

**INTERIM JUDAISM: A REFLECTION ON THE
EVE OF THE NEW YEAR 5781
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These months of quarantine and social distance have challenged us as synagogues and communities to find new ways of giving meaning to Jewish life and experience. We have been compelled to reconsider the meanings of Judaism and Jewishness.

Professor Jacob Neusner once wrote: "Jewishness refers to the conglomeration of those traits which....are regarded as peculiarly and characteristically Jewish; but those traits may have little, if anything to do with the Judaic tradition. Judaism consists of the religious tradition enshrined in the holy books, expressed in the holy words, deeds, ways of living, principles of faith."

The experience of Judaism in quarantine observed from our sofas and living rooms, has necessitated that we engage more intentionally, more honestly. The solitude of virtual Judaism makes us yearn for community, but it also elicits a more thoughtful encounter with the core values and ideals of our faith and tradition. So, during this uncommon time — and beyond — do we practice Jewishness or Judaism?

I think of Jewishness as a task, a "way of doing"; of Judaism, as an art, a "way of being". Judaism is the soul; Jewishness the body. Jewishness is often lived vicariously; you do it occasionally; by invitation, for special occasions. You pay for your seats and might not even show up. Rabbi Harold Schulweiss, once referred to this as "alimony Judaism" - you are prepared to pay for it, but not to live with it. Judaism, on the other hand is an owned identity, part of one's personal and familial rhythm. It is not transactional, but existential.

For some, Jewishness is a "spectator" sport. But Judaism is an "amateur" sport. The word amateur comes from the root for "love": amator (Latin). To be an amateur means to do something for the love of it, rather than for reward or compensation. The ancient rabbis taught – "Don't be like those who serve the master in order to receive a recompense. Be rather like those who serve without expectation of reward" (Pirkei Avot).

Sometimes people use the term "cultural" as a synonym for "secular" – as in "I'm not religious; I'm a cultural Jew." But being a "cultural Jew" is not about lox and bagels, no matter how thick the shmeer. It is not about "matzah ball soup" – that won't float! Being a cultural Jew means being "Judaically cultured." It is about Hebrew literacy, about awareness and engagement, Jewish history, literature and philosophy, music and the arts. That too is "Judaism."

The religious philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead said that religion is what "a man does with his solitariness". How is Judaism doing in our solitariness?

Judaism is preeminently a communal religion. We need a minyan, a quorum of prayer. "We are One!", we proudly proclaim. What happens to that sense of community during quarantine? How do we go about experiencing, expressing, and feeling who we are in the

context of the social distancing that has come to define our existence during the last six months, this period which I'll call "Interim" Judaism.

I have found that participating in B'nai and B'not Mitzvah within the intimate circle of families, yet surrounded by the virtual support of community, has allowed parents and children to focus more on the significance and meaning of the ceremony, rather than on the frills of the celebration. There has been greater attention to Judaism than to Jewishness. Is it sustainable?

Social distancing has forced synagogues and other religious congregations to rethink and retool. Accustomed to coming together in assembly, congregations have learned to promote a sense of community from our separate living, dining and family rooms, from our patios and backyards. This has been of immeasurable value to those who for reasons of health, age or otherwise are unable to physically attend services and events.

How will these experiences serve us once the pandemic is over? Will the increased interest and participation in services and programs through Zoom and Livestream during these times of quarantine result in the revitalization or weakening of congregational life once we are able to return to previous social patterns. What will Judaism look like once we emerge from this "Interim" period to the full throttle of post-quarantine Judaism?

Will the comfort of experiencing Judaism from your own private space lead to increased expectations of privatized and customized religion? Even as we call on Amazon to deliver our orders to our front door, will we expect the synagogue to deliver services and programs to our living rooms. Judaism, a click away!

Even as we yearn for a full return to health and safety, let us not ignore the lessons of quarantine nor fail to respond to the challenges of reintegration. We do not know how long this "Interim" Judaism will last. But it is important to think about what will it be like at the end of the crisis.

We do know that historically Judaism has been redefined and reinvented in the aftermath of external challenges: the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in the first century gave way to the synagogue as the core communal institution of Judaism; the Inquisition and medieval persecutions birthed poetry, philosophy and kabbalah; the Enlightenment shaped modern Judaism under the freedom and challenges of democracy; antisemitism and the Holocaust gave way to the fulfillment of the Zionist hope and the State of Israel.

Though we cannot foresee the future of Judaism or the contours of post-quarantine Jewishness, we can all, rabbis and congregants, professionals and lay Jews, help to shape its form, define its ingredients, incorporate and adapt what worked during quarantine into ongoing synagogue practices and values that will honor Judaism and give positive expression to our Jewishness.

During the last seven months our building has been closed for public worship, but the congregation, has remained open and vibrant. We have succeeded at being a synagogue without walls that yearns for your return. We are proud to bring Beth-El Zedeck to you, but we can't wait until you can bring yourself to Beth-El Zedeck.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel tells the story of a young man who wanted to become a blacksmith. So he became an apprentice to a master blacksmith. He perfected all the necessary skills and techniques of the trade: how to hold the tongs, how to lift the sledge, how to smite the anvil, even how to blow the fire with the bellows.

When he finished his apprenticeship, he was honored to be chosen to work at the smithery of the royal palace. However, the young man's delight soon came to an end, when he realized that he knew all the skills, but had failed to learn how to kindle a spark. All his knowledge and training in handling the tools were of no avail.

And so it is with many of us. If we have not learned or transmitted the joy of how to kindle the spark, Judaism and Jewishness will not endure. After this interim period of Zoom and Livestream, may we remember not just how to turn on the computer, but how to kindle the spark and nurture the passion — in a new and redefined way — to keep Judaism, body and soul, bright and alive.