



# What I Learned from COVID-19

by Rabbi Sroy Levitansky

## **A pandemic is a terrible thing to waste.**

It's been a long couple of months. If you're like me, you never would've imagined the reality of the lives we've lived since the pandemic hit.

I remember thinking, What good will it do if they cancel school? The kids will be playing in the streets with their friends all day. It was simply impossible to imagine a reality where we would be staying in our homes for so long.

## **The Challenge**

Adapting and surviving has challenged us in incredible ways. It has challenged our Shalom Bayis, it has challenged our parenting skills, and it has challenged us in our relationship with Hashem.

Many people are just trying to get through the day. We're not used to having EVERYONE home ALL day. We're not used to having our entire schedule upended. We're just not used to this new reality.

There are so many challenges and so much pain. In my Shul, there are four new aveilim saying kaddish for their fathers. My dear Uncle Motty is no longer with us. My sister-in-law lost her brother. The pain is real, and the suffering is great.

Who can measure the financial impact of what we're experiencing? Businesses were forced to shut down overnight. Stores were fully stocked with tens (hundreds?) of thousands of dollars of merchandise, unable to sell anything. Numerous industries have been seriously challenged, and unemployment in our country may rival the Great Depression. Truly incredible, since a few months ago we had the best employment in half a century.

It seems so large, and the impact is literally worldwide. How does this relate to me specifically? When the world is turning over, some people may begin to feel as if they're just collateral damage.

## **The Issues**

As we face the macro perspective of Corona, we ponder many global issues: The pros and cons of reopening the country. Was China really negligent? How do we deal with millions of school children out of school? We all have many opinions.

In our community, many immediate issues are being debated: Which minyanim are permissible. The rise of anti-Semitism and aivah due to the virus. Differing opinions and a lack of cohesiveness amongst our leadership in their response.

All of these conversations, both on the macro and micro level, are missing one main ingredient. This ingredient can be the key to our ultimate success or failure during this time.

## **Our Response**

What sometimes gets forgotten in all of this is that we as yidden have one word to describe our Coronavirus experience. That word is Nisayon. Yes, this is just one more example of the mysterious ways of Hashem, and how He tests us. Although it may be a unique Nisayon that only happens every few centuries, it's still a nisayon. Make no mistake, this is not your regular run of the mill nisayon; for many of us this clearly feels much more significant.

A friend of mine remarked to me, "Hashem is really 'speaking' to us now."

I responded, "He's not speaking, He's shouting."

We must get the message.

So, what does it mean if it's a nisayon? We have principles that determine how we deal with a nisayon. When we view Coronavirus as a huge, life-changing event, when we get mired in the day-to-day struggles, and when we get overwhelmed by the pain and challenges, we can lose sight of the fact that this is a nisayon directly from Hashem. It is custom-made for each and every one of us.

What is a nisyaon? The Mesilas Yeshorim, in the first perek, teaches us that everything that happens to us in life is a nisayon. We don't control what happens to us, and now, due to our new reality, this principle has never been clearer. Our job in this world is to respond effectively to each and every nisayon. How we respond to a nisayon defines us.

Many people ask the Why? question. Why is this happening? Until we have Nevi'im and the Urim v'tumim back, we will struggle with understanding why. As yidden, we are generally not focused on the Why, but rather on the What. What am I supposed to do now? What can I learn from this? What have I learned from this?

As we've spent a couple of months in isolation and we watch the world contemplate the first baby steps of reopening, it behooves us to clarify to ourselves what have we learned from the Coronavirus. A nisayon is a terrible thing to waste. If we don't give this some thought, we are bound to waste it.

The following thoughts are just my own. They are not meant to be an exhaustive list, nor are they the only lessons that can be extracted. It is my fervent hope that you, my dear reader, will be inspired to make your own list of what you've learned and how you've grown from this most powerful nisayon.

## **1. Appreciating Life**

The story is told of a man who was released from the hospital after recovering from COVID-19. When he received the bill for his stay, he began to cry. He explained to those around him that he was not concerned about paying his bills, rather, he was overwhelmed by emotion. On the itemized bill there was a \$10,000 charge for the use of a respirator for three days. That means that he was paying \$3,333 per day just to breathe! "I never appreciated each and every breath! My entire life, I've taken my breathing for granted. How much do I owe Hashem for the gift of easy breathing for the past seventy years of my life?"

Did we ever think about the gift of each and every breath? The average person takes over 23,000 breathes a day and 8,400,000 million breaths a year. COVID-19 is a respiratory illness. It primarily attacks the respiratory system, hence the need for so many ventilators.

Do we appreciate each and every breath that we take? The answer to this question will define our perception of true wealth. What's the difference between a rich person and a poor person? Only one thing. Appreciation. A person who appreciates the gifts that he has is rich, that's what the Mishna in Avos teaches us.

During the Coronavirus, we all learned a basic lesson: a breath is a gift, and we are all much richer than we ever imagined.

Focus on this, and we'll truly be happy and rich people.

## **2. Living with Hashem**

When we heard the words "Coronavirus" or "COVID-19," how many of us were really concerned? Today, in 2020, there is an incredibly sophisticated medical system, complete with brilliant doctors and supercomputers that have AI (artificial intelligence), we thought. We can beat this.

Within a few weeks, we found out that everything we had relied upon was worthless. Our only antidote was to stay at home and shut down the entire world.

What happened to all of our sophisticated medical knowledge? What happened to the supercomputers with AI?

Yes, in theory, we know that in our feelings of control are an illusion. Too many times, we believe that we are actually in control. Hashem, with a small infinitesimal molecule, destroyed our illusion of control. We have now seen tangible evidence that Hashem is in control. It's not a hashkofo we have chosen; it's the reality of life.

In challenging times, Hashem is closer to us. In challenging times, when all our illusions have been stripped away, we are closer to Hashem.

This is Step One in the process of "Living with Hashem": we have internalized that He is the Boss.

COVID-19 has also allowed us to take it to the next level. Not only did Hashem strip away any illusions we may have had, He gave us another gift as well. He took us away from all of our "busy-ness." We can't visit friends or family. We can't go out to shop or to the mall as an

experience. We can't go to work. We can't do anything. All social functions simply ground to a halt. Anything that could serve as a distraction has been eliminated. What an incredible gift: Hashem loves us and wants a real relationship with us.

The silver lining in the COVID-19 era is that we've truly learned that He is control Hashem has spoken and can't wait for us to continue the conversation.

### **3. Who are YOU?**

We live in an incredible time, where Torah learning and leading a Torah lifestyle has become commonplace. The Torah world has grown exponentially, and it feels as if our lives follow an almost predictable pattern.

Herein lies our opportunity. This matzav has given the individual, the yochid, a unique opportunity. The Shuls closed, our children are home from school, we can't go to work, and we are essentially alone. When all of the externals fail us, we are handed an opportunity to clarify for ourselves, our families, and our communities, that our lives are defined by Torah and mitzvos.

What does davening mean to me? How can I make it meaningful? What am I going to do to ensure that I daven like a mensch?

We begin to realize: My success or failure during davening is entirely up to me!

When all the noise stops, each of us is alone with our real self. This is the greatest opportunity we will ever have to really get to know ourselves and explore what makes us tick.

R' Wolbe zt"l once shared the following story. He was close to a bachur and told him that there is someone this bochur should meet. He explained that this person was a great person and that it would be very beneficial to meet him. The bachur asked him, "Who is this person?" R' Wolbe responded, "You. Go take a walk with yourself for an hour; you'll learn a lot, and it will be worth your while."

The noise has stopped; we have spent so much time alone, and there is no question that each and every one of us has learned so much about our own self. As we go back to regular life, we must make sure we don't get lost.

Self-knowledge is an incredible gift.

#### **4. Family First**

This brings us to family

It was fascinating. We had just finished the first days of Pesach and we were checking in with friends and family. We all knew that this Pesach was going to be different. Really different. How were the young couples going to make it? How were the grandparents, who were used to hosting dozens of einiklach, going to deal with a lonely seder? How were those who generally go away to a Hotel for Pesach, and were now at home for the first time in many years, going to cope?

We were all alone, with only our closest family. And yet, as we checked in with friends and family alike, each and every one told us that they had a unique and amazing Pesach.

What's the purpose of Hashem giving us family? Only to transmit the mesorah. As Torah yidden, we have access to a most extraordinary chinuch system that teaches, inspires, and engages our children. Without this we'd be lost.

But there is still something missing. If Hashem gave me this family, then He gave it to me for a reason. There are things that only I can add to my family. What is it that is unique about me? What are my values? What is really meaningful to me?

In our hectic and crazy-busy lives, it's a given that we don't spend enough time with our families. Now, as we've spent months at home, we've opened our eyes to what's really important to us, and we've begun to live our lives based on these principles.

Our families notice. Now more than ever. Our families will "do as I do and not as I preach." Never in recent history has there been a time like

the present, in which our families can so clearly see everything that we do, and everything that we stand for.

On a more basic level, we've all spent more time with our families. We've played games and taken walks. We've learned about one another and hopefully built a stronger keshet.

As we go back to our old lives, we dare not let this get lost.

When everything shuts down and when the world goes silent, only one thing matters. Our families. What an incredible lesson.

## **5. The Klal and I**

We don't live in a vacuum; rather, we live as part of a community. It's one of the greatest benefits of Torah life. The Balei Mussar teach us the importance of connecting oneself to the Klal, and the dangers of making oneself stand out.

I called my great-uncle, who is in his upper 90s, before Pesach to hear how he was doing. He shared with me that he fell a few months ago, and Hatzolah had transported him to the hospital. As he was discussing the ordeal, he expressed his concern that the Hatzolah members were endangering themselves every time they answered a call. Therefore, he decided to be even more careful every step he takes, lest he fall and cause a Hatzolah member to be exposed to COVID-19 because of him. My dear uncle may not have learned in Yeshiva, but he clearly understands that he's part of a Klal, and cares for his fellow Yid.

When the Klal makes a decision; when our Rabbonim and Poskim decide something; when general medical consensus is united; it's clearly a time that the community must follow suit.

Some people don't. The excuses are numerous. I already got it. We keep social distancing. They didn't mean me. Someone told me that Rov Ploni doesn't hold of the psak. But here's the bottom line: there's a Klal and a system, and it only works when we're all in this together.

For the vast majority of us that have followed our Poskim and worried about the Klal, we've sent our children a powerful message. We've told our children: We are part of Klal Yisroel. We don't do everything we

want. We even will go against what we want when it's better for the Klal. We listen to the public psak of our Poskim. This lesson in integrity and ehrlichkeit is worth its weight in gold, and we have been gifted with this opportunity under dramatic and powerful circumstances that are sure to leave a lasting impression.

## **6. What Makes Me Happy?**

What do we need to be happy? What do we need to make our life meaningful? What really makes us tick?

"If I don't have \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank) for Yom Tov, I simply won't enjoy it." It's 2020, the age of plenty, a time where we can buy anything we want.

Everyone needs pleasure in life. It's one of the gifts that Hashem gave us. The only question is, what constitutes pleasure?

There's a well-known pitfall that happens when one indulges in luxury. If a person is not careful, the luxury can slowly turn into a necessity.

What's so terrible about that? On a very basic level, we lose the simple pleasure the "luxury" gave us. What's of more concern is that the loss of pleasure from the original luxury drives us inevitably toward acquiring the next one. This never-ending train to subservience to olam hazeh is a natural byproduct of today's unprecedented affluence. If you're my age, you probably remember when pizza was a treat! The more one turns luxuries into necessities, the more one has to dig deeper and work harder to find the next luxury. Paradoxically, we're not happier; we just need more to be happy.

A wise man once shared this principle in the following manner:

Whereas a luxury gives us pleasure if we have it, a necessity gives us pain if we don't.

I'll never forget the time I went out to eat with my wife, and we met another wealthy couple in the restaurant. For us it was a great treat that we allowed ourselves, and we had great joy in our steak. As I was speaking to the other couple, it became clear that this was just supper to them, and they had no significant pleasure in the experience. What a powerful lesson this taught me. If I indulge freely in what I consider to



be a luxury, I'll have to work so much harder finding the next luxury. Ouch.

We've been given an incredible opportunity. We've learned that there are so many things that we don't need to make us happy. Our future happiness lies in making sure we don't unlearn this incredible lesson.

## **7. Living Without the Joneses**

Our community is the best. It's so close knit. We're always there for each other. We go to each other's simchas. Truly incredible

But there's another side to this equation. As we live in such close proximity, we begin to see how our friends live. This can create jealousy, it can raise hasogas, and it doesn't allow us to be independent. We all know the saying "Keeping up with the Joneses." None of us like it, and we constantly complain about it.

As we've lived at home for months, we've gained incredible clarity of thought with regard to Keeping Up. Our stress levels have dropped drastically in this area (I know that there's a trade off with stress, as we're cooped up in the house).

Isn't it amazing? I can do what I want, without any thought as to what anyone else thinks. Isn't that incredibly liberating? I'm in control of my lifestyle, and no one else. Why would I want to allow just anyone to dictate to me how I live my life? Who decides what's important? Who decides what's comfortable? Who decides what I need to do to be "with it?"

After a couple of months at home, we've hopefully gone through a detox. We can see clearly how incredibly liberating it is to live without the Joneses. Don't ever invite them back in.

## **8. Bring us Home**

Do we feel bad that HKB'H isn't in His "home?"

The seforim share the following seemingly challenging and esoteric concept. When Hashem sent us to golus, it's as if on some level He

came into golus with us. Just like we desire the Bais Hamikdash, Hashem also desires a return to the Bais HaMikdash, so He can be in His home. We are meant to not only mourn for our inability to serve Him in the Bais Hamikdash, but to feel Hashem's pain as well, that He cannot be home.

I've always found this concept to be way above my pay-grade. I struggle to truly mourn for the Bais Hamikdash; after all, how can I feel Hashem's pain? Yet this is a basic responsibility.

As we live alone at home with no ability to go to Shul, to daven or to learn face to face, each and every one of us is beginning to mourn our own loss. We miss davening with a minyan. We miss davening inside a shul with our friends and our Rov. We find it natural to ask Hashem "Please bring me Home."

We now have the ability to easily change the focus of this tefilla. We finally understand that we're not home. If I am missing my shul, I can now begin to "feel for Hashem" that He is missing His home. Instead of "Bring me home," I can sincerely plead, "Bring US home."

This is an astonishing piece of clarity, one for which we must be exceedingly thankful to Hashem.

### **What's Next?**

Our travels through life are meant to teach us the lessons we need to succeed in life. Success is defined by how we learn and implement from these lessons.

On a regular Tuesday afternoon, it can be challenging to stop and listen. Life is so busy, and we have to dig pretty deep to find the message.

The past few months were different. Our lives changed, we experienced tremendous levels of uncertainty, and the pain was real and raw. We lived through history. We survived Corona. In future generations, we will be the ones to share "stories of Corona" with the new generation. We will forever be impacted by this experience.

This impact is the gift we were given. It's a personal gift that Hashem gave to each and every one of us. We were given the gift of self-awareness and the gift of reconnecting to Hashem.

As we slowly contemplate reentering normal living, we must ensure that we appreciate the unfathomable bounty that we've received.

A pandemic is a terrible thing to waste.

Please, let's not waste it.

Hashem has spoken, loudly.

We must hear his message.