

## **FAITH after / during Pandemic**

Catholic Jewish Women's Dialogue Manhattan Beach, California

Rabbi Karen L Fox, LMFT

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Let me be frank, my faith has been challenged in these pandemic times. I was asked to respond to this question as a keynote speaker at the Los Angeles Catholic-Jewish Women's Dialogue in early May 2022. I was just as happy ignoring those faith questions, except I'd agreed to speak with another religious tradition. So, yes, my faith has been challenged by the pandemic and I frame that experience in different ways than traditionally observant Catholics and Jews.

My faith has been challenged at least in these ways: we moved from our home of 38 years, due to burglary; a dear friend and teaching colleague died due to Covid-19; we spend 18 months away from precious children and grandchildren—18 months without their touch, their laughter, their song. And that is only my story.

How has YOUR faith been affected by this world-wide Pandemic? Just think back to early days—Close your eyes and remember that first month....First quarter? First Holiday? First significant birthday? First child's birthday? A Grandchild's birth? An isolated Loved one's death and computer based funeral?

We have all been living through trauma, which is the response to deeply distressing and disturbing events. Trauma diminishes the sense of self and ability to feel a full range of emotion and experience. It impacts and overwhelms the ability to manage daily activities, in work and family life. Perhaps you felt Trauma Fatigue over the 30 months—that foggy brain, that lagging sleepiness, the loneliness; the wondering if and when; the asking "who will live and who will die", as written in our Jewish High Holy Day liturgy.<sup>1</sup> Note that this anxiety remains for parents of children still unvaccinated; my children experience this continued stress with little ones under 5.

Covid required new situations: we were forced to remain inside for long periods of time. People experienced discomfort, and fear of contagion, which led to economic loss, reduction of meaningful interactions, tremendous social isolation and additional conflicts within the home. The effects of living under these conditions can be experienced as a loss of one's identity in the larger world. Many people felt the loss of professional and personal connections and the reduction of communal, political, and cultural trust. Many synagogue, church and mosque members experienced the loss of local and sacred congregational community. For the religiously observant, the loss of communal spirituality of daily and weekly prayer was isolating and unnerving.

In addition, many people felt tremendous fear and anxiety concerning disease, disaster and death. With the numbers of people seriously ill and the subsequent deaths, funeral practices

(end of life rituals, in person funerals, shiva and other rites) were marked **alone**. Those who experienced profound loss could not be embraced by the living. This created more grief.

The Feelings of helplessness, the diminished sense of self; the numbness, the fight or flight responses, led to exhaustion and depletion which we understand as PTSD – post-traumatic stress disorder. <sup>ii</sup> Some people responded by self-medicating to buffer the PTSD after-effects through drug and alcohol abuse, impulse shopping, domestic violence or a feeling of “brain fog”. Some people responded creatively or artistically or physically, perhaps by walking more miles than ever before in life. The poet Anne Lamott captures the experience of trauma in this way:<sup>iii</sup>—“*my mind is a bad neighborhood that I never want to go alone in.....*” That’s the backdrop of our lives over the last 2.5 years; now let’s get to the question of faith posed by the Catholic-Jewish Women’s Dialogue.

#### **What have we learned about faith during trying times from ancient and contemporary scholars?**

Our **biblical texts** acknowledge loss of faith as God’s absence and our response as longing for God’s active presence. We hear this cry in Psalm 13 <sup>iv</sup>

How long, o God? Will you ignore me forever?  
How long will I have cares on my mind, grief in my heart all day? ...  
Look at me and answer me Lord my God.  
Restore the luster to my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death.  
I trust in your embracing kindness, your *Hesed*.

Psalm 118 is chanted on the pilgrimage festivals, Sukkot, Pesach and Shavuot and also on new months. In it the one who prays notes that God expanded possibilities for the person in pain. God heard the call, eased the fear, soothed the loneliness. Those reveal aspects of God’s indwelling presence, God’s imminence. Those qualities are needed as a response to pandemic but were first enumerated in the Exodus, the desert wandering and the entering of the new land.

In my distress, my constraint, I called to God;  
God answered my call by opening the passages, expanding the space, providing possibility.  
God is with me, I need not fear.  
What can mere mortals do to me?  
With God at my side, I will see the fall of my enemies.  
Better to trust in God than trust in human beings.  
Better to depend on God than depend on the powerful. <sup>v</sup>

In the Pirke Avot- The Ethics of the Sages, a selection of 2<sup>nd</sup> century Mishneh, the rabbis ask if God’s presence will only be recognized in public, that is, in the core group of ten, the

minyan. This text asserts God's presence even with one who studies Torah in isolation, validates that the solitary human experiences God's indwelling presence.

Rabbi Chalafta b Dosa of Kfar Channah said: When ten sit together and study Torah, the Sh'chinah dwells among them...as it is said in Psalm 82:1 "God stands in the Divine congregation." <sup>vi</sup>How do we know this applies even to five?". He has established his hand upon the earth" (Amos 9:6); .....How do we know even one? "In every single place where My Name is mentioned I will come to you and bless you." <sup>vii</sup>

The second century rabbis continue the argument and resolve it by linking it back to that Exodus 20:21 proof text "In every single place where My Name is mentioned", reminding us that even if one person studies Torah alone, God emerges. These teachings reenforce the concept that religious practice has always been a significant method to cope with distress, trauma and disaster. The Biblical writers captured the desires for God's presence, whether in a core community of ten or when standing alone. These ancient teachings have been integrated into study and liturgical texts that are still utilized today.

### Effects of Religious Practice

Religious practices carry impact. Many traditions encourage people to reframe events through a positive lens. For example, some see tragedy as *opportunity* to grown closer to the higher power or improve personal and social-cultural life. Some faiths cultivate moments of spiritual connection through individual and group rituals that then elevate the people. Most foster sense of a community, asserting that the individual is part of a larger whole, part of God's universe or the human community.

For many Jews, doing the ritual is the powerful moment, whether or not they experience God's presence, or even believe in God. For example, some Jews built a Sukkah, a outside simple tent-like structure representing the desert dwellings of our ancestors, to celebrate the fall harvest festival; the Sukkah uplifts our agricultural heritage and allows us to celebrate outside informally with family and friends. They may or may not believe that God freed them from slavery and guided them in the wilderness. For the believers, the gathering itself is the spiritual moment. For secular Jews that same moment might be described as a life-affirming and life-giving communal moment. <sup>viii</sup>

Many faiths acknowledging that the end of something is also a beginning. Occasionally a baby is born the same week that a grandparent dies, sometimes love blossoms on the anniversary of a tragedy. A concrete example ritual example: the Torah reading at the fall holiday of Simchat Torah concludes with the chanting of the very last chapter of Deuteronomy, the end of the Torah (Five Books of Moses) and moves directly into reading the first chapters of Genesis, the opening verses of the Torah, "In the beginning..." Endings literally roll into beginnings.

We also have learned that belief often leads to Hope <sup>ix</sup> Believing that we were redeemed from Egyptian slavery, allows contemporary Jews to believe in redemptions from racism, from political strife, from psychological despair. We escape the hand of the oppressor in many stages, again and again and again, personally, politically and spiritually. Hope springs eternal. However, some scholars assert that religion may undermine strength and independence especially if one might feel punished by God after a tragedy. Others consider that people lose personal agency when asked to put it all in “God’s hands” and not act to better oneself or the situation. <sup>x</sup>

In over 3 decades in research in the [American Psychological Association](#), psychologists have asked: what is the impact of religion and belief on peoples’ mental health? They interpret many responses in this way: Those who make use of positive religious coping methods have greater had better outcomes than those who struggled with God. <sup>xi</sup> A Pew Research Center survey conducted in summer of 2020 reveals that more Americans than people in other economically developed countries say the pandemic has bolstered their religious faith and the faith of their compatriots. Nearly three-in-ten Americans (28%) report stronger personal faith because of the pandemic, and the same share think that religious faith of Americans overall has strengthened, according to the survey of 14 economically developed countries. People with less education are significantly more likely than those with a secondary education or higher to say their personal religious faith has deepened in five of the countries surveyed: Spain (those with less education are 11 points more likely to say this), Italy (8 points), the U.S. (7 points), France (5 points) and Japan (3 points). There are few differences on this question by gender, even though women are generally more religious than men, particularly in Christian-majority countries. <sup>xii</sup> Two exceptional cases in this survey are Italy and South Korea, where women are more likely than men to report that their faith has been bolstered by the pandemic. <sup>xiii</sup>

#### **How do we make our faith more meaningful as we emerge from this multi-year Pandemic?**

*“Ta Shma!* Listen to the people and see what they are doing”<sup>xiv</sup>, say the rabbis of old. In other words, actively listen and note what the people are doing to carry on a meaningful Jewish communal life. What did people do during the pandemic to acknowledge holidays or sacred events? Many families retold key Jewish narratives around picnic tables. The Pesach preparations of cleaning and removing the old harvest foods and recalling the speedy Exodus from Egypt, served as a narrative for new family adventures which led to Seder as a backyard experience. For some, the little observed spring holiday of Shavuot expanded to receiving Torah by studying the Ten Commandments with 2 or 3 clusters of individuals on congregational grounds or member neighborhoods, calling those places “Mt Sinai”. For lucky Californians—some built a Sukkah for the first time, enjoying the fall harvest foods and welcoming neighbors. Lighting the Hanukah lights always meant to be a visible ritual observed at one’s windowsill became another outdoor neighborhood activity, accompanied by song, story and games. These challenging moments shifted into engaging cultural learning opportunities, led not by clergy necessarily but by family groups. Parents and adult learners adapted rituals to various places,

adapting traditions to meet the needs of individuals and small groups<sup>xv</sup>; creating communities of meaning and purpose.

Leadership in organizations, churches, synagogues and mosques require a shift in approaches to learning. Clergy and Religious leadership might study, teach and emphasize spiritual concepts that encourage resilience and growth. Conversations around such topics as **Pikuach Nefesh**, the concept of preserving life and the quality of life, might engage younger folks to debate the beginning of life questions but after living through the horrors of pandemic, they might pursue life with greater urgency. **Yitzat Mitzrayim**, the concept of eternally emerging and reemerging from Egypt and therefore, from all constricting situations, instills hope in overcoming trauma. **Ben Arbayim**, the concept of 'being in between'—between light and dark—acknowledges that life contains the bitter and the sweet; we often live in that 'in between' stage. **The concepts Hakarat HaTov** (Acknowledging the good) and **Gam Ze L'Tova** (this too is for good)—help us recognize the good moments despite disasters that we have lived through. We notice the good, we talk of the good and we begin to shift to feel the good.

We can encourage clergy and lay leadership to sit with and actively listen to their congregants' personal stories first, slowly with compassion. Leadership need transition from text-to-life approaches and embrace life-to-text methods that engage people as they are. Ongoing classes that begin with personal check-in before expanding to teach history, liturgy and texts indicate that leaders take an interest in and care deeply for their community members. Many personal stories resonate with key religious stories and rituals.

We can revise some religious terminology and explain it simply. When an organization or hospital offers "*spiritual care*" many people are confused as to its definition. Does it mean that caregivers offer a compassionate presence, that they listen to hopes and fears and validate them? Or does it mean that they guide writing of one's spiritual history? Or are they asking, "*what was spiritual about this experience of care, of concern, of teaching, of singing?*" It is not necessarily a "Where is God emerging" question. It opens a different yet related conversation. And perhaps this clearer language allows the old and young, the rich and poor, those with or without higher education to enter without the weight of their ambivalence about God.

Many have counted large numbers in attendance at Zoom services, programs and justice work. Increased numbers come from people who are not members of local congregations attending online services and programs that serve a population across the country; LA based congregants are engaging in New York based synagogue services; small congregations are enjoying the benefit of the varied musical leadership of the mega-urban congregation. There is opportunity for congregations to bring participants closer to the community, if they can actually know them. People will return to IRL, IN REAL LIFE community when we demonstrate to congregants that: "**You matter!**", as my colleague and friend Rabbi Mark Borovitz insists. **When clergy care** for the needs of people to be together, supporting each other in joy and grief, practicing aspects of Jewish life and enhancing the value of in-person relationships, folks will reconnect to the congregational setting. We might worry less about

what religious communities look like now as we emerge from pandemic and, instead, build for what the community might become<sup>xvi</sup>

***But Rabbi, What are your beliefs?***

The Catholic-Jewish Women’s Dialogue pushed me on the personal response. They asked me what helped **me** cope during the pandemic, what helped me find a spiritual center. I enjoy study and during the midst of the pandemic, I opened a text that I studied long ago; I mulled it over again and again and again. It became comfortable, uplifting, even inspiring. This reflection by 16<sup>th</sup> c mystic Rabbi Moses b. Jacob Cordovera, found in Tomer Dvora, the Palm Tree of Dvora, moved me. Study brought me to spiritual experience, allowing me to notice the grandeur and the minute as spiritual gifts. Studying this with a partner enhanced my learning and awareness.

“Imitate the key virtues of God: (the 13 attributes):  
Desire the well-being of your fellow creatures,

Let their honor be as precious as your own,  
“Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Desire what is right for yourself and others.

Extend Goodness to whomever needs your gift.

Soothe Your forehead; it should not be tense, but resemble the forehead of God, so that you soothe others.

Attune your ears to hearing the good—Listen deeply only to positive, useful things.

Open your eyes to notice those who suffer, to be compassionate to them. Open your eyes to appreciate the purple flower, the green arugula, the yellow rose.

Use your mouth to Speak only words of Torah and expressions of good-will.

Uplift your smile and eyes and welcome each person with a friendly face; let your face radiate.

Draw near to God, just do it in these concrete ways.”

*“Imitate your creator for the essence of the divine image is action.”<sup>xvii</sup>* What action I asked myself, daily? Slowly Cordovera’s description of God’s virtues became a spiritual checklist for me and I too wondered, how I might ‘imitate God’, or in my own language, experience the spiritual even within the darkened pandemic days. Cordovera’s directives speak to me today as I open my eyes to notice those who suffer, as I attune my ears for the good, as I uplift my eyes and smile.

I also searched for resources more contemporary and found the Harvard Divinity School website. Students and scholars alike presented psycho-spiritual questions and suggested approaches for coping with pandemic isolation and fear. I studied their work and found ways it spoke to me. I learned from their spiritual guidance and over time, developed my checklist for spiritual living:

**Check-in by phone**—with family and with those that are your ‘chosen’ family; hear their voices.

**Develop** a Gratitude practice – as you awake and go to sleep, select 5 things for which you are grateful today.

**Experience** Joy via online or face to face concerts, song sessions, poetry readings, ball games, dance concerts or even star-gazing.

**Express** Kindness early and often, daily.

**Celebrate** your religious holy days—even by yourself.

Read a specific prayer or study text, make a special meal, set the tablecloth, use good dishes and get fresh flowers,

When you can invite a small group and meet them outside, sun or snow.

Guide the ritual yourself; become the leader.

Recite or sing your favorite prayer—perhaps only a fraction of it or favorite phrase from it: Examples might include *Sh'ma Kolaynu* (*Listen to our Voices*), or *Adonai S'fatai Tiftach* (*Open my lips and heart to ask for help*) or *Aleynu*—(It is ON us)

**Join** some kind of group—book, music, theater, walking, tennis, yoga, Torah/ Bible study as they each become community

or Join in a weekly candle-lighting for Shabbat or other spiritual practice

or Join Community of trust related to Personal changes, social and spiritual concerns

**Study** something old, using books; study something new, perhaps online

**Study** with a partner.

**TALK** with *at least one friend on a weekly basis*...set the same time/ place/ method.

**Walk** toward Wellness, daily and notice: the colors, the scents, the animals, the people.

**Don't wait:** Create spiritual gatherings like Study groups, Recovery meetings, grief support, parenting, diabetes or asthma or cancer support **now**.<sup>xviii</sup> Do it online or in person.

**Ask:** ‘What was a spiritual experience for me today?’ Or, if it works, ‘Where did God breakthrough for me today?’

Spirituality is both an intimate and communal connection. For some it is an individual effort to discover the meaning of life with or without traditional constraints. For others, it may be the positive energy found in the presence of traditional religious community. For me, it is the

natural world and the Jewish communal experience that evokes God's presence. I ask: How do we transform our collective isolation into opportunities for community? We can understand psycho-social-spiritual health as a collective religious imperative, by being there for others as they have been there for us! We reseed renewal through meaningful connection and in so doing, we encourage Post-Traumatic growth: <sup>xix</sup> We find meaning in individual and communal spiritual and cultural life; we experience connection and act for wholeness and peace

Perhaps this checklist for spiritual living will help you find your own post-pandemic faith. This may not be the exact faith of your grandmothers, but it can be your spiritual anchor as you move toward the light. It is for me.

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#### WORKSHEET:

##### **The Impact of pandemic is personal – How would you respond to these questions:**

What have you learned:

What are the lessons you want to remember?

List three ways faith helped you cope.

Post Pandemic // Post last year // Post two years ago: How are you different?

Personal lesson

Societal lessons

Describe your own spiritual life: When have you experienced spiritual moments?

Deleted: How can we

Deleted: ;

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- <sup>i</sup> Mishkan HaNefesh, Machzor for the Gates of Awe, (CCAR Press, 2015), p. 178.
- <sup>ii</sup> <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/health/topics/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd>
- <sup>iii</sup> Lamott, Operation Instructions: A journal of my son's first year, (Anchor Press 2000)
- <sup>iv</sup> Psalms 13
- <sup>v</sup> Psalms 118, selections
- <sup>vii</sup> Pirke Avot, Ethics of the Sages, 3:7, selections
- <sup>viii</sup> Faith in a time of crisis, Kenneth Pargament, Byron Goodman, Belief Systems and Religion, May 2020 Bowling Green University, American Psychological Association, (<https://www.apa.org/topics/covid-19/faith-crisis>)
- <sup>ix</sup> Phillips, SB, Olson, J, Brett-McLean, Integrating Spirituality as a key component in patient care. Religion Magazine, 2015. PP. 476-498
- <sup>x</sup> Faith in a time of crisis, Kenneth Pargament, Byron Goodman, Belief Systems and Religion, May 2020 Bowling Green University, American Psychological Association, (<https://www.apa.org/topics/covid-19/faith-crisis>)
- <sup>xi</sup> Faith in a time of crisis, Kenneth Pargament, Byron Goodman, Belief Systems and Religion, May 2020 Bowling Green University, American Psychological Association, (<https://www.apa.org/topics/covid-19/faith-crisis>)
- <sup>xii</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2016/03/22/the-gender-gap-in-religion-around-the-world/>
- <sup>xiii</sup> 2020 Pew Study: Pew Research Center June 2021 More Americans than people in other countries say COVID has strengthened their Faith: What Why?
- <sup>xiv</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Menuchot 35b:3
- <sup>xv</sup> "Spiritual Care as a Deeper Immunity Response to Covid 19", Nicole Roman; Thuli G Membu, Majeed Hoosen, African Journal of Primary Health Care and Family Medicine. And
- <sup>xvi</sup> Koenig AG, Religion Spirituality and Health: The Research and Clinical Implications ISRN 2021, Volume 14, pp.1-33.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Rabbi Moshe Cordover (Sfad, 16<sup>th</sup>c. ), "Palm Tree of Dvorah", D, Matt, The Heart of Jewish Mysticism (Castle Books, 1997), p. 83
- <sup>xviii</sup> Spiritual Resources During the Covid 19 Pandemic, Harvard Divinity School  
[www.hds.harvard.edu](http://www.hds.harvard.edu)
- <sup>xix</sup> <https://hbr.org/2020/07/growth-after-trauma> (Richard Tedashi, Harvard Business Review Magazine, August 2020)