. Need rent relief for one or two months,” wrote Sabrina, also from New York. “Promise to pay it forward.”

Taryn said in the Bay Area, young people are used to wide income disparities, even among close friends. In talking about the mutual aid spreadsheet, she does not like words like ‘support’ and ‘help,’ but prefers ‘solidarity.’

“When young people are hanging out here, some are artists, some are nonprofit workers, some are in the restaurant industry,” she said. “And then you have someone making $200,000 per year,” usually in the tech industry.

As for Taryn, she thinks she got to the bottom of the universe. It can only fit so many people,” Taryn said. “You have a poet, a doctor, a construction worker, a mother and a sick man. Who do you save?”

“It kind of spread really quickly,” Kóatz said.

“March 20, nine days after it was shared, the spreadsheet had vanished.”

Kóatz, who was raised Conservative in Queens, New York, “can relate to someone who has diabetes medication,” she said in a phone interview. “My grandmother was a Type-1 diabetic.”

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“Like other crowdfunding sites, donors are responsible for vetting requests for authenticity.”

Kóatz and the other moderators delete requests that seem obviously off, or are only half filled out — and said that there had been no ‘obvious’ spam. Requesters are asked to provide contact information. In most cases, donors can call or email before they give.

Simpson realizes why some around her are skeptical.

“Some people in my life are like, ‘What do you mean you’re just giving money to people you don’t know?’ She said it’s not her place to ‘question someone’s need.’ And she trusts people she does not know every day (for example, the bus driver, she said).

“You know what, if someone takes advantage of me …” she paused. “I would rather be trustful than have another X in my pocket.”

“Unfortunately I manage my anxiety by helping other people,” she said. “And I’ve had a lot of anxiety the past couple of days.”

Kóatz, who was raised Conservative in Queens, New York, but has become drawn to a progressive Orthodox practice in her 20s, said her Yiddishkeit is ‘not incidental to this moment.’

“The teacher posed an ethical conundrum: ‘You have a lifeboat. It can only fit so many people,’ Taryn said. ‘You have a poet, a doctor, a construction worker, a mother and a sick man. Who do you save?’”

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BAY AREA

FACING THE PANDEMIC

Jewish senior homes seek protective masks, community rallies to address shortages

GABE STUTMAN | J. STAFF

As hospitals nationwide face shortages of essential medical equipment due to soaring demand and broken supply chains, Jewish senior homes in the Bay Area are making preparations for a potential spread of the coronavirus and are seeking donations to help bolster their supply of life-saving protective gear.

San Francisco’s Campus for Jewish Living, which houses about 300 seniors in the Excelsior District, sent an appeal to the Bay Area Jewish community on March 24, asking for donations of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), such as masks, gloves, gowns, hand sanitizer and eye gear.

“As the COVID-19 cases are surging, San Francisco Campus for Jewish Living is getting ready to care for our own vulnerable population while protecting our staff to ensure their safety,” the email said. “One of our most urgent concerns is the short supply of Personal Protective Equipment, and we want to ask for your help by donating any of the following items.”

SFCJL spokesperson Marcus Young said the residential care facility, which is in the midst of a transformational $140 million renovation project, was anticipating possible mask shortages and was “preparing for the likely increase in demand.” The same went for surgical gloves and sanitizer. He added in a March 25 email to J. that there had been no positive cases of Covid-19 among residents or staff.

PPE, including the coveted respiratory face mask N95 manufactured by 3M, are essential to health care workers and patients to help prevent the spread of disease. Masks, gloves and sanitizer are used in large quantities at senior homes, particularly during outbreaks of illness like the flu — which the Reutlinger Community in Danville experienced this season.

Rebecca Calahan Klein collected 270 N95 masks, nine face shields, 175 surgical masks and more than 2,000 pairs of gloves.

“It’s a drop in the bucket compared to large donations,” she said, “but still important to the medical workers who received them.”

while the federal government activates FEMA and marshals other resources to scale up production (critics say the effort began too late), private companies have offered to donate some of their stockpiles of PPE, mainly to hospitals, which most urgently require masks and other protective gear.

In Northern California, tech companies went for surgical gloves and sanitizer. He added in a March 25 email to J. that there had been no positive cases of Covid-19 among residents or staff.

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Hospitals across the country are reporting shortages, in part because most PPE equipment is manufactured in China and Taiwan, and the global pandemic has disrupted traditional supply chains. Factories in those countries are facing soaring demand and cannot produce face masks fast enough.

Last month the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued guidelines asking people to conserve N95 masks, or even to reuse them in some circumstances, prompting an outcry from some medical professionals.

Shortages have forced Bay Area nurses and other health care workers to ration and reuse their masks, according to a recent report in the Mercury News. Kaiser Permanente workers have staged protests out of concerns for their safety.

At Reutlinger, which is just now getting over the influenza outbreak that required quarantining residents, administrators are preparing for the possibility of another potential viral outbreak. So far no residents or employees have tested positive for Covid-19.

“Like every facility that houses seniors, every hospital, and every clinic, we’re concerned about having adequate supplies,” said Beth Kyman, Reutlinger’s director of philanthropy.

With hundreds of people working at the facility — doctors, nurses, nursing assistants, caretakers, custodial staff, food service workers and many more — there is a need for a huge inventory of supplies like masks, gloves and disinfectant, particularly during a high-risk event, Kyman said.

Reutlinger’s medical supply vendors have been “very supportive” and “energetic” in trying to meet their needs, she said. Many of the senior living facilities in the Bay Area use the same suppliers.

But “there’s not much they can do when the supply chain doesn’t have the products,” she said, adding that “anyone that has gloves, gowns, sanitizers and masks that would like to donate them, we would love to have them.”

While the federal government activates FEMA and marshals other resources to scale up production (critics say the effort began too late), private companies have offered to donate some of their stockpiles of PPE, mainly to hospitals, which most urgently require masks and other protective gear.

In Northern California, tech companies
that keep stockpiles of masks for wildfires are now working to distribute them. Apple said it would donate 9 million protective masks. Facebook said it would donate more than 700,000 and was “working on sourcing millions more,” according to CEO Mark Zuckerberg. Salesforce CEO Mark Benioff said the company had delivered 9,000 masks to UCSF and was working on “an additional 5 million.”

Locally, Jewish community efforts are popping up to supplement these large-scale efforts.

Rebecca Calahan Klein, a member of Temple Beth Abraham in Oakland, began by putting a cardboard box at the end of her driveway in Lafayette the morning of March 21, with a note asking for donations of masks and gloves. A neighbor posted about it on the website Nextdoor, and by the end of the day, Klein said she had “half a car load” of masks and nonperishable food.

Calahan Klein collected about two dozen N95 masks (many stored in garages by people who were prepared for future wildfires) and a handful of face shields, and dropped them off at John Muir Hospital in Walnut Creek. Employees there were happy to receive them. She donated the nonperishable food items to a food bank.

“I’m high risk — I’m 57 and immune-compromised,” she said. “I thought, OK, what can I do?”

As of this week, after email blasts to her synagogue and participation from more than 30 families, Calahan Klein said she counted 270 N95 masks, nine face shields, 175 surgical masks and more than 2,000 pairs of gloves, all of which were donated to local hospitals.

“It’s a drop in the bucket compared to large donations,” she said, “but still important to the medical workers who received them.”

Angela Engel, another Temple Beth Abraham member, created a GoFundMe page to buy materials to make protective masks, with help from a friend who manufactures clothing. The fundraiser quickly surpassed its original goal, raising more than $10,000.

Temple Isaiah in Lafayette sent an appeal for spare PPE such as masks and gloves, as well as experienced sewers who could lend their time and expertise to making masks. Even cotton masks made out of shirts and pillowcases would be helpful while production of N95 masks ramps up, the email said. The contact for the initiative is Dr. Dan Greninger, who can be reached at Rabbi Nicki Greninger’s email: rabbi.greninger@temple-isaiah.org.

Kyma said Reutlinger leaders hope to be “as prepared as we can be,” though she still holds out hope for what might be called a miracle that the virus would “pass over” their house.

“We’ve reached out to alternative vendors and large suppliers to get as much [PPE] possible,” she said. “Everybody’s asking for the same thing.”

Make PPE donations to the San Francisco Campus for Jewish Living by calling (415) 469-2130 and to the Reutlinger Community by contacting Beth Kyman at (925) 964-2072 or bkyman@rcjl.org.
A post-Kristallnacht escape by ‘the bravest person I know’

LIZ HARRIS | CORRESPONDENT

Closing her eyes, traveling back in time to Berlin’s “Night of Broken Glass,” 94-year-old Hilda Namm shares her memories.

“My parents were anxious,” she says, speaking slowly and thoughtfully from her quiet Marin County home. “They had a yardage [fabric] store. Somebody told them to put the shades down; they saved my parents from having to replace the windows. After that, the Germans came in and took over the store. They gave my parents a small sum of money.”

But even before Kristallnacht, the 1938 Nazi rampage that destroyed Jewish businesses, synagogues and lives, the handwriting was on the wall, she explains. With the rise of Hitler, “Everywhere they had signs: ‘Jews not allowed,’ in the parks or wherever. So we felt limited, discriminated against.”

It wasn’t long before the family — a teenage Hilda, her brother, and their mother and father — fled the country. As German Jews, they were “stateless citizens,” unwanted by other countries. Shanghai was their only choice at the time; an uncle arranged for passage on a ship leaving Italy.

“The Chinese were pretty good to the Jews,” Namm says. “They saved our lives.”

But life was far from pleasant in the foreign province, which took in an estimated 20,000 to 25,000 Jewish refugees between 1937 and 1941.

When the Japanese took control, “we had to gather into a ghetto. They built some cheap housing but you had to buy it. They put in restrictions when you could leave the ghetto and when you had to be back. They were very bad,” she says.

The weather was brutal, too. “It was hot in summer and there was lots of rain in winter. We had so much rain that it flooded the streets — you could see things swimming [and drowning], even babies.”

Still, things could have been worse. “You could go anywhere if you had money,” Namm says. “A lot of people didn’t have money, but my father had some. I think he was able to smuggle some money through his family in France.”

Her brother was denied a permit to enter the U.S. because he’d married a Russian woman. And since the woman’s parents were born in Poland, “they weren’t able to get a permit,” either. “They could only go to France to relatives.”

Of her father’s 10 siblings, Namm says, “most of them died fighting the Nazis.” Her mother also lost family members.

When Namm’s ship docked in San Francisco — a place she knew only “from movies” — “the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society came to the ship and interviewed me. Because I was alone, they sent me to a residential hotel on Post Street,” giving her enough money to last “a week or so.”

“It was a little scary,” she says, “but I didn’t think about it. I thought about looking for a job.” She scoured the newspapers and “found a job pretty quick” as a stenographer, a skill she’d learned in China.

In short order, she met her future husband, Manfred Namm, a fellow Berlin native who also came to America via Shanghai. They married in 1949 and had two children, Evelyn and David.

Manfred “worked in a butter and egg plant in San Francisco,” Namm says, but grew restless and ended up opening a wholesale sandwich shop, A1 Box Lunch, and two snack shops in the Financial District.

The couple lived in the Sunset District and were members of Conservative Congregation Ner Tamid. They moved to Marin — “away from the fog” — in the ’80s and joined Reform Congregation Rodef Sholom, where Namm became involved in the sisterhood and still attends services. She also spent lots of time at the Osher Marin JCC, where she still swims, enjoys senior lunches and other activities.

She belongs to a number of Jewish organizations, and is a generous donor to nonprofits and institutions both domestic and Israeli. Namm is a major contributor to the building fund for Rodef Sholom and JCC campus, and supports Chabad of Novato Rabbi Menachem Landa’s drive to build a synagogue.


Namm also visited Shanghai with her brother, Paul Polkowski, 96, who eventually immigrated to the U.S. and lives in Sunnyvale. That, too, stirred memories.

Namm’s next emotional journey will be her bat mitzvah via Shanghai. “It’s important to her,” says daughter Evelyn Namm. “She’s the bravest person I know.”
Passover in Pandemic

RABBI ELLIOT KUKLA | GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

Like many Jews, I will be having my Passover seder online this year. Frankly, it’s a relief. For the last few years, my main concerns at the seder have been figuring out how to precariously arrange my chair and pile of cushions in such a way that I could sit that long without too much pain or fatigue, and still be upright enough to manage dinner with my toddler and a roomful of his friends.

Seders usually led to days, if not weeks, of pain flare. For several years, between 2014 and 2017, I was too sick to get out of bed for seder. I spent the first nights of Passover in bed with a haggadah and my partner, feeling isolated and alienated from the rest of the Jewish world.

In some ways, a virtual seder feels like the larger Jewish community is coming over to meet me where I live. I am a chronically ill rabbi, and I serve ill, bereaved and dying people at the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center in San Francisco.

I’ve been meeting with chronically ill clients virtually, and bringing housebound people into my grief and other support groups via video-conferencing for many years. Many of my chronically ill clients feel as I do: Sheltering in place has somewhat broken down the isolation of illness, as the rest of the world learns the tools sick people have always had for staying connected from home.

Zoom is not the only tool that makes living at home more sustainable. Many chronically ill and disabled people have skills for slowing down and “circles of care” to sustain us in hard times. These skills are desperately needed in this moment, and are beginning to be adopted by the culture at large. And yet, even while our strategies for survival have never been more widely employed, disabled and sick people’s lives have never been more at risk.

Not only are chronically ill, disabled and elderly people more at risk of severe complications from Covid-19, but hospitals in this country are already starting to make triage decisions that see our lives as more disposable. The U.S. Office for Civil Rights, as well as numerous disabled activists, have raised alarm bells that rationing medical care based on age or ability is illegal in this country.

But it’s already becoming clear that chronically sick, disabled and elderly people will be at the bottom of most triage lists, based on factors like “survivability” and “years of life left.”

As one disabled activist said to me, “It feels like we’re facing a planned extinction.”

In this context, I feel both sad and angry when I see memes flooding the internet valorizing Covid-19 as a blessing in disguise.

My Facebook feed is filled with hoax articles about dolphins returning to the Venice canals, and people proclaiming this pandemic will be the cure for climate change. There are new sound bytes every day. “We are the virus, Covid is the cure” or “Coronavirus is Earth’s vaccine.”

It’s particularly ironic to represent this pandemic as a cure-all for climate change when the federal government is using it as an opportunity to temporarily eliminate environmental controls on businesses, a move driven by lobbying from the oil and gas industry.

This is not to say that we are not changing ourselves in new, uncertain terrain, where many of the economic and social structures of the old world are no longer relevant. Whatever is coming next is unknowable.

Like the actual desert, what makes the impacts of chronic illness or pain on daily living, and many chronic illness or disabled elders, but it also represents the need for everyone to tend to their energy in this time of shelter.

A spoon placed tenderly on the seder plate holds multiple meanings: It represents sick and disabled people, as well as elders, but it also represents the need for everyone to tend to their energy in this time of shelter.

We are in new, uncertain terrain, where many of the economic and social structures of the old world are no longer relevant. Whatever is coming next is unknowable.

Like the actual desert, what makes moments of transition so unnerving, and so filled with potential, are the wide, open spaces: the huge, arching sky and expansive sandy plains of the desert.

This year, what if we put something new on our seder plates?

The term “spoon theory” was coined by Christine Misrandino in 2003 to describe the very limited units of energy sick and disabled people have to meet our basic needs each day. In her essay, Misrandino says each spoon represents a task of living, like taking a shower or getting out of bed. Because able-bodied people typically aren’t concerned with the energy expended during such everyday tasks, spoon theory helps others empathize with the impacts of chronic illness or pain on daily living. Spoons are widely discussed online, and many chronically ill and disabled people identify as “spoonies.”

A spoon placed tenderly on the seder plate holds multiple meanings: It represents sick and disabled people, as well as elders, but it also represents the need for everyone to tend to their energy in this time of shelter.

A spoon on your seder plate is also a symbol of nourishment and care.

You may want to read something at your virtual seder written by a sick or disabled Jew, like this essay (tinyurl.com/ekukla-1) about the urgency of protecting disabled lives by disability scholar and activist Rabbi Julia Watts Belser.

Or this multi-layered reflection (tinyurl.com/ekukla-2) on the political and cultural meanings of Passover foods by Puerto Rican Jewish disabled elder Aurora Levins Morales.

Or even a part of this piece you’re reading right now.

When the ancient Israelites left slavery in Egypt, they did not head immediately to the Promised Land, flowing with milk and honey. Instead, they set off into the arid wilderness, unsure where they were going or what they would find.

As seders end this year, we too will find ourselves in the wilderness.

We are in new, uncertain terrain, where many of the economic and social structures of the old world are no longer relevant. Whatever is coming next is unknowable.

Like the actual desert, what makes moments of transition so unnerving, and so filled with potential, are the wide, open spaces: the huge, arching sky and expansive sandy plains of the desert.

This virus is neither a blessing nor a Divine lesson, but I do hope we don’t return to our pre-coronavirus lives.

In the absence of fundamental change, the disregard for chronically ill, disabled and elder lives that this pandemic has revealed will still lead to health-care disparities and unnecessary deaths. Destruction is not to be valorized, but it does bring room for creation.

In the open space that this pandemic brings to us, we have a chance to pause and begin building a new, more just world.
Once-powerhouse Dem club returns to S.F. political scene

MAYA MIRSKY | J. STAFF

The Raoul Wallenberg Jewish Democratic Club, a venerable institution in San Francisco that had all but vanished from the political scene in recent years, is back with a team of old and new members determined to breathe political life back into the organization.

“The hope is to be able to attract some new leaders, people who maybe have that bug — the political bug,” said political consultant Gia Daniller-Katz, a longtime member and past president.

The club was set up 30 years ago to unify and empower the city’s Jewish Democrats. That basic mission hasn’t changed, but the club is looking to reach a new generation.

“It’s not your father’s Democratic club,” joked Martin Rawlings-Fein.

Once a powerhouse club with 500 members and a board of directors, it hosted debates, interviewed candidates and made endorsements, helping to influence local policy. But over the last few years, the club — which also held social events, such as a political comedy Hanukkah party — had become largely inactive. Daniller-Katz, who joined in the 1990s, said because it was an all-volunteer group, it lost steam and momentum.

“As often is the case in these situations, things wax and wane,” she said.

The Raoul Wallenberg Jewish Democratic Club was founded in 1983 by veteran political activist John Rothmann. Shortly after launching, the club worked with the LGBT community and then-Supervisor Angela Alioto to co-sponsor an anti-hate crime law. It was also active in fighting anti-Israel resolutions in San Francisco and Berkeley. In more recent years, the club took part in a campaign to press Rainbow Grocery to stop its boycott of Israeli goods.

There are over 30 Democratic chartered clubs in the city, from the Latino Democratic Club to the Democratic Women in Action, but Wallenberg is the only one that represents San Francisco Jewish Democrats.

That’s what drew in Daniller-Katz. Someone who definitely has that “political bug,” she worked on campaigns for the California Democratic Party and Sen. Barbara Boxer. Upon moving to San Francisco, she wanted to find a place where her Jewish identity and her political identity meshed.

That same convergence is what attracted Rawlings-Fein to join. Though he’s been involved for only a few months, he’s already signed on to help revitalize the club.

“It’s about being part of a Democratic group, and also keeping your Jewish hat on — still with your kippah on!” he said. “I was really excited that it was a big-tent group.”

Committed to a slow but steady revival, the members are moving ahead with quarterly club events. The first was at S.F. café Manny’s on Feb. 25 — a Democratic debate watch party, followed by a panel discussion. The next event, in the spring, will look at immigration, an issue “of traditional concern to the Jewish community,” Daniller-Katz said.

In a presidential election year, it is even more important that people make their voices heard. Club activities will ramp up as the November election gets closer, including phone-banking for the eventual Democratic nominee and precinct-walking in Nevada, a state considered more vulnerable for Democrats than California. People interested in getting involved can find the club on Facebook and at wallenbergdems.org. The only requirement is to be a registered Democrat living in San Francisco.

“This is the right time to bring it back — with a vengeance” Rawlings-Fein said.

Gia Daniller-Katz moderates a panel on the election at Manny’s café with (from left) Jared Boigon, Ruth Bernstein and Sam Lauter.
Oakland’s interim top cop sees social equity through Jewish lens

GABE STUTMAN | J. STAFF

Oakland soon will have a new sheriff in town.

On March 23, Mayor Libby Schaaf announced that Susan Manheimer — a career law-enforcement official interviewed by J. in 2015 — had been offered and accepted an interim role as police chief, leading the beleaguered police department of the Bay Area’s third-largest city.

Manheimer, a member of Peninsula Temple Beth El in San Mateo, says her Jewish upbringing helped lead her to a career in public service. She was raised in New York City, where her father was a city councilman from the Bronx.

“My family marched in civil rights marches,” she told J. “I’ve always been a practicing Jew who is very proud of the strong Jewish tradition of advocating for civil rights, social equity and serving others.”

Manheimer retired in December from 19 years as the first female police chief in San Mateo, a suburb of 105,000. Before that, she worked for 17 years as a lieutenant and captain with the San Francisco Police Department, focusing on the drug-heavy Tenderloin District.

Her retirement did not last long. Pending a routine state background check, Manheimer will step into her new role on April 6, overseeing a department destabilized by leadership changes in recent years. She will succeed interim chief Darren Allison, who took over last month for Police Chief Anne Kirkpatrick after she was fired by the independent, civilian-run police commission (she reportedly plans to sue the city). Over the last four years, the department has seen seven chiefs, only two of them permanent.

In a statement, Manheimer said she was “honored and excited to step in at this time to assist the Oakland Police Department in meeting the unique challenges they face right now. My 35 years in Bay Area law enforcement have given me an abiding respect for the OPD and its unwavering commitment to the City of Oakland.”

Though Jewish police officers are not the norm, in 2007, a collection of law enforcement and criminal justice professionals formed the Northern California branch of Shomrim, Hebrew for “guardians.” J. wrote a cover story about Jewish law enforcement officials in 2011.

The mission of the regional Shomrim, based in Sebastopol, is to bring together Jewish law enforcement professionals, “encourage the religious spirit of the members... and work towards the welfare of all.”

The interim chief position in Oakland will last for six months, and can be extended to a year by the police commission.

Manheimer will face challenges overseeing a police department in a city of 425,000 with high rates of reported crime. Though gun violence in Oakland has dropped sharply, overall crime rates remain some of the highest in the state.

According to a recent report from SafeWise, a home security company frequently cited by news outlets, Oakland ranked last in California’s safe cities list, with annual rates of 12.7 violent crimes and 53.9 property crimes per 1,000 people.

In 2018, Oakland had the 12th-highest crime rate in the country for cities with more than 100,000 people, according to information provided by the Oakland Police Department. In violent crime it ranked 16th nationwide.
Gaza cancels rallies at Israeli border due to coronavirus

Mass rallies planned to be held on Gaza’s border with Israel were canceled due to coronavirus concerns. The rallies set for March 30 were scheduled to mark the second anniversary of the Great March of Return, a mass convergence on the border to protest Israel’s blockade of Gaza.

“We call upon our people not to go to the return encampments on March 30 and to stay home in order to maintain the safety of our people in the face of this lethal pandemic,” Khaled al-Batsh, a senior member of Islamic Jihad, told Reuters.

The first march took place on Land Day in 2018 and left at least 15 Palestinians dead and hundreds of protesters injured. Palestinians have observed Land Day since 1976, when six Israeli Arabs were killed and another 100 injured during protests over the Israeli expropriation of Arab-owned land in northern Israel.

The marches took place nearly every week for more than a year, but were canceled by Hamas in November. Hamas, which controls the coastal strip, has called the marches “part of a non-violent popular struggle.”

As of March 29, there were at least nine cases of coronavirus identified in Gaza. — JTA

Self-quarantined Netanyahu issues gathering limit to two

Gatherings of Israelis are limited to two people, except for nuclear family members living in the same home, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced March 30 from his home, where he was in self-quarantine.

Netanyahu and his advisers entered self-quarantine after his Knesset adviser, Rebecca Paluch, tested positive for the coronavirus on March 29. The next evening, Netanyahu and his family tested negative, though the prime minister will remain in quarantine per Health Ministry regulations.

Netanyahu announced in a nationally televised address from his home that “there won’t be gatherings of over two people who are not from the same nuclear family.” This includes outdoor prayer services in open areas and respecting social distancing, which had previously been permitted. Funerals remain limited to 20 mourners and circumsicutions to 10 people with appropriate social distancing.

Netanyahu said this is the year of the “lockdown seder,” and that Easter and Ramadan in the country should be observed the same way.

At the start of his address, Netanyahu said that the camera was at least 6 feet away and that “I did my own makeup and hair, which is why it looks like this.”

Netanyahu and Moshe Kahlon, the outgoing finance minister, also announced a $22 billion economic rescue package that allocates $2.8 billion to the health system, $8.4 billion to welfare and unemployment, $9 billion to help small and large businesses and $2.2 billion for economic stimulus.

As of March 30, there were 4,695 confirmed cases of coronavirus in Israel and 16 deaths. — JTA

Israel's chief rabbi says video seders are not OK

Videoconferencing a seder — that’s a no-no. So say Israel’s chief rabbis, who issued a list of Jewish religious legal rulings for “Passover in the shadow of corona.”

On March 25, a group of Israeli Sephardic Orthodox rabbis issued a letter approving the use of a videoconferencing program, such as Zoom, to bring families together for seders during the current crisis. Traveling to the homes of extended family for the holiday rite is now prohibited by the government.

But many Orthodox rabbis slammed the letter and many of its 14 signers removed their names after it became public.

The use of electronic devices is forbidden on yom tov, or religious Jewish holidays, said the statement issued March 31 by the Chief Rabbinate.

“The loneliness is painful, and we must respond to it, perhaps even with a video conference on the eve of the holiday before it begins, but not by desecrating the holiday, which is only permitted in cases of ‘pikuach nefesh’ [to save a life],” the rabbis said.

The list also said that burning the chametz, food not kosher for Passover, can be skipped this year due to the prohibition against a person being more than 100 meters (about 110 yards) from his home. Instead, the chametz can be placed in the garbage with bleach poured on it to make it inedible.

The rabbis called on individuals to pray in their homes and recommended that a uniform time be set, so everyone would be praying at the same time. — JTA

Israeli defense factory starts manufacturing ventilators

Israel’s defense establishment has stopped making missiles and started manufacturing ventilators.

The assembly line building the Ventway Sparrow ventilator model was setup by the Israel Aerospace Industries at an Israeli missile factory on March 31, Israel Hayom reported.

The line has been dedicated to fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. The first line opened at a small hospital in Delta, and a second line opened at an Israeli hospital.

The first ventilator line was set up in February by an Israeli missile factory on March 31, Israel Hayom reported. The line was opened at an Egyptian hospital to fight COVID-19.

Thirty ventilators made in the missile factory have already been delivered to the Health Ministry. Defense Minister Naftali Bennett announced. This line of ventilators can be used on both adults and children, and is already in use at hospitals and emergency centers in Israel and abroad.

“The State of Israel must develop independent capabilities in everything related to dealing with the COVID-19 virus pandemic,” Bennett said. “We cannot remain dependent on procurement from other countries. We must develop independent, advanced capabilities.” — JTA

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Jews returning home to Quebec from Florida bring coronavirus

Jewish Canadians streaming back home from Florida, to outrun coronavirus and beat the pre-Passover rush, unwittingly helped stoke one of the highest virus-positive rates in Quebec province.

Cote St. Luc, a Montreal suburb with the densest and most elderly Jewish population in Quebec, reported some of earliest cases and declared a state of emergency on March 17. One-third of the city’s population is over 65.

According to news reports, too many of the snowbirds were bent on restocking their pantries and refrigerators instead of directly self-quarantining for 14 days in their homes as mandated by provincial authorities. The infection rate was so high, a virus test center was to open on March 29 in the parking lot of a Cote St. Luc shopping mall.

One-third of the city's population is over 65.

On March 29 in Boisbriand, a Hasidic enclave of 4,000 just north of Montreal, community leaders begged authorities to help them enforce a 14-day quarantine. According to reports, some members traveled to New York for Purim and helped spread the virus at a 40 percent infection rate in their own community upon return.

As is the case everywhere, Canada’s Jews are struggling with the virus. All schools, synagogues and institutions are physically closed as Jewish federations figure out ways to deal “virtually” and in other ways with the crisis. Jewish nursing homes are allowing only deathbed visits. — JTA

Sheldon Adelson donates 2 million face masks to hospitals

Billionaire casino magnate and philanthropist Sheldon Adelson has donated about 2 million face masks to hospitals and first responders in New York and Nevada, the Jewish Insider website reported, citing an unnamed source close to Adelson.

The masks were made in China and paid for by Adelson, the website said, adding that some 250,000 of the masks will go to the Trump administration’s program to assist health workers.

Adelson is a supporter of President Donald Trump and a mega-donor to the Republican Party and candidates. His wife, Miriam, is a medical doctor. — JTA

N.J. man arrested after threatening Orthodox Jews

A New Jersey man sent Facebook messages to Gov. Phil Murphy and others threatening to harm Orthodox Jews for violating state coronavirus restrictions.

Anthony Lodespoto, 43, of Howell, was charged March 27 with making terroristic threats during a state of emergency, law enforcement officials said in a statement.

Lodespoto allegedly used Facebook’s direct messaging feature to threaten the Jewish community of Lakewood, a New Jersey township with a large Orthodox population that has reported a higher number of coronavirus cases than surrounding areas.

“The threats largely consisted of Lodespoto threatening to travel to Lakewood with the purpose of assaulting members of the Jewish community with a baseball bat,” the statement said.

As of March 28, Lakewood had 236 confirmed Covid-19 cases, more than 150 more than any other city or township in Ocean County, according to the county Health Department, the Asbury Park Press news site reported. — JTA

Western Wall sanitized for Passover

Every year, the prayer notes tucked between the stones in the Western Wall are removed at Passover and before the High Holidays, and buried with other sacred papers, according to Jewish law, in the cemetery on the Mount of Olives.

This year, according to a statement from the Western Wall Heritage Foundation, the Western Wall stones were sanitized and cleaned on March 31 to protect those who come to pray.

The statement noted that since Rosh Hashanah, over 8,000 prayer notes sent from around the world via the Western Wall internet site have been placed between the stones. The notes were removed with gloves and disposable wooden tools.

Supervising Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz, the rabbi of the Western Wall and holy sites, prayed there for the recovery of all those who have become ill with the coronavirus, according to the statement. — JTA
There are about 250,000 Jews in the United Kingdom. They account for only 0.3 percent of its population. But as of March 31, the coronavirus had killed 44 known Jewish victims — about 2.5 percent of the U.K. total.

That means British Jews are overrepresented by a factor of eight in their country’s death toll from Covid-19.

The statistics are compiled, released and updated periodically by the Board of Deputies of British Jews, an umbrella group representing British Jewry. The stats are unique because they are the first centralized attempt anywhere in the world at measuring the Jewish death rate and comparing it to a national total.

The figures are raising concerns that British Jews are particularly at risk from the virus. They are also giving rise to multiple hypotheses to explain this reality, though none seem conclusive.

Here are the theories and why they are difficult to prove at this point in the pandemic’s spread.

IT’S TOO EARLY

While Jews do seem to be overrepresented in the national death tally, “the numbers of Jewish deaths being reported so far are statistically, very small — too small to draw any firm conclusions,” wrote Jonathan Boyd, the executive director of the Institute for Jewish Policy Research, a group that researches the demographics of European Jewry, in a Jewish Chronicle op-ed published March 30.

Similar sentiments were expressed by Marie van der Zyl, the Board of Deputies president. “We cannot use [this data] to come to any definitive conclusions,” she said.

THE HAREDI ORTHODOX

Reports of failures to observe social distancing protocols at some haredi Orthodoxy synagogues and institutions have raised concerns about the spread of the virus among that denomination.

“People are touching the same surfaces, the same [prayer books],” a health worker told the Jewish Chronicle last week about the heavily haredi London neighborhood of Stamford Hill. “I believe the community is susceptible to the virus because they are so close knit.”

Separately, 20 British Jewish physicians, none of them haredi, also singled out haredim in a pamphlet circulated in Stamford Hill a couple of weeks ago urging them to heed social distancing guidelines.

“You are fully responsible for deaths that occur as a result of ignoring this advice,” the physicians wrote, echoing similar warnings in other places with large haredi minorities, including Israel, the U.S. and Belgium.

But Herschel Gluck, a haredi rabbi and head of London’s Shomrim Jewish security force, argued that “the facts don’t support this hypothesis.”

While the disease has claimed several haredi Jews, other victims have included four members of the Modern Orthodox Spanish and Portuguese community in London and two from the Reform community, including a rabbi.

“Among Jews, this disease doesn’t seem to be confined to the haredi population,” said Rabbi Alexander Goldberg, a chaplain at the...
University of Surrey. “All sorts of Jews seem to have it.”

THE MOBILITY FACTOR
Goldberg, a former community issues director at the Board of Deputies, presented another theory: “The one thing that the Jews who caught the coronavirus do have in common is that they belong to a group with a high level of mobility.”

Haredi families from Britain travel frequently to visit family in Israel, Belgium, New York and beyond, as do Jewish businessmen regardless of their denomination.

Boyd concurred. Among Jews of all denominations, he wrote, “many work in the center of town, travelling in daily by Tube, and are very much in the thick of things.

“Collectively, we are wealthier and better educated than average, which also means that we are more likely to travel abroad — another way in which we might have been more likely than others to have picked up the infection early on.”

But Gluck has his doubts. “The Tube had many commuters, the trains were packed,” he said of the London underground and national railway, which operated at full capacity until as recently as March 25, when the U.K. introduced a national lockdown.

Moreover, London is home to a lot of people, such as 600,000 Italians, who travel back to their countries of origin frequently. “It doesn't stand to reason that Jews would be more exposed because of travel,” Gluck said.

AGE AND CITY LIFE
Jews are older than the general population, and they are concentrated in London — the city that has seen the most coronavirus cases of any region in the U.K., and is believed to be several weeks ahead of the rest of the country.

“A London effect may partially explain higher counts” among Jews, Boyd wrote, referencing the fact that 60 percent of all British Jews live in or around the capital. “The city is an ideal place for a virus to spread.”

British Jews, Boyd added, are old — 21 percent are aged 65 and above, compared to 16.4 percent of the population as a whole.

PURIM AND COMMUNITY LIFE
Boyd and several other commentators have noted the proximity of the Jewish holiday of Purim (which fell on March 9 this year) to the outbreak of the coronavirus in Europe.

At St. John’s Wood Synagogue, with 1,300 seats, one of the largest synagogues in London, a rabbi contracted the virus shortly after returning from a Purim celebration in Morocco. He spent many hours interacting with dozens of congregants before he developed symptoms and self-quarantined.

More broadly, there may be “something about the way in which Jews organize their lives that might inadvertently cause the virus to spread between us,” Boyd noted. A quarter of Jewish adults attend synagogue most weeks, whereas the equivalent proportion for church attendance among British Christians is about 10 percent, Boyd wrote.

“These are all perfect environments for a virus to multiply,” he wrote. “So physical social interaction — typically the essential, even obligatory lubricant which underpins Jewish life — now poses a mortal threat.”

in coronavirus deaths in U.K.
Local tech titan donates $3 million to Israel’s virus response

GABE STUTMAN | J. STAFF

Bay Area billionaire technology investor Yuri Milner announced that his foundation was donating $3 million to a handful of Israeli institutions battling the coronavirus pandemic.

The Russian-born Milner is Jewish and has Israeli citizenship. In a statement he said the gifts were “an investment in the present and the future.”

The Milner Foundation, founded by Milner and his wife, Julia, donated the funds to three Israeli organization according to a March 24 press release from Tel Aviv University: Magen David Adom; Tel Aviv University’s Sackler Faculty of Medicine and George S. Wise Life Sciences; and Tel Aviv Sourasky Medical Center, Ichilov Hospital.

The gift to Magen David Adom, Israel’s national emergency medical organization, was earmarked for a telemedicine project that aims to reduce the number of people visiting Israeli hospitals, according to the release. The gift to Tel Aviv University was for research on treatments for the virus, and the gift to Ichilov Hospital would be put toward its intensive-care unit treating Covid-19 patients.

“In the face of global threats like this, science, technology and innovation are our best hopes,” Milner said.

Rained in Moscow and now living on the Peninsula, Milner, 58, was an early investor in Facebook – more than a decade ago, he spent $200 million to acquire a 2 percent share in the social media giant through his investment fund Digital Sky Technologies. He also has shares in technology companies Spotify, Airbnb and Alibaba, and he invested $400 million in Twitter nine years ago.

In 2011 Wired magazine called Milner “the world’s most successful investor in social media.”

That same year he made headlines when he purchased a $100 million estate in Los Altos Hills; at the time it was believed to be the most expensive single-family home purchase in U.S. history.

Magen David Adom’s director, Gen. Eli Bin, said in a statement that Milner’s gift would help “keep hundreds of thousands of Israelis out of hospitals” each year.

Tel Aviv University president Ariel Porat said his institution would “do everything in our ability to justify the confidence given to us. Through our first-rate researchers, we will contribute our part in this world war of a type that we have never known before.”

STEVE JENNINGS/GETTY IMAGES FOR BREAKTHROUGH PRIZE

Yuri Milner (left) and Mark Zuckerberg at the Breakthrough Prize ceremony in Mountain View last November.

COURTESY AMERICAN FRIENDS OF TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

Sackler School of Medicine at Tel Aviv University.

Magen David Adom’s director, Gen. Eli Bin

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Let my people know that this seder will be the first I’ve ever planned

MAYA MIRSKY | J. STAFF

How long does a seder really have to be? “No, we can’t just say ‘They tried to kill us, we survived, let’s eat!’” I tell my daughters. There’s some negotiation until I promise it’ll be 10 minutes. I can get the essentials done in 10 minutes, right?

We are wrangling because, for the first time in my life, I am organizing a seder. Yes, this Gen X Jew has been to a lot of seders, but always as a guest — at my aunt’s in Los Angeles as a kid, at my oldest friend’s in Alameda as an adult. And sure, I’ve skipped seders, too, while living in Budapest.

But I’ve never actually hosted one.

It’s only as our newsroom continues to report on coronavirus and canceled community events that it dawned on me: This affects me, too. I can’t go to Alameda. What will I do?

The answer, of course, is that I’ll host my own seder — for the first time. It’ll be just the four of us, two adults and two kids (children who find the haggadah appallingly dull, apparently). I’m messaging with J.’s online editor, David, and he recommends we include in our seder a special showing of “Prince of Egypt,” the 1998 DreamWorks film that tells the story of Moses and the Exodus.

He is appalled to learn that I have never seen it and begins to send me admonitory messages in all caps, upset at my ignorance. Apparently this is another thing I know nothing about!

I have to admit that I’m suddenly feeling out of my depth.

“What is this?” I’m looking at something described as a solid chocolate seder plate on the Passover aisle at my local Safeway and wondering who thought combining a shank bone with chocolate was a good idea.

Unlike the toilet-paper section, the Passover shelves are fully stocked with matzah imported from Jerusalem, dubiously packaged macaroons and a plastic matzah dish described as an “affordable alternative to elegant silver,” which I seriously consider investing in. I go through the necessities in my head and start to worry. I’ve been freeloading for too long — do I have to make my own gefilte fish?

Not if I live in the Bay Area, apparently. I can pick up rock-and-black-cod gefilte at Market Hall, where I can even get a lamb shank labeled gluten and dairy-free. Oakland Kosher Foods, meanwhile, has more packaged Pesach foods than you can shake a sprig of karpas at.

But it’s not about the cooking — not really.

It’s not about the fact that I don’t own an afikomen cover or a seder plate. It’s that I suddenly feel responsible for something that I’ve always taken for granted. I can do Pesach with homemade haroset, store-bought gefilte fish and a bone from my local butcher, with Val Kilmer as Moses saying “Let my people go!”

The point is getting it done, somehow.

This year, I’ve suddenly become responsible for the transmission of our oral history to my children. If this is the year I have to step up and be in charge, then so be it. Even if it’s only for 10 minutes.
How to have a meaningful seder while stuck at home

DAVID A.M. WILENSKY | J. STAFF

A whopping 70 percent of American Jews attend a Passover seder every year, according to a 2014 study by the Pew Research Center. A little more than half go to services on Yom Kippur, and a little less than a quarter attend services at least once a month.

But it’s the seder that keeps us coming back. It is a home-based tradition that connects us with family and traditional comfort foods — a discursive, circular ritual in which we retread the past by retelling the story of the Exodus and look toward the future by welcoming the Prophet Elijah, herald of the Messiah.

But this year’s Passover seders will be unlike any other. We cannot fly to be with our extended families. We cannot even walk down the block to a neighbor’s house. Some of us look forward for months to hosting a large seder for friends and family, and are disappointed at the prospect of a small seder. Others will be forced to host a seder, for the first time.

Worship services and classes can be frontal. There’s an easy logic to streaming them: Pick a platform (Zoom, FaceBook Live, etc.), point a webcam at the person who is leading, and look toward the future by welcoming the Prophet Elijah, herald of the Messiah.

And everybody has canceled.

In normal years, Doreen Alper hosts dozens at her seders, such as this one in 2015. In other words, Orthodox Jews won’t be streaming their seders — except for those who follow Israeli Sephardic rabbis, who, in an extraordinary measure, announced they are allowing streamed seders under certain conditions this year.

For the first time, the Rabbinical Assembly, rabbis who represent Judaism’s Conservative movement, has issued guidance that makes virtual seders possible this year (rabbinical-assembly.org/story/streaming-seder). Essentially, they allow it, although there are some caveats — for example, it can only be streamed, not recorded, and participants are encouraged to avoid typing into a streaming platform’s text chat feature and to interact only via speaking.

One local Conservative rabbi is encouraging leniency about every aspect of Passover this year, from video streaming to upholding the holiday’s complex dietary restrictions.

Rabbi Dan Ain of Congregation Beth Shalom in San Francisco enthusiastically supports the RA’s ruling on virtual seders. “It’s a must,” he said. “It’s very important to connect with people during seder. We are trying to figure out if we’ll do one for our shul. Do people want to have a rabbi and some other people on a screen during their seder meal? If they’re all alone, I think some of them really do.”

He also is encouraging people to take it easy with other aspects of the holiday. “Forget all the Narishkeit [foolish minutiae] this year,” Ain implored.

“Use common sense. Don’t eat bread. Just don’t eat bread. All of this other Narishkeit, all the way down to the most minute thing — you don’t need a $30 bag of cookies certified kosher for Passover by the OU [Orthodox Union]. Just avoid leavened food and reconnect with the ikar [essence] of what the holiday is all about.”

A ‘SMALL’ SEDER

Doreen Alper hosted 70 people for seder last year in her Walnut Creek home. By her extraordinary standards, she was already planning to have ‘small’ seders this year — just 44 people over the course of two nights.

Now, of course, she’s been forced to scale back further to 11 — her husband, son, daughter-in-law, their five kids and two additional grandchildren home from college.

Alper, 81, started cooking for Passover in February. In her freezer, she has 15 quarts of chicken soup and 80 matzah balls. “I don’t even know how to cook for 11 people. I have 4 gallons of grape juice. What the hell am I going to do with 5 pounds of matzah?” she said.

“I have two briskets, 5 pounds of chicken wings. I’ve got gefilte fish. I’ve done all the shopping.”

The thought of canceling hasn’t crossed Alper’s mind. “It’s difficult in my mind. As much difficulty as we are having with this virus, I just believe what family I can have, we need to have together for Pesach,” she said.

Passover is the highlight of Alper’s year. She’s been hosting large seders since 1992, when 50 or so people came to her home in a Cleveland suburb. “We do Yom Kippur, we do Rosh Hashanah, I do all the cooking — but that’s only for family here in the Bay Area,” Alper said. “But Pesach, family comes from all over. No one comes for vacation, they just come for seders. And everybody has canceled.”

continued on page 46
How to make the Passover seder special in the age of social distancing

continued from page 44

The importance of the seder in her family is present in every detail; they even have a special family haggadah full of family photos going back generations.

She’s taking some mild precautions this year, a grudging concession to coronavirus. “We’ll wash our hands, we’ll sit down, it’ll be all new. We do the whole service, but this year we’ll do a fast seder. That’s the best we can do,” she said. “Maybe we’ll just have one seder. But we’re going to have seder. I can’t even imagine not being together for the first seder.”

ALL ALONE

Alper’s nightmare — Passover spent alone — is some people’s reality this year.

While some who live alone will be able to join a virtual seder, there are many for whom that is a halachic impossibility, or who simply don’t know people locally. There are a few resources out there for that situation.

A guide called “A Different Pesach: Ideas for the Solo Seder” is circulating in the form of a Google Doc (tinyurl.com/soloseder). Including practical and creative suggestions, the document was created collaboratively by a group of 10 Jews, mostly on the East Coast, including Rabbi Louis Polisson of Conservative Congregation Or Atid in Wayland, Massachusetts, and Rabbanit Dasi Fruchter, founder of the South Philadelphia Shtiebel, an Orthodox spiritual community and learning center located in a former scooter shop.

“Pesach will be uniquely challenging for everyone this year,” the guide says. “One very important thing to remember is that each of us will deal with Pesach in a very different way this year. Please bear in mind that your seder might look a lot of different ways — from extremely bare-bones and low-key, to more elaborate — and that all of those ways are okay… The right Seder for you this year might involve matzah and cream cheese, a good book, and sleep. That might be all you’re up for, and that is totally okay.”

One section of the guide is devoted to ideas for creating a sense of community and companionship in the run-up to the seder.

Ideas include: cooking “together” with a loved one during a video call; cooking the same recipe as a friend or loved one, though not necessarily on a video call; having a video call right before the seder “to send everyone into Pesach with one another’s voices in their ears.”

Another section has suggestions for managing the solo seder itself: “pace yourself” … “make yourself something yummy, but be kind to yourself — no need to make it fancy” … and find “a book on the theme of ‘yetziat mitzrayim’ [the Exodus from Egypt] to keep you company” over dinner.

Local Chabad and Modern Orthodox rabbis are fielding a lot of questions about how to do a seder on your own.

Rabbi Nosson Potash of Chabad of Cole Valley in San Francisco makes it sound simple. “It will be, in many ways, the same as any other seder. Everyone will have a seder plate at home — try the best they can to get all the seder plate items. And they’ll read the haggadah,” he said.

“It doesn’t need to be four hours long. As each of us gets into the seder on our own, there’s plenty to explore and the text of the haggadah will enable people to experience this story of the Jewish people going from a state of oppression and narrowness to true freedom… The Passover story is relevant no matter who is around.”

Potash has been trying to impress on people in his community that a solo seder is totally within their grasp. “It’s in their hands to celebrate the festival of our freedom. Even if it’s on our own, we can become free,” he said.

Every year, the haggadah tells seder participants that they must see it as if they themselves went forth from Egypt. According to Potash, this year’s unusual circumstances may help engender that feeling.

“When the Jewish people left Egypt, the night of the Exodus, the night of the first Passover, they were all instructed to stay at home — alone or with their family,” he says.

“We can see how this being stuck at home is part of our journey into freedom, just like the first time the Jewish people became free from Egypt. We’ve done this before.”
‘A complete disaster’: Food businesses crushed by closures, staff layoffs

Alix Wall is a contributing editor to J. She is also the founder of the Illuminoshi: The Not-So-Secret Society of Bay Area Jewish Food Professionals.

All was going well for small business-owner Laura Athuil. The French native runs a storefront and bakery in San Francisco’s Lower Haight called Choux that sells French cream puffs. While there was some walk-in traffic, the business relied on tech company orders. Athuil’s cream puffs — which come in flavors like pistachio and salted caramel — were ordered on a regular basis in large amounts as perks for tech employees. Athuil had secured space for a second location in the Temescal district of Oakland and was planning to open it in the coming months.

Then came the coronavirus. “Most of my business is catering,” she said. “I wish instead of canceling their orders [the tech companies] decided to buy gift cards to give to their employees.”

Athuil had to lay off her employees, something all food business owners are grappling with amid the uncertainty. Many catering companies are temporarily reinventing their offerings to include takeout or heat-at-home meals. Hugh Grossman Group and Mangia Nosh are just two Jewish-owned caterers that fall into this category.

“This is a complete disaster for us,” said Athuil, “especially because what we do is so specific. It’s not like we’re making bread, which is something that everyone needs.”

Athuil has been thinking about using ingredients left in her bakery to make treats for hospital workers, giving her something positive to focus on since she can no longer think about her new location. (If anyone wants to contribute, they can do so at chouxsf.com/donate.)

“Not being able to make my customers happy is really hard,” she said, “so if I’m able to make treats for the nurses, that will give me a smile and make me feel useful.”

Other businesses are suffering as well. Napa Nuts, a family-owned operation run by the sister and brother team of Bonnie and Schecky Miluso, recently posted on Facebook that it had to lay off all of its employees. With the company supplying mostly restaurants and hotels, the closures have trickled down and orders are way down. “We want to bring back our staff as soon as possible,” they wrote.

The closing of Buttercup Diner, a family-owned diner with five East Bay locations, has meant temporarily laying off 250 employees.

“This is the worst possible news for the restaurant business, ever,” said Debbie Shavvar, who started Buttercup in 1988 with husband David; they run the business now with their three adult children.

“Our staff is like our extended family. We’re a business, but we’re trying to institute a family culture, so it’s absolutely devastating.”

Ben Shavvar, Buttercup Diner

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On March 12 Peter Levitt and Karen Adelman found out that they had lost their buyer, Berkeleyside reported last week. The sale fell through after the buyer’s bank canceled loans to restaurants, an industry hard hit by the coronavirus quarantine.

“It was a gut punch. I couldn’t breathe, and our hearts were sore,” Levitt told Berkeleyside. Though Levitt and Adelman had switched to a takeout and delivery model and had tried to follow rules of social distancing, it proved too hard to enforce and they made the difficult decision to close for now.

A GoFundMe has been set up for employees (tinyurl.com/gofundme-sauls-deli), and gift cards are available on the Saul’s website. Levitt said he has faith they will be able to reopen when the time is right.

Laura Athuil had to lay off staff at her cream-puff bakery Choux.

Grossman’s Noshery, which opened in Santa Rosa on March 19 with a takeout and delivery model, has also since closed.

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SMALL BITES: Despite most restaurants either scaling way back or temporarily closing, a popular Israeli spot on Oakland’s Piedmont Avenue has officially returned, with a new name and location. Ba-Bite, owned and run by Israeli chef Mica Talmor from 2015 to 2018, is now Pomella. It is
one of three new tenants in the old Chow space, across the street from the original location. The opening had been in the works for months, and Talmor felt she could start with a limited takeout and delivery menu. “While this isn’t the launch I envisioned,” Talmor wrote on Instagram. “I’m so happy to be able to feed you again.”

People who normally go to a community seder at a synagogue or to the home of a friend or family member have suddenly found themselves in the position of preparing the seder meal themselves for the first time. Others who usually prepare an extravagant meal for many guests may not be as motivated to do so for a much smaller affair. With those factors in mind, here are some local chefs and caterers offering takeout or delivery for the seder meal.

**KOSHER**

Oakland Kosher Foods has a Passover catering menu, available on request. The store is offering pick-up service for this special menu. Oakland Kosher is certified kosher by Vaad HaKashrus of Northern California. Contact the store for details at oaklandkosher.com or (510) 839-0177.

Afikomen Judaica is offering online ordering for Passover seder foods and items with curbside pickup at its Berkeley store, afikomen.com. Several Chabad locations are offering “seder-to-go” packages with the essential Passover foods. Contact one near you to see if this option is still available. chabad.org

**NONKOSHER**

Café Boho has a Passover meal that includes gefilte fish, matzah ball soup, a choice of various salads and a main of brisket, short ribs, baked chicken with vegetables or roasted salmon. Sides include tsimmes and roasted potatoes; dessert is either flourless chocolate cake or a buckwheat crepe with crème anglaise. Place orders by April 4. Boho delivers through DoorDash and other apps. cafebohosf.com

Chef Mat Schuster of the Spanish restaurant Canela has offered Passover menus since he’s been open, and is doing so again this year, but for takeout or delivery only. Schuster, who has been profiled in J. before, serves the classics with Spanish twists. His main this year is a roasted duck breast with horseradish marble potatoes. No fish course this year, but rather savory matzah brei with oyster mushrooms and paprika-sour cream drizzle. There is, however, matzah ball soup. The menu will be available April 7-16 and Spanish wines can be paired with each course. The Passover menu wasn’t on the website yet as of this writing, so check canelasf.com or email contact@canelasf.com.

Although the restaurant is closed at the moment, and its chefs are working with the city to prepare meals for the homeless. Solomon’s Deli in Sacramento will have matzah ball soup, Manischewitz-braised brisket and flourless chocolate cake for pickup and delivery. solomonsdelicatessen.com

Wise Sons Jewish Delicatessen’s Passover menu is available April 7-16. On offer is everything from haroset and horseradish to gefilte fish, matzah ball soup and brisket. The deli recommends ordering two days before pickup from the 24th Street location in San Francisco. wiseasonsdeli.com

Market Hall Foods does not deliver but does offer all of the seder plate fixings. Passover foods are available April 6-9 and must be ordered by noon on April 4 to be picked up April 6, and by 12 p.m. on April 5 to be picked up April 7-9. (A look at Market Hall’s Passover operation was in this column last month.) Main dishes include brisket and braised spring chicken with artichokes. rockridgemarkethall.com

New to the lineup this year is Napa-based caterer Itamar Abramovitch, whose Israeli pop-up Balagan was featured in this space last year. He’s offering an all-inclusive seder meal with gefilte fish, matzah ball soup, brisket and confit potatoes that can be delivered anywhere in the Bay Area on April 7; orders must be in by April 5. blossomcatering.com

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Passover this year is looking very different from any Passover we’ve ever experienced. People who normally go to a community seder at a synagogue or to the home of a friend or family member have suddenly found themselves in the position of preparing the seder meal themselves for the first time. Others who usually prepare an extravagant meal for many guests may not be as motivated to do so for a much smaller affair. With those factors in mind, here are some local chefs and caterers offering takeout or delivery for the seder meal.

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Add a little sweet and sour to the seder’s bitter greens

**COOKING**  
**FAITH KRAMER**

This Chicken and Celery Sauté in Sephardic Sweet and Sour Sauce reflects several seder traditions.

Some Sephardic communities dip celery leaves, not parsley, into salt water. Ancient writings sometimes confused the two plants, and early eastern Mediterranean celery was much more bitter than today’s vegetable.

In Greece, Turkey and the Balkans, it became a custom for some to have celery poached in lemon sauce as part of the holiday meal. The recipe below builds on that custom. Instructions for doubling or partially making ahead follow the main recipe.

**CHICKEN AND CELERY SAUTÉ  
IN SEPHARDIC SWEET AND SOUR SAUCE**

Serves 6

- 8 large, crisp celery stalks with leaves
- 2 lbs. boneless, skinless chicken thighs
- 1 tsp. salt, divided
- ½ tsp. ground black pepper, divided
- ½ tsp. crumbled dried oregano leaves, divided
- About 4-5 Tbs. oil
- 1 cup chopped onions
- 1 tsp. minced garlic
- ¼ tsp. paprika or cayenne
- 2 cups sliced carrots (cut into ¼-inch rounds)
- 2 cups small cauliflower florets (cut larger florets into quarters)
- 1 Tbs. plus 2 tsp. grated lemon zest, divided
- 1½-2 cups water, divided
- ½ cup fresh lemon juice, plus more if needed
- 1-2 Tbs. sugar
- ¼ cup coarsely chopped reserved celery leaves or parsley

Remove and reserve celery leaves. If desired, lightly peel celery to remove strings. Trim off bottom and tops of stalks. Cut into 1-inch pieces (4 cups). Coarsely chop celery leaves to use as garnish.

Cut larger thighs in half. Toss thighs with ¼ tsp. each salt, pepper and oregano. Heat 1-2 Tbs. oil in a deep 12-inch fry or sauté pan over medium-high heat. Working in batches (adding oil as needed), brown chicken and sauté until almost cooked through. Set aside. Cover.

Wipe out excess liquid from pan but do not clean. Add 1 Tbs. oil, lower heat to medium and sauté onions until just softened, scraping up any browned bits from bottom of pan. Add garlic, ¼ tsp. each salt, pepper, oregano, paprika and the carrots. Sauté 2 minutes, add ¼ cup of water and cover, stirring occasionally until carrots have begun to soften, adding another ¼ cup of water if needed. Stir in cauliflower, celery and 1 tsp. lemon zest. Add another ¼ cup of water if needed as they cook. Taste. Correct seasoning. Transfer to bowl. Stir in any liquid released by the reserved chicken. Cover.

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Add 2 Tbs. oil to pan (again without cleaning). Heat over medium heat. Add 1 cup water, the lemon juice, 1 tsp. zest, 1 Tbs. sugar and ½ tsp. salt. Bring to a boil. Lower heat to simmer, uncovered, until reduced by half. Taste, adding sugar, salt or lemon juice as needed. The sauce should be pleasantly sweet and sour.

Raise heat to medium. Stir in vegetables and chicken. Sauté until chicken is fully cooked and everything is heated through. Serve hot or warm. Place in serving bowl. Spoon any remaining pan sauce over dish. Garnish with chopped celery leaves and 1 Tbs. lemon zest.

**TO DOUBLE RECIPE:** Heat oven to 350 degrees. Sauté chicken in batches. Cook vegetables in batches. Transfer chicken and vegetables to baking pan and stir in lemon sauce until coated. Bake until chicken is fully cooked and dish is heated through.

**TO PARTIALLY MAKE AHEAD:** Refrigerate the almost cooked chicken and the crisp-tender vegetables separately. Bring to room temperature. Heat 1-2 Tbs. oil in fry pan. Add chicken and when almost heated through, add vegetables. Sauté until all is heated through. Remove from pan and cover. Continue as directed.

Faith Kramer is a Bay Area food writer. She blogs about her food at clickblogappetit.com. Contact Faith at clickblogappetit@gmail.com.
Virtual seders and how-to workshops around the Bay

Community seders

**SUNDAY | April 5**

**OFCC WOMEN’S SEDER**—Transformative prayer leader and musician Deborah Sacks-Mintz leads an online seder in English from a feminist perspective. With time to share personal stories. Oshman Family JCC event on Zoom. 5:30-7:30 p.m. Free with registration. paloaltojcc.org/virtual-ofjc

**WEDNESDAY | April 8**

**REUTLINGER COMMUNITY SEDER**—Jewish senior home in Danville hosts a streaming seder for its residents, their families and others led by Rabbi Debora Kohn. Also April 9, same time. 3 p.m. Free. RSVP by April 6. (925) 648-2800

**“SEDER IN PLACE”**—JCCSF hosts a Zoom seder redefining what freedom means when people can’t connect in person. 6 p.m. Free with registration. tinyurl.com/jccsf-seder

**FIRST-NIGHT SEDER**—At Congregation Kol Emeth. 6 p.m. Free. kolemeth.org

**COMMUNITY SEDER**—Rabbi Sarah Weissman of Congregation Beth Am in Los Altos Hills leads seder on Zoom. 5-6:15 p.m. Visit paloaltojcc.org for posted link.

**THURSDAY | April 9**

**SHA’AR ZAHAV SECOND-NIGHT SEDER**—Rabbi Mychal Copeland and Cantor Sharon Bernstein lead a community seder on Zoom. 6 p.m. Free with RSVP. shaarzahav.org

**SECOND-NIGHT COMMUNITY SEDER**—Rabbi Danny Gottlieb and Ricki Weintraub of S.F. Congregation Beth Israel Judea host a seder on Facebook Live. Have matzah, wine, a full seder plate and the festive meal ready; no haggadah needed. 6:30 p.m. Free. tinyurl.com/beth-seder

**B’NAI SHALOM SECOND-NIGHT SEDER**—Walnut Creek synagogue’s Rabbi Daniel Stein leads a seder on Zoom along with song leader Ben Kramarz. 6-8 p.m. Free. tinyurl.com/shalom-seder

**LIBERATION SEDER**—Rabbi Michael Lerner of Beyt Tikvun in Berkeley hosts a second-night community seder on Zoom. 6 p.m. $18 requested. Registration required. tinyurl.com/tikkun-seder

**FRIDAY | April 10**

**SHOMREI TORAH STREAMING SEDER**—Santa Rosa synagogue is taking its freedom-, justice- and equality-centered seder online on StreamSpot. Non-members welcome. 6:15-9 p.m. Free with registration. tinyurl.com/stseder-online

**SATURDAY | April 11**

**SECULAR SEDER**—Tri-Valley Cultural Jews in the East Bay leads a seder on Zoom, followed by your own family’s dinner at home. Readings in English with songs in Hebrew and English. Seder-plate shopping list to be provided. Open to all. 5-6 p.m. Free with reservation; limited to first 100 signups. tinyurl.com/tvcseder-online

Seder-hosting workshops

**MONDAY | April 6**

**“GETTING A HEAD START ON PASSOVER”**—Rabbi Lawrence Kushner of Emanu-El in S.F. leads a session via Zoom. Includes strategies, text exploration and more. 1-2 p.m. Free with registration. emanuelsf.org/event/24840

**WEDNESDAY | April 8**

**PETALUMA CHABAD SEDER WARMUP**—Join the Chabad of Petaluma family to set up your seders together, and talk about the Passover story and seder traditions. The actual seder will be on your own at nightfall. 6 p.m. Free with registration. tinyurl.com/vt-chabpet
PASSOVER GREETINGS

Should we be shopping for Passover or the pandemic?

RENÉE REIZMAN | JTA

Like most people preparing for coronavirus self-isolation, I first took stock of my pantry staples. I owned one can of beans that had expired in 2018.

When I arrived at the swamped grocery store, lines were snaking from the register back to the dairy aisle, and shelves had been cleared of paper towels and boxed spaghetti. I stocked up on beans and rice, peanut butter, and macaroni and cheese.

I called my mom, who lives near Chicago, to check in on her preparations, expecting her to brag about all her secret deals and insider tips at Costco, a store that she loves. I was startled to learn that she hadn’t made a trip to Costco. She told me that it was too close to Passover and that she was in the process of purging hametz, and didn’t want to bring any more into her home.

Passover does not begin until April 8. Before speaking to my mom, I hadn’t given any thought to Passover cleaning or how filling a cupboard with pasta could be a problem for some Jews. But my mother, who is lenient about keeping kosher in her daily life, goes all out for Passover — and the logistics of pandemic preparation clashed with her customs. As she follows the Ashkenazi tradition, she doesn’t just rid her home of leavening agents, but also packs away all kitniyot (legumes, grains and seeds). For Passover, that means no rice, corn, beans, seeds or any of their byproducts.

During my childhood, the kitniyot rule was what made a kosher for Passover kitchen unbearable. I didn’t need to eat popcorn or chili, but the byproduct loophole meant that we couldn’t eat anything with corn syrup or soy lecithin in it, and one of the two are found almost universally in processed foods.

As we enter a time of potentially uncertain supply chains, I imagine my mother eating breakfast in May, her Cheerios replaced by a hametz-free variety, grimacing through every bite of bland cardboard passing for cereal.

The most commonly suggested foods in articles offering Covid-19 grocery shopping tips are pastas, beans, nut butters, rice and canned fish. All of these are hametz or kitniyot, except for the fish — and even then, you’d need to search carefully for a can with Passover certification.

It’s clear why these foods clash with Passover tradition. They’re the nonperishable products that line bomb shelters and are deployed with soldiers. They’re the foods that cater to uncertainty, indefinite timelines and broad palates. They ensure survival in bleak times.

Passover asks us to replicate the dire conditions we escaped, not just during slavery but on the walk to freedom. It’s not just about re-creating the Exodus, but to remember that survival was a miracle.

In the time of the coronavirus, survival is not guaranteed. As of this writing, more than 2,500 Americans have died from Covid-19, and the virus is still spreading.

Does it make sense to comply with the deprivations of Passover when we’re already living in a time when resources are precarious? Do we need to sacrifice our bodies for the sake of tradition?

It’s easy for me to ask bold questions like this. My Judaism is more culture than tradition, so my Passover preparation consists of making a batch of matzah ball soup out of nostalgic obligation. For Conservative Jews who find consumption of hametz and kitniyot unthinkable, the Rabbinical Assembly wrote an opinion allowing kitniyot for Passover back in 2016, making the struggle far more manageable for the 90% of American Jews who aren’t Orthodox. Still, many Jews, like my mother, continue to avoid kitniyot during Passover, even if it’s the only time of year that they do.

More concerning than the pantry is what coronavirus will do to the seder. As more cities lock down for the next month, the government is strongly urging people to cancel their family gatherings. So are rabbis of all denominations who are telling their congregants that Passover should be celebrated at home this year.

Despite our different levels of observance, I know my mom wouldn’t be opposed to pointing a webcam toward a seder plate. Though the pandemic may alter Passover tradition, we’ll still find a way to feast.
Staying connected will show us a way out of these woods

EDITORIAL

Despite some hopeful signs that, at least in California, our compliance with social distancing guidelines is helping to flatten the coronavirus infection-rate curve, clearly we are in for many more weeks of hunkering down.

That means continuing to shelter in place, which will only increase the economic suffering.

Yet even in the face of unimaginable disruption and so many aspects of normal Jewish life grinding to a halt, our Bay Area Jewish community is rallying to support one another. As detailed in our extensive coronavirus coverage in these pages and online, mobilization has been swift and sure.

For example, the S.F.-based Jewish Community Federation is raising millions of dollars to provide assistance to vulnerable populations, including seniors and furloughed workers. The Federation also pumped more than $1 million into the coffers of Hebrew Free Loan, which had been inundated with loan requests exceeding funds on hand.

At Jewish Family and Children’s Services in S.F. and Jewish Family & Community Services East Bay, social workers are in battlefield mode, fanning out to aid everyone from special-needs kids to homebound seniors at grave risk of contracting the virus. For clients in need of therapy, Skype and Zoom have allowed JFCS therapists to stay in touch, helping clients navigate their terrors as normal life has been upended.

Like health care workers across the country, these professionals are heroes, and our gratitude is endless.

Innovative solutions have been popping up all over the community. Synagogues, Jewish day schools and other educational institutions have quickly shifted to online distance learning and livestreaming services, so that even as we shelter in place, Jewish life continues to thrive.

Then, there are the volunteers. Countless ordinary folks in the Jewish community have answered the call to volunteer.

Countless ordinary folks in the Jewish community have answered the call to volunteer.

Shoutout to Fed, Janet Harris

I am the director of a small Jewish preschool in Marin County (Gan Preschool). I am writing today to say thank you to the Jewish Community Federation (“Federations, JFCS, Hebrew Free Loan announce coronavirus emergency funds,” March 18). The Federation supports Jewish preschools in so many ways. The financial help the Federation extends to preschools is so appreciated and the value is understood clearly.

I want to say thank you for something equally as valuable, but less quantifiable. That something is actually a someone.

Thank you Federation, for employing a knowledgeable, courageous, clear thinker to lead this program. Janet Harris, director of the Early Childhood and Family Engagement Initiative, is someone who over the years has advised, directed and encouraged many, many directors (including me) to expand our vision, support each other and create a place for everyone in the Jewish community.

During this current crisis, I am super thankful for Janet’s reassuring, competent leadership. She is holding all of us, in this newly fragile Jewish early childhood world, in a tight, reassuring embrace.

At this difficult time, when I have to be a strong leader for my community and families, it is vital as a community leader to have a strong, competent pillar that I, and all early childhood leaders, can turn to for encouragement, support and advice.

Janet and Denise Moyes-Schnur, associate director at the Early Childhood and Family Engagement Initiative, deserve a standing ovation!

GITTEL GOODMAN | SAN RAFAEL
Why that night was different from all other nights

LUDA SHUSTER | GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

It was early April 1979 and the week before Passover, although we didn’t realize it at the time. We grew up completely secular in the Soviet Union.

Nobody in our Moscow apartment slept that night, except for 3-year-old Sasha. Our plane was leaving early in the morning, and that was to be the end of our Soviet life. Four of us were leaving: my former husband Volodya (Valo), my mother-in-law, Sasha and me.

We spent the previous few months slowly shedding our past. Immediately after telling my boss about emigration, I was skillfully maneuvered out of my job. The woman I was replacing on maternity leave unexpectedly came back, and I was conveniently terminated, without the unpleasant emigration incident reported up the management chain.

Valo’s associate manager showed up at our apartment one night and begged Valo to resign, to save the boss from a reprimand or termination, and of course, he did. Valo loved his boss. Our Russian life was ticking away. Dozens of small tasks — having to do with giving up our room in a communal apartment, obtaining the last pieces of paperwork, selling our things and packing — were demanding our energy and attention. Part of me was wild with excitement about the future ahead. Another part was devastated by the upcoming parting with my family, possibly forever.

A few days before our departure, my sister and brother-in-law from Gomel, Belarus, along with my husband’s uncle and his wife from Leningrad, came to see us off. There were eight of us in the room that last night in Moscow. At early dawn, we walked out of our apartment one last time and climbed into two taxis.

As we said our last goodbyes at the airport and went through the gauntlet of customs officers, I was crying and so was my sister behind the barrier.

In 1979 this wasn’t an uncommon scene: Jewish emigration from the USSR started in 1971 and was gathering speed. A stranger approached my crying sister and said, “You should be rejoicing, not crying. Be happy for them!”

Our route to the United States included a three-week stop in Rome to complete paperwork. The city astounded us with its bright April sky, trashed, noisy streets and the omnipresent sounds of bells celebrating Easter. Pictures of the recently elected John Paul II were everywhere.

Things did not feel real. Our senses were overloaded by the loud foreign speech, unusual smells and things working differently. Sasha became a favorite with the waiters in our boarding house. They would call her “Bella, Bella,” and she would crawl under the table in embarrassment.

The Pan Am flight to San Francisco was long, with many other Russian émigrés on board. We probably were not a well-behaved crowd, what with loud conversations and casual restroom hygiene. Valo overheard a flight attendant telling a colleague she “was sick and tired,” one of the few English idioms we knew.

When the white roofs of the San Francisco suburbs became visible through the windows of the airplane, we were dismayed. The mysterious San Francisco of our childhood books looked confusingly provincial.

Slowly we walked out of the plane, not quite believing the journey was ending. As we stepped on the escalator down below we could see my sister-in-law and her husband. Our American life was awaiting us.

Oversight on temple gift shops

We are sorely disappointed that our fully stocked Judaica shop was not mentioned in your recent article (“With Passover approaching, temple gift shops pick up where now-closed Judaica stores left off,” March 26). Our volunteers have been serving the South Bay and Santa Cruz area for over 30 years, under the roof of Temple Beth El in Aptos.

We carry ritual items and Israeli-made products similar to those of the stores you cite. Our profits fund camperships and a host of worthwhile projects for congregants and the broader Jewish community.

Our staff feels you would rather purchase a tallit and mother-in-law Anya Chernyak in Moscow in 1978, a year before their departure.
The fight against child marriage in India is my fight, too, thanks to AJWS

SHOSHANA GOULD | GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

Passover is my favorite holiday. When I was a child, my mom worked hard year after year to ensure that our seder was a joyous meal. She'd decorate our table with old family photos, scatter toy frogs and write parody lyrics to popular songs to make them Passover-themed. In college, my non-Jewish friends eagerly accepted their first invitation to a seder, and they weren't disappointed. They rejoiced at the endless cups of Manischewitz and searching for the afikomen around the dining hall. Passover is, of course, a celebration of freedom and resistance. And the older I've grown, the more central these themes have become.

My life in the Bay Area is filled with an abundance of freedoms, luxuries and privileges — none of which I take lightly. But on a recent visit to India, my privileges were thrown into stark relief.

I was there to meet American Jewish World Service's grantee-partners in the region. Inspired by the Jewish commitment to justice, AJWS works to realize human rights and end poverty in the developing world.

In India, many of these grantee-partners work tirelessly to fight against the root causes of early and child marriage — a form of gender-based inequality that continues to hold women and girls back from the opportunities and freedoms they deserve.

Each year, roughly 15 million girls worldwide are married before they reach adulthood, most often without their consent. Early and child marriage deprives girls of the freedom to make informed and independent choices about their consent. Early and child marriage deprives girls of the freedom to make informed and independent choices about their consent. Early and child marriage deprives girls of the freedom to make informed and independent choices about their consent. Early and child marriage deprives girls of the freedom to make informed and independent choices about their consent. Early and child marriage deprives girls of the freedom to make informed and independent choices about their consent.

During our final grantee-partner visit, I sat on the floor of a community meeting space, an hour away from Kolkata, surrounded by girls between the ages of 9 and 16.

Some of the women and children in India who benefit from AJWS programs and services.

This specific organization — due to security considerations in India, this article does not include the names of the organizations — funds adolescent girls' collectives. These collectives empower young women in rural communities by providing much-needed safe spaces for girls to freely express themselves, build strong relationships and become changemakers in their own communities.

As we sat together, the girls' initial nervous giggles transformed into confident voices as they shared, one by one, what they want to be when they grow up. These girls took the invitations to dream of the future quite seriously — and with good reasons.

That morning, they had changed the course of someone's life. Together they had marched to a grandmother's home in their community and convinced her to cancel the wedding of her 13-year-old granddaughter. These girls stood up in strength, resistance and bravery to ensure their friend's right to determine her own future.

Many of their desired jobs reflected their desire to grow into their power. They said they want to become police officers, commanders in the army. They want to lead.

Eventually, the girls began asking me direct questions: "Where are you from?" "How old are you?" "What is California like?" "Who do you live with?"

When I shared that I live in an apartment by myself, there was complete silence. The idea that a woman in her late 20s was unmarried and living by herself was just as foreign to them as it would be for me to imagine being forced to marry at 14.

I explained that I am extremely lucky and, due to a college education and a good job, I can financially support myself. I invite my friends over whenever I want, and I come and go as I please (an unfamiliar concept to many young women around the world who face restricted mobility). I stressed the level of empowerment I feel in knowing that everything in my home truly belongs to me.

Despite feeling that my experience was intangible to these girls — it’s quite possible they had never met someone close to their age who lived a life of such freedom — I later learned that I was actually able to offer them a glimmer of hope. That it is possible for women around the world to be autonomous, to live fulfilling, independent lives.

As I celebrate Passover this year and honor my ancestors' struggle for freedom, I will keep these young women front and center. I will continue to seek opportunities to lift up the voices of marginalized people today — to share their stories and honor their pursuit of justice.

I hope we all continue to recognize our own freedoms and our abilities to make a difference. This year, may we all commit to building a better, stronger, more just world.

Dayenu. ■

In distancing ourselves, we’re finding connection

RABBI IDIT SOLOMON | GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

Words influence how we interpret the world. The words “social distancing” are not an accurate description of what we need to be doing. And I am not doing it.

I am physically distancing and socially leaning in. Hard.

I have plenty of experience social distancing, and so do many others who have dealt with infertility and family-building challenges. It was a mix of choice and, at times, necessity.

Do I attend the baby naming or the party full of kids that will make me sad? Can I skip some time with my family at the holidays so I don’t have to deal with them asking about having children? I just had another hormone surge, or bad test result, or failed cycle, or pregnancy loss, and I don’t think I can handle being social. How do I answer if someone asks me if I want a drink, and I’m not drinking because I’m trying to get pregnant? I might lose it if one more person asks me when I’m going to have kids. I’m just not going to be social right now.

That is social distancing.

Staying at home because we are trying to protect ourselves and the vulnerable in our community and our health care system by slowing down the spread of a virus requires physical distancing.

Our entire society is desperately trying to be social while doing that. I have been blessed to have three children through the course of my fertility struggles. Between them, we have an average of seven online kid gatherings per day. We talk to our neighbors’ kids through the fence. I’ve had two online girls’ nights.

Online meetings are continuing as usual at work. Our neighbors join us for “happy hour” standing in our driveways, physically separated, with whiskey, wine, tea or hot cocoa. Already they’ve been saying this ought to be a tradition. Online trivia nights on Sundays also

Rabbi Idit Solomon is the founder and CEO of Hasidah, a Jewish fertility nonprofit based in Berkeley. Visit Hasidah.org for information.
Virtual Judaism is our reality, so let’s make it work

RABBI ARI CARTUN | GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

Last Friday night, my wife and I celebrated a Shabbat dinner with our daughters and son-in-law … with proper social distancing.

We live in Palo Alto. Our twins live together in San Francisco. Our eldest lives in Los Angeles. Our middle daughter and her husband live in San Diego. We all lit candles together, sang Kiddush together, and ate and chatted together. We used Google Meet to do it, but we also could have used Skype, Zoom, FaceTime or any of the other video conferencing platforms out there.

We did this because of the plague besetting us all now, the Covid-19 virus, that has us all hunkering down at home across the whole state of California.

We have lived in these four places for some time now, and it never crossed our minds to have a virtual Shabbat dinner together until this plague and its restrictions quarantined us all.

And after I finish writing this, I will be sharing a Manhattan together (virtually) with my brother who lives in North Carolina.

All this because the plague has caused us to be shut-ins.

Now I teach virtual classes, meet with study partners and study groups virtually, and will soon (G-d willing!) be holding a virtual seder. As Exodus 12:22 warned the Israelites in Egypt, “Don’t go out the door of your house tonight!” And so rabbinical study groups of all denominations are warning us to not hold group seders or travel to attend.

Not that I think this dark death is in any way a good thing. It’s not. But it may well have beneficial effects on all of society.

The irony is that though we are all practicing “social distancing,” many of us are becoming closer to those we love because we know why we need to reach out.

I spent all of Sunday calling family and friends across the country, and emailing my friends in Israel and Europe. In fact, as many have remarked, we should not practice social distancing, but physical distancing and social nearing!

Because of our Talmud group going virtual, we were able to include members who are currently out of town, and even out of the country. We could have included them this way before we went totally virtual, but we hadn’t ever seriously considered it before.

As a member of the Reconstructionist, Reform and Conservative rabbinical associations, I read the emails and group chats of my colleagues as we all grapple with the effects of this Covid-19 plague.

The more traditional of us have had to decide whether or not to stream services and Torah study on Shabbat and Passover. The others have no qualms about the permissibility of using electronic assistance on holy time. But we all share the problem of lousy feedback on all of these platforms.

For example, as our family lit the Shabbat candles and sang the blessing in “unison,” it sounded like a yeshiva from hell, as everyone’s microphones lagged about half of a second from each other.

The same thing happened on Shabbat morning when we all read the blessings before I taught a congregational Torah study.

Reading or singing, that damnable lag time (due to differing connection speeds and processing power) makes group participation difficult. And so it goes. We are all learning how to do this together.

Some churches, I hear, are even thinking of bringing back drive-in services, where the service is broadcast over short-distance FM radio while folks sit in their cars in the parking lot, just to feel the spirit of a congregation in person.

What will be the ultimate changes to our ritual and social future based on our experiences in this plague? It is too soon to tell.

But for sure it will have impacts far beyond our imagination.

In any case, while you distance your body from those of other people, remember to reach out, by phone or conferencing program, to the ones you care about.

And may we all get through this alive.

As Deuteronomy 4:9 says, “Just be very careful and guard your life well!”

Our spiritual lives are based on connections. We experience everything and everyone through our relationship with them.

Now is the time to focus on those relationships, lean in to them, hold them as tightly as possible, keep them strong, even if there is physical isolation.

This is a beautiful concept for adults to appreciate — and kids, too.

My children have a book about the invisible lines of connection we all have to people even when we don’t see them. It’s called love. As adults, we know this love has many levels: social, emotional and spiritual. In these times of facing Covid-19, everyone of all ages can take stock of those connections, socially, emotionally and spiritually.

Take a moment alone or with others in your home and be still. Close your eyes and do a social connection inventory. Who do you care about? Who could you help with a call, an email, a food drop-off, a card, etc.?

Think of the ways that others have helped you. Recall a moment of holding hands or sitting side by side near someone and feel the presence in your body of those others in your life. Try to feel connected to the Life Force that surrounds you or whatever your idea of God may be. Then bring yourself back to where you are.

Maybe you can turn these connections into action. Either way, let the connections sustain you for a while.

Social distance can be a choice. Right now, our physical distance is not. So rather than making social distancing part of your physical distancing, lean in. Maintain or expand your connections socially (and beyond) as much as you can.

May they sustain you through the physical distancing.
Art & About

New ways to share and appreciate art bloom online

LAURA PAULL | CULTURE EDITOR

Once upon a time, there were breaks built into the week called Friday and Saturday night, and Sunday afternoon, and evenings during the workweek when citizens of the Greater Bay Area could get up and go out. And if we didn’t, we’d feel pangs of guilt. Our calendars were full. There were endless possibilities for the enjoyment of culture. And nearly all of those events involved mixing it up with people. That was before Covid-19.

Who knew that our leaders could actually compel everyone to stay at home? That the Bay Bridge and the Golden Gate Bridge and the twilight streets of San Francisco would empty like scenes from “The Day the Earth Stood Still”? That everything would be canceled? And that we would suddenly — literally — be left to our own devices?

Our internet devices, that is.

One of the more novel aspects of this exceptional time is how the arts have taken a giant step online.

They already had a presence, of course. Museums archive their exhibits on their websites; online streaming has emptied movie theaters; and you can watch your latest author-crush on stage in a livestream. It’s not just young people, either, those born with cellphones in their tiny fists. My father stopped going to classical music concerts when he realized he could watch them in comfort on YouTube — without anyone snoring the next seat over.

Several changes have taken place in the art world in the shockingly short time since we all began sheltering in place.

One relates to the consumption of culture, as arts organizations have shifted to online presentations of their assets and programs, rather than seeing the internet as a secondary repository. And the more time we all spend in home seclusion, the more we’ll crave and embrace the virtual equivalent of “getting out of the house.”

An excellent example is the Contemporary Jewish Museum, which had to close the doors on its terrific new multimedia show “Levi Strauss: A History of American Style,” months short of its end date. But now the CJM has stepped up to enable the public to take virtual tours of the entire exhibit. Can you stare, inches away, at the ragged pair of miner’s jeans dug up from under the snows of the Klondike, as you could in the actual exhibit? No, you cannot. But again — it’s what we’ve got.

At the Jewish Community Library, a March 29 poetry event held via Zoom drew 49 participants, including me. Note: in pre-coronavirus times I wouldn’t have driven across the Bay Bridge to attend on a Sunday afternoon. “We’re trying to offer opportunities for creating a sense of community while we’re all apart from one another,” said JCL director Howard Freedman. Upcoming virtual events are listed at www.jewishlearningworks.org/

Serendipitous timing: S.F. Jewish library launches ebook, audiobook program

Jews stuck inside these days now have something new to keep them occupied. The Jewish Community Library in San Francisco has just launched its ebook and audiobook collection, which will let library patrons download books at home.

It’s fortuitous timing, although coincidental.

“We were definitely not designing this with self-quarantine in mind,” said director Howard Freedman. He said the official launch date had been planned for April 1, but with the system up and running, JCL and Jewish LearningWorks staff are hoping people sheltering at home will use the resource.

The collection is a curated range of around 300 ebooks and audiobooks selected by staff, ranging from fiction to history to biography to religious topics. All of them can be checked out for free.

“The idea is to sort of mimic the larger collection at the Jewish Community Library,” Freedman said.

Anyone with borrowing privileges at the JCL can also borrow ebooks and audiobooks — a maximum of two at a time — through the Overdrive or Libby applications, which require either a computer, a tablet, an ebook reader like a Kindle or a smartphone (along with an internet connection, as needed).

There are detailed instructions on the JCL website on how to set up a device for borrowing. It’s also easy to apply for library privileges, which requires filling out a form.
Have your own private Jewish film festival online, at home

For baseball lovers, nothing could be sadder than their team being driven off the field at the very start of the season.

By a lousy virus, no less.

But on the day baseball season was supposed to start (had it not been suspended by a global pandemic), the San Francisco-based Jewish Film Institute aimed to lift some fans’ spirits with the launch of a mini online film festival around the theme of the greatest game.

“Take Me In to the Ball Game” is the name of the debut Cinegogue Sessions. Volume 1, which launched on March 26 with two feature-length films and one short. Future sessions will present packages around other themes, pointing audiences to films from past San Francisco Jewish Film Festivals.

“Right now we have at least 16 ideas for upcoming volumes,” said JFI program director Jay Rosenblatt, who is co-curating the series with programmer Joshua Moore.

“And we can easily add to that.”

The shorts will always be free; the feature-length films will either be free or available for a modest fee depending on the streaming service the filmmakers have chosen. That’s not an issue for JFI.

“In this way, we will support the artists who provide such meaningful work for us year after year,” said Rosenblatt.

Volume 1 includes two full-length documentaries, “The Jews and Baseball: An American Love Story” (2010) by Peter Miller, and “Havana Curveball” (2014) by San Francisco filmmakers Marcia Jarmel and Ken Schneider, about their son’s bar mitzvah year project to bring baseball equipment to Cuban kids. Both are free to view, as is the short film “The King of Jewish Baseball.” It also includes vintage newsreel footage of Sandy Koufax in his World Series games and “an amazing performance of the song ‘Take Me Out to the Ball Game’ by jazz singer Sophie Milman,” Rosenblatt said.

Each Thursday, JFI will present a new package. Allowing viewers time to watch and digest the films over the weekend, the following Tuesday JFI will host film discussions, recorded Q&As with the directors and behind-the-scenes footage on its blog, The Cinegogue. The Tuesday discussions, just like each released volume, will remain permanently on the Cinegogue Sessions blog, medium.com/@sfjewishfilm.

Volume 2’s theme is “Food, Glorious Food,” which launched April 2. It features “The Sturgeon Queens,” Julie Cohen’s 2013 paean to the family behind the New York deli Russ & Daughters, and “Famous Nathan,” the story behind the name associated with the kosher hot dog.

Launching April 9, Volume 3’s theme will be “Passover: Let My People Go.” It will feature the full-length documentary “Streit’s: Matzo and the American Dream” (2016) and the whimsical animated film from last summer’s festival, “Seder-Masochism.”

“Seder-Masochism” will be presented in a Passover film package starting April 9.

It’s a service people have asked for. “We’ve just heard enough calls from enough people,” he said.

But until now, it’s been too expensive.

The high cost is part of the nature of the ebook publishing industry.

“People don’t generally understand that [public] libraries [that offer ebooks] have to purchase each title individually,” he said.

The average cost of a title is $60.

Although ebooks and audiobooks are just digital files, publishers price them high and limit them so that only one can be used at a time. They also can’t be copied or shared.

But a coalition with the Sperber Community Library at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles made this project more cost-effective.

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The average cost of a title is $60.

Funding also came from the Milton and Sophie Meyer Fund and the Friends of the Jewish Community Library.

The JCL’s physical library in San Francisco’s Western Addition closed on March 16, joining other libraries in Bay Area cities that shuttered their doors to keep people from congregating and potentially spreading the coronavirus.

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The JCL’s physical library in San Francisco’s Western Addition closed on March 16,...
“Sweet are the songs of Israel,” we read in the Book of 2 Samuel in the Hebrew Bible. Granted, Samuel’s knowledge of Jewish music ended in about 1000 BCE, but we don’t call him a prophet for nothing.

To Samuel’s “sweet” characterization, Jewish music over the ages has gone on to add joy, sadness, incisive observation, a love of tradition and a compulsion to experiment.

The result — for our purposes — is an entertaining and sometimes enlightening way to pass the time as we shelter in place through Passover (April 8-16), and possibly through Shavuot (May 28) … and then who knows how long?

I recently jumped into the YouTube rabbit hole to identify pleasing, historically interesting and little-heard Jewish music for your listening pleasure. What follows is a list of concerts and TV appearances well worth checking out.

Ruth Rubin “Rainbow Quest,” mid-1960s
tinyurl.com/muchin-jlist4

Ruth Rubin, a collector and performer of Yiddish folk songs, was a guest on a folk music TV series hosted by Pete Seeger in 1965-66. Seeger begins the Yiddish portion of this episode at the 10:43 mark with “Zhankoye,” a song about a Jewish collective farm during the Stalin era. Rubin appears at 13:30. The highlight is the duo’s languid collaboration on the Russian Jewish folk love song “Tumbalalaika.”

A-WA NPR Tiny Desk Concert, 2019
tinyurl.com/muchin-jlist1

Israeli sisters Tair, Liron and Tagel Haim made their splash five years ago by singing updated, traditional Yemenite Jewish songs to reggae and dancehall rhythms. Now they’re writing their own songs about the Yemeni immigrant experience in Israel. This 15-minute set by A-WA is augmented by a tight four-piece band and subtitles.

Zion80 Ashkenaz Festival, 2014
tinyurl.com/muchin-jlist2

Jewish melodies meet Afrobeat in this ensemble of top-flight Jewish musicians performing four irresistibly danceable songs for 35 minutes.

Yiddish Glory Live in concert, 2016
tinyurl.com/muchin-jlist3

This truly glorious premiere concert (56 minutes) of the Grammy-nominated ensemble Yiddish Glory features long-lost Yiddish songs written by Jews from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe during World War II, and adapted by singer-musicologist Psoy Korolenko.

Flory Jagoda Ladino music concert, 2012
tinyurl.com/muchin-jlist5


Dave Tarris Trio Tribute concert, 1978
tinyurl.com/muchin-jlist6

Clarinetist Dave Tarras, who came to the U.S. in 1921 from Ukraine, was arguably the top American klezmer musician for most of the 20th century. Here he leads a power trio — with accordionist Samuel Beckerman and drummer Max Goldberg — through an hourlong set of classic wedding dances and Yiddish theater songs.

Jewish Culture Festival Cantors’ Concert, Krakow, Poland, 2012
tinyurl.com/muchin-jlist7

Moshe Fishel, Abraham Kirshenbaum and Elazar Vino-grad — young Israeli cantorial soloists — intone traditional Ashkenazi liturgical melodies in classic cantorial style, backed by the Bells Vocal Ensemble, at the 24th annual festival in Krakow.

Veretski Pass Old First Concert, S.F., 2016
tinyurl.com/muchin-jlist8

Klezmer aces Cookie Segelstein, Joshua Horowitiz and Stuart Brotman perform music from “Poyln: A Gilgul,” their 2015 album. I was in the audience when this was recorded, and I thought the concert was sublime.
‘Plot Against America’ is a dark reflection of these wild times

TV | ESTHER D. KUSTANOWITZ | CORRESPONDENT

It’s the eve of an election cycle. The nation is split. While Jews live a fairly comfortable existence, there’s an active undercurrent of simmering anti-Semitism and racism.

This could be our world of just a few weeks ago.

But it’s also the world of “The Plot Against America,” a six-episode series HBO based on Philip Roth’s 2004 book of the same name and created by David Simon (“The Wire”).

New episodes air Mondays at 9 p.m. on HBO, with frequent replays on HBO2 and HBO Latino, and also on-demand at HBO.com for subscribers.

The series begins in June of 1940, before America’s official involvement in World War II, dropping viewers into the Newark, New Jersey, home of Herman Levin (Morgan Spector) and his family: wife Bess and sons Sandy and Philip (a stand-in for the novel’s author).

In this fictional world, Franklin D. Roosevelt is the president, but a growing noninterventionist group is putting “America First.” At its head is the celebrity pilot Charles Lindbergh, who is running against FDR and sowing the seeds of suspicion that Jews have dual loyalty.

During the campaign, Herman says “America First” supporters have “always been here, but now it’s like they have permission.”

As with other media in the alternate-history genre — notably “The Man in the High Castle” and, to an extent, the more surreal “Hunters” — the presence of these characters can send viewers scurrying to Google to find out if a character really said or believed in real life what they do in the show, or to fill in other historical gaps in their knowledge.

The real Lindbergh, like this fictionalized version, completed the first solo transatlantic flight in 1921, and fingered FDR, the British and the Jews as the three main groups urging U.S. involvement in the war in Europe. Also appearing in the series are radio personality Walter Winchell (the son of Russian Jewish immigrants, he was the first syndicated gossip columnist) and Sen. Burton K. Wheeler, D-Mont., (the son of Russian Jewish immigrants, he was the first syndicated gossip columnist) and Sen. Burton K. Wheeler, D-Mont., (the son of Russian Jewish immigrants, he was the first syndicated gossip columnist) and Sen. Burton K. Wheeler, D-Mont., (the son of Russian Jewish immigrants, he was the first syndicated gossip columnist) and Sen. Burton K. Wheeler, D-Mont., (the son of Russian Jewish immigrants, he was the first syndicated gossip columnist)

With Levin at the story’s center, narrative tributaries extend in different directions.

A nephew and uncle fundamentally disagree about how to respond to the rising threat. The children struggle with their parents’ opinions about their hero, Lindbergh, and cope with the changing and uncertain world around them.

This is especially true for the youngest son, Philip (Azhy Robertson), whose wide, terrified eyes convey the instability he feels. Philip’s mom, Bess (Zoe Kazan), and his Aunt Evelyn (Winona Ryder) split over Evelyn’s involvement with Rabbi Bengelsdorf (John Turturro), a noninterventionist Southern rabbi who becomes Lindbergh’s Jewish adviser.

Bengelsdorf seems to have the best of intentions, assuring Lindbergh that “Jews are committed to the U.S. and hold no allegiances to other countries, where they were never welcome.” But others, including Philip’s parents, say Bengelsdorf is a sellout, and one character says Lindbergh “slipped a gold ring into [the rabbi’s] big Jew nose and now they can lead him anywhere.”

While the Levin family is not religious, they are culturally connected to Judaism.

While Bess ensures Shabbat dinner is on the table and that the family celebrates together, her sister Evelyn initially feels unworthy to date a rabbi because she “doesn’t know the Talmud from the mishnah.” (He gives her a copy of Maimonides’ “Guide for the Perplexed,” as if that will solve the problem.)

But when a politician hurls anti-Semitic and racist sentiment her way, Evelyn hurls a Yiddish curse (“gey kaeken affen yam”), even though she doesn’t know what it means.

There’s a lot in this series that echoes today’s news broadcasts — at least, before coronavirus hit.

While some of these elements appear in Roth’s original, the show’s creators may have intentionally woven in some recognizable contemporary details.

Complaints about police who are present but don’t stop the violence. The election’s scare tactics, protests and rallies. And the messaging of “every vote counts” even as it becomes clear that some votes won’t count. There’s also rising anti-Semitism and the xenophobic rhetoric that permeates the Lindbergh campaign and the idea of dual loyalty.

In “The Plot Against America,” the Levin family and neighbors gather on the lawn to talk politics: Has Roosevelt done enough to bring America out of the Depression? Is involvement in a war half a world away the best thing for the U.S.? Does being a celebrity qualify Lindbergh to be commander-in-chief?

Likewise, as we remain “safe at home” or in quarantine, we stew in our beliefs about how we got here and who is to blame, knowing instinctively that the world we emerge into will be socially and economically different from the one before this pandemic.

And we huddle around the warm glow of our screens hoping to find spellbinding stories that transport us into a different world.

While “The Plot Against America” expertly transports us back in time to an America we are glad never came to pass, it provides no escape from today’s worries about coronavirus and what comes after.

[Image: John Turturro as Lindbergh’s adviser, Rabbi Bengelsdorf.]

Bengelsdorf (John Turturro), a noninterventionist Southern rabbi who becomes Lindbergh’s Jewish adviser.

[Image: The real Lindbergh, like this fictionalized version, completed the first solo transatlantic flight in 1921, and fingered FDR, the British and the Jews as the three main groups urging U.S. involvement in the war in Europe.]

While “The Plot Against America” expertly transports us back in time to an America we are glad never came to pass, it provides no escape from today’s worries about coronavirus and what comes after.
Let’s transform uncertainty into a ‘great,’ meaningful Shabbat

**TORAH**

**Shabbat HaGadol**

**Tzav**

Leviticus 6:1-8:36

The Shabbat before Passover is called Shabbat HaGadol, or the Great Shabbat when translated literally. There are references to this title for Shabbat dating back as far as the early Middle Ages in France.

But what makes this Shabbat so great compared to every other Shabbat we celebrate?

The most common understanding is that it was on this day that the Hebrews were instructed to take a sheep or goat and tie it to their bed posts for examination until Nisan 14 — at which point they would be required to slaughter the animal and use the blood as a sign on the doorposts so that they would be spared from the plague of the firstborn. The animal would then be consumed on the night of Nisan 15 and be eaten with matzah and bitter herbs. The Children of Israel would experience their very first Passover seder while still in Egypt, awaiting the great deliverance from slavery the very next day.

It seems that the very taking of the sheep or goat is what has earned the day the name Shabbat HaGadol. It still beg the question of what makes that so very great.

The Midrash that Tosafot quotes relates the following story:

*We therefore call that Shabbat Shabbat HaGadol because a great miracle was done as it says in the Midrash (Shemot Raba, Parshat Bo), "When they (the Hebrews) took their paschal lambs on that Shabbat, the firstborn of the nations gathered on Israel and asked them why there were doing that. Thus did they say to them, "It is a pascal offering to God who will kill the firstborn of Egypt." They went to their fathers and to Pharaoh to beseech him to send out the Hebrews but he refused to send them. The firstborn waged war and killed many of them. That is why the verse reads, "to smite Egypt with their firstborn." (Psalms 136)*

According to the Midrash, the very taking of the sheep or goat was the impetus that resulted in a great miracle for the Israelites.

In ancient Egypt, there were many idols that were served. Sheep were also deified, which made the insult incredibly great to the Egyptians. Not only were the Israelites preparing themselves to leave their host country and hundreds of years of slavery, but they were going to take the idols of Egypt and slaughter them as the kingdom of Egypt was being brought to its knees.

We commemorate the process as much as the final deliverance because we recognize that breaking the idols of Egypt was an important step in creating a new sense of identity for the Jewish people.

We are currently living in a completely upside down world. There is absolutely no one who is not affected by the coronavirus pandemic, and no one in California unaffected by the shelter-in-place order.

Just about everyone’s daily routine has been disrupted, and we are all facing a level of uncertainty that probably has never been experienced in the lifetime of most community members. All of the institutions that gave us a sense of security are either closed or limited. Schools, synagogues and even playgrounds are off-limits and we are forced to distance ourselves from the people that we love.

All of this is forcing us to stay inside and find ways to keep ourselves feeling productive and safe. Could it be that we are all heading into a Shabbat HaGadol—a great Shabbat experience where we take the idols of today and examine them in order to create an offering to God that will signify some kind of great deliverance?

When the Hebrews were told to take a sheep into their homes, they were also faced with great uncertainty. They had seen the power of God, but they were shown exactly how it would work out for them. Had they seen the power of God, but they were shown exactly how it would work out for them.

The Midrash states:

*Their response was to follow the instructions and not try to figure things out on their own. They trusted in God that He was going to do something great.*

We do not know what the immediate future holds, but we can take advantage of the time that we have to reassess our priorities and our values. We can take the technology that has often isolated us in a world of self-indulgent entertainment and redirect it to connect with ideas and people that can help us grow spiritually.

The world is not the same today as it was a few weeks ago. Perhaps we can take advantage of that and create a world that is infused with more meaning.

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**CELEBRITY JEWS**

**Cohen in quarantine**

Talk show host Andy Cohen, who has tested positive for coronavirus, said he has had his ups and downs. “Yesterday was horrible,” he said on March 25, “but … I have these moments every day when I’m like, ‘Oh, wait, I think I feel totally better’, and then, like, 10 minutes later, I’m like, ‘Ugh.’” The 51-year-old host of Bravo’s “Watch What Happens Live with Andy Cohen” said the hardest part is being separated from his young son.

**Home videos ... for better and worse**

A goodwill gesture by Gal Gadot has landed with a thud. The Israeli actress and star of the 2017 blockbuster “Wonder Woman” gathered celebrity friends, including Natalie Portman, Zoe Kravitz and Sarah Silverman, to sing John Lennon’s “Imagine” online together. In a scathing article, the New York Times summed it up as an “empty and profoundly awkward gesture.”

On the other hand, people love a video tweeted by Itzhak Perlman in which the 74-year-old worldwide star acts like everyone’s favorite granddad.

“Just felt like maybe I should share with you some pleasant stories, amusing ones,” the violin virtuoso said, before telling an anecdote about Jascha Heifetz’s debut at Carnegie Hall in 1917 and finishing with a masterful flourish on the violin.

Another video has come from Mel Brooks (inside a house) and son Max Brooks (outside, on the other side of window). “If I get the coronavirus,” explains the younger Brooks, “I’ll probably be OK, but if I give it to him, he could give it to Carl Reiner, who could give it to Dick Van Dyke, and before I know it, I’ve wiped out a whole generation of comedic legends.”

Another video is from Josh Gad (voice of Olaf in Disney’s “Frozen” movies, is reading stories for kids on Twitter in order to give parents stuck at home with families under shelter-in-place orders a little break. “I’ll try to provide at least 10 minutes of day care to you and your families a night while we’re going through this unprecedented global event,” said Gad, the father of two.

**Elsewhere on Twitter ...**

What happens when two Israeli journalists start fighting on Twitter over the best Lin-Manuel Miranda soundtrack? The man himself comes in to break it up — in Hebrew, no less. “Moana” … “In the Heights” … Which is the composer’s best?

To end the conversation, Miranda, 40, sent a joking tweet: “Hey, hey, what’s going on here?” he wrote in Hebrew. While not a Jew himself, Miranda has a history with Hebrew as a member of the Mazeltones, an a cappella group at Wesleyan University.

**Read the book, watch the show**

Something to watch if you’re stuck at home is Netflix’s “Unorthodox,” a story inspired by the book of the same name by Deborah Feldman. Starring Shira Haas, the daughter on the series “Stishel,” it’s the story of a young girl who cannot find peace in her Satmar community in Brooklyn and flees to Berlin.

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This week’s column is by J. staff writer Maya Mirsky.
Month of Nisan: First the 10 Plagues, then the redemption

ASTROLOJEW

LORELAI KUDE

NISAN
MARCH 26-APRIL 24

Why is this Nisan different from all others that have gone before it? It's the first time since the original Nisan, during which the Israelites experienced the 10 Plagues from the safety of their dwellings, that we've huddled indoors, either alone or with our families, praying that the Angel of Death will pass over us. The celestial cycles have spoken: the Saturn-Pluto conjunction of Jan. 12 kicked off these traumatic times. April 4 will see the first of 2020's three Jupiter-Pluto conjunctions, triggering larger and larger waves of powerful paranoia, doubt and fear. Government crackdowns on personal freedoms during times of great global pandemics may trigger rebellious reactions by those whose trust in our societal structures and institutions have already been eroded by the untrustworthy actions of those institutions. Nisan is the month of Passover, in which we remember and reenact the deliverance that seemed impossible by human standards. The full supermoon sailled off to find fresh sources of bounty to share with others. In Taurus (Shor) April 19 gives your imaginative ideas concrete form.

Cancer/Sartan

Recalibrate plans even as you chase against current conditions at the first quarter moon in Cancer April 1, squaring Sun in Aries (Taleh). The Jupiter (Tzedek)-Pluto conjunction in Capricorn (Gidi) April 4 supersedes control issues and power plays within partnerships of every kind. The full supermoon in Libra April 9 reveals which relationships are fertile and which are barren. Last quarter moon in Capricorn April 14 with the Sun's square to Pluto finalizes decisions you've made around the new reality. New Taurus (Shor) moon April 22 falls on Earth Day, planting hope for a regenerative, fecund future.

Leo/Aryeh

Your natural heroic instincts are triggered by our current collective trauma, especially around the full supermoon of Pesach April 9. Sun in Aries (Taleh) through April 18 gives your inner superhero momentum — but beware of burnout. Your mind-body connection is crucial now; the Jupiter (Tzedek)-Pluto conjunction April 4 and the Sun's square to Jupiter April 15 urgently beg you to protect your own well-being. Channel tribal ruler Shimon's outrage against situations rendering deep within your endless wellspring of self-renewal to flex those muscles. Frustration peaks when Mars in Aquarius (D'li) squares Uranus (Oron) in Taurus (Shor) on the full supermoon in Libra (Moznayim) April 7. Beat the blues by borrowing deep within your endless wellspring of self-renewal to recreate yourself. Nobody will emerge from these trying times as transformed as you when you put your mind to it.

Sagittarius/Keshet

Jupiter (Tzedek) is Sagittarius' ruling planet; the first of 2020's three Jupiter (Tzedek)-Pluto conjunctions in Capricorn (Gidi) April 4 affects your financial bottom line. This is a significant power boost if you can pivot and adapt to the new normal during these unstable times. Flexibility facilitates making major inroad toward your material goals. The full supermoon in Libra (Moznayim) April 7 reveals that often it's who you know rather than what you've accomplished that brings recognition and opportunity. Cultivating strategic relationships may have seemed less important than producing excellent work in the past; now you must recognize the value of both.

Capricorn/Gidi

Saturn (Shabtai) in the beginning degrees of Aquarius (D'li) this month brings a more universalist view while the Jupiter (Tzedek)-Pluto conjunction in Capricorn April 4 enlarges Capricorn's power to initiate creative problem-solving. The explosive booms of Jupiter and Pluto, which repeat in June and November, are the sounds of the barricades guarding the status quo crumbling and falling, while those guarding the old normal fight a losing battle against the inevitability of profound structural change. Tribal ruler Dan guarded Israel's borders guard your own just as fiercely. Don't find yourself on the wrong side of the fight; survival means we're all in this together.

Aquarius/D'li

The smell in the air during April is that of revolution, with classical ruler Saturn (Shabtai) and Mars (Mdaim) in Aquarius. Mars square modern planetary ruler Uranus (Oron) in Taurus (Shor) on the full supermoon in Libra (Moznayim) April 7 forces radical confrontation between your humanitarian ideals and your deepest fears. Sun square Saturn April 20 is your chance to model how to think globally while acting locally; those around you need your leadership right now. Set the highest example April 15-18, because many eyes are upon you. In the face of draconian measures, you'll insist that ideals, ethics and integrity still matter.

Pisces/Dagim

Mercury (Kochav) conjunct Neptune (Rahav) April 3 energizes your highest aspirations, empowering you to create offerings of your wisdom, gifts and talents to share with others though unusually creative means. The conjunction of classical ruler Jupiter (Tzedek) to Pluto in Capricorn (Gidi) April 4 enlarges the practical assistance you're able to offer your friends and community, near and far. You're one of the helpers others look to during troubled times. Full supermoon in Libra (Moznayim) on Erev Pesach inspires creative coupling. The conjunction of the moon to Neptune and the Sun's entrance into Taurus (Shor) April 19 gives you imaginative ideas concrete form.

A version of this column originally appeared at jpost.com and is reprinted with permission.
Carole A. Cohen, 81, of San Francisco, died March 17, 2020, at her home. A native of Chicago, she was born June 5, 1938, to Muriel and Harry Cohen and was raised in a large family. Her parents and her brother, David, predeceased her. She graduated from the University of Chicago with a degree in comparative literature and then received a JD from the University of Texas. She moved to San Francisco in 1962, worked in law, and taught at San Francisco State. Her 18.7-inch baby girl was born in San Francisco, weighing in at 6 lbs. 4 oz. and measuring 18.7 inches. Proud grandparents are Dr. Jeffrey Bourne and the late Mickey Naggar Bourne, a past leader at Jewish LearningWorks (previously the Bureau of Jewish Education), and Jana and the late Kenneth Kaplan. Mackenzie’s great-grandparents are the late Frankie and Avner Naggar, and the late Abigail and Saul Bourne, who were also active in the Bay Area Jewish community.

On November 18, 2019, our Mom went to be with her Sidney. Ruth was the most beloved wife of Sidney Cooper, beautiful and beloved Mother of Gary and Eileen Greenberg, Marcy Cooper, and Jeffrey (Rafia) Cooper. Daughter of Hannah and Isaac Krantz, Grandmother of Brandon (Jennifer), Jeremy, Jason (Marla) Greenberg, Alyssa and Rhianna Cooper, Great-Grandmother of Ethan and Alaina Greenberg, Grandma Ruth to Alexandra Smirnov. Sister of Leo, Harry, Mark, and Claire Krantz, Sister-in-law to Esther Jacobsen (Ralph), Shandy Crug (Manny), and Edie Wasserman (Jerry). Very specially beloved by her nephew and wife Alan and Mary Crug. Nieces Becky Jacobsen Kaufman, Joel Jacobson, and Laura Jacobsen Mroz, Bobby Crug (Diana), and many other nieces, nephews, & cousins.

Friend to Maddy, Val, Joan, and all her girls at Sonoma Retirement Community.

She was a lover of family, friends, books, documentaries, food, the San Francisco Giants and 49ers, of being right (always), and doing it her way (always). She was extremely stubborn to her very last day! Her attitude as well as her love for her Sidney “forever” will never be forgotten — quite a story!

Robert M. Raymer
January 1, 1922–March 23, 2020

Longtime San Francisco lawyer Robert Marcus Raymer of Palo Alto passed away on March 23, 2020. He was 98 years old.

A native of Chicago, born January 1, 1922 to Nathan Raymer and Gertrude Eidenberg Raymer; progressive primary school education in Winnetka, IL. Confirmed at North Shore Congregation Israel; graduated New Trier High School; college undergraduate, ex-1943, and MBA at University of Chicago and its Graduate School of Business; JD Harvard Law School, 1948, on the GI Bill. In World War II he volunteered for the Army Air Force 1942, served in the Pacific Ocean areas with the 721st Army Air Force in the Pacific Ocean areas with the 721st Army Air Force, returned to Palo Alto to practice law for many years.

She died the way she lived, laughing in the company of her family and friends to the newest, latest restaurants in San Francisco, especially sushi. She also loved the S.F. Ballet and Symphony, and Berkeley Rep.

Mostly, she loved her kids, Judi (Carl Speizer) and Andrew (Sylvia Magid); her grandkids, Emily and Toby; her sisters, Yvonne (Gary) and Marilyn (Bob, d. 2008), her nieces and nephews Renee (Lyoasha), Marc, Michelle (d. 2013), Crissy (Donald), Jeff (Kathryn), and Michael; her seven grand-nieces and nephews, and her big extended S.F. family. She died the way she lived, laughing in the company of her family and friends. She was cared for by the wonderful Dr. Kevin Saitowitz, whom she adored, and to whom we are all so grateful.

Her favorite charity was the San Francisco Food Bank, if you’d like to send a donation. Private services will be held, with a memorial to follow when we can have more than ten people in the room. We love you, mom. We’ll miss you always.
Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Africa. 
-Partook of and supported Theater, Music, and the Arts both in the City and on the Peninsula.
-At Stanford, established a professorship in Cardiovascular Medicine and funding for a chair in Cancer Research and Teaching.
-At the Jewish Community Federation, funded in perpetuity College Scholarships, and at Harvard Law, set up a permanent Book Fund.

In San Francisco, Bob Raymer was associated with the law firm Cooper, White and Cooper continuously from 1950 to 2016, where formerly he was chairman. In his time there in active practice, he represented the San Francisco Chronicle and other media, airlines and public utilities.

Actively involved in establishing the Mabelle McLeod Lewis Memorial Fund, Mr. Raymer served for many years as trustee of the Fund, making grants to support completion of doctoral dissertations in the humanities, principally at Stanford and UC Berkeley.

Predeceased by his parents and his sisters Miriam R. Bennett and Barbara R. Menaker.

Survived by his wife Shirley Stein Raymer of Palo Alto, a nephew John (Lee) Bennett of Westlake Village, and nieces Nancy Bennett Evans of Bellevue, Washington, and Patricia Bennett of Palo Alto and Jan (Tom) Brook of Oakland and their children and grandchildren.

Gifts in memory to Congregation Beth Am, Los Altos Hills, CA or a charity of your own choice.

**MANFRED (MANNY) WILDMANN**
April 16, 1930–March 24, 2020

Manfred (Manny) Wildmann, a longtime resident of Menlo Park, passed away from Supranuclear Palsy on March 24, 2020, a few weeks shy of his 90th birthday.

Manny, the youngest of four children, grew up in Philippsburg, Germany, where his grandfather was the head of the town’s small Jewish community. At age 10, Manny, along with the 20 other Jews of Philippsburg, was deported by the Germans to Camp de Gurs in southern France. Six months after arriving, his family was moved to a different camp, Rivesaltes. Manny and his two sisters were able to leave the camp and they survived the remainder of the war in France. His parents and older brother were deported to Poland and murdered at Auschwitz. In 2015, he returned to Philippsburg with 18 members of his family to be honored by the city leaders. Manny was the last remaining survivor of the Jewish community of Philippsburg.

After the war, Manny attended high school in Grenoble, France, then immigrated to the United States and settled in New York City with his two sisters. Manny graduated from CCNY in Mechanical Engineering, married, and moved to Los Angeles for a job in the aerospace industry. While working there, he earned a Master’s Degree in Engineering from UCLA. In 1962, he moved to Menlo Park where he worked at Ampex Corporation and eventually became Director of Research and Chief Scientist.

Manny thought it was important to educate the younger generation about the Holocaust, and he spoke about it whenever he was asked. In 2011, he was interviewed in the J. about his experience in the Holocaust. Currently, a video clip of him speaking about his deportation from Philippsburg plays at the Holocaust Museum in Washington.

Manny and Sylvia were active at Congregation Beth Jacob and supported Israel and the local Jewish community. Manny was an avid skier and also enjoyed traveling, reading, hiking, bicycling, swimming, bridge and crossword puzzles.

In retirement, he continued traveling the world, seeing family and friends, speaking and writing about the Holocaust and spoiling his grandchildren.

Manny is survived by Sylvia, his wife of 66 years, his three children Nadine, Hugo (Laura), and Vivane (Dan), eight grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. He will be remembered for his intellect, his positive view on life and his love of family.

Condolences may be sent to Sylvia Wildmann, 4075 El Camino Way #327, Palo Alto CA 94306.

Memorial gifts may be made in his memory to Jewish Family and Children’s Services for Holocaust Survivors, or Yad Eliezer, which helps the needy in Israel: yadleiezer.org.

**SHIRLEY PHILLIPS SICHEL**
Dec. 29, 1924–Feb. 16, 2020

Shirley Sichel passed away on Feb. 16, 2020 at the age of 95 in San Rafael, California. She was the wife of the late Warren Sichel.

Shirley was a native San Franciscan, a graduate of George Washington High School. She went on to receive a degree in dietetics from San Jose State College. In a career spanning more than 30 years, she worked in several hospitals, including Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles, the U.S. Veterans Hospital in Fresno, and the Permanente Medical Group in San Francisco, and as a private consulting dietitian at psychiatric hospitals and nursing homes.

A lifelong animal lover, Shirley supported research at the National Zoo in Washington, D.C., where she served on the Advisory Board, and at the School of Veterinary Medicine at University of California, Davis. She was also involved with the Marin Humane Society in Novato, California, and the Marine Mammal Center in Sausalito, California, where she served on the Board.

She is survived by her daughter, Elaine, and niece, Mariette (Fillman) Siczewicz.
Staying at home with two young boys and Mo as our savior

Two weeks ago — I believe this timeline is accurate, though time has now lost all meaning — when I pick my oldest son up from school, he was wearing a plastic orange firefighter’s hat and immediately wanted to tell me about his day.

That day, March 10, was the second grade’s annual “City Workers Day” at his elementary school in Brooklyn. Nate got to meet a firefighter, a judge, a librarian, a police officer and a police dog.

Now Nate’s sweet neighborhood elementary school — with its traditions and celebrations and nurturing teachers and crossing guards who know every child’s name — seems like a place that exists only in memory.

Today Nate saw his teachers and classmates through a Zoom video conference, and he raised his hand to ask a question: “How long are we going to be talking on Facetime like this?” he asked. And his teacher became misty, “I don’t know,” she said.

It’s been stunning how quickly our mental states have changed over the last weeks as the threat of Covid-19 has rapidly increased.

Never before have I lived through a time in which my understanding of the world and my belief about what was the right thing to do has shifted so radically in such short amounts of time.

On March 13, I brought Nate and our 4-year-old, Harvey, to the playground to play.

By March 14, such an action seemed unwise.

On Sunday morning, I figured our children would go to school on Monday. By the afternoon, my husband and I had decided we’d keep them home. By that night, school had been canceled anyway.

Since then, my two kids haven’t played in a playground or with their friends. I marked out a distance of 6 feet on our kitchen floor with tape to show them how far away they have to stay from those outside of our immediate family when we take them outside for exercise.

When I first faced down the prospect of even five weeks with my whole family homebound, I was overwhelmed.

Not only do I have to keep my kids occupied and nondestructive all day, every day, my home now serves as an office for me and my husband, a school for my children, and a diner for the many, many meals that we eat together every day. (Eating three meals a day together has been an unexpectedly nice part of this situation; the dishes, however, are crashing.)

During the first week that school was canceled, artists and musicians and children’s book authors flooded Facebook and Instagram offering free streaming art classes and book readings and music classes for the hundreds of thousands of children stuck at home. Emmy Award winner Debbie Allen holds weekly Instagram Live dance classes; the Cincinnati Zoo started a daily “Home Safari” show on Facebook Live.

The best one is “Lunch Doodles,” a daily video series hosted by Mo Willems, the author of the wildly popular “Elephant and Piggie” series, who is also the Kennedy Center’s education artist-in-residence.

For 20 minutes or so, Willems doodles, teaches kids to draw his famous characters, gives them creative challenges, shows them around his home studio in Massachusetts and answers questions that children have sent in. Most of all, he talks to the kids in a soothing voice, acknowledges that things have changed in their lives, but encourages them to experiment and draw on their inner creativity.

Every afternoon in my house, I spread out the art supplies on the table, turn on Mo and let my kids get swept away in art and his comforting presence. As far as I’m concerned, Mo Willems is this generation’s Mister Rogers, a balm for children and parents alike.

Willems is bringing us together as a nation.

My mom’s old ‘housewife’ phone book is precious to me

Many years back, I wanted to contact one of my cousins. I didn’t have her phone number, but I wasn’t worried, because I knew the information was in my late mother’s address book. But I couldn’t find it, and that was the end of that.

It’s been that way for more than a decade. I’d want to look up some random bit of information that could be found in my mother’s phone book, only to be thwarted by its absence. How had I misplaced such an important source of family history? How had I been so careless?

My children didn’t get what the big deal was. They couldn’t. Their information is all instantly accessible or disposable. But we of another generation remember phone books and daily planners. For decades we dutifully carried them around in our pockets and pocketbooks.

We of that other, older generation didn’t delete information. We held on to it. Names and addresses remained in our phone books — a permanent record of someone, someplace, some time in our lives.

Periodically I scanned my bookshelves and rooted through closets and storage bins, searching for that precious little volume, only to come up empty-handed.

Then, one day, while sorting through a trunk of baby clothes and toys of my now-adult children, I found it. Why I placed it there I could not recall, but I cannot describe the joy and relief I felt at the sight of it.

My mother’s telephone book has an apt title — “Very Important Data.” It is, in fact, a genealogist/sociologist/economist/sentimentalist’s Rosetta Stone, providing a detailed look at the day-to-day life of a (Jewish) American housewife in the ’50s, ’60s, and ’70s.

The book tells of retailers and businesses long gone — Abraham & Straus, the Fuller Brush salesman and the Oldsmobile dealership. It also tells of my family’s life in the cities I grew up across the U.S. — Las Vegas, New York City, Tucson, Stony Brook and Westbury.

For a genealogist, it is a gold mine, listing the names, so many names, of relatives long gone — through death or divorce. It is shocking to realize how few people listed in that book are alive today. It fills me with nostalgia and awe for all those who passed in my lifetime.

My mother’s phone book models something else that is long gone, a kind of relentless female domesticity that few women today are interested in or have the time for.

The sleek 5-by-5-inch book, a binder actually, provides multiple pages to track holiday cards (sent and received — by year!), insurance records, family automobiles, membership in clubs (auto, fraternal, book and record), subscriptions to magazines, and the years and all the U.S. government bonds you purchased.

It includes a handy “service index” to list the people who help keep your house and life running. Some of my favorites — chiropractor, fuel supplier and fruit store. Under “domestic help,” there’s room for your butler and employment agency. (My mother listed neither.)

Meticulous housewives of the era could detail clothing sizes for her and him, preferred cosmetics and their guy’s go-to shaving lotion.

Jumping to the present, my mother’s book continues to have value. I have turned to it time and time again to check a birthday or an anniversary.

After all these decades, the book shows its age. The pages and ink are faded. The cover and binding are held together with green tape.

Yet, for all the wear and tear, it’s thanks to this yellowed, still-smelling-of-cigarettes-and-perfume artifact that my mother comes so vividly to life for me today. I picture her at her desk, talking on the phone to one of the relatives, me playing on the floor beside her. It is a lovely memory.

I reflect on all this as I look at the yahrzeit candle marking the 19 years since my mother’s passing. I place her phone book beside the candle and simultaneously smile and tear up in happy/sad remembrance.