



# Vine

## FROM RABBI ZEMEL

### FINDING OUR OWN PATH TO KNOWING WHAT BEING JEWISH MEANS IN OUR DAILY LIVES

DEAR FRIENDS,



I have been using these columns to try to work out my Jewish theology. The isolation of the pandemic has for reasons that I cannot fully understand pushed me to dig more deeply into my innermost thoughts. But my ruminations never feel fully adequate.

The more I engage in this quest, the more I realize, as I suggested in my last column, that we really do lack the language to say what we believe. Our inherited way of thinking about Judaism, that is, our inherited language, does us little good. Let us begin by abandoning the phrase “good Jew,” as in, “Who is a good Jew?” What can it possibly mean that someone is a better Jew than someone else? Is being a Jew akin to being a trombone player or a third baseman, pursuits in which certain skills make one person demonstrably better than another?

We all know what people mean when using terms such as “good Jew.” They are referring to traditional and strict measures of observance: keeping kosher, saying daily prayers, forgoing electricity on Shabbat. Do I want these to be my measures? Do I want Judaism to be measured in such a way at all? Ridiculous, say I. We will chart a new path.

Our Jewish heritage is a vast culture encompassing ethics, ethnic behaviors and rules, myriad arts (literature, music, visual), philosophy and theol-

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## Nothing – and Everything – Prepared David Skorton for the Challenge of Covid-19

BY FRAN DAUTH

YOU MAY RECOGNIZE David Skorton, president and CEO of the Association of American Medical Colleges, from the Temple Micah YouTube videos on Covid-19 in the past year.

You may also know he was the 13th Secretary of the Smithsonian, is a board-certified cardiologist, a president emeritus of Cornell University, a past president of the University of Iowa and a member of the National Academy of Medicine.

What may surprise you is that nothing in his impressive career fully prepared him for the pandemic.

“Nothing in my experience prepared me completely for the enormous disruptions wrought by Covid-19: not only the terror of the virus and its lethality, but the economic dislocation, the personal fears and the isolation necessitated by social distancing and other measures.

“This resulted for many of us in tremendous anxieties, sorrow at the inability to be with our loved ones – including those critically ill – and, underlying it all, feelings of helplessness,” he said in



response to questions from The Vine.

In particular he was asked whether two events that occurred while he was president of Cornell University were in any way helpful in thinking about the pandemic. Those events were the suicides of three students who jumped to their deaths within four weeks, and

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