

Ann Braude:

I'm reading from the book of Exodus, from chapter 28. "You shall make the robe of the ephod of pure blue. The opening for the head shall be in the middle of it; the opening shall have a binding of woven work around it — it shall be like the opening of a coat or mail — so it does not tear. On its hem make pomegranates of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, all around the hem, with bells of gold between them all around: golden bell and a pomegranate, a golden bell and a pomegranate, all around the hem of the robe. Aaron shall wear it while officiating, so that the sound of it is heard when he comes into the sanctuary before the Lord and when he goes out — that he may not die."

Ann Braude:

Good morning. I greet you this morning looking out at the empty pews of Appleton Chapel, missing the encouraging faces of those who choose to start their day by coming together in this space. Morning Prayers is a practice that has resisted change and modern technology, reminding us of the way the Harvard community has gathered for centuries to share a text, a musical offering, and reflection. I am honored to be speaking to you on this very difficult day, the day after we learned that because of the coronavirus, classes will be offered online, and that gatherings like Morning Prayers cannot take place in person.

Ann Braude:

As disrupted as all of our lives feel at this moment, I want to remind us of the way I would have begun to speak to you if you were here in person with me in the chapel. Each week, Jews publicly read a portion of the Torah, with the whole of the five books being broken up into 55 portions, one for each week in the lunar calendar. And when I have spoken at Morning Prayers in the past, I have taken the opportunity to follow the practice of focusing on whatever the Torah portion is for that week. Now, those of you who've heard me speak before may remember that I seem to have a knack for being assigned to dates for Morning Prayers where there is a truly weird Torah portion. The last time I was here, it was the skin diseases, one of the more gruesome and inscrutable Torah portions. Today, I had planned to cheat a little bit and read a section from last week's Torah portion, the section giving instructions for the vestments that Aaron and his sons will wear when he makes sacrifices at the temple.

Ann Braude:

Who could resist the description I just read in Exodus 27, where God provides a detailed pattern for the brightly colored priestly robes, headdress, and sash, as well as a breastplate adorned with inscribed stones? And then there's that detail about the pomegranates: pomegranates of blue, purple, and crimson wool, alternating with golden bells jingling around the fringe of the priestly robe.

Ann Braude:

I had planned a lighthearted set of comments on God's fashion sense, connecting it with the great dress-up holiday of the Jewish liturgical year, Purim, which occurred at the beginning of this week. In the carnivalesque celebration of Purim, also called the Feast of Esther, costumes, masks, and inebriation accompany ribald reenactments of the beautiful and virtuous queen tactfully concealing and then revealing her Jewish identity to avert the eviction of the Jews from Persia. After sharing with you some of the fun of Purim, I had planned to take a more serious tone, calling attention to the way that many of us don masks when we come here to pray in Appleton Chapel, the way many of us may feel like Esther in the court of King Achashverosh: privileged to be included in a lavish environment that is at once attractive and alien, sure that if we revealed our true identity, we would risk eviction.

Ann Braude:

When I planned those remarks, I had no idea that I would speak at Morning Prayers to students who will not be allowed to return to campus after spring break, and who have been given until Sunday to pack up their dorm rooms and depart. I had no idea that I would give these remarks to an empty room, a room emptied of its human presence by the need to create distance between us for our own protection. On Monday, like many faculty members, I attended a training session on how to teach classes on something called Zoom. Over the weekend, our indefatigable IT staff had gone into the websites of each of our courses and added a Zoom tab to allow students to join class sessions offered over the internet.

Ann Braude:

My heart sank as our wonderful IT instructor cheerfully demonstrated the wonders of the platform that would allow us to complete the second half of our courses without ever being in the same room as our students. I must have been a truly terrible student in this training, because the teacher sent me a note the next day offering to come to my office to provide one-on-one instruction in online education.

Ann Braude:

Halfway through the semester, my classes were just beginning to reach the point of cohesion, that magical moment when students know each other well enough to discover the distinctiveness of their classmates' perspectives, when they have experienced enough common learning to feel that they are on a journey together, that their experience as a group is more than the sum of their individual knowledge. Can that kind of cohesion continue and grow over the internet? Will students be able to listen to each other and to hear each other the same way they would sitting together in a classroom? Will they be willing to reveal as much of themselves as they engage the course materials as they would if they could feel the human presence of their classmates?

Ann Braude:

I don't know the answers to these questions, and I'm not sure what I want the answers to be. I'm not sure if I want to succeed or fail at online instruction. While part of me wants the best for my students who are losing so much already, part of me fears that if the experiment in online instruction is successful, we will normalize it, placing less value on the intangible aspects of education with human presence.

Ann Braude:

At times like this, I feel so fortunate to have thousands of years of wisdom embedded in Jewish law to draw on. Jewish law teaches that there are some prayers that are too important to say alone, and that can only be recited in the presence of 10 adults. Most prominent of these is the Kaddish, the memorial prayer said for a deceased family member, in which we sanctify God's name in the face of death. When we recite the Kaddish, the support of the community is all that stands between the individual and the rift of reality we face when death takes a family member from us.

Ann Braude:

But we also need a minyan of 10 adults for the public reading of the Torah. This is required to say the prayers that accompany unfurling the Torah scroll to chant the sacred text. But a minyan is not required to read the text from a printed copy. So there is clearly an understanding that reading the same text in private and reading it in the presence of a community are different experiences and have different meanings, but that both have value and possibility.

Ann Braude:

Whether you are a student or not, you will be doing things alone during the next week that you are accustomed to do in community. These next weeks will bring unwelcome isolation while we avoid human contact to avoid the spread of virus. The very things that make us feel whole have now become threats to public health: intimacy, community, forming a minyan, celebration, consolation, working together toward shared goals. Anything that brings people together has become a danger.

Ann Braude:

And we will have to use any means we can to stay connected and to care for each other during this time. I guess I'll even have to learn to appreciate Zoom if I am going to bring the passion and depth to my online classes that are my fundamental commitments as an educator. We will need each other more than ever to endure this ordeal and to emerge at the other end of it whole, not just in body but also in spirit.

Ann Braude:

Let me offer this prayer. Praised are you, creator of the universe, who commands us to come together at some times and to be separate at other times, who gives us the blessings of solitude and of community, who placed within us yearning for each other that we cannot explain and that teaches us that each of us is part of something greater than our individual selves. Amen.

Speaker 2:

Please join me, wherever you might be, in offering the Lord's Prayer. Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.