

used the self to experience the choices of the characters and dealt with the concept of rebirth before they saw the character's choices in the play. After the play had ended, the meaning of rebirth and death may have become more secular for individuals, enabling them to defy the meaning and to play with it further, as they had during the play. The authority of the sacred concept of rebirth became more approachable when the choices related to it—which used to fall outside the scope of an individual's decision making—became negotiable or even deniable in the play. The unknown path was still undiscovered and flexible for a soul that may search for its own exit. The authority of the sacredness of rebirth was transferred to the individuals, who thus owned the decision making and the flexible path to be taken to search for the exit; the meaning of the rebirth then became more secular. The audience members shared their experiences with the main characters who were negotiating with a sacred concept that seemed to be unspeakable, unavoidable, or too sacred to be doubted. The privacy of the recording and the location offered a free space in which the performers and the audience members could express their individual interactions towards the concept of rebirth. Playing the sacred concept of rebirth in a secular environment online may have lightened the religious authority that influenced the performers' and the audience members' choices of expression towards rebirth in the collective environment of the public space. In December 2020, the clips recorded by ten audience members during the pandemic will be re-created by the audience members in the MSU Theatre studio stage; the personal choices of expression they had made in private and the re-generated meaning of rebirth will once again live in the collective environment of the public space. The project was aimed at exploring a secular concept of Buddhism on stage, releasing questions on rebirth through expressions of inquiry of its sacredness: the conflict of the present life, which relates to the authority of rebirth and death and to the approaches adopted by an individual in order to align the self to the concept and to react to its authority.

Tina Weiss: Observations and Reactions within the Orthodox Jewish Community to COVID-19

A window into the lives of Orthodox Jews across the globe indicate that day-to-day reality has changed within the tight-knit community, from the shuttering of synagogues, introduction of remote education and the adaptation of celebrations since the outbreak of COVID-19. The Jewish religious norms and observances were challenged, reconceived and in some cases drastically altered, all while hopeful for the speedy return to the pre-COVID-19 life. Some elements of religious life – whether access to certified kosher food through normal channels and days that had previously been punctuated with communal prayer services – quickly changed to meet the new needs of life with COVID-19. The cohesiveness of a diverse global community highlight a generally tightly woven community that cares for one another and works to provide for the needs of community members in the best and worst circumstances.

Orthodox Jewish living is anchored from cradle to grave by both communal Jewish life as well as home life. Such a life includes a calendar often dotted with events such as Sabbath and holiday meals shared with friends or family, Bar Mitzvah celebrations, weddings that include festive meals for the post-wedding week in honor of the new couple, synagogue services that often conclude with a light meal shared by worshippers post-prayer service that creates a sense of unity and fellowship among

worshippers and community members. And then it is all gone. The daily prayer services with a quorum – gone. Synagogue doors locked. Some synagogues took a preemptive approach in concert with organizations such as the Orthodox Union and closed as they saw and learned early on about local virus cases, while others continued with prayer services until a later date and closed when the local and state government officials declared that gatherings, such as those in houses of worship were to cease – and yet, there were some that attempted to find other means to hold prayer services – whether outside or in non-synagogue locations.

With legislation and guidance speedily implemented in the New York City area in late March that aimed to shutter houses of worship in an effort to reduce the spread of the virus, many synagogues quickly closed while others began outdoor prayer services on porches or backyards and yet others attempted to resist closing and risked facing being closed by local authorities in an effort to curb the spread of the virus. Simultaneously, religious organizations such as the Orthodox Union (the US-based organization that represents rabbinic leadership, synagogues, youth programming and kosher certification), created guidance for the member synagogue congregations, whereby addressing the situation in consultation with their rabbinic leaders as well as with medical experts to guide congregations and religious leadership through the challenging period. The immediate pivot and was particularly jarring in communities that recall that the last closure of synagogue doors to communal prayer or study of religious texts may have been during World War II.

The experiences and changes within the Orthodox Jewish community were particularly challenging to communal norms, such as in-person prayer with the reading of the Torah scroll that can only be conducted with a prayer quorum of at least ten men, a specificity within Orthodox congregations. While in recent years many synagogues have taken safety precautions by engaging security officials or local police for added protection, COVID-19 is something that the communal structure had not planned for and was not necessarily ready to take on – but it since has, with great care and understanding, taken on the purpose of connecting individuals that may be socially distant, but need the intellectual and communal connections that are interwoven into their lives. Especially for those that may be considered marginal in some circumstances, such as those with disabilities or health concerns, elements of the Jewish community shone bright by working to ensure that individuals would have the care and necessities needed to continue to live, such as the New York City-based soup kitchen and food pantry network, Masbia which provides such needs to the Jewish community and beyond. The concept of caring and looking out for one another is a core element within the Orthodox Jewish community.

In early March, the communal joyous observance of the holiday of Purim (observed on the night of March 9 and day of March 10 this year) when the Scroll of Esther is read publicly with cantillation, gifts of food, donations for the poor and a festive meal is hosted at the conclusion of the holiday, mostly continued as it would have any other year. The Purim holiday is usually replete with celebrations in the synagogue as well as with family and social gatherings, levels of frivolity and joy, costumed children and adults. Most of these elements were toned down or completely canceled in many communities in March 2020, but most especially in those places that had already been affected by Coronavirus, such as the Young Israel community of New Rochelle in the suburbs outside of New York City which had some of the earliest known cases in the New York area. At this point some synagogue communities had

already made suggestions to reduce density within synagogue buildings, yet this was very early within the COVID-19 pandemic's spread within United States and within the New York metropolitan area and such techniques to reduce the disease's spread of the were less widely known.

Within weeks of the first known cases in the New York area, many daily routines were upended – many synagogues were closed for services with others following suit soon thereafter. Schools, organizations and social service programming for the elderly and vulnerable such as the Moriah Center in Upper Manhattan were closed, so that meals needed to be distributed by volunteers going door-to-door, as the in-person programming and meals for seniors were canceled. In short order, rabbinic leaders and synagogue lay leaders made arduous decisions during the period and sought ways to connect with congregants. Some communities attempted to keep their synagogues open as long as possible, especially considering that the action of closing of synagogues could be devastating to the spiritual lives of the worshippers and is often a lifeline and a place to connect with others and to some, especially singles and seniors, a place for camaraderie and perhaps the only other face one might see. Some synagogue communities considered the religious needs and sensibilities of their congregants, as well as consulted and considered medical guidance and chose to close their synagogues to communal prayer prior to local authorities requested or required the closure of such spaces.

The overarching and guiding principle for many religious leaders within the Jewish community is that of saving a life – such that saving a life can override the observances of the Sabbath and other religious observances, as well as the biblical command “*V'nishmartem me'od l'nafshoteichem*” (Deuteronomy 4:15) that one should guard one's health. As evidence mounted of the devastating potential effects of COVID-19, religious leadership made sweeping moves to curtail and then end public prayer services within synagogues. This was not without certain unique challenges to the Orthodox Jewish community. Virtual prayer services were not possible on the Sabbath, but creativity came into play in many congregations including Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun and those affiliated with United Synagogue with the use of pre-Sabbath services, while at the same time providing for new opportunities for connection between community members, albeit within a socially distant framework.

While Jewish communities, even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, have used technological means to connect with congregants, in particular the Sabbath would provide a significant challenge, as Orthodox Jews generally disconnect from the outside world during that weekly period (that is, living the twenty-five hours of each weekly Sabbath without the outside distractions of mass media, internet, phone, radio, TV, etc.) aside from emergency situations. In order to connect during the weekdays, many synagogues employed the use of Zoom or similar for prayer services, although some of the tradition accompaniments such as the reading of the Torah scroll were omitted, as there are Jewish legal discussions as to whether a prayer quorum could officially convene via video conferencing technology, as opposed to being within the same room. While those in the Reform and Conservative Jewish movements have warmed to virtual prayer quorums, especially during *Sha'at Dehak* (times of need), Orthodox leaders point to traditional sources and indicate that the ten men needed for certain core prayer need to be in the same physical space. In some communities, the use of technology for social-religious events, such as a kosher cooking class at New York's Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun, took root. This Orthodox community also

created programs especially for seniors and singles – including a hosted video conferencing event for singles that included a few uplifting words shared by a rabbi and a mixologist sharing a recipe and technique for a few drinks to enjoy. This event was aimed at giving mostly non-married members of the community in their 20s and 30s space to connect and meet one another; it was meant to mimic programming that would have ordinarily be held at the synagogue itself such as a Friday night cocktails and mingle program followed by a Friday evening prayer service in non-COVID times.

As the realization that the COVID pandemic was going to last months and not days or weeks, organizations across the globe such as Chabad-Lubavitch, the Orthodox Union, the United Synagogue, and the Union of Orthodox Congregations of South Africa turned to technology to connect to congregants during the turbulent period – with the intent to provide means to connect via video and phone services. The United Synagogue, the organization of British Orthodox synagogues reached out to its members and beyond using Zoom, Facebook Live and other technological means and presented lectures and pre-Sabbath services to those in the UK and beyond. While the hosting of online content on the actual Sabbath, from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday, did present issues particularly with the use of technology for streaming prayer services, many synagogues also turned to video conferencing and call-in options for community briefings regarding such issues as COVID-19 in the community, uplifting pre and post-Sabbath services and community conversations on issues of the day and other topics. Within an otherwise close community, often with large families that interact regularly, the desire to connect with one another has expressed itself through the imperfect medium of using technology to share uplifting thoughts and stories via newly created WhatsApp groups that include funny stories, newly composed songs, memes and vlog posts from Orthodox community members and from the COVID-19 recovered patients to provide emotional and spiritual support during such a challenging and trying time.

The COVID-19 period afforded religious leadership the opportunity to confront new issues and concerns. Rabbinic leaders are sought after to deliberate on sensitive questions related to life and death issues on a regular basis, and the intense period of COVID-19 brought new questions to light within the realm of Jewish law. Rabbinic leaders are asked to address such issues, from weighty concerns of, for example, a decision to taking a family member off of life support during COVID-19 treatment, to more everyday issues such as if a wedding should be pushed off to a safer time to allow extended family to celebrate with the new couple. In light of these issues and others, religious responsa that highlight such questions and answers have been published already in the United States and abroad and cover a wide range of individual and communal concerns, such as Jewish burial rites and safety, temporary burial (due to travel restrictions) and disinterment at a later date and phoning the hospital to advocate for ill family on the holidays and sabbath (due to restrictions that prevent family members on site in hospital settings) and others that continue to arise during this period that is fraught with concern for personal and communal safety and health.

One month after the Purim observance is the holiday of Passover, a holiday that differs greatly from others on the Jewish religious calendar in that it imposes significant dietary restrictions and comes with closely-followed family customs. Food that is kosher (acceptable) for Passover must follow regulations that exceed standard year-round kosher standards and exclude items such as leavened bread. The

customary ceremonial family meal, known as a seder, specifically necessitates procurement of special food and utilization of dishware, cookware and utensils that are only for Passover, as well as foodstuffs including Matzah, bitter herbs, Kosher for Passover wine and other holiday needs. Although food is a significant component of the holiday, the observance include a retelling of the story of the exodus from Egypt with a home-based service that often includes many family and friends around the table and is punctuated by a sumptuous meal and symbolic references, readings and song. With questions regarding availability of food, food insecurity, individuals observing the holiday alone for the first time, others that usually visit with multi-generational family structures as well as those that use the time for a holiday away from home and visit a hotel for the duration of the holiday – this year was to be quite different. With the impending Passover holiday, religious leaders geared up for new questions and concerns from congregants, many of whom were preparing for the holiday with the new COVID-19 challenges, by creating primers and guides as well as hosting teleconferences, videoconferences and Q&A sessions in advance to address issues and to ease or allay concerns regarding holiday preparations and observances during this trying period.

Rabbinic leadership also acknowledged another significant component faced by many during this period – isolation. Rabbis and synagogue leadership encouraged checking in on neighbors especially those that might be older, physically limited, or sick to ensure that they had emotional support. For these same people and those that might be afflicted with COVID-19, many communities developed systems to provide food and other necessities for those unable to leave home to visit a grocery store to obtain necessities – becoming true helping hands for many. One such community in Lakewood, NJ was the yeshiva Beth Medrash Gevoha, which created curated boxes filled with Passover necessities for community members that may have never observed the holiday at home, which include new kitchenware and food products and were distributed via contactless pickup to reduce contact between individuals. Some rabbis in the American Orthodox Jewish community notified congregants that they planned to leave their phones on over the Sabbath and holiday period and to call if they are in emotional distress. Realizing that isolation and safety concerns magnify mental health concerns, many acceded to being literal lifelines to those in need by making themselves available 24/7, even on the Sabbath and holidays.

Interestingly, for some the COVID-19 period placed new perspectives on the table related to observance. With communal prayer services extinguished and much later their eventual and slow return, many prayed and observed individually, some for the first time in their lives. This permitted individuals to consider their time, personal connection with the formulaic prayers and the opportunity to be thoughtful about their emphases within their personal observances and religious connections. In an article written in the Five Towns Jewish Times, a local New York Jewish community newspaper on August 6, 2020, Rabbi Dovid M. Cohen notes that in non-COVID times, he would even scramble to find a minyan (a prayer service with the requisite quorum) while on a family vacation, but during COVID-19, he was able to set aside time like never before and concentrate on his morning prayers, devote extra time to the Hebrew words and their meaning, as well as spend more time in contemplation. While prayer services have ranges of times for their performance based on complex mathematical calculations that include sunrise, sunset and geolocation among others, some synagogues suggested that worshippers pray at the same time as one another, even

though they were not praying in the same space. Young Israel of North Woodmere and Congregation Ramath Orah, both in New York, suggested to their congregants to continue to pray individually at the stipulated times that the prayer quorum would have met in person in synagogue as a symbol of community unity. Another symbol of unity of the community is the study of a daily folio of Talmud, called Daf Yomi, that allows learners to study to learn the entire Talmud in a span of seven and a half years. The new cycle of Daf Yomi began earlier in January 2020, and the beginning of the second tractate called Shabbat began in early March, just when COVID-19 was bearing down. The recent completion of the tractate after 157 days highlights the dedication to allocate time daily whether through a phone lecture, studying alone or via a pre-recorded video accessed via app.

In such a difficult period, it is beautiful to see the slow and safe return of joyous lifecycle events that even include a summation celebration for the completion of the Sabbath tractate, including one by a groom and another by the father of the bride, in which the family and community took great joy and pleasure of celebrating both and hopefully the beginning to the return to communal observance as in pre-COVID times. As legal restrictions permit, as well as religious organizations and synagogues create spaces that conform in COVID compliance, outdoor weddings and prayer services under open-walled tents will decrease and halls of the synagogues and study halls will once again be filled with voices in prayer and learning as before. The community hopes and awaits the time that communal life can return to the well-accepted norms that they continually long for, while acknowledging new sensibilities and sensitivities.

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Forum

Field Reports on Religious Life in the Time of COVID-19

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