Disruptions and Opportunities: The Impact of COVID-19 on the U.S. Jewish Community

A social science approach

Dr. Janet Krasner Aronson
Immediate health and financial needs:

**Elderly, poor, and isolated**
- For the first time in a generation, we must completely refocus our efforts for the coming months to provide for the dramatic, additional needs of the elderly, poor, children at risk, those who are abused in their homes, the newly unemployed and of course those who are ill. Failure to do so would be to completely underestimate the size and scope of the present tragedy. (Joseph Hyman, March 30, 2020)
- The immediate concern must be for vulnerable families and seniors as income streams are frozen and as communal resources diminish. (Steven Windmueller, Ph.D., March 30, 2020)
- In this new world of social distancing and self-quarantining, there have been concerns raised about the needs of isolated people, particularly the elderly. (Ellen Flax, March 27, 2020)

Jewish institutions:

**Synagogues, Jewish education, Jewish professionals**
- On the operational side, questions are arising about the economic viability of synagogues, schools, and camps... The longer-term realities would suggest an economic tsunami that will be both wide and deep, affecting broad segments of the Jewish institutional landscape and placing substantial pressure on the core resources of our fundraising and foundation networks (Steven Windmueller, Ph.D., March 30, 2020)
- Your Rabbis are spent. They are overworked and worried. They’re worried about congregants and families and about the long-term survival of synagogues. They’re worried about isolated individuals and suicides and how to say viddui over the phone or lead a funeral. They’re scared for their families and sad for canceled B’nai Mitzvah and delayed weddings. They’re burned out – and it’s only week 2. The needs are endless. (Betsy S. Stone, Ph.D. March 25, 2020)

Sustaining Jewish life online:

**Effectiveness, reach**
- Can we create a meaningful Pesach experience independent of people? Can we host our friends, and if so, how many friends should we be hosting? Can we still have deep, all-night conversations when bound by the rules of social distancing? We always wanted the Pesach seder to be a safe space; how can we make this one safe on a whole new level? (Rebecca Blady, March 16, 2020)
- In a matter of weeks, the Coronavirus has brought Jewish education around the world to go online. The amount, quality and diversity of content could have a profound, long-lasting positive impact on the menu of options for Jewish education, for all ages in all geographies. ... By harnessing the momentum of distance learning, the cost of Jewish education could be significantly lowered. (Gidi Grinstein and Eran Shayshon, April 24, 2020)

All quotes from https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/
How do social scientist respond to pandemic?

We conduct surveys

**Brandeis CMJS surveys of 10 Jewish communities, May to July 2020**
- ~15,000 respondents
- Listed samples from 10 federated communities across the United States
- [https://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/research/resilient-communities/index.html](https://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/research/resilient-communities/index.html)
  https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-78706-6_3

**Orthodox Union (OU) COVID-19 Community Portrait Study. 3 waves: June/July, August, Oct 2020**
- 11 Orthodox synagogues
- 1759 responses from 942 individuals

**UJA/Federation of New York study of COVID impact, Feb-April 2021**
- 4403 respondents
- [https://jewishdatany.ujafedny.org/data-tool](https://jewishdatany.ujafedny.org/data-tool)
Health and financial well-being
Who is struggling financially?

11% of households “could not make ends meet” or “just managed to make ends meet”

- One-quarter older adults (age 75+, retired)
- 32% under 50
- 4 out of 10 had grad degree
- 4 out of 10 employed full time

Pre-pandemic characteristics of those who were struggling financially
Growing Financial DIVIDE:
Financial situation worsened most for those struggling before pandemic

Financial hardships
- Financial situation worsened
- Worried about basic living expenses
- Lost job/furloughed

Pre-pandemic financial situation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Struggling</th>
<th>Enough money</th>
<th>A little extra money</th>
<th>Well-off</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>61%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Greater emotional difficulties for younger respondents who were struggling financially prior to the pandemic

Emotional difficulties: Emotional or mental difficulties hurt ability to live day-to-day life in past week sometimes, often, or all the time
Not coping well: Coping not at all or not too well
Needed help: Needed help accessing mental health services

![Bar chart showing emotional difficulties, loneliness, not coping well, and needed help by respondent age categories (18-34, 35-49, 50-64, 65-74, 75+).]
...Despite having stronger social networks

In contact with others: In contact with family and friends not living with you sometimes or often in past week
Adequate support network: Fair number or a lot of people you can rely on

Respondent age of those struggling financially prior to the pandemic

- In contact with others: 93% in 18-34, 94% in 35-49, 95% in 50-64, 95% in 65-74, 95% in 75+
- Adequate support network: 54% in 18-34, 45% in 35-49, 40% in 50-64, 31% in 65-74, 24% in 75+
Mental health crisis due to isolation

“Staying home without direct human contact for a very long period of time has been very rough, even with heavy use of electronic and phone communication ... “

“Personally, the hardest impact has been how lonely I am. I am used to spending time with lots of friends and family and being completely alone is really difficult for me.”

“Sense of isolation; inability to visit and celebrate with family; frustration (and anger) with federal and state governments' response to the crisis.”
Well-being of children

- Although most parents were coping well, and most parents thought their children were coping well..
- Most parents were somewhat or very concerned about their children’s emotional and social well-being due to disruptions caused by the pandemic

Parental concern regarding child’s emotional and social well-being

- **Not at all concerned**
- **Not too**
- **Somewhat**
- **Very concerned**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Not at all concerned</th>
<th>Not too</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Very concerned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-12 grades</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Jewish institutions
One-third of Jewish adults were not contacted by a Jewish organization in first months of crisis

- All respondents were on Federation list and known to community
- Respondents may have considered only personal messages as contacts

Types of contact with Jewish organizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Contact</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Invite to volunteer</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer of assistance</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask for donation</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask how you were doing</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invite to program</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any type of contact</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Most members thought congregations responded well

- Fewer than 5% anticipated leaving for nonfinancial reasons
- Higher ratings among those who were in contact with congregation

### Rating of congregation response to crisis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Contact</th>
<th>Poor / Just fair</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Don't know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All members</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance at services prior to crisis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasionally or less</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact with congregation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No contact</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Jewish life
Online Jewish life: Opportunities and challenges

“I have not traditionally been able to attend weekly services at my synagogue because they start too early. However, now we all make it a priority to end our work/school activities by 5:00 on Friday, log into services, and spend that time together as a family.”

“We have had a weekly Zoom "meeting" to celebrate Shabbat every Friday evening since mid-March. It includes our children, grandchildren and extended family. We've talked about continuing the new tradition after social isolation ends.”

“The biggest personal impact [of the pandemic] is isolation. It has confirmed for me that being with and around people is indispensable. This cannot be overcome with technology.”
Online Jewish life: Who participates?

Online Jewish life primarily appealed to those who were most engaged before.

Online program participation in past month

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-pandemic program participation</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Less than monthly</th>
<th>Monthly or more</th>
<th>Weekly or more</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online program participation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Still less than monthly</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Feelings of closeness to God lowered levels of depression and anxiety, lessened perceived stress, and decreased loneliness for many Orthodox Jewish adults.

I am incredibly grateful and feel a strong sense of bracha. This all has hit the ‘reset’ button on my relationship with Hashem...creating a regrounding and has made my sense of Hashem and His presence with me more palpable and strong.

It has enhanced my belief that Hashem is in charge -- He runs the world, and can effect changes almost instantly.

It hasn't impacted my thinking about God at all. It has only made me pray for the health of my loved ones more consciously.
Future of online Jewish life
In 2020, over 85% of frequent users of online Jewish life expect to continue to participate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of online activity</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>4% 9%</td>
<td>43% 44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>10% 18%</td>
<td>54% 18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely</td>
<td>25% 29%</td>
<td>41% 5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Expect to continue to use online resources

Somewhat disagree

Completely disagree

Somewhat agree

Completely agree
What lies ahead?

Pew Research Center (Not Jewish), March 2022

Religious service attendance …all US adults who attended monthly pre-pandemic

Either, 88%
Opportunities and challenges: Takeaways

After two years, can we expect to return to status quo?

**Mental Health**
Renewed attention to mental health needs, particularly among young adults and children
- National trend, not limited to Jewish community
- Loneliness as a community priority

**Financial needs**
Renewed attention to economic divide between haves and have-nots in Jewish community
Struggling includes not only the traditional “poor,” but many working, highly educated families
Will there be further difficulties as government aid declines?

**Jewish life**
Jewish organizations should focus on outreach and personal connections
Online Jewish life is complement, not substitute, for in-person Jewish life
- Focus on hybrid models (example, remote lecture with in-person discussion groups)

Just as the beginning of the pandemic required thoughtful responses from Jewish organizations, so too will this post-pandemic transition present new opportunities and challenges.