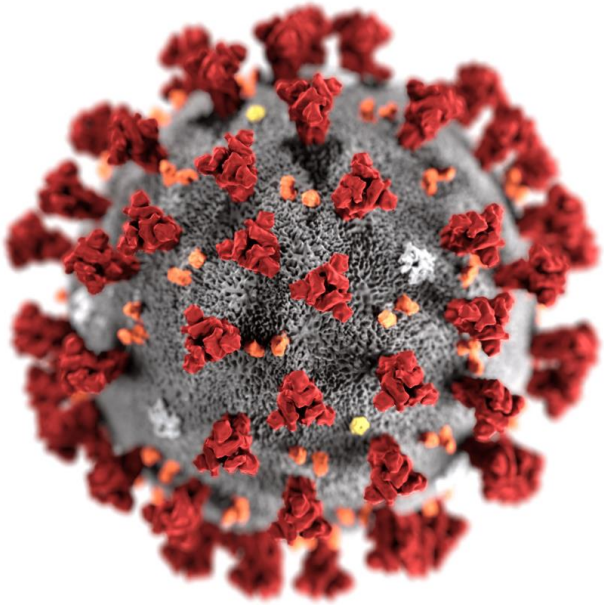
TRADITION
A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought

COVID+5

Special TraditionOnlone.org series looking back on the pandemic, five years later, considering its impact on Jewish life, community, and education



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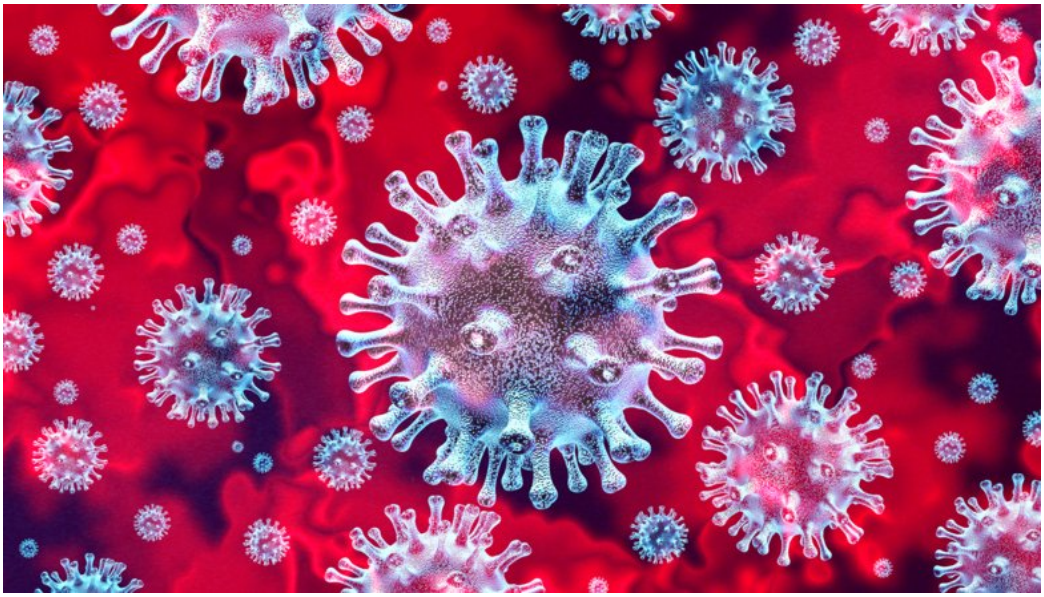
COVID+5: Series Introduction

Roughly five years ago, the initial COVID-19 Lockdown was implemented. However, if any one of us had lain down to sleep Friday night of *Parashat Teruma*, March 1, 2020, just days prior to the initial COVID lockdown, and only awoke this half-decade later—like a latter-day Honi HaMe'agel, would he realize anything had transpired upon entering shul on Shabbat morning?



Aside from the surprising number of Purell hand sanitizer dispensers that remain ever present in public spaces, the physical sanctuary appears identical. *Tefilla* seems indistinguishable from the pre-COVID prayer experience, and most Jewish interactions, at a glance, seem to mimic the reliable patterns that have remained unchanged for decades.

I do not mean to imply that COVID did not have a significant impact on our world. There are seats in *shul* that now remain permanently empty, and for those families who lost loved ones or for individuals who continue to suffer from Long COVID or post-COVID conditions, pre-pandemic life is a distant memory.

However, from a broader communal perspective, from a synagogue perspective, from a Jewish educational perspective, from the perspective of our individual day-to-day religious and spiritual existence, has the COVID experience had an impact?

If the reality is that the pandemic came and went and the world has returned to "normal," is this reversion to the status quo a good thing or a bad thing? Does it demonstrate the resiliency of our religious institutions, the firm foundation of our communal infrastructure and our unshakable religious convictions and beliefs? Or, on the contrary, does it speak to our

calcified Jewish institutions, our rigid and unbending social constructs, and our fossilized spiritual and religious practices such that even a life-altering global pandemic could not disrupt our daily individual and communal routines.

Alternatively, if fundamental changes or even subtle, but material deviations arose as a result of the pandemic, what are these changes and in which specific areas of religious life did they arise? Are these developments positive or negative? If positive, what can we do to lean into and build upon them? Alternatively, if these shifts in behavior represent negative outcomes, how do we mitigate and learn from them?

In the days to come TraditionOnline will present several essays from a diverse group of writers who will share their perspectives and perceptions on the impact of the COVID pandemic on Yeshiva day school and high school education, the relationship between individuals and their Jewish communal institutions, and the relationship of the religious individual with God.

Below are brief teasers describing each of these upcoming essays (and links once the column go live). After the series wraps, we will sit down with several of these authors for a conversation to be released on the Tradition Podcast, delving more deeply into these authors' understanding and analysis of the impact of COVID on Jewish life. The hope and intent of this project is that this content will be the beginning of individual and communal engagements with the growth opportunities and lasting impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Impact on Jewish Schooling

R. Josh Kahn, based on his experience at the Torah Academy of Bergen County and The Marsha Stern Talmudic Academy Yeshiva University High School for Boys will argue that COVID had various distinct impacts on the Yeshiva High School educational landscape. First, from a macro perspective, as ongoing lockdowns and quarantines continued to impose online and hybrid learning environments for over eighteen months, educators were forced to reconsider core values and educational priorities as Zoom learning necessitated shorter hours and more limited scheduling. This reevaluation of curriculum led to a second development, which was the need for educators to stretch their skills, revisit their lesson plans and curriculum, and move outside their comfort zones. While this education restructuring was often difficult to implement the results were often extremely successful. Once the classic educational components were initially addressed, Kahn describes how educators then pivoted to focus on the importance of mental health. Although prior to the pandemic, this need had already become a focus of additional resources and attention, the lockdowns, masking requirements, and quarantines placed a spotlight on the emotional stress that students were facing. This increased awareness of mental health issues was a positive educational development and has led to an ongoing focus on the emotional and mental health of pre-teen and teenage students. Finally, in light of the intensity of the COVID educational environment and the difficulties that educators faced, schools and their lay leadership gained a new sense of appreciation for educators in all of their capacities.

According to Kahn, these shifts and adjustments demonstrated the strength and flexibility of Jewish educational institutions and should rekindle within the broader Jewish community an understanding of the importance of our Yeshiva system and the need to ensure that the next generation of educators are inspired and incentivized to make Jewish education a career.

In contrast, Rabbi Lenny Matanky, Dean of Ida Crown Jewish Academy, will look through the lens of the educational impact that COVID continues to have on students and young adults. Matanky describes the changes he and his staff have had to address post-pandemic as student resiliency, basic skills, knowledge, and certain interpersonal skills have declined or suffered material setbacks as a result of the COVID experience. By recognizing and understanding the scope of these setbacks, educators have become more sensitive to these issues and have internalized that teachers, administrators, and the community at large, must redouble their efforts to restore the educational landscape and give students the skills and resources they need to succeed in light of the varied setbacks caused by COVID.

The Individual and the Community: The View from the Pulpit

Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin, from his perspective as rabbi of Beth Avraham Yosef of Toronto Congregation, reflects on COVID's lasting impact on Jewish communal life. He highlights significant shifts in synagogue attendance and communal engagement as many individuals left traditional shuls, either seeking more personalized prayer experiences (such as "block minyanim") or opting out of attending services altogether, as the pandemic demonstrated to them that synagogue attendance was not integral to maintaining Jewish identity and social standing. Korobkin argues that this strained relationship between individuals and Jewish institutions has precipitated declining membership numbers, particularly among the younger generation, who feel less connected to the community and, thus, less inclined to pay membership dues. His assessment is not all negative as he does note certain positive outcomes of the COVID experience, including increased Torah learning opportunities and a restructuring of synagogue offerings to better meet the more diverse religious needs of a wide range of community members. Overall, Korobkin sees his own community as more fragmented but also more adaptable, with an uncertain but hopeful outlook for the future.

Pivoting from broad communal perspectives to a deep dive into a discrete contemporary issue, Rabbi Larry Rothwachs, rabbi of Congregation Beth Aaron of Teaneck, examines how the COVID-19 pandemic temporarily transformed the way the Jewish community celebrated life cycle events like weddings and bar/bat mitzvas. During the height of the pandemic, restrictions forced families to embrace simpler, more intimate gatherings, which many found deeply meaningful and spiritually fulfilling. These minimalist events allowed the participants to focus on the essence of the substantive simcha, joy, holiness, and intimate connection, free from the pressures of extravagant spending and social expectations.

Rothwachs had hoped that the pandemic would serve as a lasting catalyst for change, prompting a shift toward more sincere and modest celebrations. However, as restrictions lifted, the community quickly reverted to its previous culture of excess, often even exceeding

pre-pandemic levels of opulence. He laments the missed opportunity for communal introspection and recalibration and calls for a courageous return to value-driven celebrations —ones that prioritize meaning, family, and connection to God over grandeur and spectacle.

Converting Crisis to Personal and Communal Growth

Gila Muskin Block, Executive Director of Yesh Tikvah, will discuss how the COVID pandemic and the intense and often lengthy periods of seclusion caused by lockdowns and quarantines offered the broader Jewish community a window into the loneliness and sense of exclusion that individuals and families struggling with infertility within our community regularly face. Muskin argues that COVID offered us an opportunity to grow and develop our empathetic muscles. However, it appears that rather than building on the emotional experiences caused by the pandemic and using those experiences as a catalyst to destigmatize and further integrate those individuals, couples, and families struggling with infertility into our communal fabric and lifecycle events it appears that the exact opposite may have occurred as the desire to avoid confronting the COVID experience has caused both individuals and communities to shrink away from and distance themselves from the pain and anguish of being excluded.

While Muskin focuses on the specifics of empathy and compassion, Dr. Carl Hochhauser focuses on the broader mental health implications of the pandemic and, more specifically, on the concept of post-traumatic growth. He marshals a broad array of sources, both academic and anecdotal, which indicate that those who faced significant challenges during the pandemic may be able to build on those experiences and affect profound growth in spirituality and/or religiosity. While the further destigmatization of the importance of mental health considerations was a positive outcome of the pandemic, treating those whose mental health was affected is an ongoing challenge that may offer valuable insights into the possibility for growth and recovery within the community at large.

We hope you will find this upcoming content stimulating and that it will encourage your families and communities to engage in the reflective work needed to generate lessons from the traumas our world endured five years ago.

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COVID+5: The Impact on Education

Joshua Kahn

“When the winds of change blow, some people build walls and others build windmills.” This Chinese proverb captures the opportunity and challenge that confronted schools with the outbreak of COVID-19, five years ago. As we confronted unprecedented challenges, schools, like other institutions, were forced to consider how we would adapt to this new reality. Initially, this involved remote schooling exclusively, followed by decisions of how, when, and to what extent we could return to in-person instruction. Reflecting over the past five years, did we build walls or windmills? Did the challenge of COVID enable us to grow, to harness the challenges into creating strong schools, or did we build walls, ensuring that we remained immune to change?

Measuring growth and change can be a difficult endeavor. While weekly, monthly, and even annual assessments can be of some value in determining incremental growth, with the passage of a period of five years since the pandemic’s onset we can begin to take a more long term and overarching review of the growth and setbacks which arose as a result of those events.

Our yeshiva high schools today do not look drastically different than they did pre-COVID. This is not surprising since the changes the pandemic caused were of necessity, not of aspiration, and to address what we hope is a once-in-a-generation experience, not to tackle educational challenges or opportunities. Yet, the impact of the COVID shutdown, remote learning, and then return to in-person learning has profoundly impacted our schools. I would like to focus on four ways in which our schools have been positively impacted five years later. First, as we made critical decisions during the COVID period, we were forced to reflect

on, balance, and prioritize values. Second, we reflected on and appreciated the importance of teen mental health, focusing on how to ensure we are investing properly in how we cultivate relationships with our students, the impact of these relationships, and how we ensure that we are providing an emotionally healthy environment for our students. Third, teachers cultivated their sense of flexibility and adaptability in ways they may not have previously felt possible, comfortable, or empowered to do. Finally, while faculty appreciation has long been a value in schools, COVID brought this to the forefront, as school leaders made a more conscious effort to consider faculty culture and appreciation.

Newton taught that an object in motion remains in motion until acted upon by an external force. This First Law of Motion does not only apply to objects, but also to organizations. Schools, like other organizations can remain stagnant, continuing to operate the way they did in the past, until acted upon by an external force, thereby necessitating change. The COVID pandemic was that external force. Forced to pause, literally and figuratively, schools quickly underwent a significant shift. Tomorrow could not simply look like today. Instead, unable to operate in the same way, schools needed to quickly triage and make priority and practical decisions. Without the liberty of time and a robust process, we had to decide in the limited time we could engage our students on Zoom what classes were higher priorities. Would our minor subjects also meet or would we only study our core subjects? Educationally, what were our priorities for each class? Were assessments important or did we want to prioritize instructional time? How important was the interpersonal interaction, thereby necessitating Zoom or were we satisfied if we could provide the educational content in other ways? What should be the role of extracurricular or co-curricular programs? With the limited time and resources available, would we invest in planning and providing these opportunities for our students? How significant are parents and their needs in our decision-making?

These questions were important during the Spring of 2020 when everything shifted to remote, but remained equally important when we returned to in-person school that Fall. For example, when we got back into the building were we willing to offer our athletics program, recognizing the increased risks for COVID spread through sports? Would we take our students on recreational and social trips, if that also increased the possibility of spreading the coronavirus? Another values-based decision was whether we would use our large *beit midrash* as a classroom enabling greater social distancing for general studies, providing an additional learning environment, which was educationally valuable, but sacrificing the perceived sanctity of this space? Or would we instead use the gym for a classroom, removing a recreational area from our students but gaining an additional learning space?

This reflective exercise caused schools to pause and drill down on our values, necessitating decisions that often required prioritizing one value over another. What emerged was a school that now understood and more deeply appreciated our mission, not just in theory, but in practice. Five years later, the impact of undergoing this process, with practical ramifications and applications has built a stronger understanding and appreciation of how our values must

drive our decisions. Thankfully, the reality and necessity has changed over these years, however, the exercise and experience continues to guide our decisions and has maintained a long-lasting impact that makes our schools more thoughtful in decision-making.

Schools have long valued the healthy social and emotional development of our students. Emerging from the pandemic, the U.S. Surgeon General declared a teen mental health crisis. While this has other contributing factors, including social media and mass violence, the challenges of the pandemic exacerbated the problem and brought this to crisis level. As a result, schools more heavily weighed the implications of specific decisions through the lens of the emotional well-being of our students. How do we balance the workload with the resulting stress and anxiety it may generate among our students? What pauses must we create in our schedule and routine to provide our students with the correct focus on their mental health?

Scarcity is often used in the context of economics in recognizing that resources are usually insufficient to meet all of our human needs and wants. In the context of schools, it also relates to how we manage our limited resources, both in time and finances. Recognizing the value of our resources and their scarcity, COVID caused a rebalancing, with a renewed focus on teen mental health. As an example, I know of several schools that maintained their shortened school day to allow students more time for recreational activities and homework. The current focus on schools going smartphone-free can also be in part attributed to the post-COVID mental health crisis, in which we have appreciated that we must play a leadership role.

During the pandemic we first shifted to remote learning and then to a more hybrid model. Throughout that time, we did not have access to in-person instruction and assessment in the same manner and frequency as we were previously accustomed. This forced us to think differently, consider our primary goals, decide how to deliver instruction and then assess our students. This was by necessity and not necessarily reflective of any desirable changes. As a result, for the most part, our instruction and assessment have returned to the previous format and style. However, like other areas of growth, while externally our approach to instruction and assessment may not look different, principles have changed. We have developed a more flexible attitude, figuring out ways to hold our students accountable while factoring in extenuating circumstances. We are sharper in understanding what our core instructional goals are and what can be stripped away if needed due to limited time or other circumstances. These examples are reflections of the way in which there is longer-lasting change beneath the surface.

Faculty appreciation has been a value in education for many years. Yet, there was a pronounced shift when the pandemic began in which school leaders made a concerted effort to check in and care for their faculty in new ways. Like other aspects previously discussed, this reflected a value that existed pre-COVID and the effect of the pandemic was to force us to be thoughtful and intentional in focusing on our faculty wellbeing as a priority and

responsibility of school leaders. Looking back five years later, this effort continues, although the more pronounced teacher shortage has likely been further motivation to continue to focus on faculty wellbeing.

The COVID pandemic stretched muscles that we did not always realize we had and taught us a great deal about ourselves. While our educational institutions may not look drastically different today than they did pre-pandemic, the muscles that were strengthened and the mentality that was refined continues to provide a stronger engine that drives our schools. We have effectively built the windmills to harness this power and are better prepared today to withstand and even thrive through the challenges of tomorrow.

Rabbi Joshua Kahn *currently serves as the Rosh Yeshiva of the Torah Academy of Bergen County in Teaneck. He previously served as the Head of School at the Yeshiva University High School for Boys (MTA).*

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Leonard A. Matanky

I will never forget that Friday afternoon, March 13, 2020. That morning, I had written a note to our school community assuring them that our school would follow government guidelines regarding COVID–19 but remain open. But then, on the drive home, a few hours before Shabbat, I received a call from my board president, who said, “Rabbi, the governor just closed down your school.”

At first, I didn’t understand what he was saying—why would the governor target our school? But within a few minutes, I understood that, without notice, the governor had closed all schools in Illinois effective Monday of the coming week.

The following hours and days were a whirlwind of activity as we trained our staff in the use of a relatively new program called “Zoom,” planned an online academic schedule, and asked the students to come to school to pick up their texts and materials for what was then thought to be a two-week closure. Of course, the closure lasted through the end of the school year and even when we reopened, it was abbreviated, distanced, masked, and filled with uncertainty.

That we accomplished all we did – losing only one day in the transition from in–person to online instruction, successfully navigating all the medical and public policy restrictions so that there were no mass outbreaks of COVID–19 in our school and no need to close classes, sections or grades is a feat for which so many deserve credit and a source of great institutional pride.

But now, looking back five years, what has changed about Yeshiva high school education?

I don’t know for sure and can’t provide definitive answers. After all, there are so many variables at play beyond COVID–19, the war in Israel, the rise of antisemitism, as well as shifting family dynamics and mental health concerns that were on the rise even before COVID–19, that it is impossible to isolate variables and determine what is a result of the pandemic and what is not.

Yet, after polling my colleagues and considering their impressions and my experiences, I would suggest that post–COVID, the world of Jewish education has undergone profound changes in four areas:

1. **Technology**

Let me begin with the good news. Because of the manner in which we pivoted to online instruction, students and faculty quickly learned how to use technology for remote instruction. The skills gained were not limited to Zoom but included an entire suite of tools and platforms that manage instruction, distribute classroom materials, and offer online grade books and reporting.

These increased technology skills have ensured that students and teachers are no longer limited to interacting only when located in the same physical space. Today, we can easily have guest speakers from around the world present to classes or to the entire school online and in real time, and we can provide remote instruction for students who may be homebound. While all of these advantages of technology were available pre–COVID, no one could have imagined that these changes would be accomplished in weeks and not years, nor the ease with which they are now used.

However, during COVID as our students’ reliance on technology grew and the amount of time they spent on “screens” increased significantly, we have also noticed a change in attention spans and learning – changes that are in line with what research has found to be a significant impact on the brain and the way we think (“deep” vs. “shallow,” “reading for meaning” vs. “scanning”). On a much more basic level, whether one subscribes to Jonathan Haidt’s dire predictions of an “anxious generation” or one merely yearns for a time when two students sitting at a table would set down their devices and have a conversation, COVID accelerated shifts in communication in ways we were not fully prepared to address or understand; we remain unprepared today.

2. **Resilience**

While the response of our schools to COVID mandates was admirable, and the pace at which we were able to reopen safely was, by some accounts, astonishing, the two years of the pandemic left an indelible mark on many of our students, especially the most vulnerable ones.

This phenomenon may seem counterintuitive; after all, the reopening of school and the resumption of regular instruction should be the ultimate example of a resilient community. Yet, in reality, there were individuals left behind, emerging from the experience in a more fragile state than before. The reason for this can be that resilience is fostered in an environment rich with connections and where challenges are overcome, change can be accepted – even embraced – and a hopeful outlook maintained. But not every student was able to do so during and immediately after the pandemic. The fears were, for many, overwhelming, and connections were severely limited.

To further complicate matters, because of health concerns or fears, some students were not allowed to return to school and remained online even after schools reopened. These students became even more isolated from their peers and were unable to confront their fears of COVID, a key factor in developing resilience. To a lesser extent, there were students who continued to wear masks well after the mandate was lifted, not for health reasons but as a way to hide and disassociate from others – similar in some respects to people who opt to go through life with a “hoodie” draped over their heads.

But even for those with relationships and positive outlooks, the very technology that enabled us to deliver education when our schools were closed was also the means enabling some students to escape the demands of school. This was especially true during school closings, when the school day was shortened because of the difficulty of being “on screens” for a full day. While teachers valiantly and skillfully employed many strategies to engage students online, many found ways to “hide” from their teachers and peers, claiming technological difficulties, turning off a camera, or hiding in plain sight as they became just one of the many stoic images on a screen filled with faces.

As a result, in the five years since the pandemic, teachers report a greater hesitation by students to tackle difficult challenges. Students are less likely to push themselves and take risks, and the number of students who experience some level of depression appears to be on the rise, as is absenteeism (another well–documented post–COVID phenomenon). But even more, we have noted that the courses that students choose to take are more often the ones perceived as easier, and except for a small minority of academically gifted students who seek to attend the most competitive schools, the most challenging and demanding courses have lower enrollment.

Moreover, the pandemic disrupted the normal rites of passage that help young people develop resilience—graduations, milestone celebrations, and social experiences that mark key transitions. Many students missed out on these moments, and while schools made efforts to create alternative experiences, they were not the same. The absence of these experiences may have contributed to a sense of loss and a lingering difficulty in adjusting to post-pandemic life.

From a religious viewpoint, the COVID years harmed the relationships that our children have with God and our primary form of encounter – *tefilla*. Because synagogues were closed, *tefillot* limited, and gatherings were forbidden, many children missed out on the opportunity to attend synagogue and pray alongside a parent – an important formative experience. Furthermore, bar mitzva boys did not have the same opportunities to read from the Torah or lead services – again a significant rite of passage and preparation for synagogue engagement. While we cannot measure the impact this has had on their relationship with *tefilla* and God, we have also seen a drop in synagogue attendance, and we attribute this to children missing out on critical role modeling.

On a communal level, after COVID, formal *tefillot* have been streamlined, singing has been limited, and the experience of synagogue has lost some of its grandeur. As a rabbi of a synagogue, I have also seen a precipitous drop in the attendance of women on Shabbat morning, perhaps due to falling out of the habit of attending synagogue that was necessary during COVID.

3. **Student Skills and Knowledge**

This is one area of change for which there is substantial data. In general, students did not have the same academic gains from the pandemic period as they would have had in a similar period before or after those events. In the public schools over the two years directly impacted by COVID, reading and math scores dropped precipitously – in some states by more than an entire grade level. While similar data is not available for Jewish schools, we have seen a drop in math, science, language arts, *Tanakh*, and Hebrew reading.

Some of the difference in scores in Yeshiva high schools may be attributed to the fact that many universities no longer require SATs or ACTs for admission (also an outgrowth of COVID). Therefore, students are not as invested in preparing for or even taking the tests as seriously as they once did. However, much of the difference is simply due to students missing out on core instruction at an especially critical time of their learning during the lower school years. This is not only due to the general challenges of online versus in-person instruction but especially due to the significantly reduced success rate of online education in the lower grades.

As a result, teachers report that a great deal of remediation is now required. Students in high school need to work on their Hebrew reading – a skill they should have mastered in first through third grades. Reading comprehension is lower than in the past because of the core skills that were missed, and teachers must provide greater support for reading comprehension than before. Because many students lack the resilience necessary for success, this remediation is even more difficult than expected.

Finally, we have seen an approximate 25% increase in students with documented learning differences. Whether these differences are a function of broadening the categories of learning differences, the greater availability of testing, the lack of early intervention, or the impact of COVID has not been determined. However, the timing of this increase aligns with the post–pandemic era.

4. **Interpersonal Relationships**

In describing the importance of in-person interactions to children's emotional growth, Dr. David Pelcovitz often quotes the verse: "As water reflects a face back to the face that looks into it, so does the heart of a person reflect his feelings to a person who faces him" (Proverbs 27:19).

The COVID-19 pandemic broke those direct connections between students and their peers and students and their teachers. Even schools that were experts at using Zoom know that looking at a screen with a gallery of faces cannot evoke the same feelings of empathy and connection as standing across from someone and interacting with them. While better than texting or posting on social media, real-time audio and video streaming still does not create deep and meaningful relationships.

For most of our students, the early days of COVID-19 were spent isolated from friends. It challenged their ability to create connections with others, develop empathy, and understand of what it means to act as a community. The impact is well-documented, with the increased amount of screen time contributing to a significant rise in anxiety and depression. In many schools, this has led to an increase in the need for therapists and social workers, and the issues and challenges we now encounter are unprecedented in their breadth and scope. Despite efforts to normalize and expand support services, many schools struggle to meet the growing demand.

Conclusion

Five years ago, as I packed my office and prepared to leave school, I could never have imagined the impact that COVID-19 would have on our world, our community, and our students. It was a "black swan event" – unprecedented and unpredicted that has left a lasting impact on Jewish education.

The challenges are many, and the road ahead remains uncertain, but with thoughtful leadership and a commitment to student well-being, Jewish education can emerge stronger, more adaptable, and prepared for the future. As Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zt"l* spoke of in his eulogy for Rabbi Zev Gold, that is the hallmark of the Jewish people; we are a forward-looking people, who awaits not only the coming of the Messiah, but also the future greatness of the Jewish people itself.

Therefore, we need to focus on the opportunities COVID created, especially the new proficiency of teachers in using technology to support education and the ability to quickly pivot in times of need to find ways to strengthen our students and schools. At our school, we have expanded the network of social and emotional services available to students and partnered with other agencies to begin to address the new needs. We have joined with schools across the country in working to find the best balance of technology and learning. We have strengthened programming to create community among students. We are introducing new programs to give students a voice among their peers and to develop leadership skills. We continue to address the remedial needs of students, integrating a school-wide Hebrew reading program, creating a tutoring program for mathematics, and constantly reviewing data to find ways to enhance our curriculum.

As we move forward, it is crucial to learn from these experiences and continue to proactively address the challenges that have emerged. Schools must find ways to balance technology with interpersonal relationships, foster resilience through meaningful engagement, and ensure that students receive the academic and emotional support they need. The lessons of COVID should not be forgotten but should serve as a foundation for building a more resilient, innovative, and connected Jewish educational system for future generations.

Rabbi Leonard A. Matanky *is the Rabbi of Congregation K.I.N.S. of West Rogers Park, and Dean of Ida Crown Jewish Academy.*

COVID+5: The Individual and the Community

N. Daniel Korobkin

Many lessons have been learned in the five years since COVID first changed our lives. Hopefully, governments, the medical community, and public policy experts will be better prepared to make decisions should, God forbid, some event of similar scale ever arise. Many mistakes were made, at every level. On one hand, with such an unprecedented, worldwide trauma, it could hardly have been otherwise. But the effects of those errors have generated suspicion, mistrust, and cynicism about our governmental, medical, communal, and even our religious institutions. Hopefully, these institutions will, in the future, accept and transmit new modalities for unprecedented events with greater humility and caution.

To utilize one metaphor from the pandemic, we've heard of medical professionals discussing "regular COVID" and "long COVID," the unfortunate aftereffect that has lingered for a significant percentage of the population. The symptoms of "long COVID" have been general lethargy, headaches, brain fog, and cold-like symptoms for protracted periods. Similarly, there were temporary impacts of COVID on our communities for a period of about two years. But there is "long COVID" that still lingers to some degree in our shuls, schools, and communities. Just as in biological "long COVID," most people have not been affected, the same can be said about the Jewish community.

When COVID first hit North America in February 2020, I was on my way home from the Conference of Presidents annual conference in Israel, in my first year as president of the Rabbinical Council of America. This was clearly not what I had expected to be working on during my presidency. All the agenda items that we had set out for the RCA had to be scrapped in order to address the crisis that our communities were facing, together with the rest of the world. The RCA worked closely with the Orthodox Union, our *poskim*, and other organizations to set up policies and protocols for shuls and *mikvaot*, based on what our health care professionals were telling us. People were dying in horrifying numbers, and the panic and anxiety were palpable. This resulted in policies that were extremely cautious, some would argue overly so. At the same time, we noted that other segments of the Orthodox world were less cautious in their policies, even to the point of ignoring legal restrictions that were imposed by federal and local governments in an effort to stem the tide of infection. This splintering in policy within the Jewish community has also played a role in what we've seen in the aftermath of the pandemic.

The observations I offer are based upon what has happened in my own community of Thornhill, Ontario. In Canada in particular, the COVID governmental restrictions placed upon houses of worship were strict in the extreme. My observations are also based on what I've noted as a past president of the RCA and in consultation with many of my colleagues serving pulpits throughout North America.

Several new manifestations emerged in the Jewish community as a result of the pandemic, some positive and some negative. In this respect, COVID was like sunlight casting light on realities upon our communal infrastructures and the constituents of those infrastructures. As our rabbis teach, the sun often affects different subjects in different ways: It bleaches colored fabric while at the same time darkening human skin. (See Kli Yakar's commentary at the beginning of *Parashat Re'eh*.) In the same vein, COVID has affected different stakeholders in very different ways. Here, then, is a partial list of what has noticeably changed in recent years:

1. For some, COVID was a way to break free of the formal synagogue structure. The current trend within society is to customize the individual's experience and consumption product, like Starbucks coffee. Today, the customer expects to have his cup of coffee made exactly to his specifications. This has spilled over to general expectations of any communal service. The idea of creating one's own *minyan* in a backyard or basement is now so commonplace that shuls that used to have large sanctuaries are now struggling to fill the pews. More people than ever before have become "shteibel hoppers," going from one shul to the next depending upon what's going on, the length of the service, and whether or not a deluxe hot Kiddush will be served after davening.

2. Another type of parishioner who left the shul was the person who was the anti-establishmentarian. As mentioned above, one of the aftereffects of the pandemic was society's diminished trust in our governmental and medical leaders. This wasn't just the case in the aftermath of the pandemic, when, for example, it was discovered that masks were largely ineffective. During the pandemic, we noticed that those who disagreed with the mask requirements for any number of reasons simply refused to comply with the mask mandates that were required by law for people who were attending services. These people viewed the rest of us as having sheep mentality, just going along with whatever our leaders were telling us to do. When told that they needed to comply with the rules, they were able to find literal sanctuary within enclaves of the Jewish community that embraced this anti-establishment mentality. Many Chabad shuls, street minyanim, and shteibelach grew as a result.

3. Another type of synagogue member who changed during COVID is the so-called "socially Orthodox." That is, people who had been attending shul for years, but for social and not religious purposes, since they had long ago stopped feeling any kind of spiritual uplift from *tefilla*. Such a person persists within Jewish communities not out of a desire for religious devotion, but rather out of a desire to be socially cohesive within that community deemed to be overall wholesome, friendly, and to be meeting their emotional and social needs. During COVID, these people simply checked out of synagogue life since their very reason for attending synagogue – the social benefit – had been stripped away. Some of these people came back after the pandemic, while others did not. Those who returned wanted to restore to their lives that social benefit that the synagogue was now once again providing. Those who did not return came to some cost-benefit analysis (mostly on a subconscious level) that it was either too expensive or otherwise too much of a price to pay to resume synagogue life on Shabbat after having been away for so long. Some of these socially Orthodox chose a compromise position: Instead of abandoning the synagogue entirely, they converted to becoming JFKers, or showing up for shul after services, "Just for Kiddush." The JFK phenomenon has become so pronounced in the post-COVID community that there is no longer a stigma acting this way or even embracing a JFK identity. Before, people would quietly and somewhat embarrassingly sneak into Kiddush, at least feigning to have davened. Today, I'm aware of a place that proudly calls itself the "JFK Shul" as a way of attracting new adherents. I say this without passing any judgment, since in the end, this may prove to be an effective tactic, in line with our Sages' dictum, "He who comes for ulterior motives will eventually come for the right reasons"(*Pesahim* 50b).

4. The “Zoom” phenomenon: Fortunately, with the exception of a small number of Orthodox rabbis, the majority of our *poskim* ruled that one could not constitute a minyan over video conference. (There are many details to this *psak*, such as the difference between constituting and leading a minyan vs. being “*mitztaref*” to a live minyan, which are beyond the scope of this essay. See here for example.) This prescient *psak* resulted in ensuring that people would eventually return to daven with a live minyan in shul. But there were other aspects of the Zoom phenomenon that have had lasting effects. During COVID, *shiurim* and educational presentations that had been previously attended in-person now perforce were video-conferenced. After COVID, some realized that even though they could return to a live shiur, they didn’t have to. Furthermore, once a shiur is being offered over Zoom, it really didn’t make much difference whether they were listening to a local instructor or a teacher on the other side of the world. For many, it also was no longer a priority to participate in a live shiur since most classes were recorded. Daf Yomi is one prime example of this phenomenon. *Shiurim* that used to have dozens of live attendees at the local shul saw reduced attendance, because a person could listen to the Daf remotely, and why listen to the local maggid shiur, when certain teachers on video platforms are often more engaging/entertaining than their local option. This has had both positive and negative effects. On the one hand, it is likely that more people than ever before are learning Daf Yomi (and Torah in general) due to the explosion of podcasts and videos that are now available. On the other hand, not being live with a *maggid shiur* is, from an educational standpoint, not as effective for the student as being part of a live shiur. It is noteworthy that people today listen on their smartphones and iPads to the Daf. While some have the Gemara open and are attentive and engaged, others are listening while driving to or from work, or while doing some other menial task. Invariably, the comprehension and retention rates of someone listening to a podcast will not be as significant as someone who is sitting around the table with a Maggid shiur.

5. Synagogue membership: In my synagogue we've noticed that while, thank God, we've been able to maintain our current membership, there are a number of families, mostly from the younger generation, who no longer seem to feel it is their responsibility to pay synagogue dues to shuls where they daven regularly. I know of a handful of young men who sit in the back of my shul every Shabbat. They've been solicited either by myself or members of our shul board, with great diplomacy and gentleness, to join the shul, whether at a regular membership rate or at a reduced rate. The response is sometimes a shrug of the shoulders or some other kind of noncommittal response. Now that our communities are so variegated with multiple *minyanim*, some of our younger attendees see no reason to commit their hard-earned incomes to paying shul membership. They may feel a sense of entitlement to go where they wish without any financial responsibilities for a number of reasons, but this phenomenon seems to me to be directly related, at least in part, to the COVID issue. It is related to the splintered nature of the community, as well as the general distrust and negative attitude toward communal infrastructures that also result from the COVID mistrust phenomenon.

6. The BAYT had always been a "mega-shul," a place where a person could come on Shabbat morning and choose from any number of *minyanim*, starting at different times and going at different speeds. This trend has only become stronger since COVID. We restructured our sundry *minyanim* by restoring some of the pre-COVID options, eliminating ones that weren't working as well, and instituting new *minyanim* that are attracting a new audience that previously hadn't found their place. This is one of the more positive manifestations of COVID, in that by being forced to close and then reopen, we were better able to assess our strengths and weaknesses and make the necessary adjustments.

These are some initial reflections on what has taken place since COVID. On the one hand, Talmud Torah has increased due to the community's realization that Torah resources are available to anyone from the privacy of their own homes. On the other hand, people seem less committed to the institutionalized physical structures within the Jewish community. Where this trend will continue is hard to know. With time, patience, and the ability to adapt to the new facts on the ground, we will hopefully succeed in strengthening our shuls and bringing Jews of all stripes back to their religious homes.

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Larry Rothwachs

Five years have passed since the COVID pandemic began, time enough for meaningful reflection. Among the many aspects of life that COVID disrupted, one area continues to weigh heavily on my mind: how we celebrate our *semahot*—our weddings, bar and bat mitzvas, and other milestone events.

In the years before March 2020, our community witnessed an unchecked progression toward increasingly lavish celebrations. Events that once centered on family and meaning had transformed into grand productions, often involving expenditures that strained or even broke household budgets. Stories—not apocryphal—circulated about individuals who fell into significant debt merely to afford weddings that lasted hours but cost tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars. Despite occasional communal initiatives to impose guidelines, like *takkanot* capping spending in certain communities, the trend continued virtually unabated. Apart from minor shifts, such as the growing acceptance of digital invitations, the communal appetite for extravagance showed no signs of diminishing.

Then came COVID. Suddenly, large-scale events became illegal, declared unsafe, and functionally impossible. Celebrations of all kinds were canceled, postponed, or dramatically reimagined. Some families understandably chose to wait until restrictions eased. But many others, recognizing the importance of the moment, adapted immediately. They held intimate ceremonies with immediate family, backyard weddings, and Zoom bar and bat mitzvas. Meals were pared down to a handful of close relatives. Ceremonies became shorter and more heartfelt. Dancing was understated, if it happened at all.

What proved most remarkable and deeply moving was how these COVID *semahot* were received. They were often described as more beautiful, more emotional, and more genuine than their pre-pandemic counterparts. (While these adjustments were undoubtedly difficult for many families who had envisioned different celebrations, they were generally met with understanding and even a surprising degree of joy and satisfaction.) I recall attending weddings and bar mitzvas during that period where the emotion in the room was palpable, the meaning inescapable. Stripped of elaborate venues, endless courses, and professional entertainment, the essence of the simcha shone through: family, connection, joy, and holiness.

It seemed, at least to me, that we had stumbled upon a profound revelation. I thought this might represent a lasting correction. Perhaps, even after the pandemic ended, we would carry these lessons forward. Perhaps we would realize that we don’t need the trappings of wealth and spectacle to make a simcha beautiful. Perhaps our community would re-center its priorities, celebrating milestones with sincerity and simplicity.

I remember expressing this hope to others, both privately and in public forums. I recall naively saying that even when COVID ended, we would never fully return to our old ways. We had witnessed too clearly how powerful a simple simcha could be.

But I was wrong.

I first began to sense it even before the pandemic ended, during my own experience of making a simcha in the midst of COVID. A few years earlier, we had celebrated the wedding of one of our children under normal circumstances. It was our family's introduction to the world of contemporary Jewish weddings. We did our best to focus on what mattered, but it was immediately clear how strong the pressures were—the expectations, the norms, the endless ways that simplicity seemed to require justification.

Then, during COVID, we made another wedding. In theory, the limitations imposed by the pandemic should have naturally pushed celebrations toward simplicity. Venues were restricted, guest lists were slashed, and many familiar trappings were simply impossible. And yet, even then, I sensed the subtle but steady pull—an instinct that if certain features were absent, we had to "make up" for them in other ways. It was not only about practical realities like inflated costs, though that played a role. It reflected something deeper: a communal muscle memory that even a pandemic could not erase.

The emotional pressure was real. Families wanted to express their joy, vendors wanted to provide their services, and friends and relatives wanted to celebrate. All of it created a gravitational pull back toward the familiar patterns. Even amid lockdowns and uncertainty, even with so much stripped away, there was a yearning—sometimes quiet, sometimes not so quiet—to hold onto elements of grandeur and spectacle.

At that point, I first began to worry. I realized that if these instincts were still so strong, even under such unusual circumstances, then perhaps the communal change I was hoping for would not come as easily as I had imagined. Yet even then, I remained somewhat hopeful. I thought that once the instability of the pandemic passed, once people had time to reflect more calmly, we might recognize the beauty we had rediscovered. I thought we would remember how genuine those smaller *semahot* had felt. I believed—or at least I wanted to believe—that we would not simply return to the old ways.

But as restrictions lifted and normal life resumed, it quickly became evident that there would be no enduring shift. If anything, the trend toward larger and more elaborate celebrations intensified. Weddings grew even grander. Parties became more opulent. New levels of extravagance emerged that had not even been the norm before 2020.

Anecdotally, and I acknowledge I have no hard data to support this, it appears our community has doubled down on its previous habits. *Semahot* are now as lavish as ever, perhaps more so. We absorbed no lasting lesson from the COVID experience regarding the nature of our celebrations. The opportunity for meaningful, systemic change came and went, leaving behind only faint memories of backyard weddings and intimate family gatherings.

This realization is deeply sobering. It feels as though we were given an extraordinary opportunity, one that came at an immense cost and with real suffering, to reflect, recalibrate, and shift our communal culture. And we let it slip through our fingers.

I often think back to the conversations we had during that time. After these smaller weddings and bar mitzvas, it was common to hear guests—and even hosts—speak with a certain awe. People would say, “There was something so real about tonight,” or “This is the kind of simcha I’ll remember forever.” There was a widespread sense that we had stumbled upon something precious, something stripped of all the extra layers that so often obscure the essence. Without huge crowds, orchestras, and elaborate décor, we could actually feel the heartbeat of the simcha itself—the *kedusha* of *kiddushin*, the pride of a parent reciting a bar mitzva speech, the unfiltered joy of family and friends who mattered most.

For many of us, those moments were not merely acceptable substitutes; they were transformative experiences. They offered a glimpse of a kind of joy that was deeper, richer, and closer to what authentic Jewish simcha is meant to be. People spoke about wanting to “hold onto this”—about never wanting to lose the simplicity, the focus, the depth.

And yet, as soon as restrictions lifted, the pull toward old habits proved stronger than the memories. The emotional clarity of those backyard weddings faded faster than we would have imagined. Without consciously realizing it, many of us allowed ourselves to be swept back into the current. The simplicity that once moved us so deeply came to be seen, again, as an unwanted compromise rather than an ideal worth preserving.

Perhaps this is one of the most sobering lessons of all: that even profound experiences can slip away if we do not make a deliberate, determined effort to preserve them.

This is reminiscent of an idea I heard close to 30 years ago in the name of R. Elya Svei *zt”l*, Rosh Yeshiva of the Philadelphia Yeshiva. He reflected that the extraordinary wealth many segments of the Jewish community enjoy today may itself be a Divine test, though, as he noted, without prophets among us, we must be cautious in making definitive claims about Divine intent. We can only reflect and learn as best we can from the patterns we see. Historically, for most of the two thousand years of our exile, the Jewish people lived in profound poverty. Whether this material deprivation was punitive or simply a consequence of our exilic existence, it certainly served as a necessary correction for a spiritual failure.

The Torah warns about this dynamic explicitly in *Parashat Ha’azinu*, where it describes what would happen when the Jewish people settled in the Land of Israel: “Jeshurun grew fat and kicked; you grew fat, you grew thick, you became corpulent” (Deuteronomy 32:15). According to this warning, material prosperity would lead to spiritual corruption—indulgence, arrogance, and ultimately rebellion against Hashem. As a consequence, the people would be

expelled from the Land. Exile, with all its attendant poverty and hardship, would serve not only as punishment but as a form of rehabilitation, stripping away the excess that had led to spiritual decline.

Now, as the process of redemption slowly unfolds, we see material blessing returning to large parts of our community. R. Svei suggested that this blessing carries with it an implicit challenge: Hashem is giving us another chance. Will we use our newfound prosperity to strengthen Torah, to live with humility and responsibility, to honor His name? Or will we again fall into patterns of indulgence, competition, and spiritual forgetfulness?

This idea struck me deeply, and during the early days of COVID it became even more vivid. Here was the test laid out before us: celebrations stripped of excess, families rejoicing with sincerity and simplicity, communities reconnecting to the essence of simcha. It felt as if Hashem was showing us, “See? This is possible. This is what true joy can look like.”

Yet five years later, we find ourselves largely back where we started, if not further entrenched in a culture of overindulgence.

I recognize that communal change is not simple. Social norms are powerful forces, difficult to resist. When so much communal energy flows in a certain direction, it is extraordinarily difficult for individuals to chart a different course.

It is important to clarify that my purpose is not to offer practical proposals or solutions. That conversation, if there is interest, will have to come later, and I would be eager to participate. But before we can think about action, we must first be willing to look honestly at where we are. To acknowledge the opportunity that COVID presented, and the extent to which we, as a community, have allowed it to pass us by.

Perhaps it is not too late. Individuals, families, and communities can still choose differently. We can still embrace the vision of simcha that prioritizes meaning over display, holiness over extravagance.

Imagine a wedding celebrated with heartfelt dancing, simple but delicious food, meaningful *divrei* Torah, and genuine simcha. Imagine a bar mitzva where the emphasis rests on the young man’s davening, leining, and words of Torah, rather than on the extravagance of the party.

We glimpsed this reality during COVID. It was authentic. It was possible. And perhaps it still is.

Choosing new paths is never easy. It requires courage, intentionality, and a willingness to swim against the tide. It means risking misunderstandings, disappointing expectations, and foregoing certain forms of recognition. But the reward can be immeasurable: celebrations

that are not only financially sustainable but spiritually elevating; moments that our children will remember not for their glitz but for their warmth, sincerity, and connection to family and to Hashem.

As we look back five years later, let us not merely mourn the missed opportunity. Let us ask ourselves how we can, even now, reclaim some of what was almost within our grasp. We do not need to return to backyard tents or masked chuppahs to reclaim what we nearly discovered. We are no longer bound by the physical restrictions of those days, but the spiritual clarity they offered still remains within reach. We can choose to build celebrations that reflect the same sincerity, the same depth, the same unfiltered joy that so many of us felt during those simpler *semahot*. We can honor what was almost within our grasp by carrying it forward—freely, deliberately, and with the strength to remember what truly matters most.

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COVID+5: From Crisis to Personal and Communal Growth

Gila Muskin Block

Reflecting on the pandemic feels both like yesterday and a lifetime ago. In the moment, its impact was raw and all-consuming, yet as time passes, life seems to have settled back into a rhythm that mirrors a pre-COVID existence. But for those of us who have walked the path of infertility, the echoes of that time—of isolation, uncertainty, and desperation—still resonate deeply.

As a fertility advocate, I often view life through the lens of awareness and support for the 1 in 6 struggling to build families. And I can't help but wonder: Has the Jewish community, which lived through a collective experience of loneliness and fear, emerged with a greater understanding of what it means for couples struggling with infertility to cope with the enduring and agonizing loneliness of infertility and paralyzing fear of the uncertainty of their future? Did COVID shift the way we support those who endure these silent struggles, or have we returned to old patterns, failing to "show up" in the many ways we might have? Five years post-pandemic, it's time to reflect on whether we have truly learned from our shared experience of isolation or simply moved on.

The pandemic was a collective experience of uncertainty, isolation, and waiting. For months (and for some, even years), we lived in limbo, unsure of what the future would bring, longing for answers, for normalcy, for the life we had envisioned. It was a time of desperation, of deep loneliness, of grappling with an unknown timeline for when, or if, things would ever feel whole again. Research confirms that so many experienced heightened rates of anxiety, depression, and psychological distress during the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a global mental health crisis as people across the world faced prolonged uncertainty, isolation, and fear. Studies documented a significant rise in anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and psychological distress. Lockdowns and social distancing measures, while important for maintaining public health, definitely left many feeling disconnected from their support systems, amplifying feelings of loneliness and helplessness. The unpredictability of the pandemic, not knowing when it would end, if life would return to normal, and what the long-term consequences would be, created a pervasive sense of unease that weighed heavily on the emotional well-being of so many of us.

Quarantine, in particular, had severe psychological effects, including post-traumatic stress symptoms, confusion, and anger. The enforced separation from loved ones, upended daily routines, and the fear of infection all contributed to increased stress and complete emotional exhaustion. Many experienced a sense of loss of control over their lives, exacerbating feelings of frustration and despair. The prolonged nature of isolation took a toll on motivation, productivity, and overall mental resilience, with many people left struggling to find some purpose amid the uncertainty. Even as restrictions lifted in the months that followed some lingering effects of this collective trauma remained, highlighting the profound and lasting impact that extended isolation and unpredictability can have on mental health.

COVID-19's Heightened Isolation for the Fertility Community

COVID-19 took the fertility journey for those seeking to build families, an already-isolating experience that is marked by endless waiting and uncertainty and further compounded these realities. In the first few months as the world as a whole and medical professionals were attempting to grasp some understanding of the anomaly of the virus, all "non-essential" medical treatments were paused. On March 17, 2020, the American Society for Reproductive Medicine (ASRM) published guidelines that recommended the suspension of all new treatment cycles for what at the time was an undetermined period. This pause in treatment added immense anguish for so many who were actively fighting to grow their families and working against time they felt they didn't have. And to the 1 in 6 nothing felt more essential than treatment to achieve this dream.

Additionally, being home in the quiet without the children and families that they were fighting to have, deepened the loneliness and void they were experiencing. Many Yesh Tikva participants shared how painful it was to be surrounded by complete silence when all they were dreaming of was the noise of family. According to a study conducted at a Columbia University fertility clinic in which over 500 of their patients participated, it was found that "of those who had a cycle canceled . . . 22% found it to be extremely upsetting where extremely upsetting was defined as the equivalent of the loss of a child."

According to a study conducted of 500 fertility patients on the emotional impact of COVID-19 fertility clinic closures, patients reported feelings of "'powerless/helpless' (78.3%), 'frustrated' (59.3%), and 'anxious' (54.7%)." Furthermore, though infertility impacts both women and

men, the brunt of a fertility journey occurs in a woman's body. For those blessed to have partners and who face this journey together, there is solace in knowing that on some level, you are not the only one experiencing this (even if you are experiencing it very differently). But COVID-19 stole that as well. Once doctors' offices finally reopened, slowly and with many restrictions, only one patient was allowed to attend each appointment. The small solace that was once found in companionship with your spouse or a friend holding you through this journey was taken. As a Yesh Tikva participant reflected on one of the many difficult appointments she had to attend without any support: "I remember shaking from feeling so alone in that very moment; I so badly wished my husband was with me."

Have We Increased Communal Empathy?

For those who have battled infertility, the experience of loneliness and fear during the Pandemic was all too familiar. Long before COVID-19, fertility warriors knew what it meant to live in a world of unanswered questions, where timelines are indefinite, and each passing day brings both hope and heartbreak. The emotions that gripped the world during the pandemic—helplessness, longing, fear—are the same ones that define the infertility journey. And yet, as we emerge from the pandemic's shadow, the question lingers: Has this collective experience changed how we support those still living in that limbo?

If anything, COVID should have given our communities a newfound empathy for the struggle of infertility. All who experienced the Pandemic now know what it feels like to be trapped in uncertainty. We all know the pain of isolation, the frustration of delayed dreams, the deep ache of waiting. And yet, despite this shared understanding of these emotions, infertility, and the fact that it carries with it these exact same struggles, still often remains on the periphery of Jewish communal awareness. The pandemic forced us into discomfort, but for many, that discomfort faded with time. For many, it remains ever-present.

Based on my experience at Yesh Tikvah and on my interactions with individuals and families struggling with infertility, it would appear that the pandemic has not yet led to a major shift in how the general community approaches those facing these fertility struggles. There have not been increased efforts to translate the parallel experience into greater support and empathy for those facing infertility. It is incumbent on us in the broader Jewish community to do better and make that shift.

So, now that we are five years out and not much has changed, what do we do? How do we ensure that the lessons of COVID are not lost? How do we translate our communal experience into a more compassionate, inclusive approach to supporting those struggling to build their families? These are the questions we must ask ourselves if we are truly committed to fostering a Jewish community that sees, hears, and holds those in pain.

We have an opportunity to make the next five years count. Now that we have acknowledged the deficit in translating our lived experience into empathy, we have the opportunity to do better. We have a motto at Yesh Tikva called “Yes, And.” Yes, we live in a child-centered religion that focuses on ritual around family and children, and there is room for inclusion of those dreaming of growing their families. Yes, we are blessed to be past the pandemic, not wanting to relive the experience or dwell on it, and we have the opportunity to tap into empathy, the understanding of emotions from our lived experience, without having to relive it ourselves. For those reasons and more, in five years from now, when we reflect on a decade post-COVID, I hope the answer to this question will be YES. Yes, we have used our lived experience to increase communal empathy for the 1 in 6. Yes, our synagogues are more welcoming and now find creative and sensitive ways to make room for both families and children and those who are still dreaming of having their children. And yes, we go out of our way to raise awareness so that no one should have to face their fertility struggles in isolation, but rather the fertility warriors in our midst should feel surrounded by a community that is well-educated about this struggle and able to offer support and empathy.

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Carl Hochhauser

COVID-19 was officially declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020, but for the Jewish community, the date of significance is Purim 5780. It is around that date that Jews in Israel, America, and around the world began to be impacted by the medical and social ramifications of the virus. *Yeshivot* closed and shuls were shuttered. In some communities, *seudot* Purim were toned down. In others, the festive holiday meals served as mass virus-spreading events that led to many fatalities. In the aftermath of Purim, the Jewish world began to shut down.

As we pass the five-year mark since the outbreak, it is worth looking back to see how the pandemic impacted the Jewish community and whether those changes were temporary or represent shifts that will perhaps continue into the post-COVID era. While there is a wealth of data on some of these changes during the pandemic, the data on what has happened since is significantly more limited due to the typical time-lag from data collection to final publication in scientific journals.

As is well known, in addition to the health ramifications of COVID, including direct neurological/psychiatric damage from the virus itself, there was also an indirect but significant impact on mental health from the way that the pandemic impacted our lives. The greatest impact seems to have been from isolation and loneliness. On a community level, this manifested in multiple lockdowns, and on an individual level, this was caused by going into quarantine as a result of contagion or exposure. Other factors that also contributed

included grief and loss from family, friends, and community members dying or being significantly ill; economic instability; and disruptions to daily loves/routines (e.g., Penninx, et al., 2022).

The results were significant. On a worldwide level, the Global Burden Disease study reported a 25% increase in both anxiety and depression in the first year of the pandemic (Santomauro, et al., 2021). These increases were greater in areas with more disease, in women more than men, and in younger adults (20-24) more than older adults. Data for the Jewish community are less conclusive but still informative. In Great Britain, the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey and Annual Population Survey data from the Office for National Statistics indicated a 15% increase in average anxiety rating from 2019 to 2020 among the 140,000 Jews surveyed (Institute for Jewish Policy Research, 2020). 64% rated their mental health as having deteriorated since the outbreak of COVID and 47% of respondents indicated greater levels of frustration and anxiety than they did beforehand. Here, too, younger British Jews (16-29) were more likely to be negatively affected, as were women. In Israel, a large study of the general population (80% of the respondents were Jewish) found that 46% of the subjects had their mental health negatively affected by the pandemic. This was particularly true for those who lost their jobs, were placed on unpaid leave, or who suffered other significant financial strains (Feitelson, et al., 2022). A similarly comprehensive study of American Jews was not carried out, but the Orthodox Union surveyed four communities from different parts of the country and did not find a deleterious impact on mental health (Bankier-Karp and Shain, 2022). A study done by Pirutinsky and colleagues (2020) during the first wave also found little to no negative impact, but this too only studied Orthodox Jews and was not geographically diverse (67% from the New York/New Jersey area).

From the data that is available, it appears that religion was a major tool in coping with stress from COVID. Pirutinsky and colleagues (2020) found that trust in God, integrating religion into one's life, and using religion to find meaning and support, mitigated the impact of COVID on stress and mental health. They also found a correlation between COVID exposure and one's level of religiosity. While it is possible that this was due to more religious individuals continuing to attend communal prayers (e.g., church or *minyan*) and thus at greater risk of exposure, they suggested that the results of similar studies led them to believe that the subjects turned to religion as a way to cope with the pandemic. It is worth noting, however, that in a Pew survey done of US Jews (not just the Orthodox community), only 7% felt that the outbreak had led to their faith becoming stronger (Pew Research Center, 2020). Religion as a coping mechanism was not assessed in the British survey, but they did find significantly lower levels of distress among Jews who are members of a synagogue as opposed to those who were not. So too, rates of distress were lower on average among those belonging to the more observant branches of Judaism, as opposed to those from more liberal denominations.

For those who did need mental health care during COVID, social distancing requirements and restrictions on travel made access significantly more difficult. On one hand, the fields of psychotherapy and psychiatry were particularly vulnerable to lockdowns and masking

because of the importance of clinical rapport and face-to-face contact. But on the other hand, these fields were also uniquely able to seamlessly move to online video platforms.

According to McKinsey and Co. (Bestsennyy, et al., 2021), from February 2020 to April 2020 there was a 78-fold increase in the use of virtual methods of providing health care. While this decreased over time from this peak level, by July 2021 the use was still 38 times as great as it was before the pandemic. Born out of necessity, this opened the eyes of patients and physicians alike to the potential efficacy of telehealth. This same survey found that 58% of doctors now viewed telehealth more favorably and 57% planned to continue to offer it going forward. Among patients, there was a shift from 11% who made use of telehealth before the pandemic to 40% who believed they would continue to use it after COVID was over.

In the McKinsey study, the area of medicine that had the greatest use of telehealth was mental health care. Similarly, in the 2021 Medical Expenditure Panel Survey, 31% of the children and adolescents who received mental health care had at least one visit via video (Olfson, et al., 2025). While there aren't data on the use of telepsychology in the Jewish community in particular, one can surmise that use is similar to the general population, if not higher. The one exception may be in the ultra-Orthodox community, where smartphones and laptops with internet access are often forbidden. Presumably, in some cases, this led to the termination of therapeutic relationships. But in other cases, such as those described in Latzer, et al. (2021) from the Maayanei HaYeshua Eating Disorders Clinic (Bnei Brak, Israel), the families were able to adapt and use such technologies in order to continue the necessary therapy.

While telepsychology enabled patients and providers to overcome the technical barriers to psychotherapy and psychiatry during the pandemic, there have always been those who refrained from seeking help due to the stigma attached to mental illness and mental health care. In Israel, Shapiro and colleagues found that these stigmas seem to have declined since the outbreak of COVID (2024). The greater prevalence of psychological distress may have led to greater empathy and understanding, and thereby destigmatizing illness and therapy. In addition, the pandemic led to mental health issues being more at the forefront of national consciousness, which further reduced the stigma. Two recent studies of American Jews found significant stigmas toward psychiatric illness and mental health care but did not assess the impact of COVID on these variables (Smith, et al., 2024; Gearing, et al., 2023).

As we stand nearly two years after the official end of the pandemic, there is a natural desire to determine how many of these changes represented tipping points, moments in history when shifts in behaviors began and futures were changed, and how many were simply temporary spikes but ultimately returned to pre-COVID behaviors and attitudes. From a scientific perspective, two years out is too early to tell. However, we can discuss certain indicators that may give us insights into future directions.

The adoption of online video platforms for psychologists and even psychiatrists appears to represent a paradigm shift. As per data from the American Psychological Association's Practitioner Pulse Survey (2024), the trend appears to be continuing. While the number of psychologists working exclusively on video has not surprisingly gone down over the past five years, the percentage of psychologists working at least partially via video has remained stable at about 90%. From my experience speaking with patients and colleagues, the pandemic forced them to use a new method of communicating with their providers/clients and they became "hooked." One telling anecdote is that when the first lockdown was over, I contacted a 22-year-old patient with the "good news" that my clinic was reopening and that we could meet face-to-face. Rather than jump at the offer, he kindly informed me that he "preferred Zoom" and requested we continue online.

An unintended consequence of this shift was also that it increased mental health care access for disabled and immunocompromised patients who did not have recourse prior to 2020. In the Jewish community in particular, a parallel phenomenon is taking place with online *shiurim*. Many of these have shifted back to being in-person, but a significant number continue to flourish online, granting access to Torah knowledge and even halakhic training to individuals in communities where such classes and teachers are not available or to elderly individuals less able to travel.

A similar phenomenon may have occurred regarding the negative mental health stigmas in the Jewish community. The increase in psychological diagnoses and symptoms, globally and (in some cases) communally, forced the issue out of the shadows. This "normalization" of therapy in general and at least certain kinds of mental illness (schizophrenia and other serious illnesses perhaps being notable exceptions) has led to individuals feeling less uncomfortable about seeking professional help and even discussing it with others.

Will shifts in religiosity or religious practice hold steady over time? Will Jews who "found religion" as a result of coping with the crisis maintain or slide back? Not only is it too early to tell, but it does not appear that there are available precedents that might shape our predictions. A pre-pandemic literature review and meta-analysis of religious changes in response to traumatic events found that most people do not have long-term changes in religious beliefs. For those that do have an increase or decrease in their religiosity, however, it's not clear from the data how permanent this is (Leo, et al., 2019). A large study done after 9/11 did collect longitudinal data and found that religiosity and spirituality were correlated with better health over time since the terror attack, but it did not assess whether the subjects' religiosity or spirituality changed over time (McIntosh, et al., 2011). The best indicator might be the 2022 American Religious Benchmark Survey (Witt-Swanson, 2023). They found that most Jews attend religious services at about the same frequency as they did pre-pandemic and that they did not change their religious affiliation over the course of COVID or thereafter. While they did not provide within-group data about these phenomena for Jews, one could reasonably extrapolate from their data on other religions that younger Jews and more liberal Jews did have declining attendance.

While there may be “no atheists in foxholes,” what happens to those former atheists 5 to 10 years after they leave the battlefield? Presumably, some of those who changed maintain their new beliefs and some do not. In the absence of data, I would conjecture that those who translate these beliefs into consistent practices are more likely to persist than those whose changes are in the realm of belief alone. In addition, I presume that those who are part of a community system where all have changed, or who join a new community whose members reflect their new religiosity in the wake of the crisis, also maintain their change.

More fundamentally, the adage assumes that the individual in question views themselves as actually being in a “foxhole” (does a Zoom classroom qualify as a foxhole—for teacher or student?). The literature on post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1995) suggests that it functions as the mirror image of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The impact is less about the actual trauma and more about the perceived impact it had on the individual. For those who went through the pandemic and never felt medically threatened, never truly felt the depressing burden of isolation, and never feared for their family’s financial solvency, they avoided PTSD and presumably the other negative mental health ramifications of living through the COVID era. However, by not having to face these fears and learn to actively cope with them, they also remain unable to reap the benefits. *Yalkut Shimoni* (Psalms 5:628, commenting on Micha 7:8) observes:

Rejoice not over me, O my enemy; when I fall, I shall rise—Had I not fallen, I would never have arisen. *When I sit in darkness, the Lord will be a light to me*—Had I not sat in darkness, I would not have received His light.

Growth as a result of crisis or trauma presumes that for the individual in question it was actually a crisis or a trauma. For many in the community it was not. As such, analysis of those individuals over time may not uncover positive changes in religiosity, spirituality, or other domains. However, this may be different for the minority who did experience significant trauma such as severe illness, death of family members, depression, or even from economic hardships and loneliness. Perhaps as we look to the future to see how our community may have changed over the past five years we may find that those hit harder may also be those among whom we may see the most growth. Let’s direct our focus there. It will allow us to help those still struggling to recover and learn from those who have risen from the ashes.

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