

Habitual Burnout in Communal Professionals

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Over the year+ of COVID-19, I am sure I have taught over 1,000 Jewish communal professionals. I have taught at synagogues, conventions, and teacher meetings. I have worked with rabbis, cantors, educators, executive directors, early childhood professionals, camp directors and staff, institutional boards, Jewish family agencies, food banks. Every week I spend hours on Zooms with the people who are keeping our institutions functioning, adapting.



They are working so hard. At the beginning of the pandemic, they put in countless hours taking live to virtual. From small shuls to large synagogues, from virtual camps to expansive educational programming, from small children to older adults, our communal professionals have created, adapted, and learned new skills. They have stretched themselves and pushed themselves and held us and our institutions together.

And they are spent. The last, worst stage of burnout is called Habitual Burnout. It is characterized by chronic mental and physical fatigue, sadness and/or depression. Almost every Jewish professional I work with these days is in this stage.

They may call it apathy. They may call it exhaustion. They may call it disinterest or the inability to feel joy. They may complain of disordered sleep or aches and

pains. They may be worried that they're developing dementia because their brains are working so poorly. They may be losing weight or gaining weight. They may be moody or emotionally reactive. And, as the summer approaches, they are starting to worry about camps and fall holidays, about how we enter spaces, once familiar, that had become toxic. They are spent and they are traumatized.

I am very worried that we will see an exodus from Jewish communal life over the next 18 months. I have heard rabbis talking about leaving the field; educators saying they can't imagine what comes next. I know social workers at social service agencies who are living in a state of both personal and secondary trauma. Well paid executives at our prestigious institutions are overwhelmed. And we're about to ask them to return to workspaces, to act as though they aren't exhausted from holding us all year.

These professionals, from the executive staff to the maintenance staff, need care from us right now. Not simply a thank you, although that might help in the short run. They need time. Every one of them needs time to recover. Not a week. They won't be able to unwind in a week. They are wound tightly, defended against the amount of trauma and loss they have experienced. They have led 11 funerals in a week, listened while we talked about missing our parents and our children, tried to be creative, preached and led services and cleaned pre-school classrooms, done

Zoom therapy and Zoom classes and Zoom shivas. They have done all this while managing children, spouses, work and shopping, like all the rest of us.

We want our communal workers to hold us. They have done so, but at a cost. What I am hearing now, even before the lead up to the Fall, is stomach problems, headaches, an increasing desire to "drop out" of society, neglect of personal needs, increased isolation and self-doubt, and a consistent feeling of emptiness. All of these are indications of their own trauma.

It seems clear to me that NOW is the time for lay leadership to reverse the flow of caring from our communal professionals back to them. Even if they do not yet recognize their needs, we need to. In a perfect world, I would like to see each and every person who has held us during this awful, life-altering time receive a month off. Every single one. I'd like them to have time to get bored, to sleep late, to spend time getting to know their families again.

I know that many of you, reading the suggestion that we give them a month off, are bristling. You're saying, "Impossible." I hope you reconsider. I hope you figure out how to make it work. I hope you invest as much in them as they have invested in us. If we don't, I fear we will see a shortage of these experienced, committed professionals in the future. They, of all people, need to recover from this year.

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