

THE JOFA Journal

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FROM OUR PRESIDENT

Disruption Can Be Our Friend

By Pam Scheininger

As I sat down to write this article, I kept coming back to the thought, “What do I have to say about COVID that has not already been said?” The global experience of COVID, and the myriad ways it has affected us individually and communally, have been analyzed and expounded upon by philosophers, politicians, economists, and theologians around the world. Much has already been written about what we might learn from this pandemic, and more will be shared as we continue to experience its impact and adapt to living in an altered reality.

COVID has been universally and uniquely disruptive in very significant ways, and disruption is not usually regarded as a positive phenomenon. We generally prefer our world to be predictable. We like to plan and to be able to rely on broadly accepted rules. However, as



Orthodox feminists, disruption is often our friend. The traditional, longstanding norms of Orthodox Judaism do not readily allow the space for women that we want and need. So we embrace—and sometimes create—disruption in order to challenge those rules and norms, with the goal of forging a new reality that encompasses a vibrant and equitable Orthodox community.

The disruptions for humanity caused by COVID have been largely negative; this has been no less true in our own communities. Many of the disruptions experienced in the Orthodox world were gendered. As *shuls* began to reopen, men were often prioritized and women marginalized even more than usual, as they were excluded from the count of those permitted to attend services. *Mikveh* became far more challenging and

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Lifting Up Our Voices During a Pandemic

By Talya Gordon

After moving to a new city during a pandemic as a single twenty-four-year-old woman, I have grown to see the incredible gifts that Judaism has given me. With all the chaos around the world, I have needed the Jewish community more than ever to provide light at the end of a very dark and winding tunnel. Latching on to my Jewish identity during this tumultuous time has meant holding on to all parts of my Judaism, including the contradictory parts, as both a proud Modern Orthodox Jew and an unapologetic feminist. Clinging to my Judaism has been a dynamic and complex journey, as I have had to ponder what it means to be an observant Jew when we are distant from one another.

For the past twelve months, as synagogues have grappled with how to react to the pandemic ravaging our world, congregants have taken a step back into the sanctuary of their own homes. Judaism, a religion associated with communal ritual, has become more and more individualized as we have been pushed away from one



another. COVID-19 has taken what we thought was important and turned it upside down. Male-centered prayer services were once the cornerstone of Modern Orthodox Judaism, but COVID-19 changed that for many. COVID-19 led to a moment of silence in ritualistic Jewish life that often moves at the speed of light.

Perhaps we were supposed to use this lull in time to introspect about how the Modern Orthodox community can make everyone feel safe, welcome, and included. *Yisrael*—which literally means to struggle with God—is the essence of Judaism. We cannot mindlessly live our Jewish lives in a pre-programmed autopilot way; we must analyze our practices and remain aware of how our actions affect one another. I believe that each Modern Orthodox community has the power—and perhaps even the obligation—to engage in focus groups to gain a deeper appreciation for how each congregant redefined Judaism during the global pandemic.

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The New Normal: Something to Look Forward To

By Daphne Lazar Price

“I’m ready to get back to normal.” I hear those words out loud and in my head daily. And even as I write them here, I wonder if we want to go back to “normal.” We have endured a lot throughout this pandemic: illness and death, quarantine and distancing, and various impositions and lifting of restrictions (that were sometimes reimposed). But I don’t think we should idealize the hectic quality of life before the pandemic or the hard costs incurred. We learned a lot about ourselves as individuals and about what it means to be in community with people, both in person and from afar. For JOFA as an organization, this experience has also meant that we took the time to look inward, review our online presence, evaluate our accomplishments, and look toward the next 25 years.

When the pandemic broke out in March 2020, pivoting to solely online programs was an easy task for JOFA. We had long been running online programs in addition to in-person gatherings. At the time, there were a few live events in the works, which we intended to postpone until the spring and then quickly had to reimagine as online gatherings.

We used this as an opportunity to expand our online community. We did so through virtual women-led *tefillah* (prayer) services and *megillah* readings. We provided educational opportunities as well as conversation starters on advocacy issues such as women in the workplace, creating a culture of self-care, domestic abuse, and *agunah* prevention. And, of course, we advocated for including women in decision-



making processes wherever decisions are being made. People from across North America, Europe, Israel, South Africa, and Australia joined us to lead and learn together. Reaching wider audiences, creating and deepening partnerships with like-minded organizations, and providing low- or no-cost access to programming have been a plus. Those moments have been inspiring and the feedback overwhelmingly positive, but not without consequences.

In March 2021, JOFA held its Tenth International Conference on Orthodoxy and Feminism: Building a Vibrant and Equitable Orthodox Community. Throughout the day, conversations were centered on lifting barriers and gaining access to increasing women’s roles in education, leadership, and ritual engagement. Of course, by holding the conference remotely, the barriers of cost, travel time, and family and childcare accommodations were lifted. And yet, the all-important, never-to-be-underestimated *shmooze* that happens organically at the water cooler, in between sessions, and in the coatroom during in-person gatherings, as well as the physical energy and shared excitement, were lost.

JOFA is far from the only organization asking these hard questions and weighing the costs and benefits of in-person vs. remote vs. hybrid gatherings. We would love to hear from you. What worked? What would you like to see more of? And what needs improvement? We want to be best prepared as we enter into this “new normal” and navigate the next phases of pandemic life, as we look ahead to JOFA’s next 25 years.

From Our President *continued from page 1*

complicated as *halakhah* clashed with health concerns. Many mothers shouldered a disproportionate burden, struggling to work while their children were learning remotely and in and out of quarantines.

But as with all disruptions, there have also been positive developments. The call for articles for this edition of the *JOFA Journal* was met with an unprecedented response. As a result, we have a rich collection of articles that cover community building during quarantine, examining and redefining our relationship with *mikveh*, and the power of institutions and organizations to pivot to online platforms and tools in order to continue their good work—as well as personal stories of challenges, strength, and positive growth in this unique time in history.

As an organization, JOFA has taken advantage

of opportunities presented by COVID to adapt our programming. For example, we convened our first online conference, which reached participants in more than 60 cities and seven countries—and we continue to use our online platforms to carry out our mission, while reevaluating what Orthodox feminism looks like in the time of COVID.

On a philosophical and theological plane too, COVID has been deeply disruptive. Many of these disruptions have been difficult and painful. But some have led to the formation of new spaces for engagement; new ways of thinking and acting; and new ways to experience ourselves, our families, our communities, and our lives as Orthodox feminists. The articles in this issue of the *JOFA Journal* reflect a range of thoughts and voices about this ongoing experience and exploration of our new reality.

Lifting Up Our Voices *continued from page 1*

My new Modern Orthodox community, Congregation Keshet Israel in Washington, D.C., which is composed of many people whom I've never met face to face, embraced this strategy. With the support of Rabbi Hyim Shafner, I decided to lead a focus group to dive deeper into the female Modern Orthodox experience unraveling during the pandemic. With each woman sitting in the comfort of her own home—away from traditional sacred synagogue life—we opened a conversation that should be happening in this moment away from the synagogue: What does the future for empowered Modern Orthodox women hold? Is COVID-19 an opportunity to redefine what it means to be a Modern Orthodox feminist?

Methodology of the Focus Group

To delve into these complex questions, Rabbi Shafner and I sent out an email to women in the Keshet Israel community to gauge interest in a focus group. Since I had just moved to the D.C. community, Rabbi Shafner's willingness to connect me with various women facilitated a smooth recruitment process. Once nine women had enthusiastically committed to the event, I sent out a Doodle (a free online scheduling tool) to find a time that worked for all the participants. I sent several email reminders, including a calendar invite, and told each participant to bring a hot drink to keep the atmosphere casual.

I prefaced the focus group by explaining that the discussion would be documented in a blog post, while also reassuring everyone that their anonymity would be maintained. I started the conversation with an icebreaker—each woman introduced herself and shared her favorite female character in *Tanakh* with the group.

I prepared a list of open-ended questions that I used to facilitate the conversation. The questions ranged from “What have your experiences been as a woman in the Keshet community?” to “What draws you to Modern Orthodoxy?” Also addressed was “What practical changes would you like to see for women in the Modern Orthodox community?” I then served as a moderator throughout the discussion, ensuring that each woman had an opportunity to respond to each open-ended question. I took notes throughout the conversation to document the results.

What the Conversations Revealed

The conversation was vibrant and lively. I watched as each woman passionately spoke about her journey toward Modern Orthodox Judaism. One by one, each woman spoke about her personal story, with her eager and curious peers listening intently. I watched as mere acquaintances began opening up to one another about their innermost struggles with synagogue life, Jewish expectations, and gender roles. Each woman's story

was unique, but a passion for both Modern Orthodox Judaism and feminism created a strong, unwavering bond among the participants.

There was diversity in the group's upbringing, with individuals coming from all over the United States—one grew up as a Conservative Jew and several grew up in the *yeshivish* community—bringing an added layer of complexity and nuance to the conversation. With a range in age as well, each of the women had unique insights about how her stage of life had informed her desire to be part of the Modern Orthodox Jewish community.

We generated a list of ideas that this specific group of congregants hoped to integrate into the Keshet Israel community. The ideas ranged from having a *gabbai't* (a female *gabbai*), passing the Torah onto the woman's side of the *mehitzah*, adding a maharat or a female spiritual leader to the clergy staff, giving women *aliyot* on Simhat Torah, and holding co-ed *tisches*.

We spoke extensively about cognitive dissonance; many women observed that they compartmentalize their feminism when they walk into ritualistic spaces, so that the lack of female involvement does not bother them. One woman spoke about the problem of using imprecise language, such as asking for “ten people” for a *minyan*, when in reality what

was being sought was ten men, reinforcing the notion that in the Modern Orthodox community, “people” means “men.” I was amazed by the nuanced comments and ideas that each woman brought to the conversation, with each comment adding more insights to this complex issue.

Interestingly, I observed that many of the women in the focus group avoided talking about women's roles in synagogue rituals, with our conversation emphasizing the social, logistical, and learning aspects of a synagogue community. This seemingly was a result of women compartmentalizing their feminism in ritualistic spaces; this was especially true for several of the women who had grown up in *yeshivish* communities, where women typically have even more traditionally gendered roles in Jewish life. Regardless of whether the participants were bothered by their lack of ritual leadership or had found a way to allay this frustration, it was clear to me that under the current status quo, Modern Orthodox feminists cannot bring their full selves into ritualistic Jewish spaces. Because no one wants to reveal angst in a communal space meant to provide comfort, many women just hold this cognitive dissonance within, never expressing it to the leaders of the community.

The rich dialogue and deep passion that each woman brought to the conversation showed me the power of actively listening to congregants. It is critical to create comfortable forums in which to discuss sensitive topics; the Zoom world has facilitated this, allowing each woman to express her viewpoint while in the comfort of her own home.

Each community has the power to create a space to discuss women in Modern Orthodoxy and raise community awareness.

Broader Implications

Although the results described here are unique to the Keshet Israel community, the methodology could be applicable to any Modern Orthodox community seeking to engage in dialogue. Whether spoken or unspoken, the tension between feminism and Modern Orthodoxy exists in every Modern Orthodox community. It is up to each community to decide whether to ignore this tension or address it through dialogue. Each community has the power to create a space to discuss women in Modern Orthodoxy and raise community awareness. A focus group alone cannot create practical changes, but it has the power to send the message that female input is valued. It takes a passionate congregant and a supportive rabbi to create a successful focus group that can lead to change.

Intergenerational presence in a focus group is important to gather insights from women of all ages and stages of life. Zoom focus groups can create a convenient medium for congregants to come together in the confines of their homes. Before the focus group, the moderator should ask each participant to identify a private space where she or he will join the Zoom meeting, to ensure the confidentiality of the session. Throughout our discussion, I noticed how comfortable each woman was with sharing her personal story, struggles, and identity. Zoom enabled each woman to remain in her own personal environment, facilitating a level of comfort to express raw emotions on a sensitive topic.

Other communities can take advantage of this moment

of Zoom and the safety it brings to engage in this conversation about women in Modern Orthodoxy. Maybe the technology can help us as a Modern Orthodox community to “zoom” out and critically evaluate how to make *shul* a place that is inclusive for everyone. This pandemic has refocused Judaism as a religion full of many *mitzvot*, not just communal prayer. This new perspective can and should help us to do the critical work of making Modern Orthodox Judaism a meaningful experience for both men and women. We must seize this opportunity as we transition out of our socially distanced lives back to synagogue life. We are stronger when we listen to one another.

Acknowledgment

I am extremely grateful to Rabbi Shafner for being the first Modern Orthodox rabbi to push me to use my voice on a topic that means so much to me. More rabbis should do the same. The next step will be for rabbis and other religious leaders in the Modern Orthodox Jewish community to respond to these voices with change—change informed by the congregants.

Talya Gordon hails from Atlanta, GA, and grew up in a Modern Orthodox family with South African parents. She graduated from the University of Maryland in 2020, worked at the NIH from August 2020 to August 2021, and has now begun a Ph.D. program in clinical health psychology at Ferkauf Graduate School of Yeshiva University.



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Did COVID-19 Change Us, and How?

A Study of Four Modern Orthodox Communities

By Michelle Shain

“Shabbat Morning Groups for Our Children Are Back ... this Shabbat!” read the subject line of an email from my synagogue sent a few months ago, in May 2021. After more than 14 months of spending Shabbat mornings at home with my four children, the prospect of going back to *shul* filled me with excitement—and uncertainty. After so much time apart, how had we changed?

Losing loved ones and beholding death on a scale unseen in peacetime challenged and transformed the underpinnings of our assumptions about the world. When Orthodox Jews found themselves faced with the spiritual dilemmas of a global pandemic, what changes were wrought? At the Orthodox Union’s Center for Communal Research, we sought to address that burning question. We were particularly interested in how women had responded to the extreme disruption of their usual rhythms of home life.

Because men had comparatively greater access to communal prayer and support, women’s spiritual resilience in the face of the pandemic is all the more remarkable.

Our *Community Portrait Study* (see research.ou.org/cps) gives a glimpse into the COVID-19 experiences of adult members of eleven Orthodox synagogues in four communities: New Rochelle and Scarsdale, New York; West Hempstead, New York; the Toco Hills neighborhood in Atlanta, Georgia; and the North Dallas area of Dallas, Texas. We did surveys at three time points during the COVID-19 pandemic, ultimately collecting data from 937 individuals, 48 percent of whom were women. Because we surveyed the same people multiple times, we learned a lot about the relationship between “staying home” (measured using Google’s Community Mobility data), religion, and mental health.

Were the people who participated in our study typical American Jews? Certainly not. They were suburban, middle-class Orthodox Jews, two-thirds of whom were college graduates and most of whom had household incomes of more than \$100,000 per year. (In New Rochelle and Scarsdale, almost half had household incomes of \$400,000 or more per year.) Most respondents belonged to Modern Orthodox synagogues and/or synagogues that employ a rabbi with *semikhab* from Yeshiva University.

Impact of the Pandemic on Religious Life

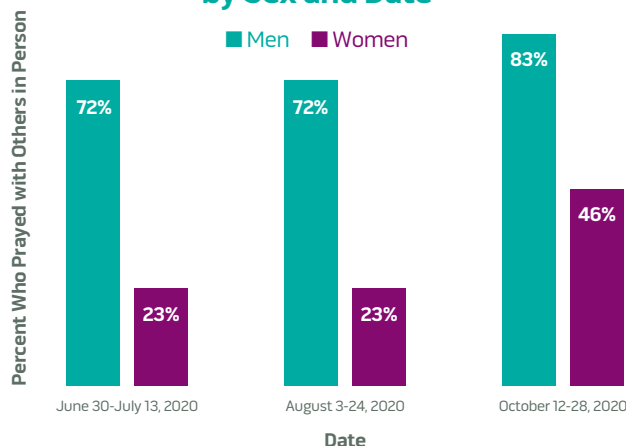
What did our study uncover about the impact of the pandemic on the religious lives of this rarefied group? Throughout the pandemic, the Orthodox Jews in our sample demonstrated a consistent, positive attitude toward God and religion. Contrary to expectations, when people were spending more hours at home, they were also *more* likely to report that they “find strength or comfort in religious observance” and “feel God’s love.” This was equally true of men and women.

In their own words, some women shared their unwavering confidence that God “runs the world” and “has a plan for us that we cannot possibly fathom.” It is impossible not to marvel at the faith of the woman who said, “I have more awe in things that are not visible to the eye like the virus that is affecting the world. I still think God is good and that some things that happen are not punishments.” Other women spoke of their conviction that they had a duty to help others, that they were “finding purpose in helping other people” and that “doing *mitzvos* will bring His *rahamim* (mercy).” Very few women expressed doubt or crises of faith.

At the same time, the pandemic seems to have widened the gap between men’s and women’s synagogue attendance. Women were much less likely than men to attend in-person prayer services (i.e., *minyanim*) throughout the pandemic, and even as the situation improved, women’s return to the synagogue was slower than men’s. Because men had comparatively greater access to communal prayer and support, women’s spiritual resilience in the face of the pandemic is all the more remarkable.

Social distancing measures changed Shabbat more than any other day of the week for Orthodox Jews.

Percent Who Prayed with Others in Person, by Sex and Date



To tap into this experience, we developed a Shabbat Sentiment Scale consisting of questions about the extent to which people felt joyful, peaceful, bored, or lonely on the previous Shabbat. On average, women had less positive feelings about Shabbat than men, with sex differences being greatest among respondents younger than 40 years old.

One young mother’s comment about the experience of being home on Shabbat with her children was sharply illuminating: “It just makes Shabbos so depressing that the women are all stuck at home prisoners with screaming children while the men are all out and in *shul*.” The strong language in her comment alludes to a painful and palpable absence—namely, the opportunities offered by synagogue life for children to learn and play while their mothers draw on the support of prayer and friends.

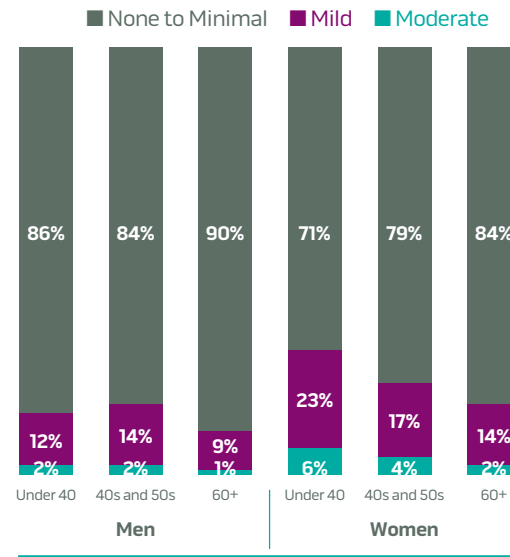
What did the pandemic teach us about women’s Torah learning? When it came to learning Torah over the phone, online, or through an app, women were less likely to do so than men: 50 percent of women did so, versus 66 percent of men. The relative difference between men and women was the same when it came to learning alone or with someone in their homes, but the overall percentages were higher: 62 percent of women versus 81 percent of men. The policy implications for Jewish content creators are many, one of which is that resources to support individual or family learning may be more appealing to both women and men than are synchronous online learning opportunities.

Younger women were more depressed and anxious, had higher levels of perceived stress, and felt lonelier than older women.

Mental Health Implications

How did the pandemic affect Orthodox women’s mental health? It is important to note that in the general U.S. population, women are more likely than men to have a mental illness, and men are more likely than women to be dependent on or abuse alcohol and illicit drugs. It was therefore unsurprising that the women in our sample were more depressed and anxious, felt more stress, and felt lonelier than men, but were less likely than men to binge drink. Furthermore, younger women were more depressed and anxious, had higher levels of perceived stress, and felt lonelier than older women. Differences between men and women, and between older and younger women, persisted throughout our study period, suggesting that they may be unrelated to the pandemic. In other words, it may be that younger Orthodox women face more psychological challenges

Levels of Anxiety and Depression, by Sex and Date



than others in the community even during “normal” times.

Nevertheless, the proportion of Orthodox women in our sample with mild to moderate symptoms of depression and anxiety decreased as time progressed and the pandemic waned. The proportion of men with these symptoms did not change over the course of the study. Here, we run into the obstacle that the American Orthodox community had no baseline, pre-pandemic measures of mental health. Without these baseline data, we do not know what women’s improving mental health and men’s unchanging mental health mean. Were women more successful in overcoming the psychological challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic? Were women more susceptible to such difficulties in the first place? It remains an open question.

Overall, the Orthodox women in our sample fared well during the pandemic. Why? Certainly, they were protected from some of the challenges of the pandemic by being highly educated and having well-paying jobs. There’s a lesson there for women, that striving for an education so as to secure financial security is important. However, our examination of the relationship between religious faith and mental health suggests that faith in God and existential meaning were also powerful sources of comfort and support. Orthodox life offers Jewish women a lens through which they can interpret their experiences and a community that offers powerful support. During a particularly challenging year, it was heartening to discover just how meaningful, enduring, and inspiring these foundations of support were.

Dr. Michelle Shain is the assistant director of the Orthodox Union’s Center for Communal Research.

COVID, Creativity, Compassion, and Community

By Candace Plotsker-Herman

It's trite to say that Purim confusion morphed into Pesah disappointment; my world fell apart and then I became resilient. It would be truer to add: and then anxious, and then resilient, and then anxious once more.

Of course, my family and friends provided care, support, empathy, and love. We endured challenges, including long-distance care for my 95-year-old mother and painful distance from children and grandchildren.

My story here is not one of loss and disappointment, however, but rather a celebration of the power of community and appreciation for institutions that helped me weather a storm and emerge as a more thoughtful woman. It centers on creative connections, often forged through technology. I'm not referring only to Zoom birthday parties, joyful virtual Sunday morning *tefillah* shared with grandchildren across the country, a New Year's Eve mixology class with friends, bar and bat mitzvah celebrations, a host of cultural events (with a shout-out to Temple Emanuel's Streicker Center in New York and every other JCC) and, sadly, too many funerals and *shivahs*.

My COVID story comprises four short stories, described here.

Brick-and-Mortar Community: Best Block Ever

I thought it cute when one of my young neighbors created a WhatsApp group called Best Block Ever, but now I suspect she might just have been a *neviyah*, a prophetess. Here are some proofs based on last year's texts.

Place your orders! I have challah, babke, and apple tarts.

This was from a neighbor who had canceled her son's bar mitzvah with three days to go. Donning gloves and a mask to pack the delicacies she had been baking and freezing for months, she taught her son that:

- a. Coming of age can entail disappointment.
- b. Communal responsibility trumps personal fulfillment.
- c. It's possible to pivot with grace and generosity and turn tomorrow's unwanted *hametz* into today's shared, delectable treats.

Who has a charged portable speaker? I need to Zoom my father-in-law's hesped from the cemetery.

I just can't do this anymore. . . . I need toothbrushes for Pesah.

There are six new toothbrushes and new toothpaste in a zip-lock hanging on my door.

We posted our needs for random Pesah ingredients as well as offers of excess bounty received when coveted food deliveries went awry. We left potatoes, matzah meal, and jumping toy frogs at doors, rang bells, and ran away. There were also midnight calls and texts offering listening ears and *hizuk*. It was a strange Pesah, yet we were not estranged.

Tefillah Community: The Bayit

My father's *yahrzeit* took place a few days after our *shul* shut its doors. I felt proud to belong to the Young Israel of Woodmere, New York, which took this proactive step in the face of some angry resistance. Yet I felt bereft. My daughter Michelle then told me about the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale's Zoom *tefillah*. "It's a [chat] room; you can't really say Kaddish," she said. Frankly, it sounded like parallel play, but it seemed better than sad solitude. I logged on

and saw a familiar face, Rav Steven Exler, with a child perched on his lap. *Davening* was led by a woman, Rabbanit Bracha Jaffee. Not my norm, but something I've claimed to embrace. Now it was time to walk the talk. Rabbanit Bracha invited me to share thoughts about my father. In 56 years of *yahrzeits*, I've felt welcomed warmly in many *shuls*, unwelcome in others, merely tolerated in some, but never had I been asked to share memories about my father.

I have now marked two *yahrzeits* with this group. During the second, my 95-year-old mom held my hand from her hospital bed. And I've walked the talk, comfortably and proudly. Along with the men, other women and I participate by reading the *tefillah* for the Israel Defense Forces, the names of the deceased for whom we are learning (in acknowledgment of the fact that the *Kaddish l'yahid* [Kaddish said without a *minyan*] is meaningful but not a halakhic Kaddish) the *mi she-berakh* for *holim*, or a special COVID *tefillah*.

I have prayed and grown with Rabbanit Bracha and a dedicated core group for fifteen months. The Bayit's rabbinic leadership saw a need and responded with sensitivity and creativity. Under Rabbanit Bracha's leadership, we have nourished and cultivated a virtual caring community that prays and learns together. We are family of sorts; we read each other's faces and note joy as well as tribulation in those little Zoom boxes. We bring

My story is not one of loss and disappointment, but rather a celebration of the power of community and appreciation for institutions that helped me weather a storm and emerge as a more thoughtful woman.

a diverse set of strengths to our *tefillah* and learning. We've shared personal, familial, and professional trials and triumphs, always emerging stronger. In this *davening* space, when a child or grandchild wanders into the room, the *tefillah* stops. Rabbanit Bracha engages them—*al pi darkhehem* (each according to his or her needs). When a tree fell on my house, Rabbanit Bracha researched the *halakhah* and invited my husband and me to *bentch gomel* (say the blessing for deliverance from danger). When my mother became ill, each person in the group provided strength in his or her own way.

My *tefillah* has become more meaningful. Words that I used to gloss over have jumped off the page and grabbed me. And I try to comply with all my heart and soul when the *rabbanit* reminds us, before we say *Mizmor l'Todah*, to breathe in our gratitude and breathe out our worry. More often than not, I succeed.

Learning Community: Nishmat and Beyond

Ever since participating in Nishmat's summer learning program in 2005, I have longed to return, but life got in the way. Strangely, the pandemic paved the way for my summer of learning. Sure, I wasn't in Jerusalem, but I was once again learning Torah from Rabbanit Chana Henkin. After the initial week, the staff pushed me out of my comfort zone and convinced me to enroll in an all-Hebrew track.

After the summer, my *havrutot* and I decided that although *Iyov* (Job) was finished with us, so to speak, we were not finished with *Iyov*. So we continued learning

weekly. We were an unlikely trio: Freida, a retired school psychologist from Maryland; Hava, an educational administrator and young Parisian mom; and me, a consultant and writer from New York.

We finished *Iyov* and proceeded to Daniel, trying to understand his experiences through a diaspora Jewish lens and make sense out of his tortuous visions. We've moved on to *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers). It's often challenging, but I look forward to our Wednesday meetings. We share a passion for learning and a sincere interest in one another's weekly challenges and accomplishments. I believe that we enrich not only our learning, but also each other, through our different outlooks and life experiences.

Backyard Shul Community

As the *hagim* approached, it became clear that, in spite of the herculean efforts of the Young Israel of Woodmere to create safe, masked, distanced *minyanim*, we were not comfortable. Collaborating with a group of friends, we transformed my backyard into a *shul*. This was no

small logistical feat. It required engineering, banging, *schlepping*, renting a tent, buying industrial fans and timers, and constructing an *aron* (ark). I charted out the seating, taping different-sized Post-its indicating the number of seats in a pod to graph paper, thus ensuring six-foot distancing. Protocols included no kissing the Torah, in-place *aliyot*, one designated person for *petihah*, *hagbah*, and *galilah*. We were less than gracious hosts,

providing neither *mahzorim* nor bathroom privileges. We did, however, supply unlimited hand sanitizer, tissues, garbage bags, and a bento-boxed Kiddush to

go (including a vegan option) on my mother-in-law's *Shemini Atzeret yahrzeit*.

As almost hourly (mostly male) phone calls and emails ensued, I developed a profound appreciation for the work that occurs on the other side of the *mehitzah*. We needed a Torah, a *ba'al tefillah*, a *ba'al koreh*, and a *ba'al toke'a*—and my yoga mat for the *kobanim* to stand on instead of wet dew-soaked grass. And speaking of the *mehitzah*, I suffered growing pains, but I walked the talk (as when eating with others one satisfies the person whose *kasbrut* observance is strictest) in accepting that our *mehitzah* needed to rise to the strictest interpretation. And as the *mehitzah* grew, so did my appreciation for it.

The bar was relatively low: I had hoped for safe *davening*. When, at the last minute, it became clear that neither my mother nor my children would join us, the bar sank a few inches more. My pod of four chairs turned into a lone seat. Yet my *tefillah* was incredibly spiritual. Of course, it is

hard to be late for *shul* when it is in your own backyard. It is hard to talk in *shul* when that requires making the concerted effort of walking six feet. So I prayed almost every word. I was able to read more of the commentaries in my favorite *mahzorim* and *daven* with *kavanah*. When I looked up, I was surrounded by dear friends and greenery—Hashem's gifts to me. And when my dear young friend Daniel blew the *shofar*, I saw neighbors gathering. I saw the woman whose husband had died from COVID and the neighbor holding her son who has cerebral palsy standing, at a distance, listening to the *shofar*. I also saw a stream of neighbors, men pushing strollers, women holding babies, siblings holding hands—all drawn to the sound of the *shofar*. It was a mystical, magical moment.

Candace Plotsker-Herman provides marketing and fundraising services to nonprofits, small businesses, and entrepreneurs. She coaches high school and college students through the school application process and facilitates book group discussions.

**It was a strange Pesah,
yet we were not estranged.**

**My *tefillah* has become
more meaningful. Words that
I used to gloss over have jumped
off the page and grabbed me.**

Sharsheret's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

By Devorah Silverman

The COVID-19 pandemic was devastating. Hundreds of thousands of lives were lost, and millions experienced isolation and social recessions from which it will take years to recover. If there is a silver lining for the women of Sharsheret, it is that we are emerging with an even sharper mission, understanding how we can more effectively support the women who need us, and more broadly share lifesaving information.

Sharsheret is a national nonprofit organization that, through personalized support and educational outreach, improves the lives of Jewish women and families living with or at increased genetic risk for breast or ovarian cancer. Sharsheret was founded by women, has always been run by women, empowers women, and educates women. We are truly a *sharsheret*—a chain of women supporting and nurturing one another.

Pre-pandemic, women contacted Sharsheret to access a range of clinical services from social workers and genetic counselors, including peer supporters—opportunities to learn about prospective doctors and health care centers, cancer genetics and genetic screening, and financial subsidies for nonmedical services. Women received resources about dating and parenting during cancer, survivorship, and financial wellness. Our callers checked in regularly as their needs evolved, and appreciated the opportunity to access Sharsheret on their own terms—by phone, email, or through our livechat. We provided telehealth services, meaningfully connecting with the women who needed us. A cancer diagnosis is life-changing for anyone, but Jewish women affected by breast or ovarian cancer face unique and complex challenges.

Pre-pandemic, Sharsheret facilitated hundreds of educational events nationwide on high school and college campuses, in synagogues and JCCs, and in Jewish and medical communities, reaching more than 50,000 persons annually, sharing life-saving information about cancer genetics and preventive measures that can be taken to protect one's health. We provided opportunities for women personally affected by breast or ovarian cancer or at increased genetic risk for those diseases to share their stories, educating and inspiring thousands each year.

And then came the coronavirus.

The early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, large-

ly characterized by fear, angst, and confusion, saw the cancellation of the overwhelming majority of preventive cancer screenings such as mammograms, breast ultrasounds, and MRIs. In “normal” times, women often neglect their own health care while they care for their parents, children, family members, and friends. As a result of the estimated 10 million cancer screenings missed during the pandemic, breast cancer diagnoses are predicted to increase dramatically in the coming years, and cancers are likely to be found at later stages than they otherwise would have been.

As Sharsheret ramped up our clinical support services to meet the dramatically increased demand for more

frequent, longer, and deeper telehealth sessions with the women we support, we also had to shift all our educational programming to virtual platforms. In so doing, we learned three critical lessons.

Lesson One: Virtual Programs Can Cultivate Community

Pre-pandemic, our practice was to run three webinars annually, focused on topics such as genetics, medical updates, survivorship, and relationships—all contextualized to the unique experiences of Jewish women. Between March 24, 2020, and May 26, 2021, we facilitated 81 webinars (all of which were recorded and are available at <https://sharsheret.org/resource/teleconferences-webinars>). Volume alone did not build community; rather, we developed strategies to maximize the impact of Zoom educational events.

We immediately realized that our webinar participants could use the chat function to support one another, almost as substitutes for the hugs they could no longer access or provide. By initiating the chat with a simple “Hi from NJ,” or “How are you feeling today?” those online began to share with one another, often intimately. We provided instructions to enable people to participate anonymously, and although some chose to do so, many kept their video cameras on and privately exchanged contact information to continue their conversations. We had not expected that to happen!

What we learned was that we needed to provide alternative means for women to access the personalized *hizuk* (strength) that they craved. In addition to matching women through our customized Peer Support Network, women began to make their own matches. They used



SHARSHERET

Sharsheret provides opportunities for women personally affected by breast or ovarian cancer or at increased genetic risk for those diseases to share their stories, educating and inspiring thousands each year.

the Zoom chat to share well beyond the focus of any specific webinar. For example, on a webinar focused on nutrition, one woman chatted to all: “Feeling nervous about my upcoming surgery.” Her comment resulted in many messages of support. Women, especially those living alone or feeling isolated, found validation, comfort, and encouragement.

“This webinar is exactly what I didn’t know I really needed!”

Sharsheret also understood that our community desperately wanted access to the most up-to-date information about COVID-19 as it related to women experiencing cancer. For example, those in treatment sought guidance about extra precautions they could take and, with the advent of the vaccines, about what the medical community was learning about their efficacy for cancer patients. Updates provided by television newscasts raised questions, and with fewer people going to their doctors, Sharsheret brought experts to our people. Despite the common refrain of “you’ll need to consult your own doctor,” women learned so much from the stories that the physicians were able to share the live-time updates they provided. Of the 81 webinars facilitated, 15 were medical updates provided by experts in oncology, radiology, immunology, and infectious diseases. Webinar participants had the opportunity to submit questions in advance or via the chat function and unanswered questions were responded to by email.

What we learned was that these two strategies helped us virtually nurture our special community. As one woman shared, “Your webinars make me feel less isolated dealing with my cancer all the way in Arizona, away from my family in New Jersey.”

Lesson Two: A Field Requires Multiple Entry Points

Eighty-one webinars in 14 months is a lot of webinars. Our first offering was a medical update that drew 842 registrants, of whom 353 were new to Sharsheret. It was clear that there was great interest in participating, but with no sense of how long the pandemic would last, we were not sure how many webinars to schedule, or which topics to highlight. We decided to broaden our content offerings and we found that high-quality and relevant content drew crowds, including thousands new to Sharsheret and our other resources and services. We used webinars as engagement platforms.

Our webinars focused on issues related to cancer experiences, including nutrition, mindfulness, parenting with cancer during a pandemic, navigating challenging conversations, exercise, and resiliency. Women channeled their inner artists through guided Paint with Me and Zentangle doodle sessions. Classes with makeup artists specializing in women with cancer provided women with opportunities to pamper themselves safely. We initiated a book club and facilitated webinars with authors

who discussed their own cancer stories. We launched Sharsheret in the Kitchen, teaching participants about traditional and innovative kosher dishes, many holiday-centric, with chefs around the world.

Importantly, we developed uniquely Jewish experiences including pre-Shabbat and pre-Yom Tov webinars. We initiated Shalom Shabbat, a series offering opportunities for Jewish women to reset mindfully as they enter the sacred time and space of Shabbat or Yom Tov. Women of all backgrounds—those familiar with traditional rituals as well as those for whom the rituals were newer—shared how important these spiritual gatherings were for them, especially as many navigated marking weekly and annual Jewish landmarks on their own for the first time. And we amplified our online Jewish resources to include guidelines for launching or joining *Tehillim* (Psalms) reading groups and offered access to guided meditations.

Even as our clinicians continued to provide expert telehealth to our callers, we launched online Facebook groups for specific cohorts (for instance, women living with advanced cancers and metastatic disease, caregivers, and those newly diagnosed) for people to share and normalize their experiences.

What we learned was that to be field leaders in providing quality virtual programming meant that we needed to offer a variety of entry points. We did not imagine that all our webinars would have equal appeal; as expected, some drew far larger audiences than others. Some women came to any and every offering, and for these women, we were a lifeline. Others chose to join only sessions that were of particular interest. One woman commented, “This webinar is exactly what I didn’t know I really needed!”

Sharsheret hopes for the day when our services will no longer be needed because cures for breast and ovarian cancer will have been found and made fully accessible.

Overall, our webinars drew almost 5,000 individual participants. Because we diversified our offerings, more individuals know that there is a Jewish breast and ovarian cancer community. Had we limited our content foci, no doubt we would never have reached that many people.

Lesson Three: News Isn't News Unless Someone Reports It

Like so many Jewish organizations, Sharsheret experiences challenges marketing and promoting our offerings. Of course, we use multiple platforms (emails, social media, press releases, word of mouth). But how

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The Joys (and Some Drawbacks) of Outdoor Davening

By Ellen Levitt

We know that we can pray on our own nearly anywhere, anytime, but Judaism does emphasize communal prayer. And many of us appreciate the group atmosphere: We listen to one another sing, we feel camaraderie, we learn from each other. We can cheer each other on as well as offer solace as a group.

COVID-19 restrictions deeply affected the traditional congregational prayer setting. Many people turned to online prayer, typically via Zoom, but also using Google Groups or cell phone apps. Even many Orthodox Jews have gone online for *daf yomi*, Purim *megillah* readings, *yahrzeit* commemorations, and *shivah* gatherings. Some congregations have not adhered to social distancing, but most have, thus drastically limiting the number of people who could gather together indoors.



Davening on the women's side of the *mehitzah* can be lonely in a weekday outdoor *minyan*.

Seeking Outdoor Davening

For a variety of reasons I made a break with a synagogue I had attended; one factor was its reluctance to arrange any outdoor *davening*. Thus, in late July 2020, I turned to a community listserve and asked whether anyone wanted to join together to have prayers outdoors. My concern was not just short-term; I was wondering what I'd do for the High Holidays in the autumn.

Three people responded with vague interest, but another told me about an outdoor backyard *minyan* that she and her family were holding. It sounded intriguing, and I took her up on an invitation to

join (and to read an *aliyah* of the Torah *parshah* from the *Humash* as well).

I enjoyed joining with a small group of people to *daven* on Shabbat morning, and at one point during the

Sharsheret *continued from page 11*

many emails is too many, and how do we ensure that people don't unsubscribe from our lists? Striking a balance is so challenging.

We tried some new strategies during the pandemic, including connecting with influencers. We networked with professional bloggers and social media savants with large followings and asked them to share some of our posts. We featured Jewish women whose names we knew would be recognized, such as Hadassah Lieberman and Ali Rogin, and medical professionals whose bios included working for the World Health Organization and the CDC. We were featured on podcasts with wide followings, and we cooked with chefs with deep reaches.

One of our most impactful strategies was to partner with like-minded organizations. For example, when we ran a webinar targeting mothers and children baking together, we partnered with PJ Library. Partnering with JOFA on our inaugural book club webinar helped us reach women new to Sharsheret. And when we discussed cancer genetics, we partnered with Basser Center for BRCA, JScreen, and the Sarnoff Center for Jewish Genetics.

What we learned was that we have a lot more to learn.

There is no secret sauce to guide how frequently we should post, but what was very clear was that partnering with the "right" organizations and influencers is a win-win. Sharsheret's focus overlaps with other organizations that serve Jewish women, and it is mutually beneficial to promote our collective opportunities.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Post-pandemic, Sharsheret's plan is to continue to offer a wide menu of virtual programming, even as we excitedly resume planning for in-person educational events.

Sharsheret hopes for the day when our services will no longer be needed because cures for breast and ovarian cancer will have been found and made fully accessible. Until then, we will keep working to identify and implement strategies to better reach the women who need our support and to more effectively educate people with life-saving information.

Devorah Silverman is the chief operating officer of Sharsheret, based in Teaneck, New Jersey. She supervises Sharsheret's educational outreach programming and the implementation of Sharsheret's strategic plan, expanding Sharsheret's reach to all Jewish women and families facing breast and ovarian cancer nationwide.

Partnering with the "right" organizations and influencers is a win-win.

Outdoor Davening

service, which was very laid back, I felt like I was back at Young Judaea sleepaway camp (with a few mosquitoes and bees added). However, we did hear blasts of loud music from a passing car and other street noise, which placed us squarely in the urban setting. Overall, I liked participating in this service, and when the family told me that their Brooklyn *shul* was going to be holding outdoor services, I jumped at the chance.

From August 2020 through May 2021 (and beyond, at least for a while) this congregation has held outdoor *davening*. Most weeks it has consisted of one weekday *Shaharit* service, Shabbat *Minhah*, and some holiday morning services. We've been dubbed the "Polar Bear *Minyan*" and the woman who held the backyard *minyan* had wool caps made with that name stitched onto it. (I bought one and wore it on several of the colder days.) We've met on the patio of the synagogue, at street level, and it's been a really good experience, a fine adaptation to the pandemic restrictions.

Usually we eke out a *minyan*, but sometimes we draw close to twenty people. We set out folding chairs with spacing in between and bring out a small Torah scroll, a box of *siddurim* and *humashim*, and a few folding tables. It's barebones, but it works very well, and everyone pitches in with setup.

I cannot say that the weather has always been kind to us; sometimes we have been battered by strong winds and cold temperatures. I've become semi-adept at turning the pages of the *siddur* while wearing gloves. One time it did get so chilly that I moved my chair to the doorway to the basement so I could avoid the wind. On a few occasions I moved my chair to be in the direct sunlight.

We've been dubbed the "Polar Bear *Minyan*" and the woman who held the backyard *minyan* had wool caps made with that name stitched onto it.

Of course, we have all been masked. I've realized that when you *daven* or *leyn* while wearing a mask, you must enunciate more effectively. We have also used advance online signups and health forms, and a few times we had to send around last-minute emails when the weather report warned of rain or snow.

I was in the *shul*'s main sanctuary just once, on the

Attending an outdoor *minyan*, you need a sense of humor and a sense of humanity.

Shabbat prior to Rosh Hashanah, and although that seemed more "normal" and traditional than the Polar Bear *Minyan*, it felt somewhat bittersweet to me. We wore our masks, seats were cordoned off, and other protocols were in place. But the drastically different outdoor *minyan* had a more chipper, scrappy but upbeat atmosphere to it, at least for me—although I did appreciate that the breeze wasn't flipping my *siddur* pages.



Raising the Torah during an outdoor service

Advantages of the Outdoor *Minyan*

One of the advantages to the outdoor *minyan* for me has been the sunlight shining on the pages of the *siddur* and *humash*. My eyesight is not great, and I am a bit fussy about artificial lighting and book reading. Reading outside has been a boon for me! And I will admit that it has an esthetic quality, too.

Sometimes we are *davening* and we hear the wind gently rustling the leaves, birds chirping; we look up and see birds flying in formation. At other times we hear loud ambulance sirens and vehicular traffic, which clashes

with our prayers. The synagogue is located near a major street, and we can smell strong aromas (some quite heavy) emanating from restaurants. And since we are in the heart of Brooklyn, and marijuana smoking is now legal, we have had our share of not-quite contact highs. Attending an outdoor *minyan*, you need a sense of humor and a sense of humanity.

Overall, I've enjoyed the experience greatly, and at times I've found it rather moving. The people who attend run the gamut of ages, and nearly everyone has participated with vigor. Congregants are friendly and not standoffish. There is much *ruah*, a sense of purpose and of being flexible. Judaism should not be a stuffy entity, and by *davening* outdoors, we have bucked tradition while embracing tradition. This past year's prayers will linger in my memory for years to come, and I think it will largely consist of fond memories.

Update: We are still having outdoor *minyanim* on weekdays and some Shabbat *minhah* services. We have been inside for Shabbat morning services since May, wearing masks.

Ellen Levitt is a teacher and writer, and a lifelong resident of Brooklyn. She has been part of the Flatbush Women's Davening Group since the late 1980s.

A Women's Tefillah Group Faces the COVID Year

By Susan Hornstein

The Women's Tefillah Group of Raritan Valley, based in Highland Park and Edison, New Jersey, has been meeting regularly for more than thirty years. Most of our current membership has been a part of the group for at least a decade, and we are a close-knit and supportive bunch. We love to celebrate together, and we love to be together in times of need. So the pandemic hit us hard. We longed for one another, and we worked to find social and ritual outlets throughout the year. Sadly, we lost a cherished member of the group and, frankly, have not had a chance to process this together.



Susan Hornstein reads the *megillah* outdoors

Our group met in person for *megillah* reading on Purim morning 2020. Thankfully, the event, the last taste of togetherness we would have, did not appear to spread the virus. Although we usually meet monthly on Shabbat during the day, and also monthly on Friday evenings for *Kabbalat Shabbat*, as well as for the *megillot* associated with the holidays, we basically shut down until the summer of 2020. During the summer, we decided to find a way to meet on Zoom for *Kabbalat Shabbat*, when the days were long enough to do so before Shabbat actually began. As we have done with all innovations, we began by learning the *halakhot*. We held a Zoom *shiur* to learn the relevant laws of beginning Shabbat, ensuring that all the participants would know the correct practice surrounding shutting off the computer at the right moment and then accepting Shabbat. We held *Kabbalat Shabbat* every few weeks until the fall, when it started getting harder to be ready for Shabbat in time. After months of missing each other, this really felt good; it felt almost like we were *davening* together.

One of our favorite gatherings of the year is Tisha B'Av evening. That may sound paradoxical, but we find the warm surroundings of a private home and the cadences of the women's voices to be a conducive environment for the observance. This was an easy practice to adapt

to Zoom. We sent out the text of *Eikhab* and *kinnot* and our customary song sheet, as well as sharing them on the screen. Those who wanted to participate in the round-robin of reading the *kinnot* indicated their willingness in the chat, and the moderator called on people in turn. Instead of singing together, which we all know to be impossible on Zoom, we played recordings of all the songs we usually sing, allowing people to sing along on mute. The program was moving and effective.

Shortly before Rosh Hashanah, our dear friend became ill. We would normally have gathered to pray for her healing, and we found that this could also be done on Zoom. We held two *Tehillim* gatherings, to which we also invited other friends and relatives. In this way, we felt that the power of the group to pray together on her behalf was harnessed.

The Highlight: *Simhat Torah*

The highlight of our year is undoubtedly *Simhat Torah*, and no one could imagine it passing without being together. We gathered our courage and planned an in-person meeting. The meeting was nothing like our usual service with *davening*, Torah reading, and amazing dancing. In fact, it contained none of those things. We gathered in a member's large backyard. Everyone was masked, and chairs were placed in a circle more than six feet apart. Members took turns reading the usual Torah portions from a book, and we quietly sang a few songs, careful not to project toward each other. We enjoyed individually packaged snack bags of apples and chocolate bars. It might not sound like much, but just seeing one another's faces and hearing everyone's voices brought us so much *simhat yom tov!*

We worked to find social and ritual outlets throughout the year.

Then it was winter. Everyone mostly hid in their homes. Some of us gathered for *Havdalah* on Zoom, but our thoughts were with spring. And as we do every year, we held our Tu B'Shevat Seder, sponsored each year in honor of the *yahrzeit* of a member's father. She delivered small fruit packages to everyone's home, and, as with our other events, we "went around the room" with the reading. It was fun, but the Zoom thing was getting old.

Purim Again

And suddenly, a year had gone by. It was Purim again. And there was snow on the ground, making the thought of gathering in a backyard not so inviting. But the weather held, and we gathered in person, in the parking lot of a friend's dental practice, and, masked and distanced, we

read *Megillat Esther*. It was difficult to project outdoors wearing a mask, with street traffic nearby, but it was so good to see one another again. In thirty-two seasons, we've never missed a Purim!

We've proved that the pandemic can keep us separate, but it can't tear us apart.

We've now done Pesah and Shavuot *megillot* in a similar manner, a few outdoor Kabbalat Shabbat gatherings, one summer Shabbat *Minhah*, and another miniature *Simhat Torah* celebration. We have become creative at finding ways to be together while staying apart, but we are so

wearied by the effort.

We will undoubtedly feel the absence of our dear friend when we gather for *tefillah* once more, as she won't be opening the *Aron Kodesh*, as she always did. We've been there for each other and marked the passage of the Jewish year. We've proved that the pandemic can keep us separate, but it can't tear us apart.

Dr. Susan Hornstein is a founder of the Women's Tefillah Group of Raritan Valley and a long-time resident of Highland Park, NJ. She holds a bachelor's degree in psychology from Brandeis University and a Ph.D. in cognitive psychology from Brown University. After a 25-year career in user experience engineering and many years as a Jewish educator, she is now a first-year semikhah student at Yeshivat Maharat.

Teaching in a Pandemic Universe

By Chaye Kohl

Teachers are urged to be lifelong learners. My career, infused with professional development, a few degree programs, and some independent study, has modeled that practice for my students. Studying made me a better teacher and helped me understand the process my students live every day. New lessons were thrust upon educators in March 2020; we pivoted from in-person teaching to virtual classrooms in a matter of days.

Coronavirus hospitalizations and deaths were steadily increasing. On Wednesday, the official announcement came via email and text: The last day of class is tomorrow. Faculty scrambled. We had students take home books and materials. Friday, a professional development day for teachers, offered IT workshops. I took a refresher on Google Classroom; reviewed how to create assessments on Google Forms; learned how to sign up for Remind.com; practiced my YouTube video skills. I met the new video platform: Zoom. By day's end my brain was full.

That Shabbat, my synagogue closed. Shellshocked, I read reports about COVID-19 and wondered whether the nursing home would allow me to visit my mother. On Monday the new version of school began. Would we return to the school building after Pesah?

When I was alone in my apartment, teaching via Zoom, I shared the experience via email.

March 16, 2020

Dear K.,

Day One of online school. Today I used Google Classroom. Reading assignments given on Thursday (our last day in person) yielded the promised assessments on Monday.

It takes hours to set up assignments, post them, and send reminders to each class. The students who usually ask the procedural questions in class were writing to me all day!

The college class I teach on Tuesday evening migrated online as well. I am tired!

Stay Safe!

March 17, 2020

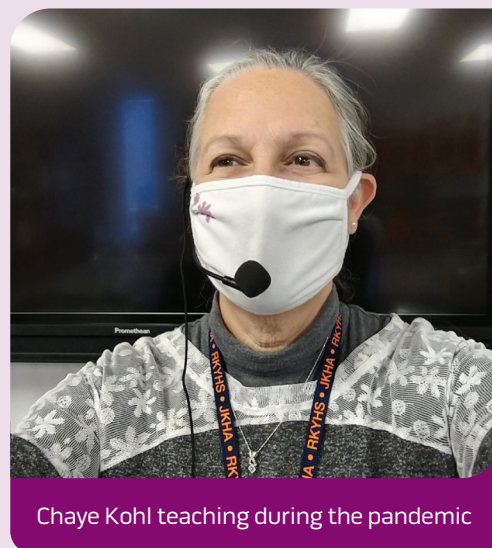
Dear E.,

I hope you are well. News reports are daunting. Strange times. My high school classes emigrated to online instruction this week. I spend hours at the computer setting up assignments and providing constant feedback to students.

Writing class at the university uses Moodle. I post instructions, documents, and assignments for my students to access. They post completed assignments online. Strange to see only small thumbnails of the students.

My high school did a full day of professional development and an online refresher in Zoom. I feel confident. If you have any questions, let me know.

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Chaye Kohl teaching during the pandemic

Devorah Scholars

In the spring of 2020, the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance awarded Devorah Scholar grants to four Orthodox synagogues. This innovative program, designed to seed the American landscape with women spiritual leaders, was made possible thanks to the generosity of Micah Philanthropies. Women who retain the position of a Devorah Scholar deliver congregational sermons, play an active role in youth and adult education, and provide lessons and lectures to the broader community, in addition to offering pastoral care and counseling. Applications for the next cohort of Devorah Scholars will be open until February 2022. For more information, contact Dr. Sarah Kranz Ciment, Sarah@jofa.org.

Online Megillah Readings

One of JOFA's most successful online programs in 2021 was the *Megillat Esther* readings. JOFA held women-led online readings on Purim night and Purim day. Readers and listeners from across North America and around the world (including Europe, Israel, and South Africa) joined in to participate in this important mitzvah. JOFA also held a virtual *Megillat Ruth* reading before Shavuot. Our *Megillat Esther* and *Megillat Ruth* apps continue to be useful and effective tools, helping

people learn how to read the *megillot* in their homes, synagogues, and communities.

Agunah Advocacy

On June 10, 2021, JOFA partnered with the Organization for the Resolution of Agunot (ORA) to host a webinar titled "Influencing Lasting Change." The conversation was held with JOFA founder Blu Greenberg, executive director of ORA Keshet Starr, and Rachel Tuchman, a licensed mental health counselor and Instagram influencer. With the *agunah* crisis in the news and so at the forefront of many minds, these leaders discussed harnessing the energy of the moment and merging strategies to effect long-term change.



JOFA Conference

On March 7, 2021, JOFA held the Tenth International Conference on Orthodoxy and Feminism: Building a Vibrant and Equitable Orthodox Community. This day-long virtual conference was opened with remarks by JOFA president Pam Scheininger and was attended by more than 800 people from around the world.

Participants had four tracks to choose from, as well



Notable women who paved the way in Orthodox synagogues in 5781

						
Rabbanit Avital Engelberg <i>Devorah Scholar</i>	Rabbanit Dasi Fruchter <i>Devorah Scholar</i>	Rabbanit Jennifer Geretz <i>Devorah Scholar</i>	Ruthie Braffman Shulman <i>Devorah Scholar</i>			
						
Hila Ben Eliyahu	Rabbanit Dr. Adena Berkowitz	Rabbanit Carmit Feintuch	Maharat Ruth Balinsky Friedman	Robin Gofine	Ann Goldhirsch	
						
Naima Hirsch	Dr. Leora Horn	Talia Hurwich	Rabbanit Bracha Jaffe	Shayne Green Kesler	Dr. Zoe Lang	Donna Moskowitz
						
Rabbi Dina Najman	Debra Passner	Gail Propp	Rachel Slutsky	Maharat Victoria Sutton	Dr. Deborah Weissman	Leah Portnoy Worenklein

as an array of affinity lunches. Sessions were centered around gender equity in day school education, advancing women in ritual roles and leadership positions, and contemporary issues such as women in the workplace during a pandemic, reproductive justice, and intersectionality. Affinity lunch topics included how to raise feminist sons, a high school and young professional meet-up, the revolution in women's learning, and building a diverse leadership pipeline.

Leadership in the Face of Pandemic

Since its founding in 1997, JOFA has advocated for expanding women's rights and opportunities within the framework of *halakhab*, to build a more vibrant and equitable Orthodox community. In the face of a second year marked by pandemic, forcing Orthodox synagogues to balance COVID-compliant safety rules with halakhic requirements, 5781 was a year when women rose to the occasion and demonstrated strong leadership in Orthodox synagogues. Whether in the capacity of spiritual leader, ritual leader, board president, lay leader, or educator, women stepped into key roles, and in some cases, served as the backbone of their synagogues, ensuring that communal *tefillah* (prayer) remained a mainstay of Orthodox life. The value added by having women serve as role models in Orthodox synagogues is incalculable. The positive ripple effects will benefit community members, both young and old for generations to come.

JOFA Ushpizot

On Sukkot, there is a custom to invite *ushpizin* and *ushpizot* (guests) into our *sukkot*. Traditionally, these guests are biblical characters. Out of this custom has grown a modern practice to welcome spiritually other key admirable figures whose presence we would want at our meals. This year JOFA honored 24 notable women whose contributions to synagogue life have

improved Orthodox communities. (See poster on p.16.)

Although this is certainly not an exhaustive list, these women, nominated by their community members, have each demonstrated strong leadership, made positive change, and created lasting impact through their work. We take this opportunity to honor, celebrate, and thank them for all they do.

Gender Equity in Day Schools

Over the course of planning and executing JOFA's March 2021 conference, Building a Vibrant and Equitable Orthodox Community, it became clear that there was a need to create a space to continue the conversation about gender equity for day school educators. To that end, the Jewish Education Project and JOFA partnered to create the Gender Equity in Day Schools Network. This network is in partnership with the Azrieli Graduate School of Education and Administration and the William Davidson School of Education.

The network is designed for female teachers who work in day schools and want to explore the tensions that arise around gender in the day school environment. Giving language to their lived experience, these educators will examine the dynamics of gender in the classroom, in the texts taught, between students, and in their role as teachers. As both an exploratory and goal-oriented network, this cohort collaboratively discusses how to support teachers in their spaces and circumstances.

This learning community consists of two dozen participants from 15 schools across the country. The cohort launched in August 2021 and is meeting monthly for the duration of the year. Topics include gendered expectations around what a teacher is supposed to be, gender and power, the educator in the classroom, communication, negotiation, career advancement, choosing the texts to teach, starting to create a culture of change, and strategizing toward the future.

Chaya Gorsetman, z"l Educator of Jewish Educators

JOFA mourns the passing of Dr. Chaya Gorsetman, a master teacher, champion of women's inclusion in the day school curriculum, and mentor of Jewish educators. In her role as co-chair of the Education Department at Stern College of Yeshiva University, she inspired and mentored a generation of novice teachers in Jewish day schools. As educational director of the Educational Leadership Advancement Initiative of the Lookstein Center of Bar Ilan University, she guided those who would mentor others.

For JOFA, Chaya spearheaded the JOFA Gender and Or-

thodoxy Curriculum Project, which sought to highlight the stories of women in the Torah and to teach third and fourth graders to ask probing questions of the text. Three years in the making, the curriculum, researched together with Sara Hurwitz (now Rabba Sara) and Amy Ament, resulted in *Bereishit: A New Beginning—A Differentiated Approach to Learning and Teaching*. The curriculum, meant to supplement the standard lessons, was not an ivory-tower creation, but was field-tested in classrooms in the tristate area. One of the teachers who piloted the program, Gavi Zevi, said, "It's a much deeper, wider kind of learning. And you know what? It's a gutsier kind of learning."

continued on page 29

JOFA Makes It Down Under

By Nomi Kaltmann

Australia, for most people, conjures images of cuddly koalas, beautiful beaches, and picturesque landscapes with laid-back people. I was born in Melbourne, Australia, and can confirm that for those in coastal cities, this image is pretty accurate. Most people live relaxed lives and take their time to get things done.

But on Sunday, May 9, 2021, Australia finally launched its own chapter of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance. Because most Australian cities have been spared the major chaos and sickness of the global pandemic with the country's borders shut to inbound and outbound travelers since March 2020, we were able to host an in-person launch.

The creation of the first branch of JOFA in Australia, 27 years after the founding of JOFA in the United States and almost a decade after the UK, was the result of a convergence of factors. Orthodox women in Australia have learned that while their secular lives may still have many glass ceilings to shatter, the gap between their religious and secular lives is much greater. In the three decades during which I have attended synagogue, not that much has changed. The structure of our synagogues is nearly identical to those my great-great-grandmothers attended in Australia at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The Genesis of an Idea

The kernel of an idea to create JOFA Australia began in 2018, when I approached the rabbi of a large Modern Orthodox synagogue that I attend weekly. As an engaged and committed religious woman, I was concerned

about the growing sense of disenfranchisement among young women who were feeling that not much was being done to encourage their engagement within Orthodox synagogues. I asked if it were possible when returning the Torah after Torah reading on Shabbat morning, that the Torah be brought up to the *mehitzah* so women could have the opportunity to kiss it. To my mind, a small gesture like that could make a big difference and would indicate to women, particularly young women, that they were seen and recognized as participants and valued members of the service.

The rabbi dismissed me outright and let me know that he would never consent to this request. He told me that there were ultra-conservative voters in his *shul* who wouldn't like it. He also told me, quite frankly, that if I didn't like it there, I was welcome to leave and find another synagogue.

As shocking as those words were, I knew at that point that my mission had changed. Those hurtful, insensitive words convinced me that one rabbi does not own Judaism nor does he have the the right to tell me to

leave a synagogue or community where I feel I belong. I would much rather work for change within a system than abandon it entirely.

I decided that if I had this experience, asking for something that would be considered normative in most Modern Orthodox synagogues around the world, the time had come to mobilize women like myself who felt that things could be much better in Australia. We might be logistically far from the global Jewish centers in Israel and New York, but a simple request—bringing the Torah up to the *mehitzah*, as is widely practiced in hundreds of Modern Orthodox synagogues across the world—was seen as pandering to conservative Australian attitudes rather than reflecting normative religious doctrine.

From the reception our launch had, it was clear that the men and women of Australia were truly ready to embrace change.

Creating a Board

I started canvassing women who might make up a board for JOFA Australia. The women spanned different age groups and Orthodox communities. They were smart and intelligent, but, like myself and many of their friends, they felt that things could be different. We were all focused on creating change—even small changes—within the communities in which we exist to overcome the practices of decades that had been



Strategic planning meeting of the new JOFA Australia

stagnant and slow moving. The time to start JOFA in Australia was ripe.

With a board of six committed women, we decided to launch. We connected with the global JOFA branches in England and United States and started brainstorming ideas. Assisted by Daphne Lazar Price, the executive director of JOFA in the United States, and Rabbi Dina Brawer, the inaugural founder of JOFA in the UK, we were given access to previously successful programs and ideas that had been used in other communities around the world. We felt totally supported by our overseas sisters and knew that there was so much work to be done in Australia. As we edged closer to our launch date, we remained optimistic that women would recognize that the need for JOFA in Australia was greater than ever.

The Launch

When COVID-19 restrictions had relaxed enough to allow 100 people in a private home, we decided to launch. While many of us knew that there was space in our communal discourse for an organization like JOFA in Australia, we were far from certain that we could get the maximum number of people in the room.

We knew that we were onto something when, with minimal advertising, all 100 tickets were booked almost two weeks in advance of our launch. We created a waitlist. Then we had messages pouring in, from men and women alike, advising that they really wanted to come to the launch event.

When the big day arrived, there was an electric energy in the room. There is something truly remarkable about getting together 100 energized people, from all ages and walks of life, with the shared mission of improving the situation for Orthodox women in Australia. From the reception our launch had, it was clear that the men and women of Australia were truly ready to embrace change. In my opening speech, I noted that change for women happens in a community when the right people gather in a room to create an alliance that pushes for these changes.

As part of the launch, we asked the attendees to break out into small groups at five stations and answer questions about pertinent topics relating to Jewish women, such as: lifecycle celebrations, education, leadership, Orthodoxy, and desired innovations we. These topics were meant to get people thinking about what is currently being done well, what could be improved, and what solutions could help solve some of these complicated issues.

Their responses were overwhelming. Women told their war stories about feeling excluded and unwelcome in Orthodox synagogues and communal spaces. They spoke about women feeling discouraged from running for board positions in many Orthodox institutions, due to bullying and sexism. Women described feeling unseen or irrelevant, particularly in older *shuls*, where the architecture places women in high balconies or far from the action. Women noted that while a small number of community organizations were trying to do the right

thing for Orthodox women in Australia, overwhelmingly women felt they lacked the education to step into Orthodox leadership roles and that the community would benefit from women's educational activities.

Suggestions for Change

Although these stories were painful, the discussions also provided a sense of optimism. The suggestions for change included the establishment of a women's speakers bureau to overcome the phenomenon of male-only panels. The creation of a women's Orthodox scholarship fund would enhance leadership opportunities for women in our community. Life-cycle think-tanks would help create awareness of the difference between *halakhah* and sexism.



As I write, I am still on a high from the incredible reception that the launch of JOFA in Australia received from women and men alike in my community. We have a lot of work ahead of us, but we also have role models in the United States and UK to look up to. We feel the love and support from afar!

Although Americans may rightly assume that Australians live in a relaxed paradise, I can assure you that although we may be 30 years late to the party, Orthodox feminists in Australia have stood up to be counted, galvanized by the creation of this important alliance. Big changes are on their way, and I look forward to reporting back to you soon with an update on our progress. Stay tuned.

After earning bachelor of laws and bachelor of liberal arts degrees from Monash University and a master's in legal practice from the Australian National University, Nomi Kaltmann became the first Australian woman to enter the Yeshivat Maharat semikhah program. She is a founding member of the Women's Orthodox Tefillah Group of Victoria, Australia, and the first president of JOFA in Australia.

Teaching in a Pandemic *continued from page 15*

March 17, 2020

D.,

Good to hear things are going well. I am exhausted. Two hours this morning spent posting all the new literature questions for five classes and then four hours (with a break for lunch) grading everyone's answers from yesterday.

No contact with Mom since a short phone conversation last week. I wrote her three cards in four days. I write in print, simple stuff that I know she can read/understand. (Dementia is a terrible thing.) The nursing home sends general updates about precautions they are taking. Mom can't remember how often I visit. Maybe she thinks I only missed visiting yesterday.

March 17, 2020

Dear T.,

Hope you and the family are well. I'm uploading assignments, answering student email, grading assessments. Made four YouTube videos on literature for my classes. Wondering if I will get good reviews from the critics. Daily I fill out lesson plans for the principal and read administrators' email. Figuring out Zoom teaching.

Trying not to be paranoid about the virus. Doing lots of hand washing. Glad I do not have to commute.

Wednesday, March 18, 2020

L.,

Kudos to you, master teacher! After tonight's faculty discussion I gave two classes a Reading Day tomorrow. I just cannot read so many homework assignments!

Hoping to clarify with my chair exactly what is expected of me vis-à-vis Zoom. Have I gone overboard? D. just has discussions on Zoom; her students have few homework assignments. Remember, in Friday's meeting Rabbi R said: "Make the teaching/learning serious!"

I am getting cranky—need sleep. *Laila tov.*

March 20, 2020

Dear D.,

Update. After Google Classroom (I am old-hat at that) and Remind.com (my new skill), I Zoomed! Took attendance, shared notes via "share screen," used the "whiteboard" and a PDF of the literature. My senior class all showed up at 9:00 AM—except for one student. My seventh period class was all in. Period 3 junior class (my large class)—only four students missing. Some first period students were still cuddled up under bedcovers. They did keep their eyes open, listened, and asked questions.

Seniors are concerned about grading, transcripts, and

New lessons were thrust upon educators in March 2020; we pivoted from in-person teaching to virtual classrooms in a matter of days.

diplomas. I assuaged their fears. The new schedule, with longer break time between classes and fewer periods each day, makes my overwhelmed students so happy. (So am I!)

P., the student whose ADHD behaviors constantly disrupted class, has been submitting his assignments every day, and he attended this morning's class with proper decorum. Zoom may be just what the doctor ordered. He can bounce in his seat and hum—on mute—without distracting others.

Motza'ei Shabbat, March 21, 2020

C.,

Shavua tov! Thanks for the link to the Yiddish speech by the doctor. He tries so hard to impress upon the *frum* community that they can save lives by "not doing" what they usually do.

Overwhelmed all week with work: create content/assessments; correct and comment on assessments; answer email queries from students. My commute to work is a few feet. But I'm not getting enough sleep. I try to walk for an hour each afternoon. Yesterday, after three Zoom classes, I logged off and baked a chocolate cake from scratch! (I haven't done that in at least a year.) Great to have homemade chocolate cake at my personal Kiddush on Shabbat morning.

March 26, 2020

T.,

This distance teaching/learning has become the focus of my waking hours. Zoom classes, YouTube videos, Google Classroom assignments, and Remind.com messages to students. In addition, there are English department meetings, Guidance department meetings, and last night an hour-long faculty meeting (all virtual, of course).

I have become so tech savvy in the past two weeks—so proud of myself!

Stay safe!

March 31, 2020

Y.,

So relieved that you and O. are recovering and did not have to be admitted to the hospital.

I am cobbling together meals from the leftover *hametz*

in the pantry and freezer—supplemented by fresh produce. I ate all the Purim goodies by myself. (Caloric but fun.) Toilet paper and tissues running low. I did not stockpile anything because I was busy figuring out how to pivot to online teaching. Can't believe I may be making a *seder* all by myself.

Refuah sheleimah!

March 31, 2020

R.,

Mom's nursing home went into lockdown on Purim (only medical personnel may now come in). I speak with Mom via telephone, via the nurses' station, once a week. She seems mildly confused—as is usual these days. She insists that since she is not sick, I should come to visit her. I write her a short note every day and mail it. She thinks it's funny. Asks me if I am in summer camp.

My days are full. Google Classroom for assignments and assessments, Zoom to teach, Remind.com to remind students about homework. I make YouTube videos about passages in students' assigned reading. I am not bored!

Stay safe!

April 7, 2020

C.,

I laughed when I saw the “news” item about the *chrain* in Spain stuck [mainly] on the plane.

I needed that laugh! *Erev Pesah*, and I'm a little crazy right now.

While *kashering* my oven for Pesah, the keypad went berserk! I turned off the circuit breaker to stop the infernal beeping. The owner's manual and product website are clear: The keypad needs replacing. Called a repair guy. Pandemic—remember? No repairmen are going on calls! So ... I bought a one-burner hotplate to cook my food. Never a dull moment.

Wishing you and your family a *hag sameah!*

Epilogue

In June 2020, my mother passed away. Only 15 people were allowed at the funeral. *Shivah* was on Zoom, and condolence notes came via email and snail mail.

We returned to in-person school in late August. HEPA filters were in every room. Desks were distanced. Students were in pods, and masks were mandated. We ate in open-sided tents outdoors—even in the cold. Every Monday and Wednesday morning all students, teachers, and personnel in the building dribbled into small plastic tubes; the saliva testing helped stop the spread. I learned to identify students by their eyes, hairstyles, and posture. Sometimes students had to quarantine because of exposure. So we teachers taught to the room as well as the Zoom.

Wondering what school will look like this school year.

Chaye Kohl teaches English at Rae Kushner Yeshiva High School in New Jersey and is an adjunct professor at Adelphi University in New York. She is part of the Heritage Testimonies cohort at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York City.

My Judaism in Quarantine

By Danielle Resh

The absence of community left space for imagining. The eastern corner of my bedroom became the Almighty's throne. Whispered words materialized—God picking up the homeless from the streets, the Egyptian oppressors drowning in the sea, the pungent scent of offerings, forefathers passing like sheep. Layers of history peeled open.

In my own constriction, I connected to those who had struggled before. The holidays approached with trepidation and left filled with meaning. Torah learning transcended boundaries. The God of my ancestors became my own. In a time when I came to understand exile more than ever before, God gave me the merit of returning home.

Danielle Resh is an avid writer and lifelong lover of Jewish learning who is currently seeking publication for her magical realism novel about a shtetl in nineteenth-century Poland with a Torah that miraculously begins growing.



In the Grove

By Deborah Wenger

Let me start by acknowledging my privilege. I am lucky to live in a temperate climate, where outdoor gatherings have not been out of the question for most of the COVID-19 era. The *shul* I belong to has a large campus, so finding space for outdoor meetings has not been difficult. And I am extremely fortunate to be a member of a *shul* that welcomes women's participation in every way possible.

Even when the COVID-19 pandemic forced all *shuls* and other institutions to close, the rabbi, *shul* management, officers, and all the congregants at Ohr HaTorah of Toco Hills in Atlanta were determined to keep the *shul* as viable and vital as possible. Zoom services and *shniurim* were a must, of course—but we also received treats like “*bag* in a box,” with holiday-related surprises.

Slowly, in late spring, things began to open up. Although some *shuls* adhered to the mandated crowd limits by having men's-only services, Ohr HaTorah would not do that, and counted women toward all the legal limits on gatherings. At first, we met only outdoors—which was fine with me, as I have always enjoyed *davening* outdoors, being so close to nature.

By the *Yamim Nora'im*, we were again allowed indoors—although not everyone felt comfortable doing so. Our intrepid team of *gabba'im* and other coordinators put together a group of seven different services—early, later, indoors, and outdoors—to accommodate as many people as possible, including spacing services far enough apart to allow both mothers and fathers to attend a service, as children were not yet allowed on the premises. There were also *shofar* soundings in various places throughout the neighborhood so that even those who didn't feel comfortable attending *shul* would be able to fulfill the *mitzvah*.

Women's services also opened up slowly, but steadily. Rather than our usual raucous *Simhat Torah* celebration, we held a small gathering on the holiday afternoon, at which only two women read from the Torah (in comparison, in the previous year, we had 30 readers!). Our next meeting was for our annual *Megillat Esther* reading, which took place mostly over Zoom—the readers came to *shul* and read from the scroll, but

everyone else watched it online.

After Purim, more openings occurred—but many gatherings were still taking place outdoors. Our Women's Torah and Tefillah group gets together to read all the *megillot* throughout the year. On Pesah, we met in a wooded area behind the *shul* building. Considering all the nature imagery in this *megillah*, it was fitting to read it outdoors in a garden area. This was so successful that

next year's reading may still be held outdoors, possibly with a discussion of the imagery as well as the reading.

Megillat Ruth came next, on Shavuot. Again, we read this *megillah* outdoors—and were privileged to have a woman join our readers to celebrate the anniversary of her conversion to Judaism, very appropriately. For *Eikvah* we moved indoors—being outdoors at night was too daunting, and our group was small, so there was space indoors (and when the lights went out and we had to read by the light of our cellphones, the “atmosphere” was appropriate as well). And *Kohelet* was read, fittingly, in the *shul* sukkah.

And here we were, back at *Simhat Torah*. By this year, many COVID restrictions had been lifted—but as the *shul* that is closest to the CDC, we are always very cautious.

Mask mandates and social distancing are still in force, and all food-related events are still held outdoors, as are most youth groups. We were lucky that the *Simhat Torah* weather cooperated, and the *hakafot*—for both women and men—moved outside. For the women's Torah reading (17 readers this time), we moved to the Grove, a new wooded area set up just for events such as this. More than 50 women participated in communal *tefillah* and Torah reading under a verdant canopy.

As I write this article, activities are still in flux—but we are managing to be flexible as well. Women's events are ongoing, but the outdoor experience has been so positive that we may just continue to have some gatherings out in the Grove, experiencing the wonders of nature along with our *tefillah*.



The Grove at Ohr HaTorah of Toco Hills, Atlanta, a space for outdoor *tefillah* and meditation.

Deborah Wenger is a freelance editor living in Atlanta, Georgia. She serves as the publications manager of the JOFA Journal.

Mikveh in Washington in the Age of COVID

By Barbara Trainin Blank

Expectations don't always tally with reality. COVID-19 may have closed *mikva'ot* for a time—or, at the very least, reduced their usage, as women feared becoming infected. In particular, potential immersees frequently asked how it could be that using the same pools of water for person after person would be sanitary and not increase the chance of infection.

But at least one facility—Ohev Sholom in Washington, D.C.—did not close at all, except for two nights for reasons unrelated to COVID. That was when the city was placed under a 6 p.m. curfew related to the protests against the killing of George Floyd. (And even then, Mikvah Chaim, as the facility is called, allowed daytime use.)

As to the need to avoid *mikveh* immersion because of danger from the water, Mikvah Chaim (and undoubtedly other *mikva'ot* as well) pointed out that the water is continuously being filtered and disinfected. Furthermore, during the early days of the coronavirus, when the experts focused on how it could spread through touch, *shomrot* at the *mikveh* constantly cleaned other surfaces.

Of course, usage of masks was absolutely required except during immersion. The *shomrot* were given gloves as well.

Health Measures Taken

In addition, one of the first health measures taken at Mikvah Chaim was limiting the use of the non-*mikveh* pool areas of the building, such as the waiting room. Women were required to do their preparations at home and to enter the *mikveh* pool as soon as they could. Only one immersee was allowed into the building at a time, to adhere to social distancing.

“Otherwise, we functioned normally, but changed the procedures,” said Maharat Ruth Friedman, maharat of Ohev Sholom, the Modern Orthodox synagogue in D.C.’s Shepherd Park neighborhood. “There was no closing, partial or otherwise, of our *mikveh*.” Another change that took place was that there was no physical checking of immersees by the *shomrot*. “We realized then we had to be very cautious,” Friedman pointed out.

Normally, the majority of *mikveh* users at Ohev Sholom follow the traditional practice of requesting a *shomeret* in the room when they immerse. However, because the *mikveh* rooms are small, some women

were concerned by the lack of social distancing and gave up that practice—at least as long as the pandemic raged.

Another small group of immersees who preferred to continue to be accompanied by a *shomeret* temporarily went to another *mikveh* with more-spacious *mikveh* rooms.

Most of the immersees using Mikvah Chaim took the new situation and requirements in stride. Only a small number of women stopped coming to *mikveh* out of extra cautiousness,

but “this number was minimal,” reported Maharat Friedman.

Safety precautions were determined by the maharat and the *mikveh* staff. Now that the pandemic has lessened and vaccination is available, the policy has changed. “And it is much simpler,” she pointed out. “We just ask that all users and attendants wear masks when interacting with each other, and that people not come if they have COVID symptoms.”

Use of the Mikveh for Conversion

One other group of *mikveh* users common at Mikvah Chaim is converts. In addition to individuals converted through Ohev Sholom’s clergy or with other Orthodox rabbis, the synagogue is one of the few Orthodox facilities that allows usage of its *mikveh* for non-Orthodox conversions.

Conversions of all kinds continued unabated during the pandemic, with the same safety precautions in place and now changing. Again, because of social distancing, the only persons allowed into the waiting room were family members of the converts. Often the rabbis and converts would meet outside. And masks were, of course, required and continue to be so. The enthusiasm about converting did not abate.

As health conditions have improved, *mikveh* use in general has remained strong. “I haven’t heard from anyone who is still afraid to go,” observed Maharat Friedman. “I think my biggest takeaway would just be all the flexibility it has introduced.” Thus, out of the adversity of the pandemic, some good has emerged.

Barbara Trainin Blank is a freelance journalist based in suburban Washington, D.C., and author of What to Do about Mama?: A Guide to Caring for Aging Family Members.

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An Appreciation for Mikva'ot

By Meira E. Schneider-Atik

When COVID-19 broke out, most *mikva'ot* closed, but many women's *mikva'ot* remained open. I remember hearing some who were angry that women's *mikva'ot* weren't closing as well, saying that it was too much of a risk for women to go out and that rabbis should find *kulot* (leniencies). I didn't agree then, and I still think that keeping women's *mikva'ot* open, albeit with extra precautions, was the right thing to do.

I actually found an advantage here, in that I got to take stock of how I felt about *taharat hamishpahah* and *mikveh*.

I admit that there are details that I don't like. I don't like not touching my husband. We're happily married, so not touching can be torture. However, I accept that if we didn't take breaks every so often, the novelty would wear off.

I don't like having to get dressed in a million layers in the winter and to peel off those layers at the *mikveh*, then put them back on after immersion. For another thing, I never liked "mikveh hair." The chlorine in the pool always did a number on my naturally curly hair, and thanks to COVID, the chlorine levels had to be increased, so now I come out of the *mikveh* looking like a shaggy dog.

Thank you for joining us at the 10th International JOFA Conference on Feminism and Orthodoxy March 7, 2021

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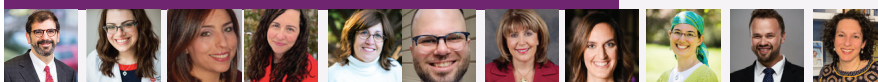
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COMMUNITY



Loving this Mitzvah

Having said all this, I've been loving this *mitzvah* ever since my *kallah* teacher taught me about it. As a woman, I love that *taharat hamishpachah* is a *mitzvah* that is entirely mine—no one can do it for me. It allows me to connect with myself as a Jew, a woman, a wife, and a mother. I feel constantly reconnected with my humanity, my *tzelem Elokim* (image of God), and the inherent dignity that goes with that.

As a woman, I love that *taharat hamishpachah* is a *mitzvah* that is entirely mine—no one can do it for me.

I firmly believe that no woman should be forced to go to the *mikveh*. According to the new precautionary policies, one is not allowed to go if she has any COVID symptoms or has reason to be in quarantine. And according to the *halakhot*, the woman is the one who determines when she can go to the *mikveh*, based on her physical examinations, but even if she can go halakhically, she might not feel safe.

I love that this *mitzvah* gets a huge priority. According to the Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin), whenever a new Jewish community is created, the first public facility should not be a *shul* or *beit midrash*, but rather a women's *mikveh*. I was disappointed to learn that there are a lot of *mikva'ot* that are not careful about cleanliness and sanitation. I'm hoping that those *mikva'ot* get shut down so that they can be cleaned up during the pandemic. This *mitzvah* is so important, but no woman should have to risk her health and safety unnecessarily.

This *mitzvah* is so important, but no woman should have to risk her health and safety unnecessarily.

This realization makes me even more grateful to my local *mikveh* and the women attendants there who were always careful about keeping things clean and safe. They implemented precautions against COVID that made me feel safer (even if I had to rinse out “shaggy dog” hair afterward).

With the vaccines, I hope that the COVID crisis is coming to an end. But on the positive side, I hope that my appreciation for this *mitzvah* doesn't come to an end, and I hope to continue feeling refreshed, rejuvenated, and reconnected with myself and my human dignity.

Meira E. Schneider-Atik is a Torah-observant Jew, wife, mother, wardrobe stylist, and writer/blogger. Her heart is in Eretz Yisrael but for now, she lives with her family in Queens, New York.

Immerse Again: On Performance and Mikveh During COVID-19

By Stephanie L. Stillman

My first encounter with the *mikveh* was at 27, when I met with my converting *beit din* for the last time. I had never seen the *mikveh* before I immersed that day, having only heard *bubbe meises* from my unmarried female friends. Unsure of what to expect, I found myself strangely calm, wet, and shivering before the kissing waters. Mistaking the chill for my nerves, the *shomeret* squeezed my arm and whispered, “Don't be afraid—you're about to be reborn.”

I didn't give the *mikveh* a second thought for the next six years; it was always resting on a distant horizon, visible but very much out of reach. As a feminist, a scholar, and a Torah-observant Jew, I spent the time between conversion and marriage concerned with issues that seemed more immediately relevant to myself than considering the feminist ramifications of the *mikveh*—the plight of *agunot*, the erasure of women from contemporary print media, and access to women's preventive health resources. It was not until the desire to perform a *mitzvah* collided with the fear of COVID-19 that I truly began to consider the feminist ramifications of the *mikveh* itself. Seeing the COVID-19 pandemic looming on the horizon and with a shelter-in-place order days away, my then-fiancé and I made our *huppah* (wedding) on the rabbi's front lawn. His children and their spouses counted for nearly all of our socially distant *minyan*, while our families and friends watched a live feed from the safety of their isolated homes.

“What you do here today is important,” our rabbi said. “*Mitzvah goreret mitzvah* [one act of *mitzvah* leads to another]. During a time of great darkness, you will bring much light.”

My Complex Relationship with Mikveh

My personal relationship with the *mikveh* is complex—a feeling exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. My desire to engage in Jewish life stood in direct contrast to the terror of exposure to the virus. Was it safe to use the *mikveh*? Could my desire to observe *taharat hamishpachah* ultimately lead to the destruction of my family? How do we maintain Jewish life when it is threatened with certain death? Once a mystical and transformative space, a space for my “self-self,”¹ the *mikveh* became a place of fear, no longer one of life-giving renewal.

I was first introduced to this concept in the work of Jewish feminist Mierle Laderman Ukeles in art school. In an interview, Ukeles discusses *Manifesto for Maintenance*

¹ A term quoted in Daniel Sperber, “Mikva Dreams: Judaism, Feminism, and Maintenance in the Art of Mierle Laderman Ukeles,” in *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art*, 5:2 (2019), p. 3.

continued on page 26

Immerse Again *continued from page 25*

Art 1969!, saying, “I wrote that if I’m the artist, then whatever I say is art, is art. It isn’t an ego thing, it’s what the artist needs.”² Reconciling the labor of household maintenance with the innate desire to create, *Manifesto* elevated the perceived banality of maintaining family life to that which is “vital and necessary for [your] family to thrive.”³ The importance of the *mikveh* transcends gender; traditional rabbinic sources agree: Both a synagogue and a Torah scroll, Judaism’s most venerated treasure, may be sold to raise funds for the building of a *mikveh*. In fact, in the eyes of Jewish law, a group of Jewish families living together do not attain the status of a community if they do not have a communal *mikveh*.³

Shortly after our *huppah*, while fully in quarantine, I ripped the *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!* from a 1971 copy of *Artforum* and pinned it to our kitchen wall.

“What’s this?” my husband asked, eyeing the glossy stock one evening as I was making dinner. I responded by reading the opening lines:

I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, renewing, supporting, preserving, etc. Also (up to now) separately I “do” Art. Now, I will simply do these maintenance everyday things, and flush them up to consciousness, exhibit them, as Art.⁴

I spoke in earnest, emphasizing the last line with the flourish of a wooden spoon. COVID-19 had robbed us of the joy of Jewish life and from the embrace of our community. We *davened* from home on *Shabbat* and ate alone—no guests. On *haggim* our rabbi would send a *bahur* (young man) around to assist with the *mitzvot* that cannot be performed alone. Armed with *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah and with a *megillah* on Purim, he would stand beneath our second-story window so that we might perform a socially distant *mitzvah*. With COVID came no *smahot* (happy occasions), only *tsuris* (difficulties).

Each month, as my visit to the *mikveh* approached, my anxiety would build, exploding in a great crescendo of tears as soon as I removed my towel and mask. Will this be the last *mitzvah* I do? Body disconnected from self, I began to apply the Ukeles manifesto to the maintenance of *taharat hamishpachah*. I reclaimed the *mikveh* as my own. By redefining each engagement with Jewish life as an opportunity to engage in art-making, I found a way to create meaning from the chaos that surrounded me. The *mikveh*, my last remaining connection to community and Jewish life, may have been quickly slipping away, but was not yet out of grasp.

Ukeles's View of Mikveh

Mierle Ukeles’s work on performance and *mikveh* as Jewish feminist art has guided the growth of my *yiddishkeit*. *Mikva Dreams*, a 1977 performance piece, and *Immerse Again*, an installation at the Jewish Museum in 1986, explore the “integrally connected”⁵

nature of *mikveh* and life. Ukeles speaks about “[t]he Death Instinct: separation, individuality ... [t]he Life Instinct: unification, the eternal return, the perpetuation and maintenance of the species.”⁶ A woman’s immersion in the *mikveh* occurs seven days after menstruation ends—a symbol of loss and renewal and of the ongoing cycle of life. *Mikveh*, a true representation of renewal and return, presents a unique opportunity for women to place themselves, physically and spiritually, within the living heart of the community.

Mikva Dreams was first performed in New York’s Franklin Furnace Gallery before an audience of both men and women. To “preserve an aura of sacred mystery and privacy,”⁷ Ukeles sat within the gallery space, covered in a white sheet, and recited a prepared text on the *mikveh* as the site of performance. She was making the point, as stated in “The Life Instinct,” that *mikveh* immersion is not based on a

dichotomy of purity/impurity, but rather on the cycle of renewal. She thus reclaimed the *mikveh*, freeing it from associations of impurity.

The coronavirus pandemic has produced a generation of women who continued to immerse—and will immerse again. We are the women who, while balancing a mind of science with a heart of faith, burnished our copper mirrors and went forth to ensure the continuation of our families and communities. Each trip to the *mikveh* became an opportunity to create a moment of light in a time of darkness.

During times of great uncertainty, many Lubavitch *hasidim* engage in the ritual performance of *igrot kodesh* (holy letters)—a letter is written to the Habad Rebbe and placed within the *Igrot Kodesh*, a collection of letters written to and from the Rebbe during his lifetime. When the letter is retrieved, it is believed that the pages on either side will provide the writer with insight, as a holy book often begets wisdom.

I am not a rabbi, a scientist, or an art critic; I’m just the *giyoret* next door, endeavoring to find meaning in post-COVID Jewish life. It is my sincere hope that this *igeret*, if placed between the pages of this collected *hokhmat nashim* (wisdom of women), will serve as point of discourse on the relationship between *mikveh* and feminism, science and faith, and community and self.

Stephanie Stillman is a graduate teaching associate and Ph.D. student in the Department of Arts Administration, Education, and Policy at The Ohio State University.

² Mierle L. Ukeles, “Manifesto! Maintenance Art: Proposal for an Exhibition.” <https://queensmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Ukeles-Manifesto-for-Maintenance-Art-1969.pdf>, (1969), p. 304.

³ R. Slonim, “The Mikveh. The Jewish Woman.” <https://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman> (1996).

⁴ Ukeles, “Manifesto!,” p. 1.

⁵ Sperber, p. 3.

⁶ Ukeles, p. 1.

⁷ Sperber, op cit.

Kaddish, in Retrospect

By Yehudit Robinson

I didn't expect to say Kaddish with any regularity. When my father, Morris Robinson, died in late January 2020, I intended to recite only the three Kaddishes at the end of the Shabbat *davening* each week and, instead, focus on helping raise my three young children. At the *shivah minyanim* at my parents' house, however, I realized that I would never experience a more supportive environment in which to say Kaddish, with my mother, sisters, and aunt by my side, and my brothers and uncle on the other side of the *mehitzah*.

My husband encouraged me to continue, as did some friends who have experienced loss; surprisingly, in addition to Shabbat mornings, I was able to attend *shul* several times a week for *minhah* and *ma'ariv*. Without fail, I found myself echoing my fellow mourners by lapsing into the traditional Ashkenazi pronunciation—and this amused me every time, as it ran counter to a dozen years of day school education.

I brought a lot of anxiety to the recitation of Kaddish. When I was in middle school, one day a female classmate insisted that, at the necessary time, she would say Kaddish for her parents. Although I was sympathetic, I remember thinking that this was not typical practice. And now I found myself wondering many times whether anyone on either side of the *mehitzah* would be offended by my vocal participation. How loud should I be? Should I recite the words, or was it OK to chant them? What if my Kaddish recitation ran counter to someone's idea of what a *shul* should be? Sometimes someone with a more traditional outward appearance joined the *minyan*, and I started sweating. How would I have responded if he had asked me to remain silent? Would it have been OK if I had said that I'm a member, that the rabbi allows women to recite Kaddish here, that my father died a month ago? But the feared confrontation never occurred. Rather, the only men who approached me after *davening* did so with words of compassion—including one who told me that he peeked over the *mehitzah* to make sure I was done with *Aleinu* before starting Kaddish. These small gestures of kindness helped me feel welcome at the three *shuls* among which I rotated.

I want to thank the women and men, mourners or not, who helped reset communal expectations over the past thirty years by helping normalize the practice of women reciting Kaddish in *shul*. There were enough horror stories of women attempting to say Kaddish who were traumatized because their efforts were misunderstood and misinterpreted. When I shared some of my concerns with a man, he was astonished and responded, "How could anyone be upset? It was your father." I think this reaction reflects an altered awareness.

I also want to thank the woman who let me know that a *shul* that I hadn't considered for Kaddish would indeed be a place where I would be welcome. I asked the *rebbeztin* of this *shul* about my concerns, and she responded, "Women have been saying Kaddish here for years." I realized how easy it is to make assumptions about faith communities based on externalities. I also want to thank the women who sat next to me (pre-COVID) who took care of my children during Shabbat services when they would suddenly seek my attention precisely when I was trying to say Kaddish.

Although COVID shut down indoor *minyanim* for several months, and Zoom Kaddish felt sufficiently detached that I did not participate in online *minyanim*, once outdoor *minyanim* began, I became very grateful to my husband for his kindness in getting up early for *hashkamah minyanim*, which allowed me to attend some outdoor *minyanim* sporadically and resume saying Kaddish once again. My first Kaddish outside was very emotional, as it came after an extended hiatus. I still feel a special connection to the

patio outside my neighbor's house where I would stand while *davening*.

By reciting the Kaddish, the mourners announce themselves as a sub-community seeking support.

The Meaning of Words

Because I had been so concerned with context, it took me a long time to reflect on the meaning of the words in the *siddur*. By reciting the Kaddish, the mourners announce themselves as a sub-community seeking support. We attempt to match one another's tempo, to create a unified plea from our private thoughts. After the collective gaze has moved on to the next *shivah*, the next crisis, the *avel* (mourner) continually vocalizes his/her often complicated grief and reminds the fellow congregants that he/she is still in need of attention. The Kaddish is a positive, affirmative prayer, and the congregants, even if they don't know the mourner, cathartically respond again and again, "amen"—we agree, we affirm the truths of your complex relationship with the one you have lost. The congregants thus verbally comfort the bereaved, and I find it meaningful that this interaction, both with God and one another, is part of the daily *davening*.

Kaddish comes at various times in the service. I sometimes I ponder that here, at some random time in the day, I find myself in *shul*, contemplating the one I lost. Here, at this random moment, I remember you. I consider the dreams that you merited to fulfill, that you raised six children to lives of Torah and *mitzvot*, which was your way to rebuild the Jewish people after the Holocaust. And I also ponder the dreams that you

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Kaddish, in Retrospect *continued from page 27*

were not given the time to fulfill, including more time to learn Torah and write. I vocalize my grief by chanting a well-worn prayer of positivity, ultimately wishing peace and serenity to the Jewish people, and I hope, somehow, that these prayers resonate and reach the heavens.

Epilogue

On Wednesday, December 16, mid-Hanukkah, I said the final Kaddish in my neighbor's backyard at *minhah*, as the darkness and snow descended in tandem, as surreal as the rest of the past eleven months. And, with *ma'ariv*, I became the agent for others' memories when I responded to their Kaddish, as I was done reciting mine.

I would like to thank the indoor and outdoor *minyanim* at Beth Aaron, Netivot Shalom, and the Jewish Center of Teaneck, all in Teaneck, New Jersey, for making me feel welcome. I found saying Kaddish to be very meaningful in helping me maintain a connection despite the ultimate distance.

Yehudit Robinson is a Judaic studies tutor and is the founder and director of mytorahtutor.com. An earlier version of this piece was published in the New Jersey Jewish Link.

Rebecca's Unwritten Passing

By *Thalia Gur-Klein*

*From one step on a ladder to heaven,
I dreamed I was seen
and seeing her,
far beyond my locked down horizon.
Yet underway back I tarried
on a thoughtful mountain
to wrestle a muscled angel,
all night long,
or was it my angry twin,
until dawn,
belatedly to realize
how one-sided
her end meanwhile came.*

*Unresolved syllables
of dreams and regrets,
drip into the Jordan,
receding sign and sound, evenly leveling
within its rippling water.*

*And what I thought
she should have said,
and what I wanted to say,
yet never did,
lingers awhile,
like a lost sock finally found,
while its missing other
had been meanwhile
thrown away.*

For my mother, Aliza, who died in Israel during the coronavirus pandemic, when flying to Israel was suspended.

Thalia Gur-Klein is an Israeli residing in the Netherlands. She earned an M.A. in English literature and Yiddish from Leiden University and an M.A. in Jewish studies, feminist theology, and Hebrew Bible from Amsterdam University, and is currently working on her doctorate at Leiden University.



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My Season of Loss

By Chaye Kohl

On the last day of Passover, the *Yizkor* prayer helps us memorialize our dead. On Pesah 2020 I recited the prayer in the solitude of my living room, slowly mouthing the words.

Ostensibly I was reciting the *Yizkor* prayers for my father, a Holocaust survivor who died twenty years ago, and for all his family members who perished in the Holocaust: grandparents, aunts, and uncles whom I never met.

On my mind, though, were those I had lost in the months before the pandemic and those dead and dying of coronavirus—the gravely ill and those who were sheltering in place.

From October 2019 through February 2020, I watched my personal world contract, as people I knew died from cancer and dementia and pulmonary disease. Two women in my study group lost husbands; my favorite uncle Norbert, my childhood friend Breindy, my fun-loving friend Rocky—all gone in the space of 120 days.

In those four months I went to funerals, organized meals at *shivah* houses, hugged the near and dear, and then went to teach school each day.

In March 2020, the nursing home where my mother was being cared for shut down to visitors. My four-times-a-week in-person visits became video chats (once or twice a week) on the social worker's personal phone. By June, Mom was also gone.

This year, on the last day of Pesah, I shivered in the outdoor *minyán* and whispered the words of the prayers Jews have been saying for hundreds of years—soulful prayers that help us remember loved ones who are no longer alive. I was caught up in a tragic realization: We all—the collective family of humankind—have dealt with loss on a daily basis. And I wallowed in the enormity of my own season of loss.

Chaye Kohl teaches English at Rae Kushner Yeshiva High School in New Jersey and is an adjunct professor at Adelphi University in New York. She is part of the Heritage Testimonies cohort at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York City.

Chaya Gorsetman, z"l continued from page 17

Chaya co-authored, with Elana Maryles Sztokman, *Educating in the Divine Image: Gender in Jewish Day Schools*, which examines the broader issues of day school pedagogy. They showed how school practices, textbooks, and gender hierarchies in educational leadership socialize students into unhealthy gender identities and relationships. Chaya presented a standing-room-only workshop on the topics of her book to the 2013 JOFA Conference. She courageously included in her remarks a call for Or-

Welcome to My World

By Laurie Dinerstein-Kurs

I am perplexed. I am amazed. I am also pleasantly moved by the degree to which I read and hear so many people lamenting the difficulties they have faced this past year and a half. Why pleasantly? To sum it up in one sentence: Welcome to my world.

Although many people believe they have been locked up, unsocial, incommunicado with friends and loved ones, with no hugs, no face-to-face meetings, no social outings, I believe they have had only a taste of the life of a homebound, handicapped, or ill person. The latter, lacking in hope for a “cure,” face these very conditions—all the time. For those remanded to their homes, if you desired, you had the freedom to choose to go out. You had the freedom to choose to go to the bathroom. And you had the freedom to go to the kitchen and get a snack. You had the freedom to choose to eat what you want, when you want, and even to feed yourself. You had the freedom to make your own decisions.

Perhaps the difficulties and restrictions that the virus imposed on so many citizens were really a gift from God. This gift provided those who have freedom and can make choices the opportunity to better understand those of us who don't.

For the disabled in our communities there are no freedoms, ever—no going to *shul*, no going to a store, no sitting with community in a *sukkah*, not having a *seder*. Now the healthy know what it is to miss *shul* and holidays, *semahot* and family.

This past year was not a plague, but a learning opportunity to gain a better first-hand understanding of our fellow Jews and, hopefully, develop more *rahmones* (empathy) for our elderly, handicapped, ill, and homebound. These people live the “virus” life all the time with no end in sight.

Having walked in our shoes a bit, maybe some have found that the shoes pinch, are tight, are the wrong size or the wrong color. I pray that their understanding of those who live a perpetually quarantined life is awakened to be ever more considerate, patient, understanding and loving.

Rabbi Laurie Dinerstein-Kurs is a Jewish hospice chaplain who lives in New Jersey.

thodox day schools to fully recognize the needs of same-sex parents and single mothers by choice.

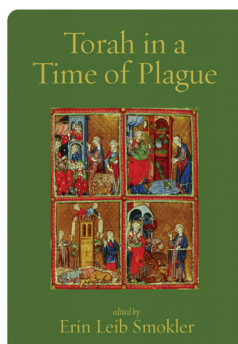
Chaya was a lifelong learner as well as a teacher, having begun learning *Gemara* with her father when she was in sixth grade. This experience had a tremendous influence on her life's work, as she appreciated the impact of the relationship on her love of learning and engagement with text study. She passed this love of learning on to her children Atara, Talya, Leora, and Yedidya, to whom JOFA extends sincere condolences.

Torah in a Time of Plague: Historical and Contemporary Jewish Responses

Edited by Erin Leib Smokler
Ben Yehuda Press. 2021, \$24.95

Review by Atara Cohen

How do we make sense of the suffering of the COVID-19 pandemic within a Jewish framework? Rabbi Dr. Erin Leib Smokler has gifted the broadly defined Jewish community with a compilation of essays by a diverse range of authors offering a variety of thought-provoking ways in which we can understand our modern plague. *Torah in a Time of Plague: Historical and Contemporary Jewish Responses* is divided into five sections: Theology of Plague; Jewish Community and Practice under Duress; History and Literature of Plague; Quarantine Reflections; and Time in Unprecedented Times. The essays vary in length, theological framing, and tone, ranging from academic to homiletic, yet they share a fundamental empathy for readers who are experiencing these unprecedented times.



As a rabbi who has spent the past two years accompanying people from many walks of life through this pandemic, I was most interested in the first section, which explores God’s place amid the suffering. Surprisingly, even essays with very different starting assumptions conclude in similar ways: most of the essays center human action as the locus for Divine goodness in the world. Although we cannot understand God’s power over evil, we ourselves can actualize God’s goodness through our own work of *hesed* or lovingkindness. When read carefully, the pieces can be viewed as a progression of models of pandemic theology moving further away from cosmic Divine intervention and toward an immanent Divine role in which *we* are the arbiters of God’s power to do good. This collection of essays suggests that many experiencing the pandemic feel a compulsion to take the responsibility for large-scale morality away from God and put it on our own shoulders.

Gordon Tucker’s essay, “Theodicy and the Slings and Arrows of Outrageous Fortune” balances our desire to question God’s goodness with a theological necessity for God to be omnipotent, even beyond the point of human morality. Tucker argues that to ask God to conform to our morals is to do the impossible: to limit God’s freedom. Instead of insisting that God’s infinite power must be good, which would constrain God, Tucker argues that there “is *hesed*—mercy, pity—in God, but not as a grant from beyond us, but rather in what of God we have revealed, by having evolved by the ultimate power of God” (p. 42). God is not the definition of goodness, but God gave *us* the power to be good. In short, “[The] answer to ‘What is God’s goodness?’ is: The manifestation of God’s power in the human being is

where goodness resides.” To understand or limit God in any way is impossible. However, we can access Divine goodness within ourselves.

Aviva Richman also argues that we cannot understand God in dire moments. Instead, she centers the forces of good in our own actions. In “Loving God Through Life and Death,” Richman argues that we “will never be able to describe fully who God is or where God is in times like these. Instead, or in parallel, the charge to ‘walk in God’s ways’ asks us *who we are* in times like these, and what we need to activate in ourselves to bring into being the God we want to see in the world” (p. 51). Richman brings a text from Talmud Bavli *Sotah* 14a, in which we are instructed to do acts of *hesed* just as God does acts of *hesed*. We are created in *tzelem Elokim*, the Divine image, and as such we are capable of manifesting Divine *hesed* through our actions, even if we do not understand God on a cosmic level.

David Zvi Kalman’s “The Natural Disaster Theology Dilemma” goes so far as to take away God’s responsibility for the pandemic almost entirely. He gives several examples of how humans have become increasingly responsible for natural disasters through climate change or bad policy. Humanity “becomes responsible for an ever-growing number of disasters, while God’s responsibility diminishes at the same pace. As we take on God’s roles, we take on God’s responsibilities, as well—but crucially, these responsibilities are identical in character to the ones we have now” (p. 61). Kalman quotes the same source from *Sotah* as did Richman and similarly concludes that just as God takes care of others, so must we. We, in the image of God, become responsible for global *hesed*.

This work is an anthology of diverse genres and voices across the denominational spectrum. The combination of historical essays, homiletical thought pieces, and exegetical analyses comes together to form a rich picture of the ways in which we are thinking of our current global disaster. Despite the diverse backgrounds and disciplines of the authors, this anthology points to an interesting trend in Jewish thought: Many Jews are feeling distant from a cosmically omnipotent God as we struggle to understand the widespread suffering of recent years. Instead, the overall trend emphasizes that we are the arbiters of God’s goodness. This model both distances us from an external, all-powerful Divine image while bringing us close to an immanent, human-centered Divine image.

Although, God willing, this pandemic will eventually end, we will inevitably encounter new struggles ahead. I believe the frameworks of *Torah in a Time of Plague* will continue to provide solace and thought-provoking frameworks for the challenges to come.

Rabbi Atara Cohen is a Judaics teacher at the Heschel School in New York and serves as the Base MNHTN Rabbinic Field Fellow, welcoming young adults to engage in Jewish life. She received semikhah from Yeshivat Maharat and lives in New York City.

Conceiving Agency: Reproductive Authority among Haredi Women

By Michal S. Raucher
Indiana University Press, 2020, \$24.

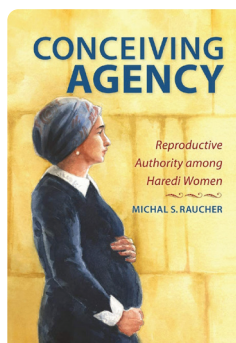
Reviewed by Roselyn Bell

If you are tired of Haredi women being portrayed as oppressed, uneducated, and subservient to their husbands, Michal Raucher's *Conceiving Agency* provides a much-needed corrective, reframing our notions of reproductive agency and religious meaning in the ultra-Orthodox community. Using the tools of ethnography and anthropology as well as the academic literature around bioethics and religious ethics, Raucher proposes a shift in the way we see the source of Haredi religious norms from texts and laws to the lived experience of the practitioners.

Raucher conducted her research over two years in Jerusalem, interviewing in depth Haredi women—23 women who had at least three children—and their obstetricians, nurse-midwives, doulas, and staff of organizations that support their fertility. As a *dati* woman familiar with the language and practices around pregnancy and birth in the Orthodox world, she was able to gain the trust of her subjects, leverage her insider-outsider status, and observe nuances that others might miss. For example, she notices the difference between the colorful covers of the prenatal advice books for pregnant women and the bindings of their husbands' *seforim* in brown or black, with gold lettering. The books sit side by side on bookshelves but represent different realms of literacy. Yet the women interviewed claim to have learned little or nothing from these books because they rely on their own embodied experience of pregnancy rather than on book knowledge.

Raucher traces how this embodied knowledge grows over successive pregnancies. A first-time or second-time pregnant woman is much more subject to the control of the male-dominated medical and rabbinic establishments (which are very intertwined and interdependent, as Raucher shows). But by her third pregnancy, she is more likely to rely on her previous experiences and to claim “I know my body” in making decisions such as whether to have additional ultrasound scans or to avoid a cesarean section. Raucher claims that “Haredi women speak about their third pregnancies as if it has become a ritual in which they have authority.” Thus they feel confident to make decisions without consulting their rabbis, doctors, or even husbands.

Thus, Raucher claims that pregnancy offers these women a unique opportunity to “challenge Haredi gender norms” and to “express agency and rely on their own embodied authority.” Paradoxically, it is precisely



because the pregnant woman is fulfilling the Haredi ideal of producing babies, and so ensuring physical continuity, that she gains this agency. Theologically, Haredi women see pregnancy as giving them a direct connection to God, which bypasses the authority of the rabbis and doctors.

During pregnancy, Haredi women see as their religious responsibility to express *hishtadlut* (efforts or endeavors) in balance with *bitahon* (confidence or trust). The former term involves actively taking steps to ensure the health of the fetus—eating healthfully, avoiding alcohol, performing necessary medical tests—even not looking at immodest billboards. The latter term means trusting in God to intercede, if necessary, to avoid disaster. As one woman put it, “This is my *avodat Hashem* [service for God]. I carry this child for nine months, and I *do not* want someone taking it away from me.” The two concepts are in tension, as Haredi women may sometimes reject medical intervention when they feel they are working in partnership with God.

There is inherent tension, obviously, between seeing every pregnancy as a gift from God and deciding what to do when a fetus is fatally flawed or will require medical attention that will threaten the needs of the rest of the family. Raucher reports that Haredi women do, at times, seek abortions or use birth control when doing so furthers the overall pronatalist goals of the community. Financial considerations are increasingly an issue, as Israeli government subsidies have declined. Raucher describes in detail the work of the EFRAT organization to “save” potential Jewish babies from abortion by offering financial incentives, with the goal being to “increase the population of Israel and contribute to the survival of our Jewish nation.”

The title of this book, *Conceiving Agency*, is a double entendre, referring both to the agency or authority that Haredi women gain when pregnant and to a fresh concept of agency that the author is presenting. She suggests that there is a “wide chasm between normative ethics and lived ethics”—that is, between textbook morality and lived and embodied reality. Haredi women show their devotion to communal norms and goals by having lots of children, just as Haredi men show their devotion by spending years in the yeshiva. Men can embody authority too, but their embodied authority is in contrast to that of the rabbis, which is based on book learning.

This thought-provoking volume gave me a greater appreciation for the close relationship with God that Haredi women feel in pregnancy. However, it raised two questions for me: Does this body-based paradigm of agency then preclude women from pursuing text-based mastery as a source of authority? And if pregnancy is the ultimate religious experience for women, where does that leave women who cannot bear children or are past the age of reproduction? Perhaps Raucher's next book will examine the religious authority of the *bubbes* of Jerusalem.



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