Stay, leave. Separate, together. Alone, connected. The Holocaust, the COVID-19 pandemic. Stay—a simple action, yet it can be one of the most meaningful actions. Whether it’s staying indoors, staying together, or staying alive, it can be the very thing that empowers one to develop inner strength and connectedness. For it is the presence of others that matters most when one finds themselves feeling isolated, mentally or physically. Stay—that is how Rosette Fischer, survivor from Lodz, Poland, persisted through the Holocaust. Recalling how she and her mother remained in a camp, Rosette says, “I couldn’t leave her alone, so I wouldn’t go… So, I stayed for her.”

From the beginning, all Rosette could remember was a “very happy home.” Starting in 1923, she stayed surrounded by her mother, father, and sisters, whom she “respected and loved” so much. Unfortunately, her memories of connectedness were tainted when the Nazis sent her and her family to Drancy, a transit camp in the outskirts of Paris in 1943. There, Rosette heard fearful screams and witnessed angst in the eyes of other victims. She remained in Drancy for six months, where she tried to stay together with her family in an “unbelievable” and “unreal” atmosphere.

After arriving in Auschwitz in 1943, Rosette learned of her father’s and sister’s deaths. Unable to tell her mother, she “put on a face” and lied about their whereabouts. Though Rosette desperately wanted to “go under the wire” to escape, she stayed for her mother, who was not strong physically but had a strong faith they would survive.

In early 1945, Rosette and her mother were forced on a death march to Ravensbrück, a German concentration camp. “If you stayed behind, they would shoot you,” says Rosette. During the march, as her mother fell further and further behind, she heard bodies falling to the side. “Leave me here, you just continue…” her mother uttered. Rosette wouldn’t allow her to cease walking. Dragging her mother, she stayed behind, reminding her, “You wanted to survive. Let’s walk.” In a shaking voice, Rosette repeats her mother’s words, “We’re going to survive. We have to tell people…” Staying with others was Rosette’s way of remaining connected and together to survive. Regardless of the consequences she could have faced, Rosette persevered through the Holocaust, staying with her mother and rediscovering happiness.

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, staying at home has been crucial for my survival; it has impelled me to stay connected to my family more than ever. My parents are privileged to be able to work from home, and my sisters and I are blessed to have the option of distance learning. Though being cooped up inside with the same people every day may seem repetitive and mundane, knowing they’ll stay just around the corner or a few rooms away provides comfort. Our feeling of togetherness prospers as we stay with each other, strengthening our bonds through saying our daily prayers, performing our chores, and cherishing each meal. By staying close to them, I establish connections that help me surmount various obstacles in life, such as coping with the recent passing of my cousin, Sonti, who I couldn’t visit due to COVID-19. Whether giving me a small pep talk or offering a hug as a reminder family is there for me; they have been my greatest source of consolation and unconditional support. Rosette’s testimony has reminded me that it is through the presence of my family that I find my inner strength and happiness.
Even after her mother’s death, Rosette states her mother “will still be with me as long as I live.” Her presence stayed with Rosette and just as Rosette survived the Holocaust, I hope to survive the pandemic. In times like these, the need to stay at home, stay connected, and stay together has intensified. Though it’s a simple action I take, it’s one of the most meaningful.