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VAERA

THIS WEEK'S LEHRHAUS OVER SHABBOS IS SPONSORED BY
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**RABBI SACKS: FROM ANGLO-JEWRY TO
CHIEF RABBI OF THE WORLD**

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Rabbi Sacks was probably the most impressive figure that Anglo-Jewry ever produced. He was born, educated, and worked exclusively in Britain until his retirement as Chief Rabbi in 2013. He became one of the most distinguished religious voices in Britain and eventually in the whole world. His speeches and writings engaged and inspired millions, and his death created deep feelings of grief and loss. But his relationship to Anglo-Jewry was complex, and he found its religious scene difficult to negotiate. While the undisputed leader of centrist Orthodoxy, both progressives and traditionalists criticized and opposed him. He even experienced a paradoxical relationship with the Chief Rabbinate. His appointment recognized his unequalled abilities, occupied most of his career, and propelled him to unprecedented prominence. At the same time, it led him into challenging controversies. Only after his term as Chief Rabbi, for seven short years when he made the whole Jewish world his arena, could he make his fullest contribution.¹

Anglo-Jewry is an unusual community. It has never had its institutions imposed upon it by the state, as was the case in Germany, France, and elsewhere. Orthodoxy remains the single largest denomination, unlike most places outside the Commonwealth. That outcome is due in large part to its unique Chief Rabbinate, which grew organically out of the Rabbinate of the Great Synagogue in London. Other synagogues in the metropolis either could not afford or did not want to support their own rabbi, so they relied on the Great's incumbent. This arrangement became the norm for other congregations around Britain and across the Empire. Rabbi Solomon Hirschell became Rabbi of the Great in 1802,

and by the time he died in 1842 his office had established hegemony over Anglo-Jewry; in 1845, the Great appointed Rabbi Nathan Marcus Adler with the explicit title of Chief Rabbi. Yet even from its earliest days, the Chief Rabbinate did not exercise authority over all British Jews. It remained an Ashkenazi institution, while the Sephardi community followed their own spiritual leaders. Furthermore, the Reform congregation West London Synagogue of British Jews also rejected the authority of the Orthodox Chief Rabbi.

As the years went by, not only more progressive, but also more traditionalist elements rejected the Chief Rabbi's authority. The Jews who formed the Federation of Synagogues and the Adath Yisroel were hostile and wary of the Chief Rabbinate. The Federation catered to more traditional immigrant groups from eastern Europe, while the Adath appealed to Hirschians from Germany. They looked down on the Chief Rabbi and those who worked under his aegis as insufficiently learned and excessively anglicized. Although levels of unity differed over time, by the post-War period, the Chief Rabbinate encompassed the United Synagogue, the centrist Orthodox body of London synagogues established in 1870 and other congregations about Britain and the Commonwealth who looked to the Chief Rabbi as their ultimate religious authority. This wider group was known as the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth. Although he did not claim to represent non-Orthodox Jews or Haredim, as the leader of the largest single group in Anglo-Jewry the Chief Rabbi unofficially served as the primary religious figure in the British Jewish community. Nevertheless, this vague and undefined arrangement caused problems.²

Rabbi Sacks grew up in a Federation of Synagogues congregation, Finchley Central, where his father served as president for some time. Although he had family links to the United Synagogue, Rabbi Sacks' early experiences occurred outside the religious institution he later led. He attended Bnei

Akiva and organized Jewish assemblies at his non-Jewish school, but he was not strictly observant. He attended Cambridge University and excelled in philosophy, but the Six Day War turned Rabbi Sacks towards intense engagement with Judaism.

Famously, at this point in his development, Rabbi Sacks met two leading rabbis in America in 1968, to seek their advice on how to give a greater role of Judaism in his life. The first, predictably, was Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik. Both had immersed in the western philosophical tradition, and as Rabbi Sacks sought to work out his relationship with committed Judaism, Rabbi Soloveitchik was the natural person to seek counsel. Importantly, although he was an admirer, Rabbi Sacks did not become a devotee of Rabbi Soloveitchik, as he might have done if he had received the American Modern Orthodox education in the circle of influence of Yeshiva University. For example, Rabbi Sacks once argued with Rabbi Soloveitchik's positions in his reflections on alienation and faith.³ The second rabbi was the Lubavitcher Rebbe, to whom Rabbi Sacks acknowledged his debt for the rest of his life. The Rebbe remained an important influence and broadened Rabbi Sacks' approach beyond a philosophical, rational Modern Orthodoxy. Rabbi Sacks' first book, [Torah Studies](#) (1986), was based on the Rebbe's discourses. Recollections of Rabbi Sacks describe him leading prayers, singing at Shabbat meals, in a way that exercised the charisma of a rebbe.⁴ This was not something any of his predecessors did, or what one would expect of a Cambridge-educated philosopher.

It is also important to consider two British rabbis whom Rabbi Sacks did not consult in his search for religious meaning, or if he did, he did not refer back to the encounter as a significant moment in his religious journey. The first was Rabbi Immanuel Jakobovits, the recently appointed Chief Rabbi, who later became Rabbi Sacks' immediate predecessor. The second was Rabbi Louis Jacobs, a leading figure in Anglo-Jewry and former candidate for the Chief Rabbinate who became negligible due to the controversy over his 1957 book [We Have Reason to Believe](#), which disputed the traditional account of the giving of the Torah. Rabbi Sacks' decision to seek counsel abroad from Rabbi Soloveitchik and the Rebbe rather than these two British rabbis demonstrates both the breadth of his horizons and his fundamental traditionalism.

Rabbi Sacks returned to Anglo-Jewry intending to take on religious leadership, but he initially concentrated on his philosophical studies. In 1970 he married, which restricted his ability to learn in a yeshiva overseas, so he entered Jews' College, the centrist Orthodox Anglo-Jewish rabbinical seminary. Rabbi Sacks entered as both a *semikhah* student and a lecturer in Jewish philosophy. The principal Rabbi Nachum Rabinovitch, an outstanding Talmudic scholar, became Rabbi Sacks' primary teacher. Rabbi Sacks also entered the more traditional Etz Chaim Yeshiva in Golders Green in the same period. He received *semikhah* from both institutions after a relatively short period of study, although he learned

individually with Rabbi Rabinovitch for twelve years in total. Rabbi Sacks' brilliance and the personal attention that he received enabled him to catch up to his peers. However, in the Orthodox communities of Britain there was an awareness that he had not spent ten or fifteen years in a yeshiva environment, and he knew it himself. It seemed to diminish his self-confidence in ways that became evident during his Chief Rabbinate, for example, his desire to defer to traditionalists in the Gryn and [Dignity of Difference](#) controversies, as we will see. Yet his personal education by a leading *talmid hakham*, as opposed to his progression through the usual yeshiva system, probably helped him become a more original thinker, much like Rabbi Soloveitchik and the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

After receiving *semikhah*, Rabbi Sacks rose swiftly. In 1978, he became Rabbi of the Golders Green Synagogue, a large and important congregation in the heart of Jewish London; he transferred to the socially elite Marble Arch Synagogue in 1983. He also continued teaching at Jews' College, which appointed him to a chair in Jewish thought in 1982 and elevated him to the position of principal in 1984. He was impatient with some of the traditions of Anglo-Jewish Orthodoxy, and he was one of the first United Synagogue rabbis to discard the hat and robe standard uniform of the Anglo-Jewish clergy. Surprisingly, at this stage in his career, he also taught at the cross-denominational Limmud Conference and at the Reform rabbinical seminary Leo Baeck College (albeit at his home rather than on the college campus).

As principal of Jews' College, Rabbi Sacks looked beyond the narrow confines of Anglo-Jewry. He organized very successful conferences at the college, including the "Traditional Alternatives" conference of 1989, bringing a range of leading Orthodox figures from around the world to London, attracting large attendances, and publishing papers from those conferences. He also contributed to a journal of Jewish thought, *L'Eylah*. As Dayan Ivan Binstock pointed out in his eulogy, at this point in his career, Rabbi Sacks still spoke and wrote in technical and complex terms.⁵ His audiences sensed his brilliance but could not always follow what he meant. Nevertheless, he continued leapfrogging other more experienced rabbis and emerged as the favourite to succeed Rabbi Jakobovits as Chief Rabbi. The patronage of Stanley Kalms, a wealthy philanthropist in the Jewish community and chairman of Jews' College, provided additional support for Rabbi Sacks. Most remarkably, Rabbi Sacks had already attracted the attention of the intellectual world beyond the Jewish community. In 1990, the BBC invited him to deliver the prestigious Reith Lecture.

As a potential Chief Rabbi, Rabbi Sacks faced the challenging task of succeeding someone as prominent as Rabbi Jakobovits, the son of a *dayan* in the London Beth Din, the recipient of knighthood and peerage, and winner of the Templeton Prize for Religion. Margaret Thatcher reportedly preferred him over

the Archbishop of Canterbury.⁶ In both Jewish and communal terms, his shoes seemed impossible to fill.

Rabbi Sacks' keynote address at the 1989 "Traditional Alternatives" conference further elevated his status ahead of the other candidates. He began with a provocative series of questions: "Will Orthodoxy see itself threatened by assimilation and secularisation? Will it retreat yet further into its protected enclaves, while the rest of the Jewish world falls to pieces? ...Or will it see itself challenged by this unique moment to lead the Jewish world?" Rabbi Sacks provided a powerful manifesto calling for openness, self-confidence, and leadership:

To make sure that every child has a Jewish education, as intellectually demanding and inspiring as the best secular education. To teach us how to be Jews in our secular involvement as well as our private lives. To teach us what it is to create a society in the *golah* and especially in *Eretz Yisrael*, based on compassion, justice and righteousness.⁷

Here, Rabbi Sacks emerged as the man capable of revitalising Anglo-Jewry at the end of the twentieth century. Sacks found himself the object of great expectations, perhaps more than anyone could fulfill. He was seen by Kalms and others as the man to save British Orthodoxy and the United Synagogue. Rabbi Sacks set out his stall as an inclusivist in his book [One People?](#) (1993), arguing that while Orthodox Judaism cannot regard other branches as equally valid, it can seek to include all Jews in a warm and open Orthodoxy. This position inevitably caused friction in practice. Rabbi Sacks believed that Orthodoxy was not one denomination among many; it was simply the set of boundaries around authentic Judaism. The weight on Rabbi Sacks' shoulders was even greater because there was an undefined notion in the community that he was a "moderate." This was in contrast to Rabbi Jakobovits, who never shirked from a conservative image.⁸ When Rabbi Sacks acted in ways that seemed less moderate, that caused disappointment and disquiet.

Rabbi Sacks launched his tenure as Chief Rabbi in his magnificent Installation Address with a call for a decade of Jewish renewal. He asked for a revival of *ahavat Yisrael* and an end to negativity within the community. He observed that some felt left out: women, the young, intellectuals, the less well-off, and they had to be attended to. He appealed for *ahavat Torah*, a new emphasis on Jewish learning and education. He discussed the importance of *ahavat Hashem* and a rejection of secularism. He expressed the need to contribute to British society and support the State of Israel. Here was a manifesto for the period of over two decades that Rabbi Sacks spent as Chief Rabbi.

What were the major themes of Rabbi Sacks' Chief Rabbinate as it developed? The first is his transition to more accessible writing. In addition to his detailed study [One People?](#), Rabbi

Sacks published several challenging theological works in the early 1990s: [Crisis and Covenant](#), [The Persistence of Faith](#), [Faith in the Future](#), and [The Politics of Hope](#). Some of these books dealt with specifically Jewish problems, while others dealt with wider religious issues. As the years went on the tone became lighter and more accessible in [Community of Faith](#), [Celebrating Life](#), and [Radical Then, Radical Now](#). Rabbi Sacks began translating and commenting on liturgical texts: the [Haggadah](#), the [Siddur](#), and [Mahzorim](#). He published a weekly essay on the *Parashah*, [Covenant and Conversation](#). Beyond the Jewish community, he addressed broader global issues such as multiculturalism in [To Heal a Fractured World](#), [The Home We Build Together](#), and [The Dignity of Difference](#).

This large body of work achieved two connected benefits. Firstly, it made Jews think more highly of Judaism and Torah. Secondly, it brought the Jewish voice to a wider societal conversation. Rabbi Sacks became a revered teacher to three Prime Ministers--John Major, Tony Blair, and Gordon Brown--as well as to the Prince of Wales. Although Rabbi Sacks wrote in 1986 that Rabbi Jakobovits' "public stances...have commanded national attention, taking Jewish values to prominence in the widest arena,"⁹ Rabbi Sacks far outshone his predecessor in this regard. His knighthood, elevation to the House of Lords, and award of the Templeton Prize equaled Rabbi Jakobovits' formal achievements, but Rabbi Sacks became an even more prominent figure around the world. Although this global prominence was a source of pride for British Jews, some traditionalists disparaged Rabbi Sacks' outward focus, calling him the Chief Rabbi for the gentiles.¹⁰

The suspicion, or lack of respect, from traditionalists stemmed from Rabbi Sack's university background and his wide use of non-Jewish sources in his writings, but it belied his actual positions. Rabbi Sacks was a social conservative. His early writings defend faith, tradition, and the family in the face of contemporary mores. In practice, he was sometimes more cautious than Rabbi Jakobovits, who, for example, permitted women's prayer groups to read from a Sefer Torah (albeit without a *berakhah*); Rabbi Sacks, on the other hand, did not even allow women to become Trustees of the United Synagogue.¹¹ Some felt that Rabbi Sacks did not push hard enough to solve the problems of *agunot*.¹² It is unclear to what extent these positions reflected his personal positions rather than merely the halakic view of the London Beth Din, which Rabbi Sacks felt unable to oppose.

When it came to skepticism about pluralism, Rabbi Sacks kept to his word. As Chief Rabbi, he stopped attending the interdenominational Limmud Conference, though he did allow United Synagogue rabbis to attend. He also attacked the nascent Masorti Movement in Britain in intemperate tones, calling them "intellectual thieves."¹³ The most dramatic encounter with the problems of pluralism was Rabbi Sacks' decision to not attend the funeral of Reform Rabbi Hugo Gryn, a prominent Holocaust survivor and the most senior Reform rabbi in Anglo-Jewry. Following an outcry of criticism, Rabbi

Sacks attended the memorial service sometime later. When the Haredi community protested that, Rabbi Sacks sent a letter in Hebrew to Dayan Chanoch Padwa, the leader of the Adath Yisroel community, claiming that he only attended the memorial service in order to prevent the Reform movement from appointing its own Chief Rabbi. He described Rabbi Gryn as one of those who “destroy the faith.”¹⁴ When it leaked to the press, the letter caused an unprecedented furor that dogged Rabbi Sacks for many years afterward. The *Jewish Chronicle* revisited the story repeatedly. Meir Persoff, a senior journalist at the *Chronicle*, and Geoffrey Alderman, an academic and columnist, pursued Rabbi Sacks further, with several books and articles, which amounted to a full-scale character assassination.¹⁵

The next and final controversy of Rabbi Sacks’ time as Chief Rabbi also concerned pluralism, but on a grander scale. His book [The Dignity of Difference](#) contained the following passage: “God has spoken to mankind in many languages: through Judaism to the Jews, Christianity to Christians, Islam to Muslims...God is the God of all humanity, but no single faith is or should be the faith of all humanity.”¹⁶ This statement prompted accusations of heresy from leaders of the British Haredi community, including Rabbi Joseph Dunner in London and Rabbi Bezalel Rakow, the Rav of the Haredi enclave in Gateshead in the North East of England. Rabbi Sacks claimed that his critics had misunderstood him, and he published rabbinic sources that supported his position, but he nevertheless revised his language. This concession disappointed some of his supporters.¹⁷ Rabbi Sacks’ transition from precise philosophical language toward a more ambiguous literary style may have partially caused the controversy by not precluding a variety of interpretations. Rabbi Sacks’ political problem reflected deeper tensions between centrist Orthodoxy and Haredim, as rabbis from both worlds served under his aegis. Rabbi Sacks revised his words not primarily under pressure from the Adath or Gateshead, but from a section within his own constituency allied with those groups, which inevitably meant letting down another faction.

After [The Dignity of Difference](#), Rabbi Sacks shifted the presentation of his ideas. He moved away from controversial Jewish topics, and his publications often appeared with the assurance that the London Beth Din had approved the contents. One can also discern a more fundamental shift in Rabbi Sacks’ focus. [The Dignity of Difference](#) in part responded to a Jewish problem, how Judaism should view other religions. Rabbi Sacks’ answer, or at least the way he expressed it, proved unbearably controversial. Therefore, for the rest of his life, Rabbi Sacks moved in two different directions. He either focused on classical Jewish texts, making them meaningful and relevant, or he tackled general human problems like [multiculturalism](#), or general religious problems like the [relationship between faith and science](#), to which he brought a Jewish voice. But he stopped trying to write Jewish answers to Jewish problems.

Rabbi Sacks’ rehabilitation from [The Dignity of Difference](#) crisis was complete when he stepped down as Chief Rabbi in 2013 and began visiting professorships at Yeshiva University and New York University. These appointments arguably marked the beginning of Rabbi Sacks’ greatest period. Unfettered by the political pitfalls of the Chief Rabbinate, he moved beyond Anglo-Jewish centrist Orthodoxy to become Chief Rabbi of the world. He used his seat in the House of Lords to combat anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, and became the primary spokesman for the Jewish community on those troubling subjects.

He spoke all over the Jewish world, and continued to produce his weekly [Covenant and Conversation](#) essays on the *Parashah* and new books. He was translated into Modern Hebrew and became a major figure in Israel for the first time.¹⁸ He started to make very [popular videos](#) for YouTube and used social media extremely effectively. His translations of and commentaries on the liturgy, published by Koren, emerged as the new standard Modern Orthodox series of [sidurim](#) and [mahzorim](#).¹⁹ His voice became the dominant English expression of Judaism, to both Jews and non-Jews. His last project, a new commentary on the [Humash](#), will hopefully be published in the near future. Beyond merely an *or la-goyim* (“light to the nations”), as some eulogies have described him, he transcended that label by becoming a teacher to his own people as well.²⁰

Although Anglo-Jewry was sometimes a difficult environment, and the Chief Rabbinate sharply challenging, that context and role gave Rabbi Sacks unparalleled opportunities to develop into the spokesman for Judaism. He became so compelling on the world stage because of his grounding in Britain, but it was only when he transcended a particular place and a specific office that he manifested his full greatness. We were fortunate to experience the last seven years of his post-rabbinate career, but the sadness remains that it did not last longer.

¹ For general background on Rabbi Sacks, see Meir Persoff, [Hats in the Ring](#) (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 219-259.

² For more on the development of the British Chief Rabbinate, see Benjamin J. Elton, [Britain’s Chief Rabbis and the Religious Character of Anglo-Jewry, 1880-1970](#) (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).

³ Jonathan Sacks, “[Alienation and Faith](#),” *Tradition* 13.4/14.1 (Spring-Summer 1973): 137-162.

⁴ See [this](#) account, for example.

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYdUrQipCVk>.

⁶ <https://www.thejc.com/news/features/margaret-thatcher-special-relationship-with-chief-rabbi-jakobovits-1.483706>.

⁷ Quoted in Persoff, [Hats in the Ring](#), 226-227.

⁸ For one example of this impression of moderation, see [here](#).

⁹ Introduction to *Tradition and Transition*, ed. Jonathan Sacks (London: Jews’ College Publications, 1986), 1.

¹⁰ <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/.premium-1948-2020-the-contradictions-of-rabbi-jonathan-sacks-1.9296650>.

¹¹ <https://www.thejc.com/community/community-news/pioneer-orthodox-women-s-learning-group-looks-back-on-25-years-1.467572>; <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk/new-role-for-women-in-synagogues-1.470872>.

¹² <https://www.thejc.com/comment/opinion/when-it-came-to-agunot-rabbi-lord-sacks-could-have-pushed-harder-1.508647>.

¹³ <https://www.jta.org/1995/01/19/archive/britains-chief-rabbi-stirs-controversy-with-recent-remarks>.

THE SYNAGOGUE AFTER CORONA: FROM CRISIS TO OPPORTUNITY

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We are turning a corner in the battle against COVID-19. The [first vaccine](#) in the United States has been distributed. Just as we have been forced to adjust to the “new normal,” the news of societal immunity has many of us fantasizing about returning to the “old normal.”

But will it really be the “old normal?” In his book [Post Corona: From Crisis to Opportunity](#), Scott Galloway presents two theses in the realm of business that impact synagogue life as well. First, he argues, COVID-19 is not creating new changes in society but accelerating them. The trends were already present, but the crisis has forced us to reckon with this impact more directly than we may have expected. An example is remote work: it was done before COVID-19, but has now become far more common. Second, there is opportunity in every crisis, especially severe crises.¹ By evaluating future options wisely, getting ahead of the accelerated trends, and being willing to reevaluate what we already know, companies can succeed in a post-pandemic world.

This is particularly pertinent to the future of the synagogue. COVID-19 did not merely press the pause button on the regular synagogue experience. Instead, the adaptations we made during this time inevitably will shape our expectations for prayer and community moving forward. We have tasted the seductive fruit of [convenient](#) and [shorter prayer services](#), be it in our own living rooms or in a neighbor’s backyard, which had neither a rabbi’s sermon nor lengthy announcements. Our experiences attending *shiurim* have changed as well; we could listen to a *shiur* on our couch, perhaps with the camera off, pajamas on, and a few other screens open. All of these possibilities existed to some degree before COVID-19, but the trends have likely been accelerated by the pandemic. Moving forward, synagogues may be

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<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/jonathan-sacks-defender-faith-9222878.html>.

¹⁵ Meir Persoff, [Another Way, Another Time](#) (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2010).

¹⁶ Jonathan Sacks, [The Dignity of Difference](#) (London: Continuum, 2002), 55.

¹⁷ <https://www.jta.org/2003/03/16/lifestyle/british-chief-rabbi-revises-controversial-book>.

¹⁸ See the end of [this](#) article.

¹⁹ For (just one) example, see [here](#).

²⁰ For example, Chief Rabbi Mirvis called him an “[outstanding ambassador for Judaism](#).”

challenged to convince Jews to once again fill the pews. Some believe that many [millennials](#) (a generation of which I am included) are less likely to belong to institutions altogether. This is due to the fact that grassroots and start-up mentality often speak more to millennials than establishment organizations, [including synagogues](#), with their long institutional history and protocol. Granted, Orthodox Jews need some sort of community structure for religious and social purposes, but we should not take synagogue demand for granted.

It therefore is critical that communal leaders articulate what we have to offer and make the case that being part of a centralized synagogue community is still a meaningful and worthwhile investment of time, money, and energy, even as they make appropriate post-pandemic adjustments.²

Why We Need Synagogues

COVID-19 has demonstrated in multiple ways that we need robust synagogues, even more than previously thought.

First, while one can pray anywhere, dedicated space is important. We often think the purpose of synagogue is to join the *minyan*, but *Shulhan Arukh (Orah Hayyim 90:9)* rules that one who cannot pray with a *minyan* should still pray in the synagogue. *Mishnah Berurah (90:33)* explains that it is a place set aside for sanctity. This principle perhaps is not just a directive for greater piety but also speaks to the core of our prayer experience. While we did our best to see the upsides of turning our homes into mini-synagogues during the pandemic, we maintain the notion of sanctity by distinguishing between the holy and mundane, between home and synagogue. It is easier to communicate with God and hear God’s voice if the place we go for that conversation is different from the place where we communicate with friends and hear the noise of

mundane entertainment and news. Particularly in light of the increasingly common pursuit of mindfulness, we can experience that in synagogue.

Additionally, it is important to consider the virtue of a verse articulated in Proverbs (14:28): *be-rov am hadrat melekh*, “the king is glorified among the multitudes.” This is not just a halakhic concept but a spiritual and experiential one. There is an energy that a community can create that one cannot replicate at home. Certainly, davening a weekday *minhah* with 90,000 people at the *Siyum ha-Shas* creates a different energy than davening with a smaller *minyan*. While that may be a once-in-a-sabbatical experience, the principle stands that power is found in numbers. For those blessed to have larger *shuls*, singing *Lekhah Dodi* with 200 people feels very different than it does with 20. Even those who pray with a *minyan* might make the choice between praying at synagogue and going to the more convenient *minyan* closer to home.

Another element of synagogues is the *shiurim*, classes delivered by a rabbi or layperson. At points, I have wondered why anyone would want to come listen to me teach Torah when everyone has the best speakers and teachers available through an internet connection. Especially during COVID-19, many organizations and institutions were able to draw upon top scholars and lecturers. Yet at the end of the day it is meaningful for people to learn with those with whom they have a connection. Inspiration can come from an online speaker, but *connection* comes from learning with someone with whom one has a prior relationship. While YUTorah and Torah Podcasts will still be popular post-pandemic, perhaps even more so than beforehand, there is much to gain from the learning that takes place with others in the same room. The speaker draws energy from the audience, and that energy creates a dynamic that is difficult to replicate online.

It is widely accepted that in-person learning for children is better than Zoom classes. While the content is the same, the community built in school along with the presence of learning together is qualitatively different in school; likewise, the content of a Zoom *shiur* may be similar to what is offered in person, but the environment could not be more different. It is hard to stay focused on the screen where the *shiur* is taking place when there are other windows looking to grab our attention. To hear the voice of God through Torah, being in that sanctuary or *Beit Midrash* with the phone on silent and focusing on the speaker, sources, and the people around us can make the experience of learning Torah transformative in the way we all dream it will be for each and every one of us.

A third element of synagogue life that is even more difficult to create virtually than prayer and learning: the social-communal relationships generated by synagogue participation. As engagement expert Ron Wolfson writes, synagogue “is not about programs. It’s not about branding, labels, logos, clever titles, websites, or smartphone apps. It’s not even about institutions. *It’s about relationships.*”³ While the primary,

expressed purpose of synagogue is our relationship with God, there is a lot of truth to the notion that we come to synagogue to connect with other people. Our social engagement with others froze in place during COVID-19. As a rabbi, I was still able to connect with and support my members through phone calls to individuals and electronic communication with the community at large. That network was pre-existing, and the connections had already been built during my time as a rabbi prior to the pandemic. But suppose the current situation were to continue as is for the next five years? Over time, it would be difficult to renew support systems, and it would be especially hard to create new relationships and networks. Indeed, friends of mine who moved to a new community over the summer shared that they were largely disengaged religiously and socially from their new community. While thankfully we are seeing the end come nearer, we can create more successful relationships by being part of an expansive and dynamic social network. There are benefits to our well-being through cultivating casual friendships beyond our closest inner circles, and we have been missing that during the pandemic.⁴ Showing up to a robust synagogue community can bring us those friendships, including with people of a different generation who have a lot to offer and teach us.

Synagogues should be seen as centers for Jewish experience - religiously, culturally, and socially. While many aspects of synagogue life can be fulfilled through other models, the collective functions of a synagogue hopefully make it experientially compelling to not only passively join but actively work to maintain and grow.

How Might Synagogues Adjust?

While leaders should make the case that people should come back to synagogue, we must also consider how the synagogue experience will look post-pandemic given the way people experienced Judaism during the pandemic. Will we return to the two or three hour services that took place previously? How will that impact the decisions of those who have been praying in smaller *minyanim* or at home until now? The only thing that might prevent people from running to the *hashkamah minyan* that takes place in many synagogues is the early hour. But should every *minyan* follow the *hashkamah* approach of speedy davening? What does that mean for creating prayer that is reasonably efficient but also creates substantive meaning? A related issue is the matter of High Holy Day services. In my synagogue, we began at 8:30 am and finished at 11:30 am on the first day of Rosh Hashanah. For some communities, that is not all that different from the length of regular Shabbat services. Putting aside [halakhic considerations](#) of eliminating *piyyutim*, should we continue on this path? On the one hand, some may find they have more time to learn Torah, eat lunch at an earlier hour, or find it easier to sit through the services without feeling Judaism is a burden. On the other hand, will Shabbat and *Yamim Tovim* feel the same in the absence of basking in the holiness of the synagogue?

A helpful way to frame this is to think about what actually makes prayer meaningful. For example, one way in which services have been kept shorter has been by curtailing singing. This was done both to limit the time people spent gathered together and because singing can be a dangerous way of spreading the virus. I personally miss the singing at synagogue tremendously; I feel a deep loss of soulful expression. To take an extreme case, I found myself quarantined on Yom Kippur. I sang some *piyyutim* alone to try to give myself some sort of “Yom Kippur experience,” but I much prefer doing that with my community than by myself. And I suspect I’m not alone in feeling that way.

But others do not feel that way. When I was in college, there were two Orthodox *minyanim* on Friday nights: “Carlebach” and a non-singing *minyan*. Most attended the former, and while some thought the latter was too separatist, perhaps going forward we will embrace the ability to provide multiple options where possible. Even in a “main *minyan*” setting, some middle ground may be sought. *Ba’alei Tefillah* will have to be ever more mindful of ending at a reasonable time for the majority, and *gabbaim* may need to balance a leader who sings a lot with someone who leads efficiently. It will also may behoove us to reevaluate the extended time that comes with walking around the whole sanctuary with the *Sefer Torah* and extra *mi she-beirakhs* that only bring people meaning if they are having a really good conversation with their neighbor. Instead of restoring these practices once they either become safer or because time permits, the absence of these practices during pandemic worship may be welcomed as permanent changes.

Sermons are another piece of services that take time. While most synagogues expect the rabbi to give a sermon, it could be worthwhile for synagogues and rabbis to explore whether the regular model of fifteen-minute sermons could look different post-pandemic. During COVID-19, even after Shabbat services resumed, I emailed out sermons that people could read at their own leisure, while still giving a brief *devar Torah* at the end of services. Rabbis will still speak post-COVID, as we have a responsibility to educate, and it can be meaningful to have this in-person learning opportunity on Shabbat. But while the well-developed fifteen-minute sermon will still have its place, perhaps rabbis could vary the script by occasionally sharing an insight into the *siddur*, raising a question before the Torah reading with an answer at the end, or even just a short, powerful idea to give food for thought instead of a formal sermon. This would also allow rabbis to invest more time in fine-tuning the quality of their sermons when they do speak and streamline their most essential messages. Even one of the greatest *darshanim* of his time, Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm *z”l*, [wrote](#) that early in his career, he was advantaged by rotating the delivery of sermons, and the task became more challenging once he was required to speak weekly. Reenvisioning the sermon slot has the potential to increase the impact of the Torah that is shared in synagogue.

Similarly, even as there is greater meaning to be found in live participation in *shiurim*, many people who do not typically attend *shiurim* in person did join on Zoom throughout the pandemic. Coming out at 8:00pm is not practical for many people. While I of course hope people will join for *Ma’ariv* and my *shiur* in person post-pandemic, I’m not ready to give up on Zoom entirely for this reason. We should take every opportunity to reach as many people as possible.

Even the medium of in-person *shiurim* could change. Shabbat afternoon outdoor classes, while initially offered to accommodate people who were not coming indoors, may be worth continuing simply for the sake of providing different environments for gathering and learning.

The same applies to events that are not learning centered. While we hope events ranging from comedy to supporting Israel will gain in-person audiences, perhaps homebound seniors or parents supervising children will still be able to participate via Zoom.

A final takeaway to be considered going forward is the experience of women. Women had a different experience of “coming back to *shul*” than men did. In New York State, the governor originally allowed quorums of ten to gather for worship. This meant that Orthodox women were not able to attend synagogue for a month in New York. Even after women were officially able to come back to synagogue, many young mothers were not able to come to synagogue because of restrictions barring children from attending, which sometimes meant that young fathers were not coming to synagogue either. An absence of female presence can really affect the whole community. We need to acknowledge that COVID-19 has furthered the arguments for increasing women’s voices in the community, and signals the importance of increased female leadership in Orthodox communities under the [guidelines of the Orthodox Union](#).

This extends to other forms of inclusivity - as many others, including children and high-risk individuals refrained from coming to synagogue, we should become better attuned to who is missing in the seats and resolve that exclusivity beyond our control should not be replicated when it is in our control to be inclusive. As we move to truly reopen post-pandemic, we should work ever harder to welcome every person who enters our doors and give them a seat at the table to help synagogues improve and thrive.

Hashiveinu Hashem Eilekha - it is in God’s hands when we are in the post-COVID world; *v-nashuvah* - but we will return to our holy spaces when that time comes. *Hadeish yameinu k-kedem* - may we find renewal that feels like returning to the “old normal,” but may it be a true renewal - an opportunity to reshape, reimagine, and rebuild.

¹ Scott Galloway, [Post Corona: From Crisis to Opportunity](#) (Portfolio/Penguin, 2020), xvi.

² Shortly before this piece was published, Rabbi Moshe Hauer, executive vice president of the Orthodox Union, wrote a beautiful [opinion piece](#) that deals with many of these themes.

AFTER COVID, REIMAGINE SYNAGOGUE LIFE, DON'T JUST TWEAK IT: A RESPONSE TO JUDAH KERBEL

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In a September 15 [article](#), Jim Berry and John D'Angelo note that prior to the pandemic, the commercial real estate (CRE) field was mired in old school attitudes, largely defined by a refusal to change legacy practices and conventional ways of thinking. Yet in these past ten months, more has occurred to disrupt and advance the field than in the ten years prior. Berry and D'Angelo conclude, "We were expecting many job roles to evolve by 2025. Now, we anticipate that the roles could evolve by 2023, if not earlier. This is because COVID-19 has hastened the need to increase digitization, automation, and virtualization of work."

Just as COVID-19 has brought to light the preexisting need CRE firms had to reassess their structures, synagogue leadership must recognize and endure the same *heshbon ha-nefesh*, spiritual accounting, if we want to emerge on the other end of this pandemic stronger and more effective. COVID-19 has highlighted for many congregations some uncomfortable truths that predated our current struggles. For us to embrace the present challenge, we must absolve ourselves of past assumptions about synagogue life and demonstrate a willingness to collaborate, rethink, innovate, and evolve.

Bearing this in mind, while my esteemed colleague Rabbi Judah Kerbel's [discussion of the post-COVID synagogue](#) initiates an important conversation, it may not run deep enough. Is it really sufficient "that communal leaders articulate what we have to offer and make the case that being part of a centralized synagogue community is still a meaningful and worthwhile investment of time, money, and energy, even as they make appropriate post-pandemic adjustments?" Or do we have to confront some harder questions about the choices many are making regarding their communal engagement during this time?

Before any discussion about the future of our synagogues, we must first acknowledge the deadly toll this pandemic has taken on our beloved communities. While some have been relatively untouched, others have faced unimaginable

³ Ron Wolfson, [Relational Judaism: Using the Power of Relationships to Transform the Jewish Community](#) (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013), p. 2-3.

⁴ Jennifer Latson, "The New Social Orbits," *Psychology Today* (January/February 2020): 53.

adversity. Nobody - congregants or clergy - was ready for the enormity of what we have dealt with. To go forward, Rabbis must lead with empathy and understanding. It will be a long time until we fully internalize the toll that the last year has had on each of us. For congregants that have remained free of COVID-19, the sheer act of being in long-term isolation may leave profound effects on both mind and body. When it comes to religious life, many have found new freedoms and flexibility available to them like never before. A few examples come to mind, such as a parent's ability to be present with their families throughout Shabbat morning, be home for bedtime with the kids, or have a meaningful family *seudah shelishit*. We must acknowledge that some congregants have found both more joy and greater meaning while at home. In private, at least some *shul* leaders are worried about the implications. If some of our congregants feel they are better off without us, what does this mean for the future of the synagogue?

Moreover, much like CRE, until a year ago, the synagogue space was often defined by rigid cultures and legacy rules that found a devout following. But if we're being honest about what has appealed in the past to some devotees of Modern Orthodox communities, it might not be grounded in Halakhah or *minhag*. While we want our sanctified spaces to reflect certain Jewish values, the communal commitment to those values has long been limited. As some institutions attempted to raise the level of religious observance and spiritual engagement within *Tefillah* services, many congregants stepped away from the discourse and out of sanctuaries, and decided that *davening* is not for them right now.

Yet because communities have by and large grown within Modern Orthodoxy, it has absolved us all - rabbis included - of having to face a real crisis staring back at us in the pews: a crisis in faith as evidenced by a [2019 pre-pandemic Nishma research study](#)¹ that suggests that only one in four Modern Orthodox people find Modern Orthodoxy to be inspiring. Put differently, for fear of inadvertently coming across as challenging traditional standards and cultural norms, we have

knowingly missed the signs that a change has needed to come to the Orthodox synagogue experience for quite some time. While this change may be different for the wide variety of congregations, the opportunity of this moment is to think deliberately and thoughtfully about what we want our synagogues to become in the future, not how to maintain and tinker with them so that we continue the path of the past. We must ask ourselves: *Can we take this moment to consider how to make our community spaces more personally meaningful, relevant, and compelling for the modern Jew?*

For example, Kerbel identifies stronger engagement through technology as one of the innovations that synagogues should utilize into the future. “[E]ven as there is greater meaning to be found in live participation in *shiurim*, many people who do not typically attend *shiurim* in person did join on Zoom throughout the pandemic.” This perhaps unexpected level of engagement seems to indicate that people remain hungry for spiritual connection. Yet in some congregations, people have not returned in droves to communal prayer in person. Some sanctuaries still sit nearly empty despite approval for them to fill up again, with interested parties seated six feet apart for the time being. While there are many legitimate explanations for why many remain apprehensive to return to pray in their local synagogues, perhaps clergy members, myself included, also must acknowledge that communal prayer is not an easy point of entry for many congregants into synagogue life. Every synagogue that has struggled at any point with sustaining a daily *minyan* has known this for years before COVID-19 surfaced. If we emerge on the other side of this year continuing to believe that the main attraction of a synagogue is prayer services during prime time on *Shabbat* morning, we will have shown we learned nothing from this experience. Prayer is an activity we encourage people to participate in, almost the totality of the goal of a synagogue-centric community. And while hosting a regular *minyan* remains a critical component of an Orthodox lifestyle and community, it is not difficult to understand the challenges *minyan* attendance presents to the lifestyle of many of our congregants.

The success of and the story of the prayers that have taken place in person over the past six months have been in their efficiency. Rather than defaulting to the simplest conclusion - that most people are either frustrated with drawn-out services or opt to occupy themselves with other activities instead - let's instead ask what about those recent experiences in backyards, in parking lots, and on rooftops made these synagogue experiences more tolerable and even enjoyable for participants. What about the more intimate *minyanim* has spoken to this limited number of people more so than usual and might even have uplifted their spirits, even awakening their souls? How can we leverage what we've seen within those experimental spaces and truncated services to spread the wealth and wisdom to those who have so far opted to remain at home? While the offerings of a synagogue before COVID-19 may have resonated and worked for many, and

tefillah may be a worthy priority for a growing population, we cannot ignore those of our communities who find *tefillah* difficult and uninspiring.

Throughout these last months synagogue leadership has examined every prayer and practice within its service to evaluate whether it is critical to maintain, or can be dropped for efficiency and COVID-19 safety purposes. What if going forward we ask ourselves fundamental questions even when they are not driven by safety concerns? Every prayer, speech, campaign, and moment is an opportunity to engage and inspire, and should be managed with the congregant experience first and foremost in our minds. While acknowledging the obligation to pray, we also need to keep in mind the goals of *tefillah*. The Rambam in the third chapter of the *Laws of Prayer and the Priestly Blessing* describes the level of *kavvanah* - focus - one is required to have to pray, and he [describes](#) that Sages would advise one who is weary from a journey to wait up to three days to regain the strength required to pray. The [Shulhan Arukh: Orach Hayyim 98](#), in addressing the role of *kavanah*, also stresses the need for peace of mind, and describes the early pious people who would seclude themselves for lengthy periods of time in preparation for *tefillah*. Where does the preparation for *avodah she-balev*, “service of the heart,” fit into the functioning of our prayer services? Why should we assume everyone is ready to pray?

To take another example, like countless others, during this pandemic I've discovered that I too am most likely an introvert masking myself as an extrovert. After a big gathering such as a *shul kiddush*, I'm incredibly drained. Yet Kerbel's argument assumes in part that social connection was a central tenet that has been crafted and cultivated by nearly all synagogues in the past, and that remains an important feature for us to recapture and recreate. I wonder if the contrary may be true: many of us have found more of our true selves and sensibilities through the limited social pressures during the pandemic, and the appetite to get back a shared, crowded space might not be all that large. Did we ever really have, “[a] community [that] can bring us those friendships, including with people of a different generation who have a lot to offer and teach us,” as Kerbel states, or does that remain a pipe dream for most congregations?

Simon Sinek, one of my favorite modern leaders, [draws our attention](#) to the need to balance the spiritual offerings that speak to extroverts, those who gain strength from social situations, and introverts, who find their strength sapped by those same experiences. Large *minyanim* that fulfill the mandate for *be-rov am hadrat melekh*, “the King is glorified among the multitudes,” may not be for everyone. We may need to consider that there are congregants who experience God in solitude and the *kol demamah dakah*, a still small voice. When we evaluate what may be the most halakhically ideal services for our communities, we must take into consideration

our diverse constituents and what may or may not spiritually resonate.

In his [famous 1978 article](#) Rav Solovetchik reflects on the contributions of his father and mother to his religious identity. In describing the contribution of his mother, the Rav writes, “She taught me that there is a flavor, a scent and warmth to *mitzvot*. I learned from her the most important thing in life—to feel the presence of the Almighty and the gentle pressure of His hand resting upon my frail shoulders. Without her teachings, which quite often were transmitted to me in silence, I would have grown up a soulless being, dry and insensitive.” Our *shuls* need to offer both *Mussar Avikha* and *Torat Imekha* - fidelity to law, and the feeling of the presence of God.

Where do we go from here? Rarely, if ever, do we have the opportunity to design our communities from the ground up, first to envision and then to execute on what we would like to see happen. As we design our post-COVID synagogues, I would suggest we place at the center of this process our congregants and their spiritual wellbeing, while placing on the periphery the conventional needs of our institutions and previous expectations. As Tim Brown, Chair of the design and consulting firm IDEO, [explains](#), “design thinking begins with what Roger Martin, the business school professor at the University of Toronto, calls integrative thinking. And that’s the ability to exploit opposing ideas and opposing constraints to create new solutions. In the case of design, that means balancing desirability, what humans need, with technical feasibility, and economic viability.”

What might this look like in practice? While there will be an array of halakhic questions that arise with such an effort, I believe we need to seek to differentiate our spiritual offerings. We must not assume that synagogue engagement begins only when someone chooses to participate in *tefillah* but rather seek to diversify what we offer and how we offer it. For example, I am considering, post-COVID-19, introducing an adult education program at my synagogue to run concurrently with our *Shabbat* morning *tefillah* services. We need to bring spirituality into our midst by starting from scratch in a way that most Orthodox rabbis have been reluctant to attempt previously by engaging in discussion with our congregants, and listening to what they have discovered about themselves these last ten months. While there may be a variety of considerations in any given community, we may want to

consider other programs that connect people with each other around shared interests, like [Richmond’s Jewish food festival](#), or we may want to consider modeling vulnerability within our *shuls* like [this program](#) on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

Each year, Deloitte publishes a report titled “Global Human Capital Trends,” capturing how organizations may adjust their mindsets because of the trends they identify in disruptive practices. In their [2021 report](#), perhaps unsurprisingly Deloitte suggests that the disruptions we have faced because of COVID-19 will lead organizations to think about what needs to be done for their survival and sustainability. They say:

It’s our view that the shift from survive to thrive depends on an organization becoming—and remaining—distinctly human at its core. This is not just a different way of thinking and acting. It’s a different way of being, one that approaches every question, every issue, and every decision from a human angle first. And it’s not just a good idea, but a mandate for growth. Today’s environment of extreme dynamism calls for a degree of courage, judgment, and flexibility that in a world disrupted only humans and teams led by humans can bring...

Being distinctly human at the core is the essence of what it means to be a social enterprise.

Being distinctly human should be the goal at the core of everything that synagogues do. It’s the essence of what it means to be a spiritual and social enterprise. These are problems that have long existed; it has just taken a once-in-a-century pandemic for us to begin to seek out the right solutions. While many of the specifics described in this article may not be true of every congregation, the opportunity to design our synagogues with the goal of making them thrive in the future presents itself today like no time in our recent history.

¹ While some have criticized this study’s research methodology, we would be wise to pay attention to its conclusions that ring true, and that are bolstered by some trending discussion topics within the Modern Orthodox community over the last number of years, including [Social Orthodoxy](#), [half-Shabbos](#) and [discussions in these pages](#).

EXPLAINING ORTHODOXY'S MANY RESPONSES TO CORONAVIRUS

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Jewish communal attitudes and behaviours toward COVID-related restrictions have varied significantly across the world, and in some situations have led to conflict within communities on the appropriateness or otherwise of certain responses. This article explores these from social, cultural, and theological perspectives so as to gain a deeper understanding of the drivers of specific responses. The intent is not to justify, rather to explain and understand. Note that this analysis is based on anecdotal evidence from a number of communities and as such would be classed as 'non-scientific'. Despite being about a year into this pandemic, we are still in the 'fog of war' and there is so much we will only be able to understand through the kind of rigorous analysis that can take place in the years to come, with greater hindsight.

Individualism Versus Collectivism

One of the foundations of the USA is individualism and civil rights, and this is reflected in a number of amendments to the constitution. While civil liberties are expressed on both sides of the political spectrum (gun rights, abortion rights), they are both expressions of a rights-based society, where the rights of individuals are held in the highest order. On the other hand, the principle of universalism is more associated with the political left.

In Asia, collectivism is an important principle in society – the needs of both family and community come before those of the individual. Governments in the region are a mix of democracy, benevolent dictatorship, socialist, and authoritarian (see more below). Yet in all cases, there is a high degree of compliance with government rules.

Where does Judaism fall on these two extremes? Halakhah mostly mandates a priority of the community over the individual. For example, in matters of *kodesh*, communal sacrifices have a higher priority to those of the individual. With regard to property rights, a public accessway through private property cannot be blocked, and one may not divert a water channel if it will affect others. While slightly tangential, the directive that for someone seriously ill, we may break Shabbat once so that the person will be able to keep Shabbat many times in the future may carry a similar view. These examples indicate that even if there is a *clash* between the needs of the individual (*yahid*) and the needs of the community (*rabbim*), we favor the community.

A fascinating story¹ involving Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky is informative here. The Rabbi was being driven in a car, and

reprimanded the driver for not yielding to a city bus out of *kavod tzibbur*... While this is not halakhic, it does reflect an acute awareness to the needs of the many over the few.

But unlike the well-known Trolley Problem (where we are challenged to take an action that will save multiple lives but cause a single death), under Jewish law, these principles do not extend to human life. The Rambam rules (*Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 5:5, and based on a case in Gemara *Terumot*) that if a community receives a threat to "hand over one of you or we will kill you all," they may not give up an individual – even a specific individual. From this we can see (a) the strong halakhic distinction between active and passive, (b) the limits of putting community ahead of individual, and (c) the importance and value of human life. In the words of the gemara – no person's blood is redder than anyone else's.

We can resolve this apparent inconsistency either by recognizing the importance of (a single) human life above all, or by putting categories of laws into different silos: *kodesh* matters, commercial matters, and human life. The silos sit side-by-side (within property law, community trumps individual), but also exist in a hierarchy (*kodesh* law trumps commercial law, human life trumps all). In any case, the basic point that the larger Jewish orientation is to prioritize the needs of the community over those of the individual, with important limitations, is clear.

How this informs the COVID response

Asia was the first part of the world to experience COVID. Because of their experience with the SARS virus just a few years prior, many countries had established pandemic protocols and sufficient capacity in their public health systems. Between that and the prevalent collectivist culture, their response was rapid, orderly, and efficient. Thus, countries like South Korea, Singapore, and Vietnam were able to bring the initial outbreak under control.²

By contrast, in the Western world, we have seen civil rights arguments used as a way to reject government rules that are ostensibly public health policies. (While some Jewish groups, predominantly Orthodox or Haredi, have adopted those arguments, it's not clear whether they are doing so based on their own belief in civil rights, or driven by other beliefs that may share a common cause.)

Strangely, the halakhic principles mentioned earlier do not appear to be a strong factor in the Jewish community responses to COVID. One would expect that prioritizing the health needs of the many over the few, and the high value of a single human life, would mandate that individuals that are at risk take extra precautions not to infect others, not participate in group activities, and that communities would be extra diligent in safeguarding the health of those most at risk. Yet in many quarters of the Orthodox community, we have not seen vocal expressions of these principles. Why have these halakhic

perspectives been muted in parts of the community that are generally deeply committed to the observance of Halakhah?

While the value of the collective has remained important throughout the Orthodox community, in modern times that collectivism has been more often expressed as prioritizing the *public perception and standing* of the community. Where did this notion come from? It may have evolved over many hundreds of years of Jewish communities living in hostile environments (as I will later explain under the heading of ‘culture’) and therefore led to the importance of not giving gentiles reasons to express their anti-semitism. This has led to a culture of keeping things to ourselves and not “washing our dirty laundry in public.” But in contemporary times, this does not always lead to good outcomes for individuals or communities, and indeed has led to terrible outcomes with regards to cases of domestic and sexual abuse.

The introduction of reputation as an important issue has distorted the previously established silo-like boundaries of collectivism. In commercial matters, we found that the community trumps the individual. When it comes to human life, the individual is paramount. How do we slot reputation into that?

If we apply the Talmudic principle of *liflog ve-litnei be-didah*, that we seek to highlight difference by comparing two ostensibly similar scenarios, we should not be pitting community reputation over individual health. Rather, we should separately consider reputation and health. In practice, that would mean if there was a reputational issue, we would favour the community reputation over that of any individual. But as mentioned, each of the silos sits in a hierarchy, and human life remains at the top.

Organizational Culture, Intergenerational Trauma, and Respect for Authority

Much has already been written about the extent to which community activity is an intrinsic part of Orthodox and Haredi life, and the impact of being restricted by government during COVID. While we can argue that various Jewish groups have been affected in a way that is qualitatively greater than the general population, it’s worth looking deeper at other cultural elements that have contributed to the response.

Having seen open disregard for and dispute of many government regulations, it’s worth exploring Jewish cultural attitudes to government and authority.

Jewish organizational culture has evolved over thousands of years, the vast majority of which we lived under oppressive governments which granted us limited rights, subjecting us to violence. In the Orthodox and Haredi narrative, what kept communities going during that time was their observance of Jewish practices – Torah and *mitzvot*.

Consider the deeply embedded Haredi culture: Government does not serve our best interests, and is often anti-semitic and opposed to our interests. Only by abiding by the Torah way of life can we survive. Our community members are the only ones who can look after us. We need to cling to our traditions, keep isolated, and separate from the wider community to perpetuate our way of life. This has evolved into a ‘siege mentality’ when it comes to anything from outside.

The fact that we now live in an open democratic society has meant different things to different communities as we move across the spectrum from Modern Orthodox to Orthodox to Haredi.

Modern Orthodoxy has found a middle path that seeks to engage both with contemporary society and maintain Orthodox practice. At the other end of the spectrum, for Haredi communities, engagement with the modern world is just a shifted threat that is spiritual rather than physical (and in some ways, that may be considered worse).

The trauma experienced by our ancestors is transmitted to us and does not magically fade away just because we have grown up in a free society. All it takes is governments that start to restrict Jewish practice (no matter what the reason), and instantly the fear returns.

When we consider communities that came from communist Russia after the Second World War (predominantly Chabad), there is an added dimension: a proud history of defying government rules against organized religion. My late grandparents and their wider family were part of a network that operated ‘illegal’ *minyanim* and *yeshivot*, and went to great lengths to ensure Jewish boys were able to have a *bris*. Their threats included *masrim* – Jewish informers.

With regulations against *minyanim* and other gatherings, the issue of *mesirah* has again raised its head. Many insular Haredi communities have maintained the strict prohibition against *mesirah*, while other communities have openly stated that it no longer applies when we have ‘friendly’ governments and judicial systems that protect the rights of all citizens. The Haredi culture of “we look after things ourselves” has led to serious failures in dealing with domestic and sexual abuse. It is clear that reporting abuse to police is not just permitted, but should be encouraged. But what about reporting a secret illegal *minyan* in your street? That is not so simple.

In Australia, during the first wave (which affected the entire country) people were most diligent in maintaining the restrictions as *shuls* closed down. The second wave in Melbourne is seen as a result of government incompetence and the rate at which restrictions are being lifted are considered by many to be politically motivated, and somewhat arbitrary.

This led to a number of distinct responses over that period, which included the *yamim noraim*:

1. We continue to fully abide by the government rules, no matter what they are. Holding a *minyan* when it is not allowed is halakhically unacceptable. As an example, I was fortunate to attend a *bar mitzvah* in *shul* on the last Shabbat before the second wave restrictions were introduced. At the time, twenty men and twenty women were allowed to attend. We sat socially distanced, but the women did not. Before *hazarat ha-shatz*, the Rabbi announced that the *hazan* could not continue unless the women complied with regulations, or else it would be considered a *berakhah levatalah*. This is a straight-as-it-gets interpretation of *dina de-malhuta dina*.
2. Another community opted to run *minyanim* by registering as ‘mental health support groups.’ They followed social distancing guidelines, and did not hide in any way. They were regularly reported, and received visits from the police, as well as some negative publicity and criticism from other parts of the community.
3. As the *yamim noraim* approached and the second wave seriously declined, a number of home *minyanim* emerged (some secret, some not). In some cases, they were in streets where a *minyan* happened to live within earshot, so people could stand in their front gardens and participate (whether people can be *mitztaref* to a *minyan* on either side of a street is, like many things in Halakhah, a matter of differing opinions). Some *minyanim* were secret and indoors. A handful were reported by neighbours and received visits from the police ordering that they disperse.

These distinct approaches roughly fell along Modern Orthodox and Haredi/Hasidic lines, in an environment where most would agree the public health risk of operating *minyanim* was very low. This example supports the notion that the organizational cultures of these communities contribute to their response.

However, the situation in Melbourne (less than 5 new cases per million population per day) contrasted significantly with communities in Israel (about 600 during Sukkot) and the USA (about 70 in New York state, and probably much higher in *frum* zip codes), where second waves were very serious and the public health threat remained high. The response in Melbourne would have been very different if case numbers were higher, or if there was significant risk in the Jewish suburbs. So in the large communities in the US and Israel, are the cultural elements identified sufficient to shift behaviour, or are there other factors at play? This brings us to a final element: rationalism and mysticism.

Rationalism Versus Mysticism

The notion of distinct rational versus mystical approaches to Judaism has been [popularized](#) by self-described rationalist [Rabbi Natan Slifkin](#). In short, rationalists look to human knowledge rather than exclusively faith, favor natural explanations over miracles, and seek to minimize the role of supernatural entities and forces. It makes sense to think of this as a spectrum rather than a bifurcation, especially as Jewish communities are so diverse and fractured.

The evolution of these streams from the Middle Ages to contemporary times is beyond the scope of this article, and is itself worthy of further exploration. That said, it would appear that Hasidim tend to be more on the mystical end of the spectrum, Modern Orthodox and Orthodox at the rational end, and the yeshivish world occupies significant space in the middle of the spectrum.

This perspective is most salient when the science of COVID (albeit grappling with many unknowns) tells us that davening with a *minyan* and learning in a *yeshiva* are dangerous for our physical health, and tradition tells us that *not* davening with a *minyan* and *not* learning in a *yeshiva* are dangerous for our spiritual health.

Thus, Rabbi Slifkin takes issue with a lengthy *pesak* from Rav Moshe Shaul Klein, a member of Rav Wosner's Beis Din and considered a leading *posek* in the Haredi world. Rav Klein draws on the principle of “*sheluhei mitzvah ainan nizokim*” – that people doing a *mitzvah* enjoy a form of spiritual protection from danger, which is contingent on the important test of “*shekhiyah hezeika*” – essentially the risk factor. We would not say someone is protected from injury while walking to *shul* and crossing the road recklessly. There are essentially two issues here: to what extent do we apply the principle of *sheluhei mitzvah* in the modern world? And how do we quantify the COVID risk?

A rationalist will tend to downplay the halakhic weight of the *sheluhei mitzvah* principle. Indeed, given the examples of its application in Halakhah relates to risk of snakebites while davening *shemoneh esrei* and searching for *hametz* in a decrepit house, it's generally considered in the category of *halakhot* that are less relevant in modern times. Indeed, the extent of its application these days is the *custom* of giving *tzedakah* to someone before they travel overseas.

If we do accept that it has practical applications in these times, it then hangs on the risk level, and that poses another challenge: what information does the *posek* rely on to make that assessment? Consult with one expert and be told that it is rampant, and another and be told that the risks are only high for people with co-morbidities. Can anyone be objective about this?

This touches on the principle of *Da'as Torah* – that we should seek the input of *Rabbanim* not just on matters of Halakhah,

but on all important life matters, on the basis that their knowledge of Torah serves as a spiritual sense to provide general life counsel. Again, this is a Haredi principle (perhaps a yeshivish version of the approach of Hasidim to seeking counsel from their Rebbe) that a rationalist would reject.

Thus, Rav Klein's approach differs starkly from that of Rabbi Hershel Schachter, whose starting proposition is that during a *she'at magefah* (a time of plague), standing next to the *ba'al koreh* for an *aliyah* is a danger (*sakanah*), with no qualification. Assuming that there will be *keriyat ha-Torah* in *shul*, his issue becomes how to handle the *aliyot*, and he draws on the Halakhah relating to whether a blind person who receives an *aliyah* could theoretically do so from his seat, as he cannot follow along. Rabbi Schachter, as posek for OU and a Rosh Yeshiva of YU, in this respect represents a typical Modern Orthodox approach, which leans more toward the rationalist Jewish view of the world.

At the best of times, Halakhah is subjective. The identical chicken brought to a Rabbi may be ruled as kosher on Friday afternoon for a poor woman with guests coming in just a few hours, and not kosher for a financially comfortable woman on a Wednesday. The difference is not the circumstance of the case (the *heftza*), but rather the context of the questioner (the *gavra*). The essential element to being a good *posek* is *shimush* – learning from the experience of others, and developing a sense of what halakhic *humrot* and *kullot* should be applied when. That is the 'art' of Halakhah.

What this example illustrates is how the rationalist-mystic bias influences the halakhic process. One *posek* classifies COVID as black and white *sakanah*, and another uses the shades-of-gray test of *shekhiyah hezeika*. That initial decision is the foundation for what follows. What influences this choice? We might suggest that for the rationalist, science is fixed and

Halakhah is flexible, and for the mystic they are reversed. The rationalist has a high 'belief' in science, and once we establish that there is danger for everyone, uses halakhic devices to do the best we can under the circumstances. The mystic either has less trust in science, or more trust in the primacy of ritual practice, its ability to protect us from harm, and the huge risk – social, cultural, and metaphysical – of putting a pause on those activities.

Conclusion

We have identified a number of factors that impact how Jewish communities respond to COVID-related restrictions. Beyond the scope of this article is the political dimension, which has also been significant. Most communities are affected by more than one factor. Some of them are competing, and others are compounding, and the compounding effect generally tends to lead to even worse health outcomes.

So much of this is a product of our diversity and dispersion. There is no single Jewish response or halakhic position to *anything* in this world. The most effective responses to COVID have been geographic, where rules can be established to limit the spread of the disease, but as a people we are *mefuzar u-meforad* - spread out across the world. In a time when other countries and communities have been able to unite against a rare event that truly affects everyone, we continue to be our own worst enemies and our divisions tear us apart.

¹ <https://torah.org/torah-portion/ravfrand-5760-bereishis/>.

² Singapore's second wave came from within the neglected immigrant worker population who live in poor conditions, and are a lower priority for government. Similar situations occurred in the Emirates, who also have multiple 'classes.'

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