What follows is a collection of sources in connection with the April 7, 2020 webinar on “Caring for Your Spirit in a Time of Crisis,” led by Rabbi Simkha Y Weintraub, LCSW, the Jewish Board’s Rabbinic Director. This packet contains a number of different stories we can use as tools from our spiritual worlds during this time of crisis and uncertainty.

On Stories

Stories are Beings.
You invite them to live with you.
They’ll teach you what they know
in return for being a good host.
When they’re ready to move on,
you’ll let you know.
Then you pass them on to someone else.

_A Cree Storyteller, quoted in Mark Katz,
On Playing A Poor Hand Well_

It was truth, it was a parable.

_Rabbi Judah b. Ilai, Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 92b_
Our Rabbis say: Let not the parable be lightly esteemed in your eyes, since by means of the parable a man can master the words of the Torah.

If a king loses gold from his house or a precious pearl, does he not find it by means of a wick worth a farthing? So the parable should not be lightly esteemed in your eyes, since by means of the parable a man arrives at the true meaning of the words of the Torah.

*Shir HaShirim/Song of Songs Rabbah*, 1.1.8

The world says that tales put people to sleep. I say that with tales you can rouse people from their sleep.

*Reb Nahman of Bratzlav (1770-1810), Hayye Mohoran*

Two people who live in different places, or even in different generations, may still converse. For one may raise a question, and the other who is far away in time or in space may make a comment or ask a question that answers it. So they converse, but no one knows it save the Lord, Who hears it and records it and brings together all the words of people, as it is written:

"They who serve the Lord speak to one another, and the Lord hears them and records their words in God's book." (Malachi 3:16)

*Reb Nahman of Bratslav*

God made man because he loves stories.

*Elie Wiesel, The Gates to the Forest*

The universe is made of stories, not of atoms.

*Muriel Rukeyser*
The Bull’s Eye

A long time ago, the Dubner Maggid was walking with one of his students along the banks of a river. As they walked, the Maggid told a story to explain a certain Jewish tradition. Suddenly, the student stopped and asked, “Rabbi, tell me, how do you always know the right story to explain the subject being discussed?”

The rabbi smiled and said, “I’ll answer you with a story.”

Many years ago, a nobleman’s son was a student at a military academy and one of the sports in which he was an expert was shooting bull’s eyes. In fact, he had won many gold medals for his marksmanship. After he was awarded his diploma, the young officer rode home on his horse. Passing through a tiny village, he saw a hundred circles drawn on the side of a barn – and in the center of each circle was a bullet hole.

The officer was so amazed, he stopped his horse and yelled out: “Who is this expert shot? A hundred perfect bull’s eyes! That’s incredible! Even I could not do that!”

Just then, a young boy walking by looked up at the officer on his tall horse and snickered: Oh, that’s Nar, our town fool!”

“I don’t care what he is,” interrupted the officer. “Whoever can shoot a hundred perfect bull’s eyes must have won every gold medal in the world! I must meet him and shake his hand!”

“Oh no, no, no – you don’t understand,” laughed the boy. “Nar doesn’t draw the circle first and then shoot. He shoots first, and then he draws the circle.”

“And that’s how it is with me,” continued the Dubner Maggid. “I don’t always know the right subject being discussed. What I do is read many stories, and then listen to many stories, and remember all of these stories. Then when I find a story I want to tell, I introduce the subject that leads me into telling that perfect story.”

And the Maggid and his student continued their walk.

From Peninnah Schram, Jewish Stories One Generation Tells Another (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1989)

“All Kinds of Shapes”

There once was a man who loved shapes -- triangles, squares, ovals, rectangles, diamonds, you name it, he loved it.

He didn’t care much what color they were, or what they were made out of -- what mattered to him was that they have smooth edges so you could easily determine what kind of shape they were. (That way, he figured, when you needed a triangle, you’d just open your triangle drawer and pull one out.)

As the months and years of his life went by, he collected many, many beautiful shapes, and could barely keep up with organizing them all. Some even got misplaced or lost, there were so many!

But now and then, he was given an odd shape -- sometimes very jagged and strange -- and he didn’t know what to do with these. Some of these he threw away, some he stored next to the most similar kind of shape, and others he put in a ‘miscellaneous’ compartment, figuring that, at some point, he’d know what to do with them. Still others he left out, lying around, not knowing what to do with them at all.

One night, many decades later, as his life was drawing to a close, he dreamt that all these odd shapes were, themselves, part of a very, very big shape -- that they all fit together neatly into one huge piece. When he woke up, he rushed to gather all these odd shapes, and in a short time, he found that, indeed, they were part of a beautiful whole. When he finished fitting them together, besides forming a perfect shape, the image of everyone who had touched his life was discernible -- all his family, 0 friends, neighbors, teachers, co-workers, and so on.

He never tired of studying this great puzzle until his last day of life, clutching it as he breathed his last breath.
The Trumpeter Offstage

In the late 1930s, the great Arturo Toscanini was conducting the New York Philharmonic Orchestra performing Beethoven's Leonore No. 3 Overture. This particular outdoor concert was held at City College's Lewiston Stadium and was exceptionally well attended. The famed trumpeter Harry Glanz was going to play offstage trumpet solo, an integral part of the production of this symphonic masterpiece.

Indeed, people had flocked to hear the great trumpeter perform under the baton of the legendary Toscanini. When the time came, Glanz positioned himself in a corner about 50 feet behind the stage ready to play his notes. As the concert led up to the key moment, Toscanini held his baton high, pausing to hear the sharp blasts of Glanz's horn. They never came. All Toscanini saw was a burly security guard wrestling with the hapless musician on the grass behind the stage.

The guard was pointing to the stage. “You fool!” he was shouting. “What do you think you’re doing blowing that horn back here? Don’t you see there’s a concert going on up there?!”


Buying the Bracelet

There is a fellow who owns a jewelry store in Israel. One day a nine year old girl walked into the store and said, “I am here to buy a bracelet.” She looked through the glass cases and pointed to a bracelet that cost $3,000. The man behind the counter asked her, “You want to buy that bracelet?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“Wow, you have very good taste. Who do you want to buy it for?”

“For my older sister.”

“Oh that is so nice!” the storekeeper replied. “Why do you want to buy your older sister this bracelet?”

“Because I don’t have a mother or father,” the little girl said, “and my older sister takes care of us. So we want to buy her a present, and I’m willing to pay for it.” She pulled out of her pocket a whole bunch of coins that totaled just under eight shekels, a little less than two dollars.

The fellow says, “Wow! That's exactly what the bracelet costs!” While wrapping up the bracelet he said to the girl, “You write a card to your sister while I wrap the bracelet.” He finished wrapping the bracelet, wiped away his tears, and handed the little girl the bracelet.

A few hours later the older sister entered the store. “I’m terribly embarrassed,” she said. “My sister should not have come here. She shouldn’t have taken it without paying.”

“What are you talking about?” the storekeeper asked.

“What do you mean?” replied the sister. “This bracelet costs thousands of dollars. My little sister doesn’t have thousands of dollars – she doesn’t even have ten dollars! Obviously she didn’t pay for it.”

“You couldn’t be more wrong,” the storekeeper replied. “She paid me in full. She paid seven shekel, eighty agurot, and a broken heart. I want to tell you something. I am a widower. I lost my wife a number of years ago. People come into my store every day. They come in and buy expensive pieces of jewelry, and all these people can afford it. When your sister walked in, for the first time in so very long since my wife had died, I once again felt what love means.” He gave her the bracelet and wished her well.
Good and Bad Luck*

An old man, a poor widower, lived with his only son at the top of a lonely hill. One day, his only horse broke loose. Word spread quickly and soon, members of the community came to express their sympathy at his bad luck and unfortunate loss. But the old man greeted their expressions of condolences with, “But how do you know this isn’t good luck?”

A short while later, his horse returned, and with it, as if in obedient formation, a group of beautiful, strong wild horses, who willingly entered the fenced yard, making it their home. Word spread quickly, and soon neighbors appeared, congratulating the old man on his good fortune, but he replied, “How do you know this isn’t bad luck?”

With a herd of horses now at their disposal, the son took to riding frequently, but soon he fell off and broke his leg. Sadly, the injury was serious and the young man was left with a bad limp. Members of the community came to sympathize, but the old man said, “You never know – this could be good luck.”

A year passed and war came to the region. All able-bodied men were obliged to go off to war, and many died. The son, due to his bad leg, was spared.

What seems to be good luck may really be bad, and what seems to be bad luck, good.

Life unfolding.

*versions of this story may be found in many traditions, worldwide

The Treasure (aka Reb Eizik son of Reb Yekel’s Shul)

Rabbi Bunam used to tell young men who came to him for the first time the story of Reb Eizik son of Reb Yekel of Cracow:

After many years of great poverty which had never shaken his faith in God, Reb Eizik dreamed someone bade him look for a treasure in Prague, under the bridge which leads to the king’s palace. When the dream recurred a third time, Reb Eizik prepared for the long journey and set out for Prague.

But the bridge was guarded day and night and he did not dare to start digging. Nevertheless he went to the bridge every morning and kept walking around it until evening. Finally the captain of the guards, who had been watching him, asked in a kindly way whether he was looking for something, or waiting for somebody. Reb Eizik told him of the dream which had brought him to Prague from a faraway country.

The captain laughed:

“And so, to please the dream, you poor fellow wore out your shoes to come here! As for having faith in dreams, if I had it, I should have had to get going long ago, when a dream once told me to go to Cracow and dig for treasure under the stove in the home of a Jew – Eizik, son of Yekel, that was the name! I can just imagine what it would be like, how I should have to try every house over there, where half the Jews are named Eizik, and the other half Yekel!”

And he laughed once again.

Reb Eizik bowed, travelled the long distance home, dug up the treasure under his stove, and used his fortune to build the House of Prayer which is called “Reb Eizik Reb Yekel’s Shul.”

“Take this story to heart,” Rabbi Bunam used to add, “and make what it says your own: There is something you cannot find anywhere in the world, not even at a tzaddik’s*, and there is, nevertheless, a place where you can find it.”

*particularly righteous, pious individual

Adapted from Chapter VI, “Here Where One Stands,” in Martin Buber’s The Way of Man (New York: Carol Publishing Group/Citadel Press, 1995)
How Precious

After a long illness, I was permitted for the first time to step out-of-doors. And as I crossed to the threshold, sunlight greeted me. This is my experience – all there is to it. And yet, so long as I live, I shall never forget that moment. It was mid-January – a time of cold and storm up North, but in Texas, where I happened to be, a season very much like our Spring. The sky overhead was very blue, very clear, and very, very high. Not, I thought, the shamayim, heaven, but sh’mei shamayim, a heaven of heavens. A faint wind blew from off the western plains, cool and yet somehow tinged with warmth – like a dry, chilled wine. And everywhere in the firmament above me, in the great vault between the earth and the sky, on the pavements, the buildings – the golden glow of the sunlight. It touched me, too, with friendship, with warmth, with blessing. And as I basked in its glory there ran through my mind those wonderful words of the prophet about the sun which someday shall rise with healing on its wings.

In that instant I looked about me to see whether anyone else showed on his face the joy, almost the beatitude, I felt. But no, there they walked – men and women and children, in the glory of the golden flood, and so far as I could detect, there was none to give it heed. And then I remembered how often I, too, had been indifferent to sunlight, how often, preoccupied with petty and sometimes mean concerns, I had disregarded it. And I said to myself, How precious is the sunlight but alas, how careless of it are men. How precious – how careless. This has been a constant refrain sounding in me ever since.

Rabbi Milton Steinberg, in Jewish Reflections on Death (Schocken Books)

With What Remains

Some years ago I went to Avery Fisher Hall in New York City and saw the great Israeli violinist Itzhak Perlman. As you know, Itzhak Perlman suffered polio as a child and has braces on both legs and walks with two crutches. To see him cross the stage is both painful and slow, but somehow heroic and majestic at the same time. He came out center-stage, he took his seat and reaching down he unhinged the clasps that were on his leg and, tucking one leg back and extending the other, he took his violin in hand, laying the crutches on the floor. He began to play. No sooner had he started playing than one of those marvelous strings broke on his instrument. We heard it. It went off like gunfire across the room. There was no mistaking what it meant. There was equally no mistaking what he had to do.

We started applauding softly, finally louder and louder and louder waiting for him to leave the stage. He did not leave the stage, but rather he signaled the maestro and they started out the symphony...He played with such power, with such intensity, with three strings. Now I know that is impossible to do. He was modulating, he was changing, he was recomposing the piece in his head, and on one or two occasions it even looked as if he de-tuned the strings to get different sounds or tuned them upward to get other sounds. I do not know. All I know is that when he finished, there was extraordinary, awesome, awe-inspiring applause and accolades from the audience. We were on our feet screaming and yelling and doing everything we could to say how much we appreciated what he had done. He quieted us down and gave us these words...He said, “It is my genius as well as my heart to make music with what remains.”

Debbie Friedman, 1951-2011, American Jewish singer-songwriter
In Sand and in Stone

Two friends were walking in the desert. During some point of the journey, they had an argument, and one friend slapped the other in the face.

The one who got slapped was hurt, but without saying anything, he wrote in the sand: “Today my best friend slapped me in the face.”

They kept on walking, until they found an oasis, where they decided to take a bath. The one who had been slapped got stuck in the mire, and started drowning, but his friend saved him.

After he recovered from the trauma, he wrote on a stone: “Today my best friend saved my life.”

The friend, who had both slapped and saved his best friend, asked him, “After I hurt you, you wrote in the sand, and now you write on a stone. Why?”

The other friend replied, “When someone hurts us, we should write it down in sand, where the winds of forgiveness can erase it away; but when someone does something good for us, we must engrave it in stone where no wind can ever erase it.”

Learn to write your hurts in the sand and to carve your blessings in stone.

Anonymous

One Recipe for Solace

A woman whose husband had died came to a Tzaddik* and poured out her heart to him. In her distraught state, she described how her loss had robbed her of all peace of mind, and how her friends’ attempts to console her merely intensified her anguish.

After listening closely, the Tzaddik advised the woman to bake a cake -- but only to use ingredients gathered from people in her town who had never experienced pain and loss. Truly seeking solace, the woman went from house to house, but found that in each dwelling, she was unable to accept even a single grain of wheat or speck of sugar.

That night, disappointed and exhausted, she returned to the Tzaddik to inform him of her failure. As she approached his study, and saw him, through the window, studying Torah, she realized that in her very “failure” was the remedy. She realized that she had not been singled out for punishment, but rather that loss is part of the fate of all mortals. She was able, once again, to envision a future state of peace, and to accept comfort from well-intentioned friends.

*Tzaddik means, literally, a “just one.” It is applied, figuratively, for a saintly, righteous individual, a charismatic leader, and/or a hassidic leader (a rebbe.)

Stems Out of Scratches - A Parable of the Maggid of Dubno

A king once owned a large, beautiful, flawless gem, of which he was, justifiably, very, very proud, for it had no equal anywhere in the world.

One day, the gem dropped and acquired a deep scratch. The king summoned the most highly skilled jewelers and offered a great reward for anyone who could remove the imperfection from his treasured jewel.

But alas, none could repair the damaged gem, and the king was deeply depressed.

After some time, a gifted lapidary came to the king and promised to make the rare gem even more beautiful than before the mishap. The king, impressed with this expert’s confidence, entrusted his precious stone to his care.

With superb artistry the craftsman engraved a lovely rosebud around the imperfection, the scratch now becoming a strong and graceful stem of the flower.

Some say the king balked at first, but soon renewed his appreciation of his treasure, which now embodied not only its past beauty but new possibilities and directions.
The Cracked Pot

Long ago, in a town in Israel, there lived a water bearer, who owned two large pots; each hung on the ends of a pole which he carried across his neck. One of the pots had a crack in it, while the other pot was flawless and always delivered a full portion of water.

At the end of the long walk from the stream, the cracked pot arrived only half full.

For a full two years this went on daily, with the bearer delivering only one and a half pots full of water. Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments, fully discharging its daily responsibilities. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection, and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of what it had been made to do. Perceiving itself to be a bitter failure, the cracked pot spoke to the water bearer one day by the stream: “I am ashamed of myself -- this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your house.”

The bearer said to the pot, “Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of the path, but not on the other pot’s side? That’s because I have always known about your ‘flaw,’ and I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back, you’ve watered them. Without fail, and without self-congratulating! For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate the table. Without you being just the way you are, there would not be this beauty to grace the house!”

The Wagon Bears the Burden

A wagon-driver passed another man who was struggling along, bent under the burden of a heavy sack.

“Care for a ride?” the wagon-driver asked.

“That thank you, thank you,” responded the man, accepting the invitation with gratitude and loading himself and his package onto the wagon.

A short while later, the driver glanced back and saw that his passenger was still struggling to bear the sack on his shoulders.

“Why don’t you put your load down, my friend?” he asked.

“Oh, no, kind sir,” replied the man. “It is quite enough that I have imposed on you to ride in your wagon! I do not wish to add even more to your load!”

“Brother!” said the driver. “Once you are on my wagon, it makes no difference whether you carry the sack or put it down. Either way, my wagon will bear the burden.”

Adapted from Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, Living Each Day (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1995), page 335

The Multi-Colored Bird

Once, in a tropical land, there was a splendid bird, more colorful than any that had even been seen before, with every color in its plumage. It lived at the top of the tallest tree, perched so high that no single person could ever hope to reach it.

News of this remarkable creature reached the palace, and the King ordered that the bird be brought to him the next day. Within hours, many of his subjects lined up to form a human ladder alongside the formidable tree. There were to stand on each other’s shoulders until the highest person could reach the bird and bring it back to the King.

While they were standing balanced on one another’s shoulders, some of those near the bottom decided to wander off. As soon as one of them moved, the entire chain collapsed, injuring several of the King’s subjects. The bird remained at the top of the tree, uncaptured.

The subjects had doubly failed the King. For even greater than his desire to see the bird was his wish to see his people closely joined together.
Two Men in a Hospital

Two men, both seriously ill, occupied the same hospital room.
One man was allowed to sit up in his bed for an hour each afternoon to help drain the fluid from his lungs.
His bed was next to the room ’ s only window.
The other man had to spend all his time flat on his back.
The men talked for hours on end.
They spoke of their wives and families, their homes, their jobs, their involvement in the military service, where they had been on vacation.
Every afternoon, when the man in the bed by the window could sit up, he would pass the time by describing to his roommate all the things he could see outside the window.
The man in the other bed began to live for those one hour periods where his world would be broadened and enlivened by all the activity and color of the world outside.
The window overlooked a park with a lovely lake.
Ducks and swans played on the water while children sailed their model boats. Young lovers walked arm in arm amidst flowers of every color and a fine view of the city skyline could be seen in the distance.
As the man by the window described all this in exquisite details, the man on the other side of the room would close his eyes and imagine this picturesque scene.
One warm afternoon, the man by the window described a parade passing by.
Although the other man could not hear the band - he could see it in his mind ’ s eye as the gentleman by the window portrayed it with descriptive words.
Days, weeks and months passed.
One morning, the day nurse arrived to bring water for their baths only to find the lifeless body of the man by the window, who had died peacefully in his sleep.
She was saddened and called the hospital attendants to take the body away.
As soon as it seemed appropriate, the other man asked if he could be moved next to the window. The nurse was happy to make the switch, and after making sure he was comfortable, she left him alone. Slowly, painfully, he propped himself up on one elbow to take his first look at the real world outside.
He strained to slowly turn to look out the window besides the bed.
It faced a blank wall.
The man asked the nurse what could have compelled his deceased roommate who had described such wonderful things outside this window.
The nurse responded that the man was blind and could not even see the wall.
She said, “Perhaps he just wanted to encourage you.”
Two Kids and Their Castle

I was sitting on a beach one summer day, watching two children, a boy and a girl, playing in the sand. They were hard at work building an elaborate sandcastle by the water’s edge, with gates and towers and moats and internal passages. Just when they had nearly finished their project, a big wave came and knocked it down, reducing it to a heap of wet sand. I expected the children to burst into tears, devastated by what had happened to all their hard work. But they surprised me. Instead, they ran up the shore away from the water, laughing and holding hands, and sat down to build another castle. I realized that they had taught me an important lesson. All the things in our lives, all the complicated structures we spend so much time and energy creating, are built on sand. Only our relationships to other people endure. Sooner or later, the wave will come along and knock down what we have worked so hard to build up. When that happens, only the person who has somebody’s hand to hold will be able to laugh.

*Harold Kushner, When All You’ve Ever Wanted Isn’t Enough*