

Bringing People Together When Apart

Rabbi David J Fine, PhD

Every religious leader in the world has had to struggle with the challenge of bringing people together while keeping them apart. We have had to learn how to lead worship services over a Zoom platform with asynchronous singing and unwanted background noise. We have had to serve grieving families who were prevented from burying their loved ones in person, and to officiate at small gatherings of five people in a cemetery when there would usually have been a hundred or more bidding farewell. The pastoral work of a rabbi in New Jersey, what was a “hot zone” of the covid-19 pandemic in April, felt like serving in front-line conditions. I was burying two to three people a day and would change in and out of my black suit before entering our house so as not to bring the virus into contact with my family. There was at the time a debate among rabbis over whether we should officiate at funeral and burial services in-person, especially after the New York Board of Rabbis recommended that rabbis serve families through remote connection. I continued to do funerals in person. Sometimes there was no family at all, just me and the casket. I sometimes connected with the family over my mobile phone, sometimes on Zoom, so they could watch as I said the prayers and honored their lost relative with the words, sounds and motions of our sacred tradition. I remain grateful for the opportunity to bring consolation where it has been needed.

Some of our synagogues are starting to re-open while others are remaining closed as we continue to weather the crisis. As we start to gather together again, we have to learn how to join together in prayer without the shaking of hands, without the embrace, without joyous singing. If we do sing, we are told, we must keep such to a murmur, a quiet melody, a restrained expression of the spirit. This will be the hardest challenge. We have been trained to encourage people to open their souls in worship and sing from the heart. Now my job will be to maintain restraint, to contain, to soften. Rather than the sound of voices rising up, we are put into the role of silencers, all for the sake of health, of life.

In a sense, we as rabbis, as well as pastors and ministers, are well trained for this challenge. We went to seminary to learn how to reach people across vast distances, to reconnect them with the joy of tradition, the order of ritual and the call of the Divine. Covid-19 has made plain the task that has faced us since the onset of modernity. How can we help our people answer God’s call through distance and separation? And while we have lost somewhat the tool of expression through song, we are also blessed with an opportunity to break through the silence that was always there, to better hear each other, and to hear God’s voice through the silence. The still small voice.

At the same time, we also hear the call to rise up and protest amidst the Black Lives Matter movement. The building restlessness of quarantine combined with centuries of silence in the face of overt racism, called forth a broad spectrum of people from their homes to gather together and be heard. What has marked our protest gatherings is the combination of concern for both the victims of racism and the safety of those protesting themselves. Facing real danger, whether it be an invisible virus or by force of arms directed against the people they are meant to defend, the call to be heard was answered. Both dangers, from a virus and from government force, are unjust. But both are fixable with time, determination, and faith in humanity.

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