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Hamilton Jewish

INews

The voice of Jewish Hamilton

Coronavirus brings community closer together

Individual acts of kindness and out-of-the box thinking are fueling a new era of altruism and collaboration

STORY BY **WENDY SCHNEIDER**
HAMILTON JEWISH NEWS

JEWISH HAMILTON may look back on March 2020 as the beginning of lasting changes in the life of the community. As the coronavirus crisis continues to upend lives and force synagogues, schools and communal organizations to adapt to a new reality, modern technology has become a lifeline that's allowed many of us to maintain our social and work connections. But while social distancing has helped limit the spread of the virus, low-income seniors and other vulnerable members of our community are in danger from the effects of isolation and food scarcity. Thankfully, Hamilton Jewish Federation and its partner agency, Hamilton Jewish Family Services have conducted a coordinated response to urgent community needs from the very beginning. "Our mission came alive during this crisis," Federation CEO Gustavo Rymberg told the HJN, and the community is better off for it.

CLOSER TOGETHER CONTINUES ON P4



PHOTO BY WENDY SCHNEIDER, THE HAMILTON JEWISH NEWS

Max Bida, pictured here in the Adas Israel kitchen, teamed up with three community organizations to create Food4U, Hamilton's first Kosher Meals on Wheels program.



PHOTO BY WENDY SCHNEIDER, HAMILTON JEWISH NEWS

Single parenting during COVID-19 definitely challenging, but Dafna Bener treasures the time she spends with her children. See Special Feature on page 10 and 11.

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“I can't change the big picture, but I can make my little corner of the world happy.”

Max Bida pays it forward **P4**

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GUEST EDITORIAL

The COVID food system

We need each other
now more than ever

Ben
Loewith



MY GRANDPARENTS arrived in Canada from Czechoslovakia in November of 1938. At that time, Canada was only accepting refugees who were willing to work in the mining, forestry, or agricultural industries. One of the reasons my grandfather, Joe Loewith, chose the dairy industry as his vocation in his adopted land, was that he felt that with agriculture, your success was dependant only upon your own effort.

You would succeed or fail by the sweat of your own brow.

While that may have been true in 1947 when he bought his first farm, agriculture today is integrated, interconnected, and efficiency driven. Every product grown or produced is part of a system that brings nourishment from the field to the fork. When it works well, the system is all but invisible. And it has worked well for over 2 generations.

But the COVID-19 pandemic has, for the first time in decades, caused a disruption in the food supply chain, and allowed consumers to finally see that flour does not appear on the shelves by magic; that behind every litre of milk, there is a cow, and behind every cow is a farmer.

So for the first time in memory for many people, the grocery store had empty shelves. And at the same time, stories were spreading of tomatoes and lettuce being plowed under, potatoes being left to rot, and milk being dumped down the drain. It is understandable that there was an outcry. "Why would the store limit the number of bags of milk I can buy when farmers are dumping milk?" "How is it possible there is no meat in the cooler section?"

There were two massive changes that occurred to the food system at the same time. The first was the overnight devastation of the hospitality and food service industries. Restaurants, convention centres, hotels, were all shut down. This represents a significant portion of the food industry. Tim Hortons is the largest purchaser of cream in Ontario. And when Tim Hortons purchases cream, they buy it in large 20 litre bags that fit into their custom cream dispensers. The packaging lines that create those bags of cream for coffee, or the 20kg bags of shredded cheese for pizzas, or the large containers of chicken wings for game night, can't be changed overnight. There is no retail market for food produced and packaged in this form. So we have an excess of food, but no immediate way to get it to the market in the form that is required.

Because these food service industries were no longer taking product, dairy farms were asked to dump milk until the market readjusted. On our farm, we were told by the marketing board to allow 2 days of milk, 40 000 litres, to go down the drain. I can't tell you how emotionally difficult this was for our family. Not just because of the work that goes into producing that food, but because as a family, we remember what it is to be hungry. Throwing away food is like burning books. It is fundamentally wrong.

Many were asking why the milk wasn't donated to food banks. And in fact, an additional 100,000 litres was donated to Ontario food banks, on top of the 1 million litres that are donated each year. However, the volumes that go into the food service industry, and the packaging that the processors can provide, are not viable for the food banks. The food banks are not set up to take 25kg blocks of butter, or have the refrigeration for tens of thousands of litres of milk. So, for two days, our milk flowed into the gutter.

The second phenomena that occurred almost simultaneously was panic buying. As stores struggled with social distancing and increased cleaning regiments, people began emptying shelves in the fear that supplies would run short. At its peak, retail grocery sales doubled their historic levels. They have now flattened out around 20-30 per cent above norms.

My grandmother often told us "if you don't have your health, you don't have anything." And food is inextricably linked to health. If some good comes from this event, let it be that Canadians gain an appreciation for our country to be able to feed itself. Agriculture in Canada adds over 100 billion to the economy. Farmers, transporters, processors, and retailers are working every minute of every day to make sure the shelves are full. Let the last few months remind us of our past, and that food sovereignty is vital to a free nation.

Ben Loewith is a third generation dairy farmer. The Loewith family has been milking cows in Copetown, Ontario for 73 years.



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A welcome donation



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE HAMILTON JEWISH FEDERATION

Hamilton Jewish Federation CEO Gustavo Rymberg was delighted to receive 22 boxes of leftover Passover products donated by Fortinos on Main West for Hamilton Jewish Family Services' kosher food bank. Rymberg saw the grocery store's gesture as a meaningful way to give back Jewish community during the crisis.

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It would have been enough already

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Coronavirus crisis brings community closer together

CONTINUED FROM P1

Hamilton Jewish Family Services (HJFS) executive director Alexis Wenzowski remembers sitting in the audience during last September's Community Campaign opening and being struck by its theme, "Let's Write Our Story." Six months later, those words have taken on an added significance she could never have anticipated.

"It's clear to me now more than ever that Jewish Hamilton is writing a story of a strong, engaged, caring and supportive community," Wenzowski told the HJN. "This is a story of partnerships, innovation and dedication, and I'm proud to say that HJFS is playing an integral role in this chapter."

Those partnerships began in the early weeks of the crisis and continue to this day. Temple Anshe Sholom and Oakville's Shaarei-Beth El Synagogue got involved in Federation's emergency Passover campaign, which saw Passover packages delivered to families in Hamilton, St. Catharines, Burlington and Oakville. Another initiative has HJFS partnering with Temple Anshe Sholom and Kehila Heschel to grow fresh produce in a community garden over the summer months. The produce grown will be used to feed the vulnerable in our community through the kosher food bank. Food is also being grown at Grace Lutheran Church, with the support of the HHA.

One of the community's most significant collaborative initiatives, which has gotten the attention of UJA Toronto and the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA), is the Food4U program. This partnership began when local chef Max Bida (see sidebar story) reached out to the Adas Israel Congregation, HJFS and the Hamilton Jewish Federation seeking their help to cook for the community. Bida's extraordinary offer prompted the launch of what has become Hamilton's first kosher meals on wheels program. Still in early development, Food4U is currently providing 30 free meals a week for kosher food bank clients, while providing dozens of paid-for meals through order forms available through the Adas Israel and Hamilton Jewish Family Services.

"A kosher meals on wheels program has never existed in Hamilton, so this program has been really transformative for the community," said Wenzowski.

"The success of Food4U is sending us the message that there's a need in our community for this kind of thing," said Rymberg. "It's part of our role to provide these opportunities."

Funding for Food4U was initially provided through Federation's emergency Passover campaign, but grant funding from the City of Hamilton, the Hamilton Community Foundation, the Azrieli Foundation and the Lewis and Ruth Sherman Foundation, has since come in, which Rymberg hopes will allow the program to continue for months to come.

By now, one thing had become clear to both Rymberg and Wenzowski. Despite the fear and uncertainty the community was facing, a silver lining has emerged: people want to help.



PHOTO COURTESY OF HJFS

Above: HJFS executive director Alexis Wenzowski and Federation CEO Gustavo Rymberg delivering Passover food packages in the early days of the pandemic.



PHOTO COURTESY OF HJFS

Left: A happy smile greets the bearer of a delicious meal from the Food4U program.

Calls have been coming in to Federation from donors with offers to add to their Annual Campaign contributions, young adults have responded to a call for grocery shoppers for seniors, and people of all ages are asking what they can do to contribute.

"Between our dedicated staff and volunteers, we reached out to every person in our database through our wellness check-in calls, provided ongoing grocery support to dozens of people and packed and delivered more than 150 Passover food packages. We were able to do all these things because people supported us. Our top donors really rose to the occasion. People who were never involved before have stepped forward. The involvement of young adults has been amazing. Everyone from all shuls are working together and there's no separation," said Rymberg.

NEED TO KNOW

COVID-19 HELP:

The Hamilton Jewish Federation has forms at jewishhamilton.org where community members can ask for COVID-19 related help or offer support. COVID-19 advice is also available on the Federation Facebook group, **Hamilton Jewish Community response to COVID-19**.

VOLUNTEER:

Hamilton Jewish Family Services is seeking volunteers for its Senior Centre Without Walls and other programs. Email info@hamiltonjfs.ca or call 905-627-9922.

FOOD4U:

If you or someone you know would like to sign up for the Food4U program, email info@hamiltonjfs.ca or call 905-627-9922.

Max Bida pays it forward

Local chef teams up with organizations to feed community's most vulnerable

BY **WENDY SCHNEIDER**
HAMILTON JEWISH NEWS

WHEN THE coronavirus pandemic began sweeping through the Hamilton area in early March, local chef Max Bida decided he had a role to play. Bida, his wife Alla, and their two young children have been living in Hamilton since September 2015, after immigrating to Canada from Israel. Resourceful and entrepreneurial, Bida was confident in his ability to navigate the crisis, despite having to put his culinary consulting business on hold. Eager to put his culinary skills to use on behalf of the community, he reached out to the Adas Israel's Rabbi Daniel Green, Hamilton Jewish Family Services executive director Alexis Wenzowski and Hamilton Jewish Federation CEO Gustavo Rymberg with an extraordinary proposition.

"Who can I cook for," was the question Bida posed to Rabbi Green during their initial conversation, and, with those words, planted the seed for what has become Hamilton's first kosher meals on wheels program. Here, Bida tells the HJN what motivates him to help others.

Q. Can you tell our readers something about yourself.

A. I grew up in jaffa. I was in the security business before I came to the culinary business. I became a culinary consultant for various restaurants, mostly in Tel Aviv. When we came to Canada, I worked at Parallel in Toronto for two years, commuting five to six days a week. My wife, Alla, is the homemaker. She's the minister of everything. I go to work. I cook.

Q. How and why did you come up with the idea to feed the community.

A. I'm what you call my father's boy. My father was a Holocaust survivor, and he always told me that through your deeds, you can make someone happy and he, in turn, will spread that happiness to someone else. I can't change the big picture, but I can make my little corner of the world happy. When I came here, people helped me and I need to do the same for other people, whether they're newcomers, homegrown Canadian, or whatever. Anyone who needs help, I'll give it to him.

Q. You've refused to be paid for



PHOTO BY WENDY SCHNEIDER, HJN

Max Bida in the Adas Israel kitchen.

your work. How are you managing?

A. I am worried a little bit about the money that I'm not bringing in. I was supposed to start another project before this happened, but we deferred our mortgage for six months and took down one car insurance. We're surviving. It's okay. Right now I'm more focused on helping people.

Q. Are there guiding principles you live by?

A. Yes. Family first. Money after. And you don't measure family by blood. I have friends over here who are my family. I have a community who, although not as close, are still family. When I was a child, I would go to my Muslim neighbours after school if my mom was not home, and eat at their place. If we needed to buy something, we would go to our neighbours to ask who they'd recommend. That community life, that community idea is almost lost. When I think of an isolated senior receiving a good meal one day a week, together with a few kind words that bring a smile to his face, it's enough for me.

Q. What does your week look like?

A. I spend three days in the Adas kitchen, the rest of the week in my garden. I'm what you call an "A" type. I wake up at five in the morning, do stuff around the house. I'm in the backyard. I'm in the front yard. It keeps me busy.

Q. How much longer do you see yourself doing this?

A. As long as we can stretch it. It's a win win situation. I think something like this should be on a regular basis even without COVID-19. There are always people in need.

Q. What would that look like?

A. It would actually look like a business. A part of it would involve selling meals and with what we sell, moving that forward to donating, helping, promoting, giving and growing the community. The idea is to make the community stronger, not just Jews for Jews, but by being a platform that would show other communities how an idea like this could work.

Shalom Village faces financial challenges, but optimism prevails

A report from interim CEO Dr. Larry Levin

BY **DR. LARRY LEVIN**
SPECIAL TO THE HJN

IT IS MY pleasure to bring you greetings from Shalom Village.

As you can imagine, it is a very stressful time for both residents and staff operating under the constraints of the Corona virus pandemic. However, in spite of the difficulties, our outstanding staff have risen to the occasion and our residents are doing well.

Some months ago, CEO Renee Guder advised us that she would be leaving in the spring. Unfortunately, the pandemic slowed down the search process for a new CEO, and the board of governors asked if I would step in as interim CEO until they identified and hired the ideal candidate. Since my dental practice was temporarily closed due to the pandemic, I was pleased and able to accept.

As a longtime board member and past president of Shalom Village, I was quite familiar with its structure, and my experience both as president of the Ontario Dental Association, as well as president of the Canadian Dental Association, has given me the requisite managerial skills.

The transition has gone smoothly and I am working closely with staff to make sure that we continue to meet or exceed all governmental requirements and regulations during this time, and that the great experience that residents and families have come to expect from Shalom Village continues unabated.

All the entrances to Shalom Village have been closed with the exception of the main entrance. Only staff are allowed in, after being thoroughly screened. They are screened both on arrival and at the completion of their shift. Staff are cohorted to their particular area to prevent possible cross-contamination between different sections. Visitors are not



PHOTO COURTESY OF SHALOM VILLAGE

Mother's Day at Shalom Village this year kept social distancing rules to keep residents safe.

allowed. All packages and deliveries are disinfected before being delivered. Residents are being constantly monitored and temperatures taken to identify any possible indication that COVID-19 could be starting.

We recently had all residents and staff tested by public health and fortunately the results came back completely negative. Being realistic and seeing what has happened in so many other long-term-care and retirement homes, it is always possible that COVID-19 could start at Shalom Village, however we are doing everything we can to minimize that possibility.

The cost for this has been quite high both financially and emotionally. I would respectfully ask that if you have not already done so, to please consider making a gift to Shalom Village in support of our work. Visit shalomvillage.ca to see a short video of life at Shalom during the pandemic.

Life at Shalom Village is certainly much different these days but good spirits and optimism still abound. We have just completed a week of staff appreciation during which, we held daily draws, raffles and contests and provided treats such as smoothies. Daily letters of appreciation and thanks were given to staff and it was a fun

week, which raised the spirits of everyone at Shalom Village.

Mother's Day was celebrated with numerous window visits as well as video chats assisted by staff to connect residents with loved ones. A local greenhouse donated a small plant for every resident.

All in all, the mood at Shalom Village is calm, professional, and focused. We are paying close attention to everyone's psychological needs. Staff are making every effort to spend more time looking in on residents and spending time with them to mitigate some of the stress of isolation from loved ones.

I understand the great responsibility we have to take care of our parents, and I pledge to do everything possible to keep them safe, healthy and as happy as possible.

Stepping into the role of interim CEO at Shalom Village, has been a very intense experience for me personally. I have spent countless hours working and strategizing with senior staff to get through what is arguably one of the most difficult chapters in the history of long-term care and retirement living.

It is an honour and privilege to lead this wonderful Shalom Village team.

Young volunteers step up during pandemic

BY **WENDY SCHNEIDER**

Hamilton Jewish Family Services (HJFS) was gratified to see a number of young adults offer to grocery shop and make deliveries for seniors during the COVID-19 crisis.

When the outreach programs she runs at Centre3 were put on hold, art educator Becky Katz, 36, was looking for other ways to help people. One of Jewish Family Services' most stalwart volunteers, Katz spends approximately three to four hours a week shopping and delivering groceries.

Misha Apel, 23, co-chair of JNext, Hamilton Jewish Federation's Young Adult Group, is currently

working as a legislative intern with the Ontario Government, but she still makes time to grocery shop and make deliveries. Together with her JNext co-chair Zackery Weitzman, Apel also spends her free time planning social programs for Hamilton's young Jewish adults.

When she's not singing, reading and working in the garden, Hannah Byrne Wolfson enjoys giving back to the community during these unprecedented times. "It definitely makes me feel like I'm making a difference in people's lives, and I have gotten to witness the power of a mitzvah each and every time."



Becky Katz, Misha Apel and Hannah Byrne-Wolfson were among the young adults who answered the call for volunteers.



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

On racism, let's keep talking

THANKS TO RUTH GREENSPAN for starting this important conversation, and to Oliver Borr for continuing it. Here is my perspective, as an Ashkenazi Jewish woman.

The first time someone pointed out to me a racist mistake I had made, I was mortified. Like most people, I do not want to act out racism or any other oppression. "But I'm not racist" is a common, and understandable, reaction. However, I have found it more useful to listen to the person generous enough to not give up on me, and examine the ways that I sometimes collude with the profound societal injustice of racism.

Nobody is born racist, just as no one is born antisemitic. But, despite our best intentions, we can unconsciously absorb those messages. Just as I expect my non-Jewish friends to be open to learn if I point out an antisemitic action or inaction of theirs, so do I expect that of myself with regard to the racism that I have been set up to benefit from and, at times, act out.

Everybody knows that physical violence and name calling, are not okay. But for both oppressions, there are the more subtle moments, whether it is a hateful thought that goes unspoken, or "small" actions that are nonetheless hurtful, such as social exclusion or treating people as if they embody the stereotypes about their group. The passive bystander is by no means as bad as the active white nationalist, but I only stand to gain from realizing that my mind, too, has been corrupted by witnessing and participating in an oppressive society.

Miriam Sager

Grateful for support

I am writing to say how grateful I am for the support I've received during this pandemic by Alexis Wenzowski and Hamilton Jewish Family Services. Alexis and her staff call me regularly, bring me prepared food or whatever else I need. What I most appreciate is how Alexis works in collaboration with the Jewish Federation, the JNF, and the synagogues, as if they were one organization.

I am 84 years old, live alone, and can't go anywhere. It's very hard, but Jewish Family Services always comes to my help. Even a simple bowl of soup from one of their deliveries makes me feel secure, like a child with a security blanket. I feel very blessed to be in this community.

Paulina Gelman

To Gustavo Rymberg: We have never met and yet you extended kindness in this time of isolation and uncertainty. Your volunteer delivered a package and warmth of communal spirit that was not expected but most welcome. I am no longer able to offer physical support but feel it is important to convey a tangible thank you. Enclosed is a modest cheque with my sincere good wishes.

Joyce Bazar, Oakville

I always thought of myself as a young senior, but I was concerned about being out there grocery shopping. As I thought of options and fretted, I got a phone call from Federation. When I heard about the wonderful group of staff and volunteers who were offering to buy groceries for those who are more vulnerable, I could not believe that we have such amazing and caring people in our community. I decided to donate some extra money to show my gratitude, as it was my pleasure to give back. Thanks again from the bottom of my heart.

Sima Aronowicz

Special thanks

Our formal relationship with the Hamilton Jewish Federation began 15 years ago with a visit from Wendy Schneider. She walked in and asked me if I was Jewish. Direct. Fearless. And initially, a little off-putting. But, I somehow felt compelled to sit down with her. I quickly learned of her passion for communicating what was happening in Hamilton's Jewish community and was amazed at her work ethic. That was the beginning of a personal and professional relationship that brought our families together from time to time and brought our three businesses to support the Hamilton Jewish Federation and the Hamilton Jewish News. I would like to sincerely thank Wendy for being who she is, a wonderful person.

Ilya Pinassi, VP Operations, Parkway Motors, Hamilton

The HJN welcomes letters to the editor. To submit a letter for publication, email wshneider@jewishhamilton.org.



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Tribute to a dedicated volunteer

Incoming Jewish Family Services chair pays tribute to her predecessor

BY HANNA SCHAYER
SPECIAL TO THE HJN

IT ALL STARTED in 1999 in the basement of a run down hotel in Kiev. Two women, Carol Krames, then executive director of Hamilton Jewish Social Services (JSS, now Hamilton Jewish Family Services), and Susan Roth bonded while sorting donated clothing as part of the United Jewish Appeal's mission to the Ukraine and Israel. That experience illustrates the community mindset of these two remarkable women and was the beginning of a beautiful personal and professional relationship: Susan joined the JSS board and became president in 2003.

While Krames's passion and commitment to JSS convinced Roth of the value of the agency to the Jewish community, she was predisposed to engage.

"I believe my dedication to tzedakah and community service came from my parents, who always preached the importance of giving back to the community and devotion to Israel."

In 1977, armed with a masters degree in social work, Roth and her husband, Paul, made Hamilton their home. They raised three children, Leah, Jay and Jordan, and infused their busy household with the ethos of community engagement. Whether working at various social service agencies or teaching social sciences at Mohawk College, Roth continued



HJFS executive director Alexis Wenzowski with outgoing president, Susan Roth at the agency's AGM last winter.

to embrace her parents' mantra of volunteerism. With her family's support and encouragement, she became copresident of Na'amat, food convener for many of their famous author luncheons and Women of Inspiration events, cycled through Israel with Paul to raise money for Beit Halochem and somehow managed to stay out of the spotlight. Until now.

While it is difficult to encapsulate the depth and breadth of her tenure, highlights include the annual wine tasting event, a fundraiser she initiated for the kosher food bank, which grew exponentially from a small gathering that raised \$2,000 to a community-wide celebration which this year netted \$25,000. Her greatest challenge was Krames's hospitalization and eventual retirement, all of which happened quickly and necessitated the

running of the agency without its executive director. But during this very critical time, it became apparent to all involved that the agency could function in the interim because it had the most exceptional and dedicated staff in Chris Nusca and Terry Nyp, as well as the support of Federation's Gustavo Rymberg and Jacki Levin and the gift that keeps on giving, Toronto's Linda Kislowitz, consultant extraordinaire. It was ultimately Roth, however, who had to hold the agency together, and with the support of a devoted board and cadre of volunteers, she managed to do just that.

Perhaps you do reap what you sow. Krames built an agency rooted in compassion and respect; Roth mirrored that ideology in how she functioned as board president. "The relationships that I have developed with my board, the staff and both Carol and our oh so fabulous new executive director, Alexis Wenzowski, are very special and meaningful. These are people who are truly devoted to their community. As we work on projects and policies, we always end up sharing about our personal lives. We've grown with each other, our lives interconnected with love."

I have the honour of trying to fill these mighty big shoes but Susan is still "our Susan." She will continue to be engaged as Hamilton Jewish Family Services changes and grows to meet the needs of our community. But one thing will not change — our foundational principle that we are mandated to look after each other with dignity and with respect. In partnership with our community, we plan to continue doing just that.



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Their stories inspire us, they lift our spirits and they unite us with a common bond of gratitude.



If you have any questions or would like to enquire about including your story, please contact Gustavo Rymberg, 905.648.0605 or grymberg@jewishhamilton.org

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MAZAL TOV TO OUR COMMUNITY'S VOLUNTEERS



2020 CECE SCHREIBER VOLUNTEER LEADERSHIP AWARD | SANDRA MORRIS



As the only person who has received the Shem Tov award for three different organizations, Sandy Morris epitomizes the expression, "Give a busy person something to do, and you know it will get done!" Sandy was honoured by Beth Tikvah, Shalom Village and the Hamilton Jewish Federation. Sandy began volunteering in the early 1960s with the United Jewish Appeal and Hadassah WIZO. Over the last several years she's been a stalwart volunteer with Beth Jacob Synagogue, Shalom Village, Beth Tikvah, and the Hamilton Jewish Federation. As a Beth Tikvah board member and a dedicated member of Federation's Special Needs Action Project Committee, Sandy has championed the rights of special needs children and advocated for caregiver support. Sandy has been invaluable member of the Community Campaign Cabinet for decades and is always willing to step up and be involved with the planning and canvassing.

"My parents were always active in their community, so I knew that I would follow them. Volunteering for me has two benefits. First, there are many organizations that need your assistance, and the thrill inside when your direct aid makes a difference is awesome. Secondly, you meet many different people whose paths you've never crossed, and they become your friends. Everyone has the common goal to help their community flourish".

2020 PRESIDENT'S AWARD | SUSAN AND PAUL ROTH



The President's Award is presented to those who have shown exemplary, longstanding volunteer service to the Hamilton Jewish Federation. Federation president, Jacki Levin, is recognizing Susan and Paul Roth who have given selflessly of their time and wisdom over many years to ensure that Jewish life thrives in our city.

Paul served on the Federation board for many years, chairing a UJA Campaign and played an essential role on several committees, including Federation's Allocation Committee.

In her role as chair of Hamilton Jewish Family Services (HJFS) for many years, Susan inspired staff and board members to dedicate themselves to the well-being of low income seniors, Holocaust survivors, and our community's most vulnerable members. Susan's leadership was instrumental in bringing in a new executive director to the agency and introducing new and innovative programming. She has been an important part of the community's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as HJFS leads the way in ensuring that the most vulnerable in our community are not forgotten.

Both Susan and Paul have been inducted into Hamilton's Book of Life. They have worked hard to build our community and ensure its future. They are clearly deserving of the President's Award.

2020 SHEM TOV AWARD RECIPIENTS

JEWISH GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY | ANNETTE RICHARDSON

Annette is a kind and generous person and JGSH is proud to nominate her for the 2020 Shem Tov Award. Elected to our board in 2016, she is now our treasurer. Annette has enormous energy and many ideas that regularly brighten our discussions. Her skills as a hostess, cook and facilitator have made our social gatherings something everyone looks forward to.

TEMPLE ANSHE SHOLOM | VIRGINIA MENDES DA COSTA

No one exemplifies commitment, involvement and generosity of spirit at TAS like Virginia. Last year, Virginia retired from five years of service as Temple president after leading our congregation through significant and challenging developments. Virginia has been involved in virtually every aspect of congregational life, while running a successful law practise and maintaining a wonderful family. Temple Anshe Sholom is deeply indebted to Virginia and are proud to honour her with the Shem Tov award.

JEWISH NATIONAL FUND | MARK LEVITT

JNF is pleased to nominate Mark Levitt for a Shem Tov award. We would be hard-pressed to recall an event or board meeting at which Mark does not step up with a supportive and compassionate attitude. No task is too menial.

SHALOM VILLAGE | ENID AARON

Enid is truly an amazing volunteer and Shalom Village is delighted to recognize her by nominating her for a Shem Tov award. Enid volunteered every week in the Club Fitness Centre, interacting with people from diverse backgrounds and abilities. Enid deals with everyone with care and compassion. She has an exceptional ability to communicate and connect on a personal level with participants. Enid is also a constant presence at our Hustle4Health fundraiser, assisting and cheering residents along the race course, and enriching residents' sense of purpose.

JEWISH SOCIAL SERVICES | AGY FERDINAND

Agy's enthusiasm, kindness, and willingness to go above and beyond make a tremendous difference to everyone at HJFS. She is noted for her kindness and for supporting newcomers to the Hamilton Jewish community. She has volunteered for our Memory Cafe, ESL Language Circle, Kosher Wine Tasting Night, and more. We are lucky to have Agy as part of the family at HJFS. Fluent in Spanish, English, Hungarian, and Romanian, Agi is the proud mother of three daughters who are all actively involved in Jewish leadership roles in Hamilton, Toronto, and Panama.

NA'AMAT HAMILTON | LAURA LUDWIN

Laura Ludwin, longtime member of Na'amat Hamilton, has generously hosted Na'amat meetings at her home for years, and has been a steadfast volunteer at our fundraising events. From coordinating and tracking our ticket sales, for our Author Luncheon, to preparing the food, doing pickups and dropoffs, setting up the room, selling door prizes, the room set up, Laura's many contributions cannot be underestimated. Laura has a huge social conscience who has worked tirelessly on behalf of the marginalized members of the general Hamilton community, and on a global level through her involvement in UNICEF.

MCMASTER HILLEL | JOSH ARBESS

Throughout the last year, Josh served as president of McMaster Hillel, managing a 20-person executive and being the face of Hillel for the campus and the McMaster Jewish community. Josh has a strong commitment to community and to Jewish life on campus and led the Jewish community at McMaster with much strength and determination.

BETH JACOB SYNAGOGUE | BRENDA BURJAW

Brenda Burjaw serves on the Beth Jacob Synagogue executive committee as treasurer, but her contributions are so much deeper. In addition to working tirelessly to balance our budget, negotiate supplier contracts, and develop exciting and effective events, Brenda embodies an infectious enthusiasm for teamwork and community engagement. Brenda's family has been integral to our congregation for generations, and her personal involvement began at our Hebrew School with Fay Schmerling and Gloria Silverman. Brenda and her daughter, Rebekah volunteer at fundraisers, purchase school supplies for students in need, and, during COVID-19, have sewn hundreds of masks for essential workers, friends, and family.

ADAS ISRAEL CONGREGATION | ALLEN RAMS

The Adas Israel is proud to honour Allen Rams with a Shem Tov award. Allen's dedication to community is unrivaled. He is a visionary who is able to identify communal gaps and address critical needs. Over the years, he has spearheaded numerous causes around the community. His commitment to strengthening and securing our community on the front lines is inspiring. Together with his wife, Flora, their acts of kindness are too great to enumerate.

HAMILTON HEBREW ACADEMY | ENZA NAFTALI

The HHA feels privileged to be the beneficiary of Enza Naftali's giving spirit. Endowed with immense culinary talents, Enza is undaunted by any challenge, singlehandedly creating events for hundreds of participants with a smile on her face and an unshakable spirit. Enza embraces life with an uplifting spirit. Enza embodies all the attributes of incredible volunteer and an exceptional human being.

HAMILTON JEWISH FEDERATION | ARLENE SINGER

Hamilton Jewish Federation is delighted to honour Arlie Singer with a 2020 Shem Tov award. As chair of Federation's Holocaust Education Committee, Arlie has become a passionate advocate of its mission and an eloquent spokesperson at the committee's many outstanding programs. Arlie is unfailingly kind, collaborative and generous with her time. Her inclusive approach makes both staff and volunteers feel that their ideas are being heard and honoured. Arlie took part in Federation's Yesod Leadership program and is always looking for opportunities to continue to grow as a leader. We congratulate Arlie on all her many accomplishments and look forward to many more years of collaboration and innovation.

JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTRE | JUDI CAPLAN

As chair of the Jewish Community Centre's inaugural Jewish Book Festival, Judi Caplan inspired a team of volunteers with her energy, enthusiasm and passion for the project. Judi's dedication to honouring the memory of her late husband, Marvin Caplan, has created an annual program from which the entire community will benefit in the years to come. Her attention to detail, love for Judaism and strong sense of community made her a pleasure to work with, and the JCC is so pleased to present Judi with this year's Shem Tov award.

**KEHILA HESCHEL JEWISH SCHOOL
MIKE DRESSLER AND NAOMI BERNSTEIN**

With great pleasure and gratitude we nominate a dynamic couple for their significant contributions to Kehila Heschel School and our community. They have two children in Kehila, with one joining in future. Naomi has given tirelessly of herself as board member, and currently, as board chair. Naomi has formed partnerships, shaped our vision, organized events, raised funds, and helped out in countless ways. Mike Dressler has served Kehila as treasurer, board chair, and head of the Finance Committee. Mike has applied his expertise, innovative ideas for fundraising, and hard work to successfully support the sustainability of our school. We thank Mike for his key role in our success!



MIKE DRESSLER AND NAOMI BERNSTEIN



ANNETTE RICHARDSON



ENID AARON



JOSH ARBESS



ARLENE SINGER



VIRGINIA MENDES DA COSTA



AGY FERDINAND



BRENDA BURJAW



JUDI CAPLAN



MARK LEVITT



LAURA LUDWIN



ALLEN RAMS



ENZA NAFTALI

Self isolation musings

We are so lucky

I ALWAYS tell my kids to make the best of things. They know that when we find ourselves somewhere we don't want to be or doing something we don't want to do, they will hear me say those words. It's what we're trying to do these days.

We work, we do school, we go for walks, we play many, many board games and watch many, many movies. We try new recipes and shoot hoops and read books. But it's not always easy.

Some days, I do the morning yoga, make the afternoon healthy snack plate, manage to get all my work done and fit in an afternoon game of mini sticks hockey. Other days, I am interrupted a million times as I try to write just one sentence, neglect lunch until after 2 pm and can't find the sink under the dishes.

But we are lucky. My kids are happy and getting along. They are learning, playing and vacuuming (!). We are having a rest from a very hectic extracurricular schedule and are getting amazing amounts of time together. And while my kids miss their friends and teachers and sports, they don't really dwell on it.

But I ache for them. I think about the days my son missed with a teacher he adores, the track and field meet where my daughter couldn't run, the end of the year parties and their daily bike rides to school with friends. I am thinking about the fun summer outings we won't get to take and the camp activities they will miss.

These don't even come close to the losses and hardships others are facing and as I said, I know how lucky we are. Last night, when I was feeling sad, I was interrupted by my kids' voices calling me downstairs for a family game of mini sticks. And there was music. And my team won.

I guess my kids sometimes listen to what I teach them. They really are making the best of things.

Abigail Cukier

Perspective helps

I HAVE BEEN self isolated now for more than 10 weeks, but fortunately my late husband, Morley Balinson, has left me with an extensive library of books. I have been reading records of Canadian soldiers from the First and Second World Wars, and the Korean War, in which he served. Reading about our courageous soldiers helps put our present challenges of isolation and fear in perspective.

I liken our circumstances to the families who lived during the blitz in London, England where people had no choice but to gather together in bomb shelters, living with fear of contamination, enduring rationing and suffering the loss of friends and family.

Joan Balinson

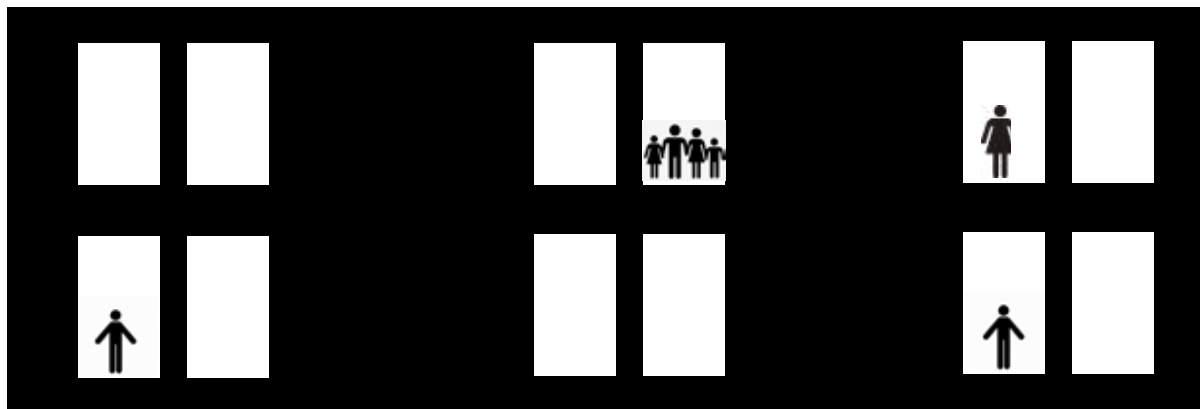
Feeling grateful

PERSONALLY, I feel grateful. I am able to work from home, and I am grateful about that. My income has not been affected. I am extremely grateful about that. I have a phone and a computer. I don't know how I would manage without those, because I use them consistently—and gratefully.

I have friends and neighbours bringing me food and masks. I feel so lucky.

I think it is so important for us, not to deny the challenges, but to try to keep a perspective. We are lucky to live in Canada and to be able to use the many opportunities provided for us here.

Helen Metz



Family is everything

I STOPPED welcoming people into our home a week before Purim. I always had people over for Shabbat dinners and I like parties, but I told everyone, I'm sorry but my mother lives with us.

For the first few weeks, my eldest, who is in high school, didn't receive any homework and then he started to receive tons of homework. His teachers don't Zoom with the kids, so they just send them an email and he has to study by himself. It's very hard for him. My younger son has autism, is non verbal and very hyper. They closed all the parks, and the weather has been cold, so we try to do some homework, activities, baking, puzzles, whatever I can give him to do. Every few days I would take him for a ride in the car, but we didn't stop at Tim Hortons the way that we used to. I brought snacks and drinks from my house, and we'd just drive just to see something out there.

My mother is not a very healthy person. She's 79 and has dementia. But I love her, she's my mom. To wake up in the morning and see your mom next to you is a deep blessing.

As long as everybody's healthy, I have no complaints. I have my husband, my mom, my two kids. You don't need more than your family. If you have healthy relationships with your family, not even the coronavirus can ruin it.

Michal Asulin

Finding resilience

I AM ESSENTIALLY carrying on each day holding down four plus full-time jobs with each having a very unique compensation packages. I am a full-time commercial banker. I am a full-time mother of a teen. I am a volunteer treasurer and a member of the Beth Jacob Synagogue executive committee. Most recently, I am now a full-time teacher for a Grade 7 overachiever. In addition, I continue to train in powerlifting (in my garage gym) and any free time I have is devoted to giving back to my community, through making masks or participating in programs online.

As a Type A personality, I need to remain busy. I need to be doing. I attribute this to the female role models in my life. First was my Bubbie Haren who survived the Holocaust, and taught me resilience. Then there is my mom, Alina Papernick, who taught me how to be a doer, a fixer, a fighter and most importantly, a caregiver.

Dealing with the frustrations and disappointment from cancelled plans and staying at home can take me to a dark place. But it is the resilience that helps me to push forward. To get up and wipe away the tears and try to find things to look forward to. To accept the now but create the future. This too, shall pass. So, I continue to rely on my resilience, and my capacity to recover quickly from difficulties and tough times.

Brenda Burjaw

“Beit Zoom”

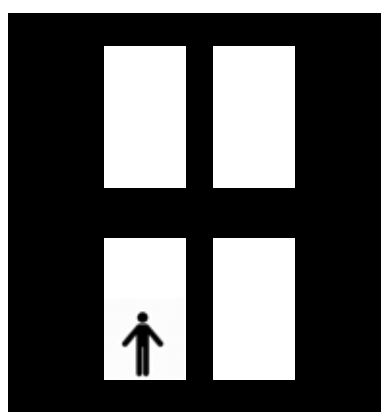
MY TWO Jack Tzus, Joanie and Zoe, make social isolation in my condo livable. They play with each other, bringing me toys, and beg to go into the long hallway, where they run up and down repeatedly to get their exercise.

When my neighbourhood grocery store announced that a team member had tested positive, it meant having to go through the drive-through for testing and being relieved when the test was negative.

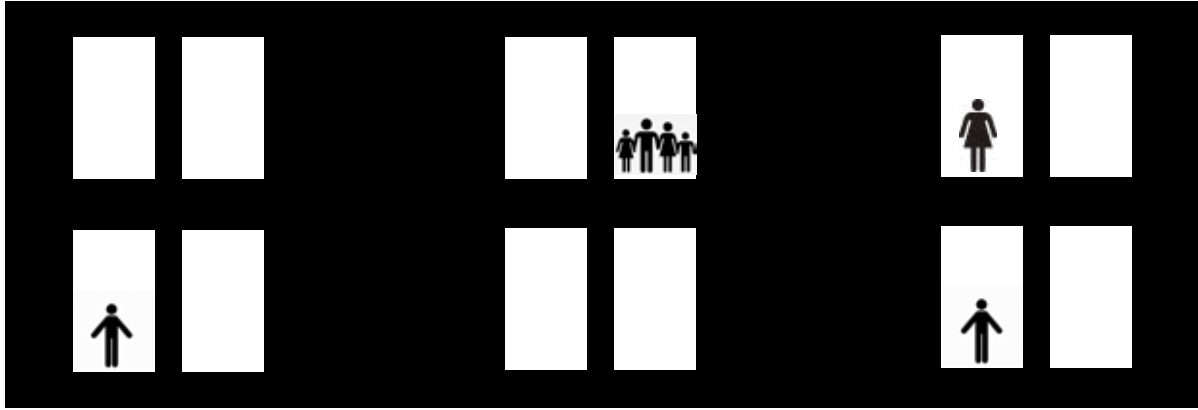
I look forward to coming home where various projects await me, such as sewing masks and contributing ideas for solutions to Ontario Together.

Rabbi Cohen and Cantor Paula have adeptly adapted to restrictions by providing Zoom programming practically every day of the week, including Kabbalat Shabbat and Talking Torah. Our Temple is now known as “Beit Zoom!” I enjoy phoning friends on my contact list to let them know that TAS cares for them.

Shlomit Acciaroli



We're all in this together: The HJN invited our readers to record their thoughts about adapting to new realities in the age of coronavirus



I miss school!

I THOUGHT I would never say this, but I miss school! And you probably do too! (If you are a kid) If anyone would have told me a few months ago that this would happen, I would have just laughed. It is so crazy!! When I go on a walk with my family, whenever someone approaches, we have to cross the street.

I have heard stories about people talking to one another and police approaching them and asking questions I never would have thought a police officer would ask like, "Do you live together?" etc.

It is weird staying at home, when I would normally be with my friends at school. You should talk to your friends once in a while. This is for adults too! For me, there is this app on my mom's phone that I use to video chat and text my friends!! This helps me not miss them so much.

Me and my brother are trying to do exercises every day because if this were normal, we would have been walking to school, doing gym, having recess, going to judo class. Kids are supposed to be doing physical stuff for one hour a day. Keep all this in mind!

Hannah Cukier
10 years old

Covid confusion

I WAS BORN in 1947; that makes me 55, right? Okay, I know that math isn't my best subject. My rational self knows that I'm not 55, but I feel 55. On really good days, I feel even younger. I cycle to work; I negotiated my first climbing wall not so long ago; while my wife and I were in France in February and March, we regularly walked way more than the standard 10,000 steps, before rushing back to Canada at the urging of our children and our prime minister.

But COVID has suddenly placed me and my demographical brothers and sisters into a class that makes no sense to us. Suddenly we are elderly, and as such we are at higher risk. Suddenly we really need to self isolate and, more than others, to keep ourselves out of harm's way.

I'm confused. I hadn't thought of myself as elderly. Maybe I should have. Occasionally on crowded buses or subway cars young people would offer me their seat. 'Why?', I wondered. Cashiers at our neighbourhood grocery store would ask if I wanted help carrying the bags to the car. Sure, I wanted help, but not because I couldn't carry the bags. I'm lazy, and if someone else offers ...

We are hearing more and more that COVID is changing everything - that we will need to adjust to a new reality.

Does that mean that now I'll have to start acting my age?

Harvey Starkman

A gift of time

AS A SINGLE PARENT, my days start whenever my three-and-a-half year old daughter and 14 month old son wake up, usually around 7:30 a.m., and are filled with making snacks and meals, attending a lot of Zoom meetings with colleagues, changing diapers, and picking up online grocery orders. I play games with the kids. I try to do housework. But the little guy is too attached to me right now and my daughter is having tantrums. For my sanity, I am taking a few online courses. So when they sleep, I do the cleaning and listen to the audio version of the course.

You do what you can do. My house is clean but not tidy, because I have two monsters taking everything out. It's close to impossible. But if I vacuum and the dishes are clean and there is food to eat, that's what's important. My hope is none of us get sick. That is my whole wish. I don't care about anything else.

It would be nice to take them to the park and the playground, to go freely to stores. My daughter enjoys helping me shop. All the summer festivals are gone. Is it tough? Yes. But it's not only for me. Everyone is in the same boat. If we all do the right things, we will get through this.

I see this as an opportunity. In normal times, I would be away from my kids nine, 10 hours a day. When in my life will I be able to have them full time other than now? It is a gift. It's a difficult gift, but it's a gift of time.

Dafna Bener

A mystery solved

FOR MANY PEOPLE, myself included, this pandemic has challenged us to find a "new normal." It's also forced us to be more creative in how we communicate and do our work, while at the same time giving us some extra time to think, develop new relationships, and discover more about ourselves.

I will always remember this COVID time, as I've begun to think of it, as one of the most important periods of my life. It started the week of my 53rd birthday when I received the following text from my daughter, Melina.

"Dad, you have a match on 23andMe. YOU HAVE TO CONTACT HER." At the same time my younger daughter, Jazmin sent me another text that came with a photo.

"Dad, I can't believe that this guy is not related to you," she wrote about the man in the photograph who really did look like me.

Within 10 minutes, questions I've been asking myself for more than 30 years about the mystery of my origins were getting answered. The match from 23andMe is my second cousin. The man in the photograph is my first cousin.

This is the first time in my life that I've seen anyone who looks like me, a very common situation for most people, but not for me.

Since that day, I have experienced one revelation after another. I have gotten to know my biological mother's family (unfortunately she passed in 2012). I have met aunts, uncles, cousins, and most importantly, a half-sister. Because of the quarantine in Argentina, my family members have all the time in the world to text me, message me, WhatsApp, Zoom, etc. And slowly, during the time of pandemic, I am learning and discovering how amazing it is to have a sister and to be a brother.

Gustavo Rymberg

Not a stretch

TRUTHFULLY, ALL of this isn't a big stretch for me. I grew up as an only child, and spared would-be live-ins throughout my adulthood due to my self-partnering proclivities. But there are stresses in these challenging times.

Food comes to mind. Like how to do it. I have no useful kitchen accoutrements, nor many domestic skills for that matter. So, when a friend suggested I could make smoothies, it fell on deaf ears as I don't have a blender. Another suggested stews, but I don't have a slow cooker. You get the picture.

Zoom has come fraught with anxieties. My microphone wouldn't work (to the delight of many), my hair can't be described and everyone's homes look so much more orderly than mine.

Thank goodness for Netflix, my ultimate escape from the CNN circus. If the virus doesn't get me, I can scare myself to death with serial killer offerings.

So I tread my neighbourhood, duly masked, dodging dogs and other humans, until it's time to Zoom again. Stay safe my friends.

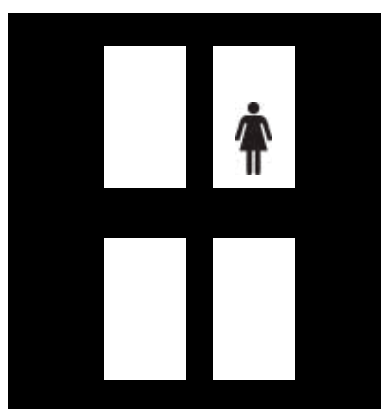
Enid Aaron

Can't plan anything

IT'S GETTING TO ME. We still haven't met our new grandchild in person. It's heartbreaking and I don't know when I'm going to get to see him. When we do, I don't know if I'm going to be allowed to cuddle him. But we do FaceTime as much as possible and that helps. I'm still working, so that helps me take my mind off things. I try and keep my workday as a workday. I do the laundry, cook dinner, maybe clean a cupboard. Then I have my dog who makes me take him for walks.

We were talking about renting a cottage this summer for a week. And then we're thinking, there's a little baby, will they be okay? I'm thinking about when we left South Africa and what we did to our parents. There wasn't Facetime back then. But at least they could plan a trip when they wanted to come or we could plan a trip if we wanted to go back, but now you can't plan anything.

Michele Schneider



Pandemic planting a simple pleasure

Mother of four discovers gardening is the perfect family activity

BY ALICE MENDELSON
SPECIAL TO THE HJN

ISOLATION SALVATION came to us by a 1' x 1' green piece of hard plastic. Somewhere in our travels, I came across this ingenious square marker that indicates how many plants can be planted within a square foot, with convenient holes indicating where they should be planted. Radishes? 16 per square foot. Tomatoes? One per foot. Shallots? Four. This little green square sat in my kitchen for months.

"What is it?" The kids asked. "Send it back," my husband suggested. It was a vibrant, odd-shaped dust collector.

Then suddenly I was gifted with endless fillable hours with my four children. We built planter boxes and ordered dirt to fill them. When the truck arrived before 7 early one morning, the kids greeted the driver ecstatically in their pajamas (He was the first person we had seen in our backyard in months).

On cold and rainy days, we looked at seed catalogues and plotted our plots. We watched our seedlings grow on our windowsill and planted cold-loving plants as early as we could. The idea behind the square foot garden is that it allows you to grow as much as possible, as early as possible, in a small space. The square foot garden has become my metaphor for living in this pandemic. I want



PHOTO BY SIMON MENDELSON

The Mendelson girls planting tomato seedlings in their family garden.

our family to flourish amidst less than ideal conditions.

I pulled out an article my mother-in-law had sent me ages ago about growing a winter garden, in Montreal. Knowing too well the reality of a Montreal winter, growing a winter garden in southern Ontario seemed much more feasible and a good way to make use of the planters now occupying our backyard. So now, as everyone else plans their summer gardens, we are planning our winter one.

Making a winter garden, like being with kids 24/7, requires persistence and flexibility. I will have to gear up and get outside to uncover and water the garden in frigid temperatures. I'll also have to accept that some plants may not actually grow, but remain dormant instead until the temperatures warm up. Who knows? Maybe their roots will grow steadily beneath the snow where we can't see them. Similarly, my kids

won't be able to show me their projects and marks, formative assessments of what they have learned these past few months. Maybe my kids appear dormant at this time. Grumpy, introverted, and sleeping too much. That's okay, it doesn't mean they won't flourish with time.

While some people might think that a winter garden is simply making the best of a bad situation, the hidden truth is that some vegetables actually do better in winter conditions. Cold-loving veggies taste better and sweeter when exposed to cooler temperatures. My gut tells me that some of our kids are growing just fine too. Even in this pandemic madness in our chaotic, messy homes, kids are learning and growing in flawed and imperfect conditions. We forget that kids, like vegetables, often only need the basics to thrive. Love, sunshine, food, and a bit of weeding.

The cruelty of COVID-19

The inability to observe mourning rituals has made this period particularly difficult

BY BARRY ROSEN
SPECIAL TO THE HJN

LIKE MOST people, I never expected COVID-19 to happen. And when it began, I never expected it to affect my wife Leslie and I in the way that it has.

Being unable to go to a movie, live performance, or art gallery is certainly an inconvenience. However, it's not the end of the world since one can do some of these things online.

On the other hand, being unable to visit your relative who is living in a hospital or care home is far more serious, and being separated from them feels like a cruel, inhuman blow.

But the cruelest aspect was what happened after my wife, Leslie, lost her beloved father David Viner.

David was a proud, hardworking scrap dealer and a devoted family man throughout his long life. He also had a very creative side, which he expressed through poetry and art.

David and his wife Pearl were residents of Shalom Village, having moved there from Toronto in May 2019.

Even though he did not die of the coronavirus, David's funeral and burial were very much dictated by pandemic requirements. Only immediate family members could attend. Physical distancing had to be maintained at the cemetery, denying us an opportunity to receive and provide hugs during a time of heightened emotion and



PHOTO COURTESY OF BARRY ROSEN

David and Pearl Viner during happier times.

sadness.

Jewish rites such as carrying the loved one's coffin to the grave site, and placing earth on the casket were either severely constrained or not permitted at all. Beyond this, we had to complete the service within a 30-minute time limit.

Sitting shiva was also a lonely abnormal experience, as mourners could not receive comfort from face-to-face visitors.

However, there were helpful things that took place in the midst of COVID-19. Many friends and extended family members offered words of consolation via phone and internet, and Temple Anshe Shalom provided an online shiva minyan, thanks to Rabbi Cohen and Cantor Baruch.

We are all feeling saddened by our loss, cheated of proper Jewish ritual by COVID-19, but comforted by the support of Shalom Village, our synagogue, family and friends.

DAVID SWEET

Flamborough-Glanbrook



David Sweet, M.P.
and Almut Sweet

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On parenting during the pandemic

A young mother reflects on these uncertain times

BY **LAURA KATZ**
SPECIAL TO THE HJN



PHOTO COURTESY OF LAURA KATZ

Laura Katz with her partner Dan Addison and their two daughters.

WHEN THEY announced that schools would be closed after March Break, I saw the flurry of panic amongst my peers on Facebook. The main message was: “How are we going to do this?”

Because my eldest only started kindergarten this past September, the transition has not been so difficult. We’re used to being home together, and I don’t have to stress about curriculum since both kids fall into the play-based learning category. Though there certainly are some challenges staying home with small children, I am incredibly grateful to have their love and cuddles during these unprecedented times. My partner, now working from home, is able to witness the little things for himself, as opposed to receiving a few photos of what they’ve been up to during the day.

The kids seem to have a general understanding about staying home to avoid germs. They’re happy at home and not overly bothered that everything is closed. It’s difficult keeping them physically separated from family and friends, but we’re lucky they are young enough to not be fearful during this time. We have a backyard, a full fridge, and a huge support network (albeit now virtual). We are as privileged as they come. Yet even I

have bouts of difficulty with this. As I sit in my safe little bubble, I wonder what is happening in other homes. For the very first time, we are all in this together, but the pandemic is affecting people incredibly differently within the city and around the world. Adults and children are living in quarantine with their abusers; people are facing homelessness or living with severe mental health or addiction issues; people are living

in conditions that don’t allow for social distancing or don’t have the capability to wash their hands — the list is endless and for that my heart is heavy.

As an environmental activist, I yearn for people to wake up to the fact that our pre-COVID way of life was undeniably unsustainable. Will this experience be enough to convince society to give up some of our comforts? Will people stop flying unnecessarily?

Will telecommuting become a new norm? Will people pay attention to their water usage, food waste and buying habits? Many have taken to exploring nature as a way to get out of the house or started growing their own food and baking their own bread. Will they continue after these quarantines have been lifted? Will this appreciation for seemingly “unskilled” workers, whom we are now relying on to survive, be sustained? Many want things to go back to “normal,” but normal most certainly wasn’t working. The longer this goes on, the less likely we are to go back to business as usual. Perhaps that’s a good thing.

My anxiety is like a rollercoaster and I know that I’m not alone. This period of time is filled with uncertainty. What will happen? When will this end? Are people going to be ok? What can we do but take it one day at a time? What can we do but rely on the insight of our mentors and teachers?

I often look to my children for wisdom and that has been no different during these weird times. As my four-year-old said, “It’s ok. When the sickness is gone we can see each other again.” For now, help wherever you can. Local grassroots groups have been set up to ensure vulnerable people in the community can get through this.

Here are two you can join today: CareMongering-HamOnt and Hamilton Jewish Community Response to COVID19



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It would have been enough already



Gary Barwin

THIS YEAR was an uncanny Passover. Plagues? We know from plagues: we're in the middle of a pandemic. And as we thought about the Jews' vast migration, our leaving Egypt, we all were staying home, Zooming from the Seder table with our absent families.

What is it to stay? What is it to leave? Jews have always thought about this. What is it to gather? What is it to have a home? To be safe? How do we connect with distant family and community?

The day of the first night of Passover, I read a thoughtful and moving essay in the Toronto Star by Rabbi Yael Splansky of Toronto's Holy Blossom Temple exploring all of this. She cited Exodus 12:22: "And none of you shall go out of the opening of his house until the morning."

This edict from Exodus is strangely apt for our present COVID-19 times, though there is no biblical mention of Netflix, masks or curb-side pickup. Rabbi Splansky ended her column with some very timely additions to Passover's one-hit wonder song, Dayenu. Dayenu is a prayer of gratitude. A series of "It would have been enough if..." detailing all that God did for the Jews

in Egypt. She amends the list for the present moment to include some of the things that we should currently recognize with gratitude: medical professionals, grocery stores and pharmacies providing for our essential needs, governments acting responsibly, books, internet, means of communication with friends and family, neighbours, fresh air, and even health and the opportunity of life itself. It was a good reminder. The sacred—what we can be profoundly grateful for—is present in everyday life. I do think about this. Indeed my recent selected poems is entitled For It Is a Surprise and a Pleasure to Breathe. Because it is and it is.

What do I do when I encounter a text that engages or inspires me? I write a response. I seek to absorb it by working with it. So I took Rabbi Splansky's additional verses to Dayenu and did what I've been doing lately with other poems that interest me. I ran it through a bunch of different languages in Google Translate as well as running it through an application which changes the nouns to nouns found seven entries later in the dictionary. As one does. Then I edited it.

Ok, Gary, knock yourself out, but why do this? I know there's a pandemic on and we're all stuck at home and we've all got time to kill. But couldn't you be sorting Tupperware or doing online aerobics with goats?

When I do these kinds of poetic transformations, I look to what I see in the changed

text—and of course, what I see reflects how I'm feeling and what is going on in the world. The process reveals to me what I'm thinking. Helps me expand my thinking. Helps me engage with the world. Grounds me.

Although I learned about such writing techniques from experimental poetry traditions (for example, the Oulipo group), I'm also aware that Jewish tradition has been interested in exploring patterns in texts. There are Kabbalistic practices which look to transform texts, for example, counting the numerical values of words. There is something powerful, even in the secular context, of using formal aspects of a text as a guide.

The result? My Dayenu also speaks about connection, health, and hope, though much of the rabbi's text is changed into more abstract poetic images, images which are softly surreal. Think of the Lorca-influenced Leonard Cohen of "Take This Waltz" or "Dance Me to the End of Love," though admittedly it's unlikely that I'm going to become an iconic international superpoet, though I must say, I look pretty good in a dark suit. My goal in writing poetry is to create work that opens up thinking and feeling, that doesn't tell you what either the poet or the reader is thinking, but makes a space where both can think and feel more and be more aware.

So, enough already, you say. It would have been enough if you just wrote the poem, but

we need all of this? Well, I do think that in these times particularly, it's good to think through what one is doing, to listen to what one is feeling—anxiety, fear, love, numbness or hope—or whatever changeable and unsettling combination of them one is experiencing. And one does this through whatever creative means makes sense to you. Baking. Cleaning. Woodworking. Couching. Singing. Shouting. Talking.

So, here's the poem. Here's wishing you health and connection.

A Passover

after Rabbi Yael Splansky

If my dove is good
If your coat and phone are open
If you were the only lioness or were paralyzed
If only I were a boomerang
If I could go outside or open the kissing cabinet
If the sun shines on each motel
If you had a door so you could sing
Hope which brings you from the cloak of the world to the scorching heat and soup to the galaxy
For now, my only friend is health

Gary Barwin is a local writer, poet and artist.

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away ...



Phyllis Shragge

MANY, MANY years before COVID-19 threw our world into turmoil, a young woman named Brownie and a young man named Sam rebelled against physical distancing guidelines. They kept their rebellion a secret until their "big reveal" to their adult children, the details to be disclosed further into this story. But first, let's backtrack a bit.

In English folklore, a brownie is a household spirit said to come out at night and perform chores for the owners of the house while they sleep. A fairy is a mythical being with magical powers who dwells on earth in close relationship with humans.

So why were two Jewish twin girls born in Winnipeg in 1909 nicknamed Brownie and Fairy? The obvious answer appears to be that Claris (Brownie) had brown hair

and her twin Ruth (Fairy) had fair hair. As legend has it, Ruth wisely discarded her nickname when she was a young teen. Claris, however, was known as Brownie her entire life.

Brownie, who lived almost 100 years, was my mother. I remember her as sophisticated and statuesque, as well as practical and well organized. She had no elf-like qualities.

In 1927, when she met my father, Sam Freedman, she was a hard-working student nurse at the Winnipeg General Hospital.

Brownie was popular with boys and had numerous dates. Sam was an intellectual bookworm whose first date, when he was in law school, was with Brownie. It was love at first sight. Perhaps their instant connection on that date at the Princess Tea Room on Portage Avenue was buoyed by their menu selections. In the spirit of romance, my father ordered a sardine sandwich. My mother ordered a banana split.

My parents were married on June 29, 1934. That's the date on their Ketubah, the Jewish wedding certificate that is framed

and hanging on a wall in my home. That's the anniversary they celebrated each year. But as my brother, sister and I discovered at a family event in the 1980s, there was some deception regarding their wedding.

I recall my parents gathering their adult children together for a discussion. "Brownie, is now a good time to tell them?" my father asked. My siblings and our spouses were puzzled.

My father's puckish grin was a clue that he was going to reveal a secret. He loved stretching out a story to a captive audience.

"Sam, tell them already," my mother said. He was milking this for all it was worth. He loved this. (As a renowned public speaker, my father, Chief Justice of Manitoba at the time, had impeccable delivery.)

After a slow build up and a quick slide into the shocking revelation, my father said: "Your mother and I got married five years before our Jewish wedding."

I think we all exclaimed, "What?" at the same time.

We were flabbergasted. Why had our

parents kept this a secret for so many years? Eventually, they admitted that they—actually my mother—had been embarrassed about their civil wedding. They had kept it secret because apparently the reason for the civil ceremony was simple: they wanted to have sex. In those days, physical intimacy outside of marriage was frowned upon. What if Brownie got pregnant? The shame was not worth the risk.

The civil ceremony, performed at city hall with one friend as a witness, gave them permission to be intimate years before they could afford to get married at a Jewish wedding with family and friends.

My parents, in their own rebellious fashion, found a way to be intimate in a climate of restrictive social norms. But their insurgence didn't hurt anyone. Now, in 2020, if we rebel against physical distancing stipulations (albeit of a different kind), we risk hurting others. It's best we follow the rules.

Phyllis Shragge is a local writer, mother of five, and grandmother of four.

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