Editor's Introduction

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This special issue began as a kernel in my mind more than a year ago, shortly after the global pandemic had begun to take hold. Israel had emerged early on as a leader in controlling the spread of the coronavirus, and I wondered whether this would be a “Jewish” pattern, and whether the Jewish response to the pandemic would be different from that of other religions or ethnicities or identities more generally. I didn’t really have hypotheses in mind; I was just curious. The pandemic and its implications for social interaction fascinated me as a sociologist: I studied its impact on my university; I joined a survey research group sharing methodologies for studying the pandemic; and I joined a research group focusing on certain Jewish subpopulations and their reaction to the pandemic and its impact on them. When I put out a call for this special issue, I had no idea what would be submitted. Usually, social science research takes several months to get off the ground; I didn’t know how quickly research rising to the standards of the journal could be completed.

I wondered how the relatively high education and affluence of contemporary Jews would affect their experiences of the pandemic; whether Jews would “take care of their own” in greater need, or rely on national/local government and voluntary associations; whether Jews would extend their service orientations to the greater populations in need; how the demographic skew of most Jews toward older ages would impact Jewish morbidity and mortality brought on by the coronavirus; whether Jewish disproportional representation in health professions would expose them to greater danger from COVID-19; whether the increasing numbers of Jews who live alone (see the most recent PEW survey of Jewish Americans for example) would result in greater loneliness and mental health issues from isolation during the pandemic; whether Jewish traditional importance placed on family would serve them well during the pandemic, or whether the geographical distance of contemporary Jewish families across continents and transnationality would prove too hard for maintaining solidarity. While I didn’t get answers to all of my questions, there is a lot of rich material in what we have collected for this special issue. I will say that I erred on the side of leniency if a research piece was in exploratory or early stages, so that readers could become aware of what types of research are being done that related the pandemic to contemporary Jews.

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As you will see, we got responses around the world—Australia, South Africa, Europe, Israel. In fact, the pandemic provided a rich source of understanding different ways Jewish communities are organized and mobilized for dealing with public health and economic emergencies. We have survey research, demography, qualitative studies, content analysis, and oral history. We have research into ritual, liturgical, and halachic challenges from and adaptations to the pandemic conditions—seders, prayers, and kaddish are discussed in unique articles, for example; uses of social media and the internet—see “Saturday Night Seder” for the creation of a cultural space that provided virtual community among a diverse group of Jews (and non-Jews) that is rarely as broad and inclusive, or documented, as it was during the pandemic; impacts on youth and young adults and “seniors” over 65; impacts by socioeconomic status, and its implications for “Jewish” and other cultural and social capital. We present research on digital Yiddish and its contribution to virtual community during the pandemic (and, before and after as well). We have demographic research on the “Jewish penalty” (or lack thereof) in morbidity and mortality resulting from the coronavirus and its complications (and the complexity of studying and measuring this). We have research spanning different denominations—including ultra-Orthodox and non-Orthodox—and non-denominational adaptations. The popular media highlighted the atypical response of haredi communities among the Jews, sometimes raising questions of motivation and spreading questions that were implied for all Jews; but popular media does not represent an entire group systematically, and it publicizes what will provoke the most attention and reaction. In fact research presented in this special issue provides explanation, sometimes in the individuals’ own words, and analysis, some of which exposes the vast diversity of Jews that are included under the wide umbrella of contemporary Jewry.

Additional research is being done by research institutes under various auspices. Some of these have provided details about their projects and reports in the Research Updates section of this special issue.

Don’t miss our book reviews in this issue, as well. They’re not directly connected to the coronavirus, but Benor et al.’s book on American Jewish summer camps will remind us of what many missed during the pandemic, and Newfield’s book on “identity formation while leaving Ultra-Orthodox Judaism” will drive home the complex ways we navigate the contemporary Jewish world.

Unfortunately, the impacts of the pandemic are continuing. Not as unfortunate is the continuation of commensurate research. There are a number of articles that have been submitted on the topic but did not make it into this special issue. Look for them in the coming issues of the journal and online in Springer’s OnlineFirst. And please do continue to send your own research on the pandemic (or any other topic related to contemporary Jews) to the journal.

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