

(Cautiously presses the pause button overlaid on the screen...)

It's like we all pressed pause at the same time, right?

We pressed pause on graduations, and weddings, and B'nei Mitzvah celebrations, and baby-namings. We pressed pause on long-planned trips and spontaneous visits to Starbucks. So many plans, so much excitement...dashed upon the reality of our societal effort to slow the spread of COVID-19. Sometimes it feels like too much.

We pressed pause on visiting loved ones, holding their hands through surgeries and seeing our most vulnerable in their care communities. In too many cases, we have missed opportunities to say goodbye, to provide comfort when it was most needed. My heart breaks with yours at the losses we have experienced as people, as a community, and as a society.

We pressed pause, and while my ardent hope is that many of these plans and celebrations can be placed upon the shelf for when this national nightmare subsides, I know many lives have been forever changed — and forever lost — because of COVID-19.

The world? It pressed pause right along with us. Schools went on an early spring break from which they still struggle to return. Business shuttered, partially reopened and shuttered again, in a disruption to our economy visible from space.¹ Reductions in pay, furloughs, and layoffs impacted an unprecedented number of us, imperiling both livelihoods and lives.

Please know that your Temple family is here to help. Our members stand ready to shop for and deliver groceries and prescriptions, to provide a social connection on a bad day, and many have made generous donations to help financially with essentials, utilities, and more. We all need others we can lean on in difficult times, knowing they will in turn lean on us when the circumstances change. You are not alone in this.

And I do hope that pressing pause wasn't all bad. Did you press pause on a long and frustrating commute, allowing you to spend more time with family or in pursuit of other passions? Did you get to press pause on business travel that it turns out need not be so frequent, or on excessive spending in a way that allowed you to get credit card bills under control? Perhaps pressing pause gave you the time, the space, the perspective to reevaluate what is important, to reassess how you are spending time (our most precious commodity) and to recommit to those things that enrich you as a person.

I remember well when Temple pressed pause, too. Emily and I were together with some 60 congregants at the Benedum Center to watch what would be the last Pittsburgh performance of The Band's Visit. It is a magical show — and when the opportunity again presents (and it will) I encourage you to see it. After the performance we even got to speak with and learn from the actors. Rabbi Locketz and I stepped away from that conversation to conference with David Weisberg, Michelle Markowitz, and Leslie Hoffman (Temple's President, Nominee for President, and Executive Director) and we made the decision to suspend our in person gatherings. While so much was unknown at the time, our tradition is clear that *pikuach nefesh* — the preservation of life — takes precedence over all else *even in cases of doubt*. We cast our lot with the congregations throughout the region and the world that would rather be judged harshly for overreaction in deference to preservation of human life than callousness which might further jeopardize those most at-risk, and we continue to do so to this day. Do you remember that original email that said "Effective immediately and lasting through the end of March?" If only!!

¹ <https://www.fastcompany.com/90489321/these-8-maps-show-the-massive-drop-in-smog-caused-by-the-coronavirus>

Never could we have imagined that we would be here, in the virtual space together, for the High Holy Days.

This isn't what I want, this isn't what any of us want...and I have to tell you how impressed and filled with awe I am at the strength of this community. 2020 didn't hand us lemons, it planted an orchard of lemon trees in the courtyard, and members of this community brought the sugar. Temple Emanuel never closed; we simply pivoted to do some amazing things. Perhaps you have joined us for learning sessions with Temple members and our extended community — doctors, lawyers, therapists, principals, journalists, pastors, politicians, and many more — who brought us enriching, important information. Shabbat services — and these High Holy Days — are lifted by the participation and voices of this community, whose talent and generosity of time and spirit makes my heart sing. Participation in learning sessions and everything we do has increased, as yearnings for connectivity and barriers to participation have been significantly lowered. Tzedek-driven giving, to support SHIM and our members in need, is inspiring. Our Temple, our community, has gotten stronger through this time of crisis, and I cannot tell you how much I appreciate all of your support and your contributions to this effort. Thank you. *You* are the core of Temple Emanuel, not 1250 Bower Hill Road, and truly we are stronger together.

(Points to the fast forward button overlaid on the screen...)

It is that energy, that flexibility, that creativity that allowed us to press another button: fast forward. In a span of ten weeks, we made ten years worth of changes. Boy, there were some rocky moments at the start, weren't there? Dropped connections, grainy laptop camera images, overheating computers in the sunny Beit HaT'fila, and audio/video sync issues were the bane of my existence. While these sound like the concerns of a television producer — or, with our cobbled together equipment, a low-budget vlogger — they represent an important facet of the new rabbinate. Rabbis and synagogues have long known that families are more geographically dispersed than ever before; we just assumed you had to be here in person to celebrate or mourn with us. We have long known that many of our systems are outdated and that synagogues the world over are the lagging indicators in the field of technology; we just assumed you would tolerate that. We have long known that there are more Jews outside our walls than within; we just thought we could program our way out of declining affiliation with status quo “if only: if only we offered that program, if only we did more of this.” We still have much to learn and many painful growth spurts ahead — all organizations that wish to remain relevant do — but pressing fast forward has brought about some necessary changes.

First, while we eagerly await and plan for the opportunity to welcome people back to the sanctuary — I miss you! — we also realize there are many reasons people are unable to join us: long-time members splitting their time — or spending their time — in Florida; people rushing from work or school and unable to make it to Temple at a specific time; people with health vulnerabilities unable to be the first back in large groups; and many more. The virtual cat is out of the bag, and with upgrades to our technology infrastructure we endeavor to continue streaming services and adult educational opportunities online even when we can be together again.

Second, Temple will continue to be active in the virtual space, on our website and Facebook page and Instagram, through emails and updated electronic communications. You can and should expect more colorful, picture-forward publications like our High Holy Day Magazine; more frequent, short chances to infuse every day with Jewish learning and connections on social media; and expanded access to community partners, nationally-renown scholars, musicians, and more.

Third, in the early days of the pandemic, we rushed to replicate the functions of Temple online. Now, we are working hard to realize the ways technology can actually improve how we fulfill our mission of Living, Learning, and Leading Judaism. Our collective capacity to transcend, to re-envision, and to strike a balance between the timeless values of our tradition and contemporary needs is the lynchpin of our resilience and no small part of why we are still here. That capacity will continue to serve us well today. There are likely things — committee meetings, learning opportunities from tutoring to Talmud study, even certain ritual observances — that might be best done online. And would it be too groaningly self-referential to suggest that the best is “yet” to come? The same flexibility and creativity that allowed us to press fast forward will also help us identify, cultivate, and seize upon expressions and realizations of Judaism we knew not how to imagine. Who could have imagined *this*, yet we are stronger together.

Together we pressed pause. Then we pressed fast forward. And soon, hopefully, it will be time to press play, to resume life with some modicum of normalcy. Not to return to “normal,” not back to exactly where we were, but to a better version of the present.

As a synagogue, that means a version of the present where we can welcome you back to the Sanctuary and Beit HaT’filah to celebrate s’machot, to mourn inevitable losses, to pray and study and simply be together — in-person and online. A present with more accessible, appealing Jewish content and communications. A present where we fully embrace the resilience that is a hallmark of our community and are ever open to new possibilities.

As a society, I hope pressing play and returning to a better version of the present means we might realize and embrace our collective responsibilities to our fellow human beings. That we might live in a present where we never again take for granted our connections with those fellow human beings, from handshakes to high-fives to hugs to heart-to-heart conversations. That the present to which we return is one where our proven resiliency enables a brighter future, a present where we have learned these hardest unsought lessons about the need for compassion and caring for others. At least a present where grocery shopping isn’t an adrenaline or anxiety producing experience and where Groundhog Day is confined to Punxsutawney, right? We will get there, as a society and as a synagogue, stronger together.

Are you ready? I’m ready. Temple Emanuel is ready. Let’s do this, together.

(Definitely presses the play button...)