

Communal Prayer During the COVID-19 Pandemic Religious Fervour or Ritual Fetish?

In the past few weeks, my English 'stiff upper lip' has been tested to its limits.

The British traditions of stoically subduing emotions, standing strong and adopting the "Dunkirk spirit" go back generations. But I finally crumbled after conducting an online memorial service for two prominent members of our intimate, friendly community who had sadly succumbed to the dreadful effects of Covid-19. Their widows, who were both self-isolating, called out to one another over the teleconferencing platform to console one another.

Worse still, I had to tell my own kids what had happened. How do you break the news to a child that they will never again see some of the familiar faces they have come to know and love?

In the middle of March, the UK government enacted a set of draconian rules to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus, protect the most vulnerable and ease the pressure on our treasured National Health Service. Included in this legislation was the closure of all religious institutions and the cessation of ritual practices, educational events, and social gatherings. The only exception that remains in place is carrying out funerals, with only close family members allowed to attend. The umbrella body of my community, the United Synagogue responded immediately with colleagues scrambling to send messages of comfort to their communities on the unprecedented closure of our sacred places of worship.

While it is technically permissible to pray alone, a fundamental tenet of orthodox Jewish practice is to endeavour to pray with a quorum of ten men who constitute the minimum to form a community, as there are many key parts of the service that cannot be performed individually.

Praying together as a community, like so many other communal activities underpins our religion. Indeed, the word religion itself comes from the Latin '*religo*' which means 'to connect, tie or bind'. The word 'synagogue' comes from the Greek words '*syn-agein*' meaning 'to bring together'. The Hebrew form '*beit kneset*' means 'the house of meeting'. And this is the great strength of all religious communities. We are bound together by our collective history, traditions, and laws. We are a family of families. We pray together, eat together, celebrate together, and grieve together.

But that strength has now become our weakness.

Orthodox Jews rightly equate ritual observance with the performance of Divine will. Our laws are sacrosanct and immutable, and our customs are testament to our unique culture and history. Stories abound of Jewish heroes risking their lives to continue our heritage in the living hell of the ghettos and concentration camps of Nazi Europe. Before them, countless Jewish Spaniards were martyred, submitting to the *atos de fé* of the inquisition, accepting torture and public execution rather than abandon their Jewish faith. In the mid-17th century, Rabbi

Shabbetai Kohen wrote his magnum opus on Jewish law while in hiding from the Cossack massacres led by Bohdan Khmelnytsky.

But religious practice does not inevitably demand the ultimate sacrifice. Martyrdom is only sanctioned for the three cardinal sins of murder, idolatry, and sexual immorality. For every other law, one must abandon everything to preserve life.

The draconian laws set out by governments across the world to practise social distancing and refrain from leaving one's home except for the most essential trips, are the only way of protecting the vulnerable by slowing the spread of this deadly virus and easing the pressure on our health care systems.

While we have lost the most fundamental piece of our communal life, religious leaders from across the faiths have used initiative and creativity to recreate our communities online, teleconferencing our services and holding virtual events.

Yet many individuals have opted to carry on as normal, defying explicit government orders and the directives of religious leaders, by organising private communal services in homes, streets, and parking lots. This blinkered, pertinacious intransigence to dogmatically continue communal religious practice in the face of a threat such as Covid-19 is not clever or heroic. This is not equivalent to the obdurate tenacity to serve God that our forebears displayed in the face of the Cossack mobs, Spanish inquisitors, or Nazi thugs. It is criminal, it is dangerous, and it is a defective, theological corruption of our religious values.

Idol worship is not merely the act of praying to a lifeless statue. The Medieval sage Maimonides explained that idolatry is defined as attributing Divine power to something other than God. Anything can be made into an idol. But painfully, some have idolised the very sacraments meant to bring us closer to God. Compared to the threats endured in previous generations we are not being asked for much. Resilience is less about brute strength and more about the ability to adapt in response to change. Right now, God wants us to protect life, not our rituals.

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