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A Conversation with an Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Family During the Pandemic

Katayoun Alidadi

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CONVERSATION WITH AN ULTRA-ORTHODOX JEWISH



Ilana and Menachem Weissmann look through a photo album with pictures of family events. Drawing by Regevah Merly.

FAMILY DURING THE PANDEMIC



Ilana and Menachem Weissmann look through a photo album with pictures of family events. Drawing by Regevah Merly.

Rabbi Menachem Weissmann and his wife Ilana of Providence are both teachers and belong to the New England Rabbinical College (Yeshiva Gedolah of Providence). They identify as Ultra-Orthodox and raise their three young sons, who attend Jewish schools, in the tradition. With the family's apartment unit nestled between those of two other Orthodox Jewish families (including a family of 13), early in the pandemic the three families decided to count themselves as one for purposes of social distancing, making for a very big 'bubble'. That made the isolation many experienced during the pandemic less of a problem.

Dr. Katayoun Alidadi

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Minyan

In Judaism, Communion with God is found through community. A Minyan is a prayer quorum of 10 men over the age of 13. For Orthodox Jews, once a Jewish boy becomes bar mitzvah at age of 13, he can be counted for the purpose of determining whether there is a minyan, the minimum required for congregational worship and public Torah reading.

Ilana recalls an incident towards the start of the Pandemic: // On a Saturday afternoon a family had come out to see other members of the community. This family had walked to come see people. They came and stopped at a distance. The little kids didn't understand and were going. It was an awkward stilted situation. But we were like lionesses, us three moms. Our kids went around playing a game called six feet //

She further notes that // the pandemic could make a person feel extremely alone, but we didn't have that. We were blessed to have a semblance of normalcy in our particular circumstance, perhaps not reflective of how it was for others. Also, our Rabbi made it a point to ask other noteworthy speakers and rabbis of larger communities in the country, who normally don't have the time or ability to come out of town to far flung places, to speak and give us words of encouragement. That was really special. It was like a child who has to have surgery and then he gets ice cream. Wow, this is silver lining, special treat. This person is here to speak to us in little Providence. It made the Jewish community smaller and more intimate. Even though in some ways we were so splintered, everybody was in their own home. Through Zoom we were able to use that to bring connections //

The celebration of holidays of the Jewish calendar marks family and communal life for the Weissmans. The year and a half the pandemic has so far spanned were unlike any other for the young family. For the first time, they celebrated Passover at home instead of at their parents' house. During this eventful period, Ilana also gave birth to a baby boy, the couple attended a Jewish wedding in Providence online, flew out to Baltimore to attend an in-person but social distanced wedding, and managed to find meaning in the pandemic and deepen their faith. Ilana has developed an acronym for COVID, namely // Concentrate on Validating Individual Differences //

HOT SPOT

Rabbi Weissmann recounts: // the synagogue was closed. Studying was in person. A lot of the households in our community do not have internet. We do not have television. No television. We do have access to the internet. So we did **phone conferencing**. We had a system set up. All classes during the week transferred to Zoom //

His wife Ilana notes that // a number of people did not have internet before but they resignedly got internet so their family and children could participate in Zoom. Most of them have since kept the internet //

// On Facebook that completely is gone, breaking the bread, sharing the bread. However, the text part that led up to that, the blessing the body, blessing the spirit, that we continued reading //

The Weissmanns are an exception among the ultra-Orthodox community; they only borrowed a hotspot for a short time to get ready for the first Passover on their own.

SYMBOLS AND GOSSIP

Early on, the meaning of the pandemic was a topic of debate in the community and the symbolism of the moment took over.

Rabbi: // Lectures on Jewish law, thought, history were over Zoom. One Rabbi spoke about what he wanted us to work on during the pandemic. Gossip came up a lot. Because masks cover the face and the mouth. God is telling we're not using our mouths for the right things so we've got to cover our mouths //

Ilana: // Also, there is a concept in the Torah that when someone speaks gossip, he would get leprosy and have to leave the camp and sequester and quarantine for a period of time. People found meaning in that, like here we're having to quarantine //

Rabbi Weissmann noted that // We're not expected to know necessarily what THE message is, but God just wants to see we are trying. Maimonides stated in his Code of law that a person who has misfortune befall him and he says 'this is just how the world runs', he is a cruel person. Because God is sending him a message and is opening a door for him and he is just completely ignoring it //

His wife Ilana agrees: // Nothing is taken by chance, God is sending us a message and we have to take the message and grow and use it as a stepping stone. To just shrug this as happenstance that would be an error. What can we do as an individual, a people, a community to try and improve our ways, improve our relationships with each other and with God. That was a big subject //



Rabbi Menachem Weissmann at home

MESHUGANA

// This hit between Purim and Passover //

Rabbi: // In the Orthodox household, Passover is meshugana, crazy (laughs). By Jewish law, you're not allowed to have leavened products in your house on Passover. For example, no bread, cheerios, oat products, cereal, cookies, crackers, pretzels, beer, whiskey. There are various methods: you destroy them, you sell them to a non-Jew [who then sells them back after Passover], but you may not own them at Passover. Not only that, but the night before Passover, we do an inspection of the house. To prepare for that inspection, we clean the house from bottom to top. That's where Spring cleaning comes from //

Ilana: // Also, all of the utensils we use have to be specially cleaned so there is no residue. It's a big job //

Rabbi: // Normally, Passover is a family holiday. Up until last year, we have gone either to my parents or in-laws and usually both for the entire Passover. We have cleaned out the house, for example when our middle son was born right after Passover. But we basically just pack up to my in-laws //

Ilana: // Younger couples, that is what they do. So younger families rarely do Passover themselves //

Rabbi: // Things started breaking down, it was not clear what was happening. But by two weeks before Passover, it was very clear that we weren't going anywhere //

Ilana: // Also, I was in my 7th month of pregnancy and we had the children at home all day. And then we realized that we are making Passover. We don't know how we did it, but we did //

Rabbi: // One way that we did, apart from the tremendous work from above and my wife's mind-boggling work, is that my mother-in-law did prepare all the food //

BOWLING

During this time, Ilana set up a makeshift bowling alley in the backyard for their kids.

Ilana: // We tried to give them some semblance of normalcy. Because this was a big blow, we are not going to Baltimore, we are not seeing our in-laws. I remember saying to my son, in the past we've showed our grandparents how much we love them by seeing them and now we are going to show them how much we love them by not //

// I've heard from many people that the quality of prayer during that time cannot be recreated. In a quorum of 10 men you can get distracted. Being alone and one with God, even if it's not ideal, there are people who learned from that. It's like someone has -God forbid- a terminal illness and their faith or relationships gets stronger, and then they go back to regular life there is something they gained and will hold on to. I'm happy that it is over, but I want to make sure that I take all the lessons with me //

—Ilana Weissmann

We hope you enjoyed learning about religious worship in Rhode Island during the COVID-19 pandemic. Feel free to reach out to Professor Alidadi, principal investigator, at kalidadi@bryant.edu