



## **THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE LOCAL AND GLOBAL JEWISH COMMUNITIES**

**I**solation, quarantine, and shul shutdowns have disturbed the very fabric of the Jewish community model that we once held so dearly. In ancient times, to be excommunicated or shunned from one's community was to be removed from interacting with another soul. The *metzora*, one who was struck with the skin disease, *tzaraat*, is the paradigm of isolation in the Torah.

כָּל יָמֵי אֲשֶׁר הִנָּגַע בּוֹ יִטְמָא טְמֵא הוּא בְּדָד  
יֵשֵׁב מֵחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה מוֹשְׁבֹו.

*He shall be unclean as long as the disease is on him. Being unclean, he shall dwell apart; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.*

**Vayikra 13:46**

The verse clearly notes that one must leave the camp entirely. Without further study it seems obvious that a Zoom or a FaceTime call with a *metzora* would be forbidden because the quarantine of the *metzora* is not as much about a physical infection, like COVID, but rather a spiritual one that could easily be transmitted even virtually.

COVID, in distinction from the *metzora*, has forced us to physically distance ourselves from one another, yet spiritually we have remained connected through technology. As our communities have undergone our own quarantines, we have simultaneously experienced the

expansion of our global community, and in some sense, the dismantling of our local ones. I certainly do not mean to discount the endless hours of work that community leaders have put in to keep their communities together in these difficult times. Rather, I speak from personal and shared experiences that maintaining a sense of community during the pandemic has been an uphill battle for every rabbi, educator, and administrator, who have been tirelessly working around the clock. Despite our best efforts, it is an unfortunate, yet, real fact, that since our shuls have not been able to gather in our usual manner, there has been an inevitable breakdown in

the communal structure as we have previously known it.

In contradistinction, while communities on a micro scale have encountered difficulties in keeping everyone connected, on a macro level, organizations and select, sought-after speakers have experienced an unprecedented growth of their own virtual communities. I have the esteemed privilege of running community programming for Yeshiva University and I have witnessed first-hand how our programs as well as those from other similar organizations have grown and far surpassed their previous attendance records.

Naturally, there was always a certain geographic limitation to every institution's reach. While our incredible Yeshiva serves as a bastion for Torah on a global level, never before has there been such a systematic opportunity to invite the roshei yeshiva, teachers and scholars of these hallowed walls into the living room of anyone from Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, and Israel concurrently. As a concrete example, one regular program under my auspices that has been virtual since the onset of the pandemic has multiplied tenfold. Other programs that have previously reached hundreds now reach thousands. Our programs have always strived to innovate and inspire. That has not changed. What has, is the capability of individuals across the globe to join and access these programs from the comfort of their living rooms.

Coveted, "celebrity" speakers, who have naturally been bound previously by their geographic constraints, have experienced similar growth. These speakers, many of whom are closely followed on YUTorah.org,

have begun welcoming attendees to their live Zoom shiurim from all over the world. Educators who once had only a handful of attendees at their live classes can now easily reach many more of their fans with a simple click of a button. While in the past we might have been limited by the invisible walls surrounding our communities, our present reality of physical isolation has ironically expanded our ability to learn with nearly any educator, anywhere and at any time.

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With many classes and programs both locally and globally taking place on a computer screen there has been "virtually" no difference between attending a Zoom class hosted by a shul and attending a nationally run (and acclaimed) program. This has shifted the community experience for many and has inevitably led to lower attendance in local community-based programs. In turn, some shuls have reduced the number of programs and classes they run due to waning interest from those previously committed, including some who may have simply

shown up for the social opportunity, which no longer exists.

Due to this major shift in how we learn Torah and experience community this should cause us to ponder: what will our post-COVID communities look like? Will we once again be confined by our geographic walls or will our borders remain open? Will Zoom programming cease to exist on a national level or will global enterprises continue to impact the way we think about our local communities? These questions maintain significant relevance as we have now begun to feel the approach of a post-pandemic world.

To answer this question, we turn to the topic of the *korbon Pesach*. The sacrificial lamb that was brought on the eve of Pesach in Temple times is unique in that it possesses many qualities unlike any other sacrifice in the Torah.

The Mishna in *Pesachim* notes a significant distinction between this sacrifice and others:

אין שוחטין את הפסח על היחיד — דברי רבי יהודה, ורבי יוסי מתיר. ואפילו חבורה של מאה שאינן יכולין לאכול כזית — אין שוחטין עליהן.

*We do not slaughter the Paschal lamb on behalf of an individual, only for a group of people; this is the statement of Rabbi Yehuda. And Rabbi Yossi permits it. And even if there is a group of one hundred who together are unable to eat an olive's volume of it, we do not slaughter on their behalf.*

### **Pesachim 91a**

There are two takeaways from this Mishna: 1) An individual (at least according to one opinion) is not allowed to bring the *korbon Pesach* by himself and 2) Inherent within the commandment of bringing the

*korbon Pesach* is that participants must partake of the sacrifice. If they do not plan to eat it, presumably together, then they may not even sacrifice it altogether. The implication of this Mishna is that the *korbon Pesach* is meant to be enjoyed as a meal with a larger group. The imperative is so great that it literally may not be fulfilled without one.

The source for this Mishna is found in the introductory description of this commandment in the Torah:

דַּבְּרוּ אֶל כָּל עֵדוּת יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר בְּעֶשֶׂר לַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה וְיִקְחוּ לָהֶם אִישׁ שֵׂה לְבַיִת אָבֹתָ שְׂה לְבַיִת. *Speak to the whole community of Israel and say that on the tenth of this month each of them shall take a lamb to a family, a lamb to a household.*

**Shemot 12:3**

The Mishna understands that this extensive focus on “family” and “household” implies that this is not a sacrifice that can be enjoyed by one person but rather demands a group. Generally, there are two types of sacrifices: *korbon yachid* — the individual’s sacrifice — and *korbon tzibbur* — the national sacrifice. The *korbon Pesach* appears to be a hybrid of these two as the *korbon chaburah* — the group or community sacrifice.

Rabbi Soloveitchik zt”l elaborates on this idea further:

*Interestingly, the symbol of redemption in the Torah is the korban Pesach, the paschal offering, which is a very strange sacrifice. The concept of chavurah, community, is completely nonexistent in regard to other*

*offerings: shelamim, chatas, olah, and asham ... The Pesach differs from all other sacrifices because it is a symbol of cherus, freedom. The Torah calls the paschal lamb a lamb for each parental home, a lamb for each household because freedom expresses itself in the realm of bayis, of community, of being together. Bayis is a new category which was revealed to the Jews as they gained their freedom.<sup>1</sup>*

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch zt”l remarks further that:

*... God wanted to create ... not an “ecclesiastical congregation” to worship Him, but a people, a nation, a society. From this redemption must emerge a state whose whole social existence is to be rooted in God, built by Him, founded upon Him, fashioned by Him, and dedicated to Him. And it was with the korbon Pesach that God laid the foundation stone of this edifice.<sup>2</sup>*

To boldly combine the descriptions given by these great sages, we conclude our understanding with the following formulation: The *korbon Pesach* is a sacrifice that is uniquely suited to establish and reestablish our unified nationhood year in and year out. Our national unity is achieved by the gathering of smaller sub-communities enjoying a single meal together. To translate this into modern day terms, we achieve national unity when each individual community around the globe can achieve its own sense of communal pride and camaraderie. Perhaps, the community Seder that typically takes place in

many shuls around the country is a remnant of what once was in the days of our Temple and the *korbon Pesach*.

With this, we now have a more profound understanding of the critical value of the individual communities that make up our larger global Jewish network. National Jewish unity is a value that is achieved on the micro level with individual communities gathering for meals, classes, and programs in their own homes, social halls and shuls. Indeed, we value the international interconnectivity and community, but not as a replacement for our local congregations and gatherings.

The world of COVID, in many ways, has created a world of *bidieved*, less than ideal situations and circumstances. We are not meant to be sustained through a virtual community but rather by an in-person one. We have endless appreciation and gratitude to the Almighty that He has given us the alternative of virtual programming and nationally-based platforms by which so many have remained connected in these unprecedented times. Yet, we must never forget that these are not replacements for what once was, but rather temporary measures to keep us “together” in some form while awaiting our return to our local community structures.

I believe that the global virtual community enterprise that has been developed during these times will continue to flourish in a post-COVID world but always



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as a secondary measure, with our primary communities defined by our geographic boundaries.

The greatest proof to this is the *metzora*. The *metzora* experiences exile and isolation but is never meant to live like this permanently. He is, rather, told to bide his time, regain confidence in the people whom he betrayed, and once again rejoin the community. Rabbi David Fohrman notes numerous textual and practical parallels between these two sacrificial paradigms. Upon deeper reflection of the comparison between the *korbon Pesach* performed in Egypt (Shemot, chapter 12) and the *korbon metzora* (Vayikra, chapter 14), there seems to be an inextricable conceptual link between these two seemingly unrelated sacrifices.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, even the Ramban makes this comparison in his comments on the *metzora*:

והנה המצורע ותורת הבית המנוגע וטומאת  
... המת קרובים והנה הם כדמות פסח מצרים...  
*And behold the metzora, all of  
the principles of the house that is  
afflicted and impurity from the dead  
are connected and behold there is a  
similarity to the korbon Pesach in  
Egypt...*

The nexus between the two sacrifices becomes clear when we note that each of them serves as a necessary component to enable the community to flourish. Just as the *metzora* leaves exile and rejoins his congregation by way of his sacrifice, the Jewish nation achieves a sense of unity by way of the development of individual micro *chaburot* surrounding the *korbon Pesach*. The isolated *metzora* and the Jewish nation without the *korban Pesach* could only survive temporarily in these less than ideal states. The Jewish people need the *korbon Pesach* to fulfill our nationhood and the *metzora* needs to leave exile and rejoin his nation in order to truly thrive. Ultimately, through the strengthening of the micro communities the macro, global Jewish community can continue to grow and blossom as well.

There is so much that is unknown about what lies ahead for us in a post-COVID world. Nonetheless, I remain optimistic that our local communities will once again join together and thrive on the individualized personal connections that can only be made at a shul kiddush and at an in-person class, rather than over Zoom. We will

continue to use Zoom as a platform to include those from near and far, but that will remain secondary to the shuls and community centers just down the block.

May Hashem redeem us from our physical and spiritual exiles, and may He reunite our communities so that we may bring the *korbon Pesach* once again this year in Jerusalem.

## Endnotes

1. *Festival of Freedom*, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, page 43.
2. *The Hirsch Chumash*, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Shemot 12:3, Page 167.
3. See [www.Alephbeta.org](http://www.Alephbeta.org), "The Tzaraat Purification Ritual: What Does It Mean?" and "What Does The Passover Sacrifice Teach Us About The Metzora?"

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