

Pastoral Strategies for Leading Through Change

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Please note that this is not an official responsum of the CJLS.

Rabbis and lay leaders face significant challenges in managing congregational expectations and transforming disappointment and potential disaffection into an inspiring and purposeful journey of communal transformation through the coming High Holy Days and beyond. Below are several strategies for managing and leading through the changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Acknowledge the Sense of Loss for What is Missing:

All change generates some grief, for what was lost, for what is missing. The power of being physically together in large numbers as a community, the expectations of seeing and being seen, of shaking hands and kissing or hugging each other in greetings, of schmoozing during and after services, is so much a part of the High Holy Day experience. It is important for pastoral leaders to name what will be missed, acknowledge that sense of loss and help the congregation navigate the journey between what was and what will be by recounting what was and explaining what will be. It is crucial to utilize every form of communication from clergy, educators, and lay leaders, including, but not limited to, virtual town halls, electronic or snail mail letters to the congregation, sermons, all rabbinic opportunities to discuss with the Board and congregation the halakhah and values upon which these decisions to limit services are based.

Rabbis and lay leaders can use all the platforms available to them to set a congregational tone of purpose: *hesed* (compassion), *rahmanut* (mercy), *tzedek* (righteousness), mutual respect (*derekh eretz*) as well as interpersonal caring, cooperation, and patience, and the willingness to listen to each other within the congregational community.

Liturgical Sensitivity

One of the most emotionally powerful moments in our High Holy Day services is when we recite the *Unetanatokef* prayer during the Musaf Amidah and exclaim: “Who shall live and who shall die” and then list the many ways people could die in the coming year, including who by plague. This year these words will be particularly poignant and perhaps chillingly prescient, even when we take this prayer metaphorically. Clergy must be particularly sensitive to the way our liturgy sounds amidst the pandemic.

Teach Jewish Values in the Context of Decision Making:

One of the most important roles rabbis hold within our communities is to teach Jewish values as the guide for communal and individual action and decision making.

For Jews, *pikkuaḥ nefesh* (“saving a life”) and *sakkanat nefeshot* (“protecting life”) are “prime directives” of Jewish law: the preservation of human life overrides virtually any other religious rule or duty. As Rabbi Elliot Dorff, one of the leading bio-ethicists of our day, puts it, in his book *Matters of Life and Death*, “Indeed, Jewish law views endangering one’s health as worse than violating a ritual prohibition.” Endangering others’ lives and health is even worse than endangering one’s own life and health (b. Baba Metzia 62a). That is the situation in which we find ourselves.

Share the Compromises In Halakhic Practice You Make to Meet Congregant Needs in This Emergency:

Clergy may find their personal level of halakhic observance compromised in the desire to minister to their congregations through virtual means, even given the leniencies approved for the COVID-19 emergency by the CJLS. To serve the religious needs of others, clergy may decide, however ambivalently, to do certain actions, even if it violates their personal standards of observance. The mixed feelings of clergy in making decisions for their community are real. Congregants may have no idea of the religious challenges clergy face in serving congregational needs through emergency technological solutions. It behooves the clergy to thoughtfully share with lay leaders and perhaps the congregation as a whole their concerns about technology use, explain how they navigate conflicting calls of conscience and unexpected hiccups as a way of sensitizing our people to the challenges of religious leadership, and educating them about the somewhat complicated halakhic and ethical issues in play as clergy balance responsibilities in leading them through these difficult times.

Acknowledge How These Times Will Change Us and How They Won’t:

By necessity, many congregational communities are learning how to use technology, and integrating technology into their programming, in ways they never contemplated. There are some advantages to these technologies, notably allowing homebound individuals to access congregational services. There are fears that this crisis will escalate a desire for virtual connection, particularly among a generation that already relies on technology for so much of its social connections.

That said, Sabbath and holiday services are not just about liturgy but about community. We trust that the pandemic in which we now find ourselves will be seen, with hindsight, as a situation in which we had to “make do” but not how we want to continue to live our

lives. Changes in working conditions at the office, including more remote work, may result from this abnormal period. Synagogues certainly will need to explore how to make the best use of virtual access to services and classes on a greater scale than before. But this does not mark the eclipse of importance of brick and mortar synagogues and in-person congregational communities. Particularly when it finally becomes safe to gather again without restrictions, people will yearn to come back together as a community. Having the option of livestreaming for homebound people and others will be an important consideration for a community. It does mean that the main mode of operation in the future will again be community gathering together in one location for services, study, programs and events.

Prioritize Other Ways to Stay Connected:

If rabbis keep reaching out to their individual members in these difficult times, and if lay leaders reach out to individual members, that, too will, keep people connected to the shul community, remind them what they are missing by having to stay home, and keep alive their desire to reconvene in a common space as soon as it is safe to do so.

There is so much to do that is filling our days. Many of us are busier than we have ever been. Yet, it is these kinds of individual clergy-member and leadership-member connections that are critical to maintaining the kind of community we hope to reconvene when this pandemic passes.

As Jews, we believe we sanctify God's Name in the world when we act as good citizens and do the best we can not only for our own congregants, but for our neighbors as well. We are all our brothers' and sisters' keepers. Rabbis, hazzanim, lay leaders, and communities face difficult choices in this period of pandemic, and they must work together and be supportive of one another in the decision-making process and in carrying the decisions they have made together. When the time comes to look back to the actions we took during these difficult times, may we be proud of we have exemplified Torah.