

Budding Authors ages 20-34

First place, *Community and Connection*, By Tobias Vogelstein, age 28

4000 years ago the Jewish nation would perform the unique mitzvah of Hakhel, by gathering in the Bais Hamikdash in a reenactment of the giving of the Torah. This communal act of devotion serves as an essential reminder that adherence to the Torah is the reason why the nation occupied and retained the Land.

In modern times, we maintain this tradition by going to shul. At shul, we form a deep connection with G-d, but it is also where we congregate and come together with our fellow Jews.

Though of course, I go to shul for one man.

Brian Goldberg is just about the sweetest man you'd ever meet. As my bar mitzvah teacher, Brian helped me learn my parsha in braille since I'm partially deaf-blind. He now runs a youth Minyan, commonly called the Teen Minyan at my local synagogue, which I've been attending for years.

We have our own little subterranean chamber in the corner of the synagogue that Brian likes to refer to as the dungeon.

It is just like any other service minus the cushioned chairs.

We daven, play games, and this one is important, eat the donuts that Brian orders for our break. But Brian goes above and beyond all that. Apart from frequently inviting the entire Minyan to his house for a backyard barbecue, he also makes an effort to arrive early and stay late after services to read to me.

The donuts, the trivia questions, the chance to win fabulous prizes; those are all incentives for everyone else. What I value most about the Teen Minyan is the time I get to spend with Brian, joking around, reading books together, and Brian is pretty much the only person left willing to play my favorite word game with me after everyone else got tired of declaring me the winner.

Of course I'm friends with several other members too, but other than a few brief exchanges during the service, and an email now and then, our communication skills could use some improvement. Thus my connection to them is nowhere near the bond I have with Brian.

I do try to pick out books that I think we will both enjoy. However, Brian would never tell me if a story is really up his alley or not.

So recently, I decided to try and give back to the community in my own way. About every Saturday, halfway through the service, Brian's friend, Doug, goes to the front of the room and gives a speech or D'var Torah either about something in the news or that week's parsha. I noticed that some weeks other members got up to give their own commentary on that week's parsha as well. So I thought I could do the same.

I am not a Torah scholar, and may not even be as religious as say, Doug, but I have learned a thing or two about storytelling. Mainly, just how by tightening the structure of it, the importance of a novel, stories exaggerate and just how special is the magic of community. Realizing that many of the themes found in a well told narrative could be traced back to specific life lessons

imparted in the Torah, I started creating monthly speeches to shine a light on just what these aspects could reveal.

Then the coronavirus hit, and everything changed.

Brian and I could no longer meet at shul. I could no longer inspire the other members with my brilliant insights, and for all intents and purposes, it felt like I have lost a friend.

This year, for the first time on the holiday of Pesach, my grandmother was unable to be with us for the Seder. Instead we had to break tradition, and bring her in on a zoom call. Though her visual representation was there, and she was most certainly with us in spirit, it just wasn't the same.

We are all living in a time like no other. The coronavirus has impacted our lives, our community, and our economy. But the Jewish nation is stronger than all that. If there's one thing that I learned through writing out my speeches, it's that the Jewish people put a high emphasis on the value of community. In the end, all you really have are the people you love. Not your job, not your career, not your awards, not your money, not your stuff. Just your people. Somewhere out there, there are scientists working round the clock to find a cure for this pandemic. We must have faith in their ability to bring these times to an end. Let's hope that time is soon. In the meantime, keep the connections you still have.

Keep praying, and if you're like me, keep writing to bring peace and prosperity to the world.

Second place, *At Sea*, By Atara Vogelstein, age 27

Floating
as a virus
floats
Earth overturned
its deadly roots
reaching out
in air thin
enough to break
turning lovers
into strangers
and strangers
into ghosts

scientists dig in sand
to reach China
arms thrusting through
the grainy weight
clawing fingertips
dry eyes
hands absent of triumph
as fists clench
fighting to break through
the blind comfort of whiteness

the sand gives shelter
housing ships of
enslaved people floating
forcing feet to touch ground
leaping from ships
that originated in England
and battered Africa
and the Caribbean
and the Native Americas
Everywhere sun touches this virus,
Racism
born of human insecurity
and the power hunger of men
taught and served by women
in kitchens and plantations
this virus
has been here
this virus is here

And now
picking up a rock
to toss into Atlantic
fleeing deadly virus
of corona
my privilege
to flee
to turn toward
or turn away
to protect
my white body
and white skin
my family's
white bodies
and white skin
this community
is not protected
from any virus

it has been here
in uglier forms
the government
has masked before
ugly ugly virus
we pretend not to know
what it does
how it invades
how it blocks

barriers masks walls
we pretend
underneath the guise of whiteness
masks covering grimace, smile
this community knows hatred

the virus is in Hitler
the virus is in Trump
the virus is in Swastika graffiti
the virus is in low income communities
the virus is in Rwanda
the virus is in prisons
the virus is in Berlin
the virus is in Johannesburg
the virus is in Vietnam
the virus is in police
the virus is in Alabama
the virus is in Baltimore
the virus is in neglect
the virus is in trauma
the virus is trauma
north south east west
carried by wind
breathed between humans
from bats butchered
from truth buried
from earth decaying
from human folly
2020 is awakening
a Renaissance
a necessary ugliness
baseless hatred
for which God punished
and punishes
earth rebels
humans protest
governments retaliate
families suffer
humans die

alone
many from this virus
have died alone
in hospitals
in houses
in shelters
in fields

on streets
the virus carries fear
and sadness

a virus breaks through cells
disrupts organisms upsets ecosystems
a virus unhinges unleashes
unmanageable anxiety fear
chained to a way of life
takes lives imprisons old cells

a virus
spreads
hurts
lethargy
exhaustion
sickness
all edges of the earth
feel this virus

and here
we feel it
we fear it
we fight it

we cling to loved ones
and run from them
we hide in cells
that do not change
human nature
does not change

it is in nature
where I feel safe
where particles floating
in the atmosphere belong
where streams and mountains
and rivers and dirt
are cleansing
healing
purpose

where love
abounds
within me
in shade
recovering

my senses
my footing
this world
tries to take
from me

I fight for it

my heart open
my body climbs in solitude
fighting to be free of fear
and free of masks
and free of virus
sick of indifference
and injustice
and human pollution
I refuse to tolerate
Climb with me, America! Climb!

restore the earth beneath us
the earth that holds us
the earth that saves us
the earth that buries us

I float through these ages
searching for an anchor
I am anchor
heavy weight defeat
mourning dead and dying
imprisoned by unjust virus

This is the world now
This is no novelty
This is how it's always been

I call on you, see it
even though it's scary
face it with your mask off
6 feet apart or 6 feet under

What are you protecting?

We all die from something
We kill black and brown bodies daily
We suppress and repress and depress
with our hands, our economy, our bodies

how do we recover from mass incarceration?

how do we teach children to love?

how do we learn from our own nature?

to live in community with oneself
is to love one's entire being

to live in community with others
is to embrace difference

threat forces apart
who can remain alive
who rejects the value of others' lives
no blood is redder to any virus

let us redeem ourselves from mass incarceration
let us once again show that Hitler did not win
let us eradicate this virus that lives within us

I run to the mountains for refuge
fleeing to fight, fleeing to feel

because I can
because I will float away
because I refuse

to as others storm streets
because they have to

What is community?

Is it checking in on that neighbor you do not love as yourself?

I become curious,

I drink the salty water

I gather the love outside of me

Honorable Mention

I wonder where I can find the time to be Present, By Sara Vogler, age 34

the presence remain in the breath,
a breath that is longing and deserving.
i wonder where time goes,

when we are breathing through the life.

my grandmother passed away during this longing period,
she passed peacefully among literature and the city's view
her body felt weak but her mind sharp,
into a container of ash which waits on us,
she is waiting for us.

while we weren't there
we were among her memories
sitting with her talking with her
until we can meet and bury her as a family
not through live video or phone
but in person in the environment of her memories

i sit and wonder how perfect it might
through tears and laughter
we can be there in the breath,
the breath of circle,
a circle of life.

till then.