



What will Post-COVID look like?

By Dr. Betsy Stone

We may be entering the final, albeit lengthy, phases of COVID. As we approach the one year marker of this difficult time, overlaid by racial injustice and political turmoil, many of us are looking forward to “freedom” with excitement and anxiety. We imagine a world where simple errands no longer include fears. We hope to “return to normal.” But what is normal in a post-COVID world?

What are you planning for? We are all thinking about the logistics of a return to spaces that have been locked down, to people who have been reduced to a Brady Bunch screen, to a world without 400,000 of our friends and family. Go slowly, be patient with yourself and with others. This won't be easy. If we are smart, it will be intentional. With our world in turmoil, we can actually make choices that impact who we want to be going forward.

I am sure that lots of us are thinking about the practical issues that arise. Getting in an elevator with other people, returning to our workplaces, movies and plays. We buy hand sanitizer, mark six foot distances. How long will we need to socially distance? When can we see our elderly relatives again? When and how do we return to *Shabbat* services and celebrate *Pesach*? How do camps, offices and theaters reopen?

I am thinking about the psychological issues that arise with reopening. These include, in no particular order: TRUST, SAFETY, DECISION-MAKING, SOCIAL SKILLS and TELLING OUR STORIES. How we approach these issues may impact how we and others manage our steps into the world as it will be.

The greatest erosion over the past year (or four years) has been the erosion of TRUST – trust in others, trust in the meaning of words, trust in our institutions, trust in our government. We tend to use the word trust in a binary way – either I trust you or I don't. This is simply incorrect. Trust is much more slippery than that.

I trust you with certain things and not others. We trust each other in intentional ways. So I might trust you to read this, but not hand you my checkbook. Parents trust kids to be able to make some decisions – and not others! When my kids accused me of not trusting them, my response was always simple. “I trust you to be 14 (or 16 or 8).” We should never trust anyone to always put our needs ahead of theirs, or to anticipate all our wants. Trust is a continuum, not a binary choice. It's not as simple as I either trust you or I don't. Trust is built and rebuilt, scaffolded by experiences that are both positive and negative. Over time, I learn where I can trust you. Trust

is hard to build and easy to undermine. Trust thrives when we value human connection over being right.

One aspect of COVID that has been especially difficult has been the lack of clear guidance. Do we send our kids to school? Do they get to play with their cousins, their friends? Do we get on planes? What do you say to the person who is wearing a mask on their chin?

Over these past years, trust in language has changed. Recently, I walked with a friend who told me she and her family were being very SAFE... and then described a dinner party they attended. Not my definition of safe. In this short interaction, I was aware that I no longer felt safe with her, and that the word safe had utterly different meanings for us. And this question extends to our physical spaces as well – is the grocery store safe? Is the *shul*? Is daycare? Our relationships with each other and with spaces have changed and will take time to reestablish. We won't simply reenter spaces, or friendships. It will take time and adjustment.

We have all lost SOCIAL SKILLS. The back and forth of conversation, the water cooler exchanges – these are erased by back-to-back Zoom meetings. For some of us, this has been a huge relief, the opportunity to simply get work done without social pressures. Relearning and reclaiming these skills will take time. I imagine that we will also need to reset some social norms, and I hope we do this with intention. One of the best parts of Zoom is how difficult it can be to interrupt people. Can we carry this skill back into live interactions? How will we set boundaries around behavior? How will we navigate those relationships that we didn't sustain during COVID?

We will also need time to TELL OUR STORIES. While many of us had similar experiences of lockdown, part of reconnecting will be sharing these stories, good and bad. Who and what did you mourn? What did you learn? From sourdough bread to divorces, jigsaw puzzles to deaths, intensified relationships with immediate family to children barely seen for a year, COVID's impact is deeply felt. Humans need to talk about experiences to process them. When people come back into your space, how will they tell their stories? Not simply once, but as they arise? Can we create a Jewish lens for these stories of triumph and hardship? I envision that we will be telling these stories for the rest of our lives, as they are the stories that have shaped us. COVID-19 is our D-Day, our 9/11.

Our society closed down abruptly. I imagine many of us know exactly where we ate our last dinner out, or the last movie we saw in the theater, or the last person we hugged outside of our family or our pod. No matter how slowly we reenter the world, it will also feel abrupt. I expect we will see both deep separation anxiety when we reopen camps – and a lot of pent-up sexual activity. We will see anger, fear, discomfort. How will we manage the complexity of a developing normal? Hopefully with intention, planning and forethought. That's our next job. It's time to start planning – the logistics and the human content.

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