

Point of View no. 84

The Disruption of Corona to the Jewish People & the Unparalleled Opportunity

THE ESSENCE

The Coronavirus Pandemic dramatically disrupts the Jewish People, and is going to radically change priorities, values and patterns of conduct of Jewish communal life. The Jewish people may find itself not only financially weakened, but facing a lieu of insecurities; decreased ability to collectively organize and deploy political or social capital; a weaker sense of belonging to the Jewish collective (Peoplehood) and connection to Israel; along with a rising challenge of anti-Semitism.

But Corona is also an incredible opportunity to revitalize Jewish communal life. Even with the decline of Jewish financial resources during this time, a bold, adaptive, visionary, and conscious leadership could take advantage of the unprecedented opportunities and strengthen Jewish continuity and identity.

Most notably, Corona constitutes a fantastic opportunity to provide alternative low-cost Jewish education, as online remote schooling becomes more viable, in addition to traditional Jewish education, which has not been affordable to large segments of the Jewish community.

Moreover, Corona may increase the attractiveness of communal way of life as a social and economic safety net and reinvigorate the desire for collective affiliation. The crisis likely to bolster Jewish communal organizations, who have declined in numbers in the last few years, in their attempt to maintain relevance to increasingly individualistic young Jews.

Reut's work is based on a theory, methodology and technology that allows us to extract knowledge to help Israeli and Jewish leaders to 'make sense of things' in the face of disruption, and mobilize them in a way that brings the ecosystem to a new equilibrium. This paper is our first attempt to do so in light of the challenge presented by Corona.

HOW CORONA IS CHALLENGING JEWISH COMMUNITIES

1. **As Corona rapidly spreads throughout the world, Jews comprise a significantly higher proportion of its victims**, notably in the UK, Strasburg, and New York. Dozens of rabbis and community leaders have already died due to Corona all over the world.
2. **Throughout history, pandemics have had far-reaching political, economic, social and scientific impact.** Although it is too early to determine the full meaning of the challenge, **Corona is already reshaping Jewish communities:**
 - ❖ **Decline of economic resources within the Jewish community, and expected demise of Jewish organizations** – the global economic recession is already accompanying the current health crisis, and will significantly erode the Jewish community's financial resilience. Jewish wealth is declining, and so are Jewish communal organizations and operations. The social isolation has already imposed the closing of several organizations and mass layoffs within the Jewish world.
 - ❖ **Communities are looking to address only their most basic needs**, all other operations are being put on hold.
 - ❖ **A blow to the idea of Peoplehood; Israel engagement moves to the backseat** – the attention given towards Israel decreases, and even Birthright, which brings 40,000 young Jews every year to Israel, has stopped all of its activities.
 - ❖ **Transformation of Jewish education** – As the global shutdown continues, Jewish education and programs, which culminate in the summer - such as Jewish day schools, summer camps and delegations to Israel - are no longer available. Forced social isolation is generating a wealth of new and accessible online Jewish educational materials in all languages, subjects and levels.
 - ❖ **The rise of Anti-Semitism** – As in previous historical pandemics, Jews are accused of the plague or for profiting from it. Corona is another opportunity for radicals to spread anti-Semitic conspiracy theories about the involvement of Jews in the virus.
 - ❖ **Haredim in the crossfire, Jewish solidarity collapses** – Due the high rates of infection among them, ultra-orthodox are experiencing a wave of hatred and prejudice, including within the Jewish community – In Israel and around the world. Haredi communities live in densely populated communities. The emphasis place on Jewish communal rituals and gathering make social isolation particularly challenging. This is especially true for a community disconnected and skeptical of mainstream news outlets and warnings from government officials.

UNPRECEDENTED OPPORTUNITY FOR COMMUNAL INNOVATION & TRANSFORMATION

The below outlines potential opportunities for the Jewish community in the crisis' aftermath:

3. **Globalization as we know it is going to change** – Jewish communities worldwide are being challenged by the many young Jews who are opting away from communal framework and became agnostic towards their Jewish identity and Israel. **The roots of this reality could be largely attributed to the influx of globalization**, which brought about a formation of shared universal norms and individualistic outlook at the expense of traditional and communal values. It is still too early to assess the effects of Corona in a comprehensive and accurate way, but it is very likely that globalization as we know it is going to change.
4. **A social and economic 'proof of concept' to communal framework** – The value of the community as a social and economic safety net has the potential to be better appreciated in the aftermath of the crisis, with the desire for collective affiliation increasing. During the crisis, Jewish communal organizations are focused on making sure that the most vulnerable get the help they desperately need.
5. **Unprecedented opportunity to lower the cost of education, as online remote schooling becomes main platform:**

- ❖ **The cost of Jewish education has been one of the main challenges to Jewish continuity.** Due to social isolation, the Jewish world is currently producing an expansive online educational infrastructure that could serve to open up Jewish learning through the next decade, and could dramatically lower the education tuition fees and change current modes of engagement.
 - ❖ **Communities are presented with an opportunity to return the work of generating Jewish identity back to parents and individuals.** Ever since the 1950s when American Jewry fully committed to outsourcing the Jewish experience to the institutions, the local JCC, synagogue or camp became the center gathering point in building the individual and communal Jewish identity, thus outsourcing the bulk of responsibility away from the Jewish home.
6. **An opportunity for a 21st Century Tikkun Olam –**
- ❖ **Elevating the existing Tikkun Olam infrastructure** - the most vulnerable will be even more vulnerable in the aftermath of Corona. Existing global Tikkun Olam operation would position the Jewish World in an excellent position to lead as a collective the process of global recovery and aid for the disempowered.
 - ❖ **Tikkun Chevra (repairing the society): The “community’s model”.** The communal framework that compensates for the limitations of state institutions during this time of crisis, has the potential to be become a social model exported to other communities and nations, like the Israeli Kibbutz was during the 70’s and 80’s of the 20th Century.

POLICY OPTIONS

In light of the Corona's calamity, taking advantage of certain opportunities won't just happen on its own, but requires a bold, courageous and vision-driven leadership. The following are a few themes for Jewish leadership to consider:

7. **Standing up against the surge and revitalizing Peoplehood** – in the face of the likely tendency of Jewish communities to look mainly inward, Jewish leadership will need to prioritize values that bolster the collective identity, and promote Jewish Peoplehood, Arvut Hadadit (Jewish solidarity), communal frameworks, the connection to Israel and the fight against anti-Semitism.
8. **Prioritizing the organization and structure of the online Jewish Education** – Moving forward, the Jewish community's task will be to organize the influx of Jewish content in order to create an accessible online Jewish library, connecting the Jewish world to each other and to our history and texts in unprecedented ways.
9. **Philanthropic leadership: Allowing flexibility, encouraging experimentation** – The ability to recognize and adapt to a changing reality involves profound learning and experimenting. In the long expected recovery period from Corona, Jewish philanthropy should decrease bureaucracy and consider giving more general support over project-specific grants in order to encourage experimentation.
10. **Halachic innovation is the order of the day** – Corona has brought to light the extreme complexity between ethical and Halachic issues to technology. As an example, senior Orthodox rabbis are allowing the use of Zoom for Passover Seder due to Corona, though the Rabbinat ruled it out shortly after. Corona pushes Judaism to edge and to a moment of tough decisions: Will Halacha adapt and innovate or impose stagnation on Judaism?
11. **The role of Israel as the nation state** - The State of Israel and Israeli society ought to assist Jewish individuals and communities around the world in dealing with Corona. This starts with listening to the needs and concerns of world Jewry and generating dialogue to better understand what resources they are lacking and what Israel and our institutions can provide. This aid will be an expression of Israel's commitment to living up to its role as the nation-state of the Jewish people.

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