

Dreaming About a Post-COVID Life

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Last month, just as the country began to emerge from COVID hibernation, my wife, daughter, and I drove to Las Vegas to visit my dad, who has lived in the area for the past two decades. It was the first time that we had crossed the state line together as a family since 2019, and only our third opportunity since the start of the pandemic to spend a few nights in an environment other than our own home. To celebrate, we made a short vacation of it, staying at one of the Las Vegas Strip's iconic resorts, where we safely enjoyed time at the pool, savored a variety of fine dining experiences, and relished the sense that we may finally be approaching a long-awaited, if cautious, return to normal. The prevailing sense of relief and exhilaration was palpable throughout the property.

The waning of the pandemic era feels a bit like the start of a national spring break. Just as we all shared the trauma of COVID-19 and the immeasurable loss of life and resources it wrought upon our society, so we now seem to be experiencing a shared sense of euphoria and glee as we emerge from a 15-month pandemic-induced winter. We are hyper-aware of the social deprivation of the past year-plus, our senses absorbing every molecule of scent, light, sound, and flavor with which they are bombarded as we return to restaurants, beaches, and boulevards. Fans newly permitted to pack back into sporting arenas appear on television more zealous and full of joy as their teams succeed, with their disappointment at their team's failures feeling less profound than before.

Even minor pre-pandemic annoyances, such as the line to check into a hotel or the wait for a table at a restaurant feel more like small pleasures than

inconveniences. Throughout the pandemic, we relied on "COVID silver linings" to help us maintain our patience, and at times our sanity. We relished time with family, or perhaps rediscovered the satisfaction of finishing a book that has long sat on a shelf, half-read. We caught up on movies, checked in on friends more often via video chat than text or e-mail, and found creative ways to both celebrate and mourn.

If this is indeed the beginning of the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, it brings with it both a renewed zest for life, but also questions about the extended impact of the pandemic and our reaction to finally emerging from it. How long, for instance, will the honeymoon of our re-emergence continue? Are we capable of remembering those COVID silver

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linings that brought joy, comfort, and relief, and of permanently incorporating those elements into our post-pandemic lives?

Humanity can expect a global pandemic about once every century. One wonders if those who experienced the last one—the Spanish flu tragedy of 1918—resumed life post-pandemic with a similar sense of appreciation, gratitude, and perspective. If so, then we might surmise, based on our own experience, that society eventually regressed to its pre-pandemic nonchalance and that people once again jadedly began to take small privileges for granted.

Humans are remarkably adaptable creatures. We adjust to reality as necessary, allowing us to cope with both triumph and trauma. So, we can

reasonably expect that, at some point, we will settle back into a new post-COVID normal, and it will once again become our mundane daily reality. The gratitude we feel for the ability to safely stand in that check-in line or wait for that indoor restaurant table will gradually devolve back into resignation at best, and at worst, contempt for the inconvenience.

Perhaps we can forgive ourselves for this eventual regression, as it is that adaptability that has, to a degree, contributed to our longevity as a species. If Jewish relevance to this notion exists, it is in the fact that our adaptability and resilience as a people mirrors that of the human race, bringing with it both the miracle of continuity as well as, in times of quiet, the specter of apathy.

While every day brings new promise, we do not yet know for sure whether our apparent emergence from the pandemic is genuine or a temporary reprieve. The discovery of virulent new COVID variants, plus the virus's continued uncontrolled spread in India, Japan, parts of Europe, and elsewhere around the globe, are cause for caution and managed expectations. We are, by no means, assured that the crisis is nearing its end.

Let us, however, allow ourselves to dream for a moment that we may be watching the COVID-19 pandemic fade into history. While the afterglow of our potential triumph over COVID is likely to fade, we would be well served to remember how it feels to experience this moment together as a community and as a society. I hope that the appreciation we feel for each other, the empathy we sought and received during the most uncertain times, and the newfound understanding that productivity and self-care need not be mutually exclusive become permanently etched in our collective consciousness and culture. 

Staying for Good

Rebecca Caspi | Executive Director Israel Office, Jewish Federations of North America

Whenever he called me from the United States, my uncle asked the same question, "Do you think you're going to stay in Israel?" As the decades passed, the question turned more and more into a jest. And now that I've lived in Israel for almost forty

years, including marrying and raising a family here, it's pretty clear that I'm here for good. And I mean that last phrase in two senses—not just that I'm here permanently, but that I'm contributing to the vibrancy and vitality of my adopted homeland.

I've felt that profound sense of pride ever since I started working for the Jewish community in Israel in 1991 – first for the Joint Distribution Committee, and then, since 2007, in my current role as the director of the Israel office for the Jewish Federations of North America. And I've experienced it especially deeply lately, as Israel was under relentless rocket attack from ruthless terrorists for



two nerve-racking weeks in May, and as my staff and I at JFNA worked around the clock to manage Federations' emergency response and to keep the North American Jewish community up to speed on all the breaking news, up to and including the ceasefire that was finally declared.

It was also crucial to us to inform the Israeli public of the wave of antizionism and antisemitism that crashed upon North American shores in the wake of the conflict between Israel and Hamas. Promoting understanding and building awareness about the different challenges faced by American Jews and Israel helps us all to stay connected through thick and thin.

What was also truly fulfilling was the opportunity, just a few days after the ceasefire had been declared, to host the first senior leadership mission to Israel since the pandemic began. Their high-profile trip came on the heels of an emergency fundraising campaign by Federations that raised more than \$3 million to aid the victims of the bombings and the first responders. It included meetings with former Prime Minister Netanyahu and new Prime Minister Naftali Bennett. It featured a visit with an Israeli

woman in Ashkelon whose house was ruined by a direct rocket hit in her living room and a tour of a neighborhood in Lod where violence between Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs jeopardized long-standing relationships that are now being painstakingly rebuilt. The delegation's message of love and support was heard loud and clear throughout the length and breadth of the land.

That visit was followed just a week later by one by the Israel Travel Alliance, a JFNA-convened collection of both Jewish and Christian organizations that sponsor trips, many of which are geared to young adults, to the Jewish State. We are working with the Israeli government to ensure that, by the end of the summer, more and more North Americans will have had the opportunity to visit Israel and deepen their own connections to the people and the land of Israel—some may even decide, as I did, to make Israel their home.

So, am I staying? You'd better believe it. I'm staying for good.

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