

Religion and COVID19

by Rachel Berkower

As Covid-19 spreads throughout the country, social distancing requirements have forced many religious and spiritual institutions to adapt their practices to the changing circumstances. My family and I are practicing Conservative Jews, so when Covid-19 forced our synagogue to shut down, my father quickly found a way to attend virtual services from our dining room. One of the most important aspects of Judaism is the idea of a congregation. Services cannot occur without a Minyan, or a group of ten Jews together. Social distancing has tested us in ways that have forced us to rethink the core of what it means to practice our religion. While many Jews understand the necessity of virtual services, others view the orders not to congregate as an offense against “God’s will.” This conflict is especially pertinent when considering the Jewish tradition of calling to Shiva. When a loved one dies, the family must observe Shiva, a week-long period of grief and mourning. During this time, it is customary for the friends and family of the deceased to gather in the home and pay their respects. However, with social distancing rules in place, families of the deceased have been forced to skip many mourning rituals.

Three weeks ago, hundreds of Orthodox Jewish mourners filled the sidewalks of a Brooklyn neighborhood during a Shiva service to honor the memory of a rabbi who had recently died from Covid-19. Upon hearing about this gathering, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio instructed the police to force the crowd of mourners to disperse, denouncing the congregation as “absolutely unacceptable” and imposing a “zero tolerance” policy on such events. People like my father saw the mayor’s message to the Jewish community as shamelessly hypocritical, believing that it directly targeted the Jewish people while ignoring the blatant violations of self-isolation amongst other groups. Condemning an entire ethnic group while ignoring the actions of others has been seen as not just offensive but an invitation for others to engage in anti-Semitism. Many Jews are finding themselves in a historically familiar position as anti-Semitic attacks reach another peak in the metropolitan New York area. The urge to find someone to blame has led many people to single out Jews as the reason for the quick spread of Covid-19 in New York.

While I don’t believe the Jewish community has any right, religious or otherwise, to have such large congregations at this time, I condemn the choice to single out an already vulnerable community. Instead of fostering hate through proclamations of non-compliance, we should

encourage communities to seek new ways of connecting while providing assistance to those in need.

Bella, Timothy. "De Blasio Breaks up a Rabbi's Crowded Funeral, Gets Slammed by Critics for Singling out Jews." *The Washington Post*, 29 Apr. 2020.