

"With One Hand Behind Me

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[Chaplain Barry Pitegoff, BCC](#)

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Left human palm. (Photo by Carlos Arthur M.R on Unsplash.com)

As a professional hospital chaplain, two of the major tools in my tool box have been put on hold and one tool is just not being used as much. I am trained in non-verbal communication. Who sees my smile or puzzlement behind the mask du jour? I have at least three different hospital masks on my desk. I am trained in appropriate touch, a handshake, a pat on the shoulder, hugs with the suddenly bereaved. Again, not now. Social distance is a-social distance. Reduced are the happy assignments of the chaplain: blessing a new baby, celebrating a successful

surgery, the moment learning of an optimistic diagnosis and prognosis.

Too many people are seduced by sham science and conspiracy theories today. Fortunately, when we allow ourselves to look beyond these, as we should, we smile at the deep caring and resiliency of our core. I truly feel that when objective spiritual histories of this sad pandemic are written, G-d will be smiling down at those who went out of their way with their acts of *gemilut chasadim*, or "Acts of Loving Kindness." We heard from a priest colleague all the way away in Sri Lanka. The Director of Chaplains at a major Manhattan Hospital in the middle of it all, who is an Orthodox rabbi with his own congregation plus directs the chaplains at a Hospital at Pandemic ground zero took the time to text my wife and me to check in with us. A disaster psychologist, retired professor from Columbia University, spontaneously reached out to me from a resource list I am on for the Red Cross. Last weekend, the volunteer fire department serving my hospital drove through our parking lot with engines, sirens, flags and applause for us. Yes, you see a lot of it on the television. However, it truly sends you goose bumps when it is your own hospital, 70 miles northwest of NYC.

In struggling with how to be an effective chaplain without patients, families, and staff seeing my smile or feeling my

hand, I came across the artist Erich Stegmann. [Please see mfpausa.com for more information.] MFPAUSA is the Mouth and Foot Painting Artists Association. From its web site, "The roots of MFPA go back to 1957 when the painter Erich Stegmann and a small group of disabled artists from eight European countries created a self-help association... A polio survivor, Erich Stegmann grew up without the use of his arms, yet built a highly successful career in Germany by painting with a mouth-held brush."

Polio was classified as an epidemic, not a pandemic. It was a tragedy of my lifetime. Look how similar are the descriptions of the polio epidemic to the COVID-19 pandemic, from a recent article in Discover Magazine. "Like a horror movie, throughout the first half of the 20th century, the polio virus arrived each summer, striking without warning. No one knew how polio was transmitted or what caused it. There were wild theories that the virus spread from imported bananas or stray cats. There was no known cure or vaccine.

"For the next four decades, swimming pools and movie theaters closed during polio season for fear of this invisible enemy. Parents stopped sending their children to playgrounds or birthday parties for fear they would "catch polio."

"In 1952, the number of polio cases in the U.S. peaked at

57,879, resulting in 3,145 deaths. Those who survived this highly infectious disease could end up with some form of paralysis, forcing them to use crutches, wheelchairs or to be put into an iron lung, a large tank respirator that would pull air in and out of the lungs, allowing them to breathe."

Ultimately, poliomyelitis was conquered in 1955 by a vaccine developed by Dr. Jonas Salk and his team at the University of Pittsburgh. I remember a cousin (z"l) contracting polio around then and her children being given the Salk vaccine in an experimental state. I began college at the Baruch School of City College of New York (CCNY) before it became the separate Baruch College. I remember fondly seeing Jonas Salk's name on a wall plaque at CCNY of distinguished graduates.

The polio vaccine was a gift from Dr. Salk in the type of *gemilut chasadim* we are all benefiting from in a resurgence now, after nearly lying dormant, by comparison, for way too long. Wikipedia relates this dialogue between the television interviewer Edward Murrow (z"l) and Dr. Salk: "Young man, a great tragedy has befallen you—you've lost your anonymity," the television personality Ed Murrow said to Salk shortly after the onslaught of media attention.^[34]

When Murrow asked him, "Who owns this patent?" Salk replied, "Well, the people I would say. There is no patent. Could you patent the sun?"

Although Dr. Salk's biography says he was born of parents with Ashkenazic Jewish heritage, it is not clear if Dr. Salk came by *gemilut chasadim* through *cheder* or environment, but this ethical journey of Dr. Salk is more relevant than ever now.

Besides the mask, besides the social distancing, do your part by reaching out to someone who has been on your back burner for too long, and let them know you care. Say thank you to those who reach out to you. As Peter Yarrow wrote in his Chanukah song, "Don't Let the Light Go Out."

May you be well and stay safe.

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I vividly remember that September night in 1987. We had left the hospital earlier that evening knowing that the end was near. The hospital called a few hours later to let us know it had arrived. We were stood at mom's bedside holding vigil. Each of us tried to say...

Barry Pitegoff is a Staff Chaplain at Bon Secours Community Hospital in Port Jervis, New York. Barry enjoyed thousands of hours of volunteer chaplaincy at hospitals, hospices, and prisons while he was vice president of market research for Visit Florida, the state's tourism board. After retirement, Barry transformed into professional chaplaincy by taking a second Master's

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Degree and two years' of hospital

In "Reflections on Aging" internships. Barry was awarded the title of BCC, Board Certified Chaplain at the May 2019 conference of the NAJC (Neshama: Association of Jewish Chaplains). In 2020, Chaplain Barry was elected to the Board of NAJC, serves on Chaplain Review Committees, and facilitates a monthly national video call of Jewish hospital chaplains.