THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY IN THE CORONAVIRUS EPIDEMIC

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According to the statistics, the essence of Judaism is community. Time and again, when I look at the question of what works in Jewish education, or what is most powerful in Jewish life, the numbers point consistently to the essential nature of connectivity – of being in relationship with other Jews. And the more regular, the more genuine and the more immersive those connections, the better.

Why? Because you can’t really do Judaism alone. It’s not a solitary pursuit. We need a minyan for key elements of Jewish life and prayer – the repetition of the amidah with kedusha, the reading of the Torah and Haftarah, the recitation of the kaddish, the sheva brachot at wedding ceremonies, all require one. We learn quickly in Judaism that if we’re not surrounded by others, something is missing; something’s not quite right.

So the notion that those connections cannot happen due to the coronavirus epidemic – or at least that they are severely restricted – is shaking the Jewish community to its core. It’s not simply that we miss the face-to-face interactions with others that communal activities allow, or that we feel disappointed that certain activities we were looking forward to will now not happen, or even that solitude may well take a toll on our mental health. It’s that Judaism itself is being curtailed – Judaism, and everything about how it functions and operates, is being undermined.

Tremendous efforts are being made to minimise the damage. Rabbis are davening online to allow others to watch and accompany them; educational and cultural organisations are putting content online to allow more peoples to access them and connect; numerous initiatives are being established to help provide care for the most vulnerable. They are all wonderful. But none of them truly bring people together as Judaism intended; none of them can ultimately overcome the fundamental power of being in direct physical contact with others, of truly being together.

And the fact is we don’t know how long this will last. The most optimistic projections are twelve weeks; the more pessimistic ones suggest six months, with further waves of outbreaks – and presumably isolation – to follow. Either way, it’s a long time to be out of direct contact with normative Jewish communal life.

Viewed through a sociological lens, one of the things that powers Jewish life, indeed perhaps its strongest motor of all, is what Maimonides described as hergel, or habituation. In many respects, Judaism is a habit – it is something we all do over and again, albeit with very different degrees of regularity, in part because we are simply in the habit of doing so. We do it because that’s what we do.

But habits are much easier to break than build. Indeed, according to one major study of social psychology from a team at UCL, it takes people anything from 18 to 254 days to create a habit, and 66 days on average. So if we get out of the habit of going to shul or any other communal activity – which we will under these circumstances – we cannot assume that the instinct to go will simply return at the end of this. It will need to be rebuilt. My concern is that when this is all over we will see a short-term
spike in participation fuelled by the relief of being able to return to normal life, followed by a significant slump.

I am equally concerned that the Jewish community will be trying to respond to the challenges with fewer human and financial resources. Our community organisations, all of which are registered charities, will be hit hard by this crisis – job cuts, closures, drops in income and the value of investment portfolios, with all their resultant effects, are inevitable.

Not so long ago, people spoke of Jeremy Corbyn being an existential threat to our community. Perhaps he was. But in the case of coronavirus, there is arguably a stronger case for using this type of language. We are facing a threat that could damage the very existence of our community as we know it, or certainly key parts of it.

Thus the watchword of this period must be ‘connect.’ Connect at all costs, with everyone and anyone, within and across the Jewish community, with habitual regularity. Bend halacha as far as it can possibly be bent to support this principle. Right now, its spirit matters so much more than its letter. Work for one goal only: maintain the critical links that hold community together.

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