<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>04.</td>
<td>Elan Ezrachi</td>
<td>INTRODUCTION: The sustainability of Jewish life is being tested</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06.</td>
<td>Andrés Spokoiny</td>
<td>Seven questions we need to ask</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08.</td>
<td>Nikki Marczak</td>
<td>Too far, so close: Covid bends time and space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Tehila Friedman</td>
<td>Time for Israel to support the Jewish people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Clive Lawton</td>
<td>The ‘Covidend’: a chance to move beyond self-interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Rebecca Forgasz</td>
<td>Fleeting testaments to despair, joy and resilience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Michael Gawenda</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A new insight into the importance of ritual</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>David Myers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Love, criticism and the need for ‘good trouble’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>Yael and Michael Weiss</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Masks are a source of renewal, not just protection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>Aliza Kline</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jewish wisdom can change our experience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td>Tamas Büchler</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The story we want you to hear</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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There is a strange connection between Purim and Yom Kippur. In Hebrew, there is also similarity of sound and spelling to the two words. What is the connection between these two such different and even contradicting events in the Jewish calendar? How can we compare a day of atonement and fasting to a holiday that commands us to dress up and get drunk?

This juxtaposition prompted multiple rabbinic commentaries that aimed to show the connection between these two benchmarks. One similarity is that on both days we disconnect ourselves from reality. On Yom Kippur, we separate ourselves from material and bodily constraints and on Purim, we put our brains on hold and allow a full body pleasure.

In both cases, we have an out of body or out of soul experience that enables us to reflect on fundamental existential questions regarding personal and collective identity, in the world and in our Jewish communities. Both days also hold a message of social responsibility.

On Purim we are obliged to provide gifts to the poor and on Yom Kippur we are told that without forgiveness from fellow humans we will not be exempt from the ultimate punishment. In short, Purim and Yom Kippur are two sides of the same coin.

In this “Year of the Mask” we’ve had all these elements in our daily lives. We didn’t have to wait for Purim or Yom Kippur. We wore masks and by doing so separated ourselves from others; we hyper-reflected on the meaning of this pandemic on our personal and communal lives; we showed concern to our fellow Jews and to fellow humans; and we discovered our ability to
devise creative responses to a difficult situation. All these responses are reflected in this 2020 High Holy Day supplement.

This is the fourth supplement that I am privileged to edit for Plus61JMedia. The previous ones had overarching themes that contributors addressed from their various cultural and ideological perspectives. This year, there was a single theme, but it propelled our writers in different directions.

We received writings with philosophical reflections, descriptions of organisational innovations, powerful emotional responses and even creative business ideas. We also saw how this pandemic affected us as individuals, and then as citizens of countries and members of communities.

Here, again, Purim and Yom Kippur connect. On Yom Kippur we are instructed to torture our souls and distance ourselves from all evil and on Purim we delight our bodies and hyper-socialise. According to the Jewish tradition, both contribute to redemption.

Our contributors have described how the pandemic has affected them, what they have been going through and how they plan to renew the covenant. In other words, the pandemic has pushed all of us to the extremes of our existence. The sustainability of Jewish life around the world is being tested.

In the coming years we will see the demise of certain practices and the rise of new modalities. It is my hope that these articles will inspire our readers to see the opportunities ahead and energise them to act and celebrate our inner resources.

L’Shana Tova
Elan Ezrachi, Jerusalem
Seven questions we need to ask

ANDRÉS SPOKOINY

“Since the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem”, says the Talmud, “prophecy has been taken from prophets and given to fools and children”. In other words, there’s no way of knowing what the future holds. But if I can’t prophesise, I can at least ask questions. And the questions are more important than the answers, for they can spark important communal conversations.

Blip or earthquake?
The first question is, in a way, the key one. Is the pandemic a momentary disruption after which everything goes back to normal or is it a turning point that demands a restructuring of our communities?

After a minor tremor, we clean up: a few broken glasses, a few gaps in walls hastily covered, etc. After a major earthquake, we must rebuild, which is costly, but offers the possibility of addressing pre-existing structural problems. Why were our buildings so fragile? How can we build better?

Those in positions of leadership will need a dual approach. Much of our communal infrastructure is relevant, attuned to the needs of clients, and properly managed. But what about organisations in perennial danger of closing, those frameworks that have outlived their relevance and are on life support? Wouldn’t the community benefit from an earthquake approach there?

Who gets the ventilator?
In New York City, where I live, the big question was: If the health system collapses and there are not enough ICU beds, who gets the ventilator? How do we decide who is saved and who is left to die when the ventilators run out? Should doctors use one on a patient with little chance of surviving or save it for the younger patient who is stronger?

With less dramatic consequences, Jewish communities face a similar dilemma. Should we use resources to try and shore up every community organisation, or use our few “ventilators” on those most likely to survive?

Democracy or dictatorship?
There are two views here. One is: “Look at China; because it is a dictatorship, the government quickly controlled the outbreak.” The other is: “Look at China; the government could lie about the outbreak and hide it, and thus it spread out of control.”

Which one will we take? Democracies like the US and Brazil that are run by populist leaders are doing dismal work, while liberal democracies like France and Germany are doing much better. Does that mean liberalism is better?

During Covid we have been giving away our civil liberties as if on a liquidation sale. We gave governments the right to put us under house arrest, track our phones and restrict freedom of worship. Those restrictions were necessary, but do they have an “off button”? Will people get used to less freedom, or will they demand more than before?
This is relevant for Jews because communities mimic their environments. Will the authoritarian trend make our communities less democratic, or spur a demand for more participation and representation? Will we be looking for strongmen to command and control, or discover the need for collaboration and connection instead?

Religion or secularism?
After every pandemic comes a spiritual reckoning. After the Black Death, Europe saw the emergence of the Protestant Reformation; after the smallpox epidemic of 700 CE, Japan embraced Buddhism; after the Spanish Flu, people abandoned religion for secular ideologies based on science (or pseudo-science).

How will Covid affect the Jewish spiritual landscape? Are we going to see a religious revival or the abandonment of faith? Will Jewish denominations survive or will we see new streams emerge? How will the Haredi community respond after so many of its senior leadership have died? What will younger leaders do? Will they become even more conservative or go the other way?

Isolation or openness?
The pandemic presents a paradox. It’s a global disease and the solution requires collaboration between nations. At the same time, countries are closing borders, restricting exchanges and becoming isolationist. Which trend will prevail?

Will Jewish communities become more insular and separated from general society or more integrated? Will we circle the wagons to protect ourselves better, or strive to build stronger bridges with the outside world? Will the growing tension between Israel and the Diaspora make us look inward? Will travel to Israel resume?

Social cohesion or individualistic dissolution?
There are two pictures of this pandemic. In one, first responders risk their lives and young people accept virtual house arrest to protect their elders. In the other, people fight over toilet paper.

Which attitude will mark the post-pandemic era? More cohesion and solidarity or a new era of selfishness? How will these divisions play out in the Jewish community?

“In Judaism, we choose our path and write our own destiny.”

Physical or virtual?
People are missing physical contact and interaction. But can we be sure that once quarantines are lifted, the virtual barriers will disappear? The pivot to virtual presented many limitations, but also radically expanded possibilities. Organisations that could never invite major speakers can now access top-quality content virtually. Would you accept a mediocre synagogue lecture after you’ve seen the best speakers on Zoom?

Videoconferencing is in its infancy. What will happen when we have new tools to interact virtually?

In Greek mythology, humans don’t have free will. The Fates mark the destiny of every individual. In Judaism, we choose our path and write our own destiny.

These High Holy Days are the time to consider these questions and understand that the answers are not pre-determined. They will result from our individual and collective actions.
Einstein said “time and space are modes by which we think and not conditions in which we live”. While this may always be true, our perception of time and distance has been uniquely warped this year by the pandemic. The world seems at once further apart and closer together.

The relativity of time is accentuated: hours spent in lockdown have felt like years; moments of freedom have passed too quickly. Yet the way we, as Jews, mark the yearly calendar and bridge distances with relatives and communities around the world has proven resilient and even innovative.

As we approach the High Holy Days, one thing is clear: the significance of Jewish rituals in our understanding of life and the struggle for solidarity in the face of hardship.

Rosh Hashanah is set in the calendar and will come to pass no matter whether we’re in lockdown, or able to hear the shofar. It is our perception that will determine whether Rosh Hashanah symbolises a period of transition or continuation of the alternating monotony and drama of 2020.

Choosing to signal these moments of Jewishness, from the ceremony of Tashlich, during which my family casts pieces of bread into Brisbane’s Ithaca Creek to apologise for mistakes and sins, to lighting candles and singing Maoz Tzur at Chanukah, gives us a meaning of time that we can grasp, as well as a sense of peoplehood, of something that binds us to Jews all over the globe.

At Pesach this year, we all hoped not so much for “next year in Jerusalem” but for “next year in person”. Yet Zoom Seders surprised us with the ability to bring relatives together across nations and continents, even those who do not normally celebrate as a family.

We may be more physically separated than we can ever remember but we’re connected spiritually by shared experiences and by the effort to stay in touch. The pandemic has simultaneously solidified and evaporated our old concepts of time and distance.

My mother fears her 13-year-old grandson will be shaving by the time she can cross the state border to visit. Yet some borders are more malleable now than they have ever been. During lockdown, I could put on my headphones and listen to the Emanuel
Shabbat service broadcast from Sydney. I rarely attend Shabbat services but this opening up of communal experiences has allowed me to connect with something transcendent, all the while in my kitchen in Brisbane. Regardless of one’s faith or degree of observance, there have been bridges built between communities and our rituals have sustained us.

That effort to retain one’s community identity is also a form of spiritual resistance to hardship. Not only does it give us comfort in times of uncertainty, but it is a way to assert our survival and resilience. It’s one reason why Jews in ghettos and concentration camps during the Holocaust clandestinely celebrated festivals and holy days despite the risks.

In 1944, a group of prisoners in Auschwitz marked Rosh Hashanah by sounding a shofar that had been smuggled in. Our reality is far better. Covid 19 is a threat to all humanity, of course, not only to Jews, and this year we can celebrate freely, albeit only in our own homes and without relatives who would normally be with us. Celebrating the new year should be a source of strength and optimism, providing familiarity in a world of unknowns.

The distortion of our awareness of time is also merging the past with the present, with varying degrees of hope and despair about the future. The distortion has also joined dots between historical and current challenges.

I can’t pretend to understand debates around theoretical physics, but Einstein’s assertion that “the distinction between the past, present and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion” seems apposite this year.

As Jews, our history is always with us. Each Friday afternoon, my young cousin, Eden, visits her 97-year-old grandfather Sam (Shlomo) at an aged care home in Sydney. The staff bring him down in his wheelchair to listen to her sing Shabbat prayers. Her mother says the distance created by the few metres they are forced to stand apart without being able to hug could well be the space between here and the moon.

The singing bridges the gap to some extent, and my daughter, whose Hebrew name is Chava, after Sam’s mother who was murdered in the Holocaust, has joined via WhatsApp to wish Sam “Shabbat Shalom” and listen to Eden singing. The pandemic has forced Jews further apart and simultaneously closer together.

“We are connected to our ancestors when we choose continuity of tradition and culture despite daily threats, and our relationships can be stronger and closer without being able to travel. What does it mean to be “far away”, or for something to happen “soon”? Distance and proximity, now and later, mean different things to us now than they did at the start of the year. The Jewish calendar, its holidays and rituals can help us process this strangeness, to contain its obscurity and grant us some peace.

As we face the prospect of another holiday to be celebrated over Zoom, or Kol Nidre without being in Shul, an end to all this seems an eternity away. But it’s not. The future is all a matter of perception.
Time for Israel to support the Jewish people

TEHILA FRIEDMAN

There have been times when my comments have resulted in controversy and harsh criticism. But nothing prepared me for the reaction I received to an idea I recently put forward to the Knesset. I proposed that Israel assist Jewish educational institutions around the world during the Covid-19 crisis.

One of my arguments was that Jewish education was the best investment in the future of the Jewish people and an antidote against assimilation. I received thousands of angry responses on social media. From the Right, there was anger at the idea of spending Israeli taxpayers’ money for endeavours that do not serve Israeli citizens. “The door is open,” one critic wrote. “Whoever wants help should move to Israel”.

From the Left, there was anger at the notion that assimilation was a problem. From all directions, I was criticised for suggesting this “luxury” while Israel is in the midst of one of its most difficult crises. I was accused of being detached, insensitive, you name it. Another critic quoted the classic Talmudic phrase: first take care of the poor in your own town.

I was surprised but not deterred. I regard Jews around the world as the poor of my town. As a feminist, for many years I used two last names, my maiden name and my husband’s surname. Similarly, I have two family names: Jewish and Israeli. I am part of Israeli society, now serving as a legislator, and I am also part of the Jewish people.

There is no contradiction. And I stand by my proposal. Israel can and should dedicate at least one per cent of its budget for the fight against the pandemic by assisting Jewish communities around the world. This should go beyond finances. We need to rethink relations between Israel and world Jewry.

As a resident of Jerusalem, I vividly recall the time when the Second Intifada was raging. The streets were empty. Buses became death traps, restaurants were blown up, hotels were empty and our economy was collapsing. We ground our teeth but continued with our lives. We were scared.

I remember how during that time, in 2003, the Jewish Federations of North America decided to hold their annual gathering, the General Assembly, in Jerusalem. Delegates filled Jerusalem’s hotels and one of the highlights was their march down an empty...
Jaffa Street. It was a statement: You are not alone, never. We are with you, and we are here.

I have a deep need to say the same today: You are not alone, never. We are with you. For many years you have supported us, now it is our turn. We are not doing you a favour; our wellbeing is tied to yours. If we aspire to be the nation-state of the Jewish people, then the wellbeing, safety and future of the Jewish people is part of the deal. There are no Israeli people. There are Jewish people with a right for self-determination in their ancestral land. Therefore, the ties to world Jewry are an essential part of Israel.

One of the first things I did as a new Member of Knesset was to propose a bill that requires all branches of government to consult with representatives of world Jewry in matters that pertain to Jewish life around the world. If we wish to build a relationship, it has to be mutual.

My proposed bill requires a larger conversation. We need to ask: what issues impact the lives of Jews around the world? On the one hand, there are security concerns in Israel and those are matters for Israelis. On the other, providing for amicable arrangements at the Western Wall is clearly a global Jewish matter.

Where do we draw the line? Once there is a consultation process, who do we consult with? Who is authorised to represent Jews around the world?

Unlike the heated responses of social media, I feel that in the Knesset there is a willingness for a renewed conversation on the relationship with world Jewry. I find allies for this process in almost all the parties, across the divide. Many members of Knesset understand that this issue is not a luxury, but rather a core necessity.

Not everybody agrees with me. One prominent MK told me he believed 10 per cent of Knesset members should come from the Diaspora. This is too radical for me as I am looking for a balance between Israel being a Jewish state and a democracy for all its citizens. Still, I am thrilled there is a conversation.

It is too early to tell how the pandemic will affect relations between Israel and world Jewry. When will we be able to travel again? Will the use of zoom and other technologies become an opportunity for the creation of encounters between people who have never met before? How will the strong connection that Jews have with their countries of domicile influence the sense of belonging to the Jewish people?

For the time that I will be in office, I am obliged to continue promoting the place of world Jewry in Israel’s public agenda, and to ensure that we use the pandemic as an opportunity to change and improve the way Israel deals with this subject.

For so many years, Israel has been the mission of the Jewish people. The time has come that the Jewish people will be Israel’s mission.

“Israelis need to ask: what impacts the lives of Jews around the world?”
Jews know about masking. It is probably only the Haredim who never hide their Jewishness. Unlike black people, who can’t hide, no doubt many Jews are happy to simply blend in with the crowd on the street.

We’ve got a whole festival devoted to hiding and, not surprisingly, it is characterised by masks and fancy dress. Purim is the archetypal diaspora event. Jews, at the mercy of their rulers, can often only quiver in fear as the flow of events swirls around them.

Esther hides herself (admittedly in plain sight), Mordechai gets to dress up, Haman (boo!) disguises his antipathy for the Jews when persuading Ahashverosh to sign the decree against them. Nothing is what it seems. All is continuously befuddled and confusing. The boozing is of heroic proportions.

But in the end, the festival outs us. You can’t hide, it tells us – and counter-intuitively for so many Jews, it insists that we’ve got more friends and more power than we think. Yes, we are understandably afraid from time to time. We can’t control everything. But we can bring about far more than we initially realise.

Rabbi Akiva tells a parable about fish being lured out of the water onto dry land where they’re told they’ll be safer. Wisely, they recognise that if they’re not safe in water, their natural habitat, they’re certainly not going to survive out of it. But still Jews seem not to learn that lesson.

Many bring up their children to behave as if being less Jewish will somehow help them save them messing up schooldays with festival absence, enable them to eat what they like, make it easier to socialise with colleagues over the weekend.

But do masks help us, either as Jews or as grapplingers with a virus? In our corona-world we think of them as protective, but masks were originally for disguising, for crime and deception, or perhaps transgressive flirtation. Even wearing make-up was thought to be an unacceptable dishonesty for decent folk (“To mask or not to mask” remains one of the hottest issues for lockdown survivors). Masks clearly touch a nerve in all humanity.

Or not quite all. We’ve all seen people from oriental countries wearing masks as almost routine, though in their case it was mostly to avoid intensely polluted air. But surely their air was not necessarily more polluted than in the industrialised West. Why did they find it easy to mask themselves but so many Westerners have to be coaxed into buying fashionable masks to seduce us into using them?

I suspect it’s to do with our strong Western culture of individualism. We want to express ourselves, be true to ourselves and so on, rather than devote ourselves to the community and give of ourselves for the greater good. Until now.

Now we applaud lowly workers who help people in care homes, posties who make sure we can keep in touch with each other. We notice the garbage collectors who keep our streets clean. We value the train and bus drivers who kept working while the rest of us cowered at home. They put themselves on the line for the greater good and to keep society rolling.

Perhaps, then, the Covidend – the Corona dividend – is a renewed appreciation that greed and self-interest really doesn’t do

"Only co-operation will work if we want to live at all freely."
it in this situation. Might we come out of this better people in a better world? Will Black Lives Matter more and will the climate crisis finally get the attention it deserves? Changing our lives radically for the greater good seemed unthinkable six months ago. Now it's the order of the day.

Masks had two functions – either they deceived so the wearers could take advantage of those they encountered, or they protected us from disease or pollution. But now we are to use masks in the medical style. This is not about protecting ourselves, but protecting others. We have to do something we don't really want to do because others need us to. I suspect most people still haven't really understood that.

This is not the way the world has been. The social solidarity required people to pay their taxes ungrudgingly, not for what they get back but because society needs it, has been a hard sell in much of the Western world for 40 years or more.

Even after the banking crisis of 2008, when greed was outed for the devil it is, it took a while but eventually things righted themselves and we went back to the dog-eat-dog system we were used to. But Covid has come to teach us. A mask might be a barrier, but its purpose is not to hide me, but to protect you.

There are no barriers that will work selfishly, unless we simply shrink our own worlds to our disadvantage. Only co-operation will work if we want to live at all freely.

We all know that, as Jews - educated, generally prosperous, mobile, well-networked globally - we have a lot to offer. And now’s the time to do it. But we’re not just clever or well-placed or entrepreneurial. Jews are something in particular. We have distinctive Jewish insights, particular Jewish experiences and rich Jewish wisdoms to add to the world's pooling of its resources.

But before that, for some of us … we’ll first have to learn what that distinctive Jewish contribution can be. Time to get studying!
How has the pandemic impacted Jewish life? Some reflections.

Anecdotally: A Jewish professional in his twenties tells me he was on a masked walk with a fifty-something member of his shul. His walking companion tells him Judaism died during this crisis.

Counterpoint: My mother is in her sixties and a retired academic. Though married to a former headmaster of Melbourne’s Mount Scopus College and parent of a former CEO of the Jewish Museum of Australia, she has never been one for much personal engagement with Jewish religious or cultural life. Throughout the pandemic, however, she has Zoomed into lectures, panel discussions, virtual walking tours of Jewish neighbourhoods in New York – programs and events she would never normally attend “in real life”.

Parenthetically (just a Jewish mother shepping naches): My three-year-old joining my six-year-old every morning at our kitchen table for his prep Hebrew class via distance learning. By mid-way through Melbourne’s Stage 4 lockdowns, both know the Hebrew alphabet, sing along with Elmo and Cookie Monster about the word of the week, and model Hebrew letters in blocks and home-made playdough.

There have, of course, been many negative impacts for our community – the social isolation, the jobs lost, the increase in domestic violence, the strain on social services, the havoc wreaked on education. The 100th birthday celebrated in an aged care residence with grandchildren and great-grandchildren behind a glass wall. The recitation of Kaddish in isolation, with a minyan only on the screen of a phone. And of course, the virus itself – those who have become sick, those who have died.

Yet, as is so often the case, crisis brings out the best of our humanity and sense of mutual responsibility. I have been deeply moved to see the rallying of our community behind the Jewish Response Coronavirus Facebook group initiated by Stand Up, the offering of support and services to meet every need imaginable – cooked meals and groceries for those in crisis, pharmacy supplies, career counselling for the suddenly unemployed, support for parents home-schooling their children, or a simple phone call to check in.

Similarly, I’ve been blown away by the explosion of online programming and events in the Jewish community. Organisations usually dependent on “bums on seats” have adapted swiftly. And while there is no comparison to the energy and community that comes from being in a room together, there are definite advantages – for both organisations and participants – to the now...
ubiquitous model of online engagement. Audiences have grown, in some cases exponentially. There are no geographic boundaries for presenters or attendees. There are no venue hire fees, catering or logistical costs, though moderating the chat box on Zoom can present challenges.

Parents can put young kids to bed and still be “at” an event that starts at 7.30pm. Events are accessible to the elderly who may prefer not to go out at night, and to the disabled. Even those who, despite a strong interest in the educational and cultural offerings, cannot bring themselves to go out again after a long day at work, can easily Zoom in.

Anecdotally, participant feedback suggests that the experience and outcomes for participants in online programs and events is almost identical, even though presenters find the experience less satisfying. There is also, of course, the challenge of monetising these events.

With so much competition and free content, organisations would find it hard to justify charging a fee. But as the pandemic goes on for longer than first anticipated, this, too, will become the “new normal”.

Throughout Jewish history, tragedy and disruption have never got the better of us. In fact, quite the opposite – they have been the triggers of great creativity and adaptive change. So, too, with this crisis. We can’t yet know which changes will be fleeting and which will stay with us for ever.

My hunch is that online Jewish events are here to stay, even when large-scale gatherings become possible again. One thing is for certain – we are living through a unique and momentous historical moment.

As a former museum curator, one of the questions I have been asking myself is: what are the artefacts of this moment in time? What can we capture and document as a record of our experience so we can understand, interpret and reminisce in the future?

I am drawn to the ephemera of Jewish family and communal life from the pandemic: the advertisements for events, the email communications, the signs, the social media posts, the Facebook live events and the memes – even more ephemeral than usual because of their uniquely digital existence.

Though not often considered of great historical significance, these ephemera express and are testament to our despair and joy, sadness and humour, adaptability and resilience, determination and creativity – both as individuals and as a community.

Together with my colleagues at the Australian Centre for Jewish Civilisation, I am working to create an online archive to document the Melbourne Jewish community’s experience of Covid-19.

The archive is part of a global project instigated by historians at Arizona State University. It’s called Journal of the Plague Year, after the novel by Daniel Defoe set during the bubonic plague in London.

We’re inviting members of the community and organisations to contribute and are looking forward to seeing the picture that emerges.

To contribute to the Jewish Melbourne COVID-19 Archive, please visit https://covid-19archive.org/s/Australia/page/JewishMelbourne

Rebecca Forgasz is an Associate Professor at the Australian Centre for Jewish Civilisation at Monash University, and a co-founder of the Jewish Climate Action Group in Australia.

“ My hunch is that online Jewish events are here to stay. ”

15.
A new insight into the importance of ritual

MICHAEL GAWENDA

When was it, the last time, at sundown, that we sat close together at the table, all of us, Buba and Zaida, our daughter and her partner, our son, our good friend who came to Shabes dinner every week? And of course, our grandson, who could not wait for the candle lighting and the prayer before the wine and the prayer that our son recited holding the challah he had baked that afternoon; the challah warm and sweet smelling, our son’s face open, smiling, in anticipation of our reaction to this week’s offering?

I remember how, on that last time before the plague came, our grandson stood in front of his uncle, pressed against his uncle’s body. I remember how we sat together, almost touching, Buba and Zaida and we each in turn - and sometimes at the same time - reached out to touch our grandson, his cheek, his hair, his hands. I remember how our friend ate his piece of challah and as he did every week, pronounced it the best he had ever tasted.

There is more that I remember about that last Shabes dinner and the memories are more vivid as time goes by, but time has also vanished, sequential time that is, so that I can only say that our last pre-plague Shabes dinner exists in my memory somewhere outside of time, like an ever-more vivid dream.

We are into the fourth week of a lockdown in Melbourne - stage four they call it - in which visits to homes by even the closest family members are forbidden. I am writing this on Friday afternoon. It is still winter and soon it will be time for the candles to be lit and the wine to be poured and the challah - which our son will soon deliver to our front door - to be blessed.

He has also baked a challah for his sister and her partner, and a small, bear-shaped challah for his nephew who no doubt will be waiting outside his front door for his uncle to arrive.

They will stand apart and he will reach out to take his bear challah and they will stand like that, apart for a minute and perhaps sing
“ding dong the witch is dead” - his favourite song at the moment, and then our grandson will turn and go back inside. He is four years old. I wonder whether he remembers that last pre-plague Shabes dinner, at Buba and Zaida’s place?

Though Rosh Hashanah is still three weeks away, I have spent the morning searching the web for kosher butchers that take online orders and deliver - I no longer go out shopping. I want some calf’s liver so I can make chopped liver and a veal brisket with bones left, which is my wife’s Yontev speciality.

I have also searched for fishmongers that can deliver the minced fish we need - several varieties of perch - for gefilte fish and eight cutlets of snapper perhaps or if they have it, Murray Perch for sweet cooked fish. I want the heads as well, for the fish yorch. For us, there can be no Yontev without gefilte fish.

This is how I have passed the hours before Shabes, online searching for Yontev food. Soon we will celebrate the coming of Shabes, our family and our old friend, each in our separate homes, connected with each other in some sort of digital reality which collapses time and space and in which our senses, smell and touch in particular, are frustrated, inhumanly denied a role in this gathering of family for Shabes, which for Jews like us who hardly ever go to shul, nevertheless ties us to the Jewish people and to Jewish history and to our Jewish ancestors.

I am not a religious Jew though I do not describe myself as secular either, but until the coming of this plague, I had never fully understood, not consciously, not in any examined way, how much of my sense of being a Jew is tied up with the rituals of our weekly Friday night Shabes dinners, the celebration of the Yomtoyyim that always includes the elaborate preparation of the Yontev food, especially at Pesach and Rosh Hashanah, the lighting, as a family, together, of the yortzeyt candles for our dead parents and other family members.

In this time of plague, none of this is possible. These things are denied me, these things that are my deepest expressions of what it means to me to be a Jew - these rituals and celebrations and times of sorrow that connect me to my family and to my long dead parents and to my ancestors and to my Jewish history.

I am not a religious Jew and I do not wrestle with God about the meaning of this plague, but I do wonder when Jewish life - the sort of Jewish life that like mine, is family and community based - will be possible again.

I wonder whether the plague, even when it is tamed, will have forced permanent changes to the way we once did Shabes, celebrated Yontev, the way we touched and hugged and kissed and shared food and wine.

It is time now to prepare for Shabes. My son is a few minutes away with the challah. I shall now put on my mask and wait for him at the front door. Dusk has arrived.
It is hard to avoid a foreboding, even apocalyptic, sense as we approach 5781. The global Covid contagion, joined by raging fires, the seeming corrosion of democracies (including in Israel), and political instability, lend the impression that the world is spinning out of control.

The situation reminds us of the theological principle of *hester panim*, that God’s face is concealed. We read of this phenomenon in the psalm that is recited every day during the month of Elul (27: 9): “Do not hide Your face from me; do not thrust aside Your servant in anger.” Various religious thinkers over the ages declared that due to our sins, the Jewish people were in exile and God’s providence was suspended.

One of the most pointed expressions of *hester panim* was sparked by the Holocaust, when Jews raised their eyes to heaven in perplexity and rage. Where is God? How could God abandon us at our hour of greatest need?

Few have captured this question better than the author Zvi Kolitz in his novella, *Yosl Rakover Talks to God*. Yosl struggles to make sense of the collapse of the universe as he had known it: “God has hidden His face from the world and given mankind over to its own savage urges and instincts.”

For some Jews, this act constituted an irreparable breach. For others, it served to affirm an up-and-down, life-sustaining and unbreakable relationship.

Today, thankfully, we do not face genocidal forces as in the Holocaust. But Covid challenges us in every domain of life, including theologically. We implore God in our daily prayers to heal the sick. We recite Avinu Malkenu in the hope that God will prevent people being harmed. But to no avail.

Whether we continue to believe or not, we are not pawns of an indifferent God whose face is concealed. We are agents of our own making, especially after we have entered the month of Elul and the work of *heshbon ha-nefesh* (spiritual accounting).

One of the most compelling early 20th century rabbinic voices was the eastern European Aharon Shmuel Tamares (1869-1931), the socialist, pacifist traditionalist who spoke of the need for a repentance of love (*teshuvah mi-ahavah*). Insofar as we come to this world through love —indeed, no child is born with hate in their heart — we are obligated to love others. This is a realisation of the most basic human impulse.

Rav Tamares was not a starry-eyed utopian. He possessed a hard-headed ethical bearing that compelled him to speak truth to power. He called the leaders in his time “official criminals (who) create around them a circle of corrupt and cunning people”, and abhorred their haughty sanctimony.

His trenchant criticism does not lead to surrender, but to an ethical activism that demands an accounting of one’s soul as a prerequisite to pointing out the moral lapses of others. Never should we shirk our responsibility to fight corruption and indecency, which would spurn our origins in love and respect.

There may be no more noble successor to Rav Tamares than the recently departed American social justice warrior, John Lewis. Born on a share-cropper’s farm in rural Georgia, Lewis made his way to Fisk University and Baptist seminary in Nashville...
where he met the Rev. James Lawson, newly returned from India where he learned the teachings of Gandhi’s non-violence.

Lewis became a prized disciple of Rev. Lawson, as well as one of the youngest leaders of the civil rights movement. He was as unflinching in his commitment to non-violence as he was in his struggle for racial equality. Lewis suffered physical violence, most infamously at Selma, Alabama, in 1965, where he was badly beaten while leading demonstrators heading to Montgomery, demanding equal rights. Eventually, Lewis’ activism took him to Washington, where he served as a congressman for 23 years.

Remarkably free of rancour, Lewis exemplified the pursuit of justice as an act of love, faith, and joy. At the same time, he was indignant and critical when he perceived immorality, as, for example, his refusal to attend the inauguration of President Donald Trump.

He also refused to attend the speech in Congress in 2015 by Benjamin Netanyahu, who had been invited — against all norms of American protocol — by the Speaker of the House without consultation with the President and House Democrats. Lewis also opposed the BDS movement, but at the same time, resisted attempts to pass laws directed against supporters of boycotts against Israel.

These actions reveal the fine art of discernment based on a loving but critical ethos. It is precisely this discernment that we ought to bring to our relationship with Israel. We must not surrender our strong bonds to that place and to the ideal that we love; but neither are we permitted to suspend our critical or moral faculties when Israel engages in behaviour that violates our Jewish and universal values.

The task is daunting. A decade of assaults on Israel’s democratic foundation, part of a larger global illiberalism, seems interminable. And the 50-year occupation of the West Bank, so dehumanising to Palestinians, seems irreversible. But how daunting must the task have seemed to a young John Lewis as he stood on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma and faced America’s legacy of slavery and racism?

Rather than succumb to despair, he dug deep and drew from an untapped reservoir of strength. So must we, by reaffirming our commitment to the struggle for justice in Israel.

John Lewis’ most enduring legacy to us may well be his repeated call to engage in “good trouble”, to disrupt patterns of inequality and injustice wherever we find them. Whether God is looking or looking away, this is our obligation as humans and as Jews. Now more than ever.
In February, we received a record number of orders for the upcoming summer travel season. Our start-up venture was rocking. Our award-winning app, Bitemojo, offered self-guided culinary tours in 12 cities around the world. The app, which was initially developed for the culinary treasures of Jerusalem, was very popular among young and low-budget travellers.

Towards the end of February, we were also in the final stages of raising $US1 million from investors to further develop the venture. All the documents and presentations were ready, we were on track and the future looked bright.

March arrived, the world came to a standstill, and five years of work went down the drain.

We decided to embark on a new journey. We have four children, a mortgage, and an awareness that the world of tourism that we loved so much would not be the source of our sustenance for the foreseeable future.

March was the first shock. Then came April and we found ourselves spending every day at the hospital helping our ailing parents. Like everybody, we were wearing single-use masks for hours each day. It became clear to us that face masks would soon to be a regular feature of our wardrobe, and for a long time.

The single-use masks available were unattractive and wasteful and we saw an opportunity. Our entrepreneurial impulse was reignited. We felt there was an opportunity for a product that was safe, fashionable, and had a social value, a principle that has informed us since we began our business in tourism in 2008.

We decided to move as quickly as possible.

Our learning curve regarding the types of fabrics, resistance to microns, and the method of stitching required us to start from a point even lower than the Dead Sea. We conducted intensive research for three weeks. We read everything we could about the use of fabrics for masks, the effect of fabric density on virus resistance, what works and what doesn’t.

We decided not to compromise on quality. We chose premium cotton fabrics from quality Israeli suppliers. We felt the fabrics and the textures with our own hands and chose designs that would make people happy when they left their homes. We created more than ten prototypes before choosing the designs that reflected the elegance and look we were aiming for.

In addition to the high-quality fabric and sewing, we decided that each mask would have a fashionable neck band, identical to the mask fabric, enabling the user to take the mask off while still keeping it close. Users could maintain a nice look when not using the mask.

We complied with all Health Ministry guidelines regarding fabric density, with the capability of adding a filter. After further research we imported a special anti-bacterial filter from Belgium that lasts long after multiple washings.

When masks are more than a metaphor

YAEY AND MICHAEL WEISS

The ability to recover from devastation is engrained in our DNA.
The business side was not enough. As with our previous endeavours, it was important for us to ensure that this initiative contained a social justice value. That is why we chose to manufacture the masks with two organisations whose mission we believe in. One is the Imra (‘statement’ or ‘saying’, in Hebrew) sewing project that employs young women at risk, and the other is Danny and Mussa, a sewing workshop located between Jerusalem and Bethlehem that serves as a bridge between Israelis and Palestinians.

We expect to have sold more than 10,000 masks by the end of August. Our first sales were made only six weeks after we began exploring the world of textiles, design and health.

It has been a fascinating journey. We believe tourism will return to its former glory but for the time being we are pleased we can provide for the future of our children by doing something meaningful and effective.

As we start the new Jewish year, we wish to share our experience of renewal and the ability to rapidly change course. We feel it is our Jewish response to an unexpected challenge: always look forward, walk straight and walk together.

The ability to recover from devastating consequences is not only a business strategy; it is engrained in our DNA as a people. We are happy that even in these times we managed to resort to our millennia-old sources of inspiration.
The rhythm of the Jewish calendar - the weekly practice of Shabbat and the intensity of the High Holy Days – suggests a wisdom that can help us experience the pandemic. It offers deep connections to help us feel moored, present, grateful, responsible and hopeful. “People lose track of time when the future is in question. The continuity from the past to the future is gone. Those feelings are called ‘temporal disintegration’, a direct result of trauma,” says Dr Alison Holman, from the Irvine School of Nursing in California.

This pain and lost sense of time is acutely true for those of us with an eye on the Jewish calendar. The lost ability to gather for the High Holy Days may further feelings of isolation and the disruption of time. We need to redirect that narrative by applying experiences and using technologies to open up Jewish collective practices.

As CEO of OneTable – a platform for young adults across the US to end their week with intention and create unique Shabbat dinners – I have been focused on designing ways for people to experience Shabbat and deepen connections to others, to Jewish wisdom, to themselves and to their sense of time. I have seen first-hand that the value of ritual is even higher during this pandemic.

Covid-19 has created a new form of exile. Our worlds have become smaller, focused on those with whom we live, care for, or connect with over technology. The time of communities held together by loose acquaintances has come to a standstill. How do Jewish community leaders connect their understanding of these emotional realities to frame the experience of the pandemic through Jewish wisdom? We start with understanding what our community members need, now.

“We’ve lost a daily rhythm and are eager to find a new one.”

When it became apparent that we’d be adhering to shelter-in-place for more than a few weeks, my team conducted two studies about how Jewish young adults were feeling and relating to Jewish practice: first, a survey of 1200 OneTable users, representing the 50,000 who’ve participated in a Shabbat dinner in the past 12 months, and second, a series of focus groups.

The studies captured the complexity of
often bleak current events with optimism for the future. Young adults are clearly feeling the impact of the crisis, but they are also feeling extremely thankful for their own relative health and comfort. When presented with a list of words to describe how they were feeling, 68 per cent said that “lucky” describes them, even more than words such as “stressed” (64 per cent), “frustrated” (65 per cent), or “exhausted” (51 per cent).

Their answers can inform the design of meaningful and enriching High Holy Days experiences. Three main areas of focus were identified:

• “We’ve lost a daily rhythm and are eager to find a new one.”
• “Our relationships have transformed and we need new strategies for connection.”
• “We’re reckoning with a changed world and don’t just want to go back to how it was.”

This rhythm, relationship, and reckoning framework offers a unique opportunity to approach ancient rituals in a totally different way. By addressing the yearning for human connection, we can deepen our community’s experience of Jewish tradition and peoplehood.

Given the breadth of online Jewish offerings, it feels safer than ever to try out different styles of Jewish practice. Our data shows that interest in Jewish practice both online and - importantly - offline at home has increased. After all, we don’t even have to leave our homes and many organisations have waived fees.

A new look at the concept of affiliation is needed. In America, a staggering 40 per cent of Millennials are religiously unaffiliated, with numbers of Gen Z suggested to be even higher. Yet since Covid-19, 46 per cent have started a new religious practice.

Meaning, values, connection have taken centre stage. This will be a moment of intense creativity alongside the tragic disruptions.

OneTable users reported a marked increase in Shabbat observance. Sixty-six per cent say they have celebrated Shabbat at least once or twice since the crisis began, and a full third are celebrating every week — nearly twice as many as before the pandemic.

Presumably, there will be unprecedented interest in making new meaning of the High Holy Days. What better time than the Days of Awe, the season of reflection, to support Jews who are taking this time for reckoning?

Young adults are assessing what’s important in life. Personal ambitions, relationships, and careers are all put in perspective by the pandemic. There’s a clarity in which values take centre stage. They’re also recognising where they need to change. New priorities are emerging.

What is the best way to address this? Focus on the platform rather than the program.

To that end, we invite you to Here For (Herefor.org), a newly designed platform for individuals, families, communities, and organisations to connect with one another during these High Holy Days.

Here For helps us feel anchored by the High Holy Days, grounding us not just in the calendar, but in the broader community. It offers a gathering space for and by the Jewish community, inviting collaboration, engagement, and participation, with few barriers.

Jewish communities are evolving and we’ve embraced a platform model to provide the foundation to design and join meaningful experiences. With a New Year comes change, an opportunity to embrace new habits and routines - holding the wisdom of tradition in one hand and the creativity of interpretation and personalised Jewish expression in the other.
Through stories we build our lives and our communities and become agents of our future. Now that I am socially distanced from my Budapest community, I realise the value of our work in revising and reclaiming stories that empower us and make our voice heard in the global Jewish discourse.

My previous job in Budapest involved networking and fundraising. I met hundreds of visiting groups: philanthropists, Jewish professionals and tourists. They came from North America, Israel, Argentina, Australia and beyond. Budapest became a hotspot for Jewish explorations. Most came with presumptions about Jewish life in Central-Eastern Europe and during their brief visits we told them our stories, hoping to touch their minds and hearts.

To be fair, it’s noisy out there even if our stories are interesting. We hear hundreds of stories every day, tailor-made in the echo-chamber of social media bubbles and the attention economy.

According to Marshall Ganz, a Harvard lecturer in leadership and civil society, we all have great stories that articulate who we are: our shared values, hopes and experiences, the difficult choices we face, why we do what we do. A good story engages us and captures our interest. It inspires us to act, and others too.

I grew up in a family where the Holocaust was a reference in every gathering. My four survivor grandparents felt at ease to open up and tell us about their experiences in detail. I’m not alone in this, many from my generation grew up with the only connection to our ancestry coming from the stories of what was lost.

It became part of our DNA. The visitors expected to hear those stories and rightly so. However, the stories overshadowed our new story of personal and communal renewal.

We wanted to tell how in the past two decades young Jews found their way back to Judaism and to the Jewish community, discovering their roots as teenagers or students, and how this generation created a vibrant Jewish community of young adults. But as much as our story was compelling, it was insufficient and did not provide a convincing vision for the future.

And there is a third prevailing story that is often heard: the renewed anti-Semitism. I remember attending a meeting in the US and being asked if Hungarian Jews would need an “evacuation fund” should they be forced to flee.

It’s hard not to become frustrated. Everyone wants to hear how our safety is at risk. This story lies in everyone’s comfort zone: a
victimised Jewish community in Eastern Europe, threatened by its very existence, feeds well into mainstream Jewish narratives; the Zionist that assumes Israel is the safe homeland; or the American lens that looks at Eastern Europe as a place our ancestry escaped from.

I admit that being perpetual victims is also comfortable for us, Hungarian Jews. In survival mode, we wait for the next pogrom to start, feeling passive and powerless, dependent on the help of outsiders. As long as we are in this position, we can avoid issues such as communal responsibility and self-reliance. We neglect to ensure inclusion of LGBTQ+, women's leadership, people with disabilities and so on. Victimhood allows us to be blinded and not see our own privileges.

Don’t get me wrong, anti-Semitism is real, and its ugly face shows up in academia, politics, sport and media. Anti-Semitic hate speech and hate crimes are real, too, and require reporting and monitoring. However, the current narrative offers only one perception of anti-Semitism: a physical threat on our lives. Within this distorted view, the only adequate answer is increased security. More armed guards, police protection and detecting equipment.

Anti-Semitism is not only about security, and rarely it manifests in violent attacks. We need to focus on the more subtle and implicit manifestations of hate, such as bias at school or the workplace, which is widely present. Tackling anti-Semitism in Europe through security measures is important, but it’s only a technical quick fix for a bigger adaptive challenge.

Happily, the European Commission is funding a historic initiative lead by CEJI – A Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe, to combat anti-Semitism on a systemic level. Within this, Networks Overcoming Antisemitism aims to make an impact through education and training, culture, dialogue, social media campaigns, sports and mapping the hundreds of initiatives that are already doing great work.

In Hungary we are not victims anymore. Rather, we are the most privileged minority group in Hungarian society. With help from global Jewry, we have built a vibrant and exciting community, with Jewish culture, sport clubs, JCC, student organisations, youth camps, social innovation hubs, museums, and even new synagogues.

When we take off our protective masks and resume social contact, we will need to look into the future. Today, Jews in Europe are in the forefront of building a more inclusive society: in social justice, human rights, democracy, interfaith dialogue, welcoming refugees, reducing poverty, advancing LGBTQ+ rights, and combatting systemic racism. As we reflect on the New Year, we should recognise that it’s not anti-Semitism that defines us, but our shared purpose.