



המכון למדיניות העם היהודי (מיסודה של הסוכנות היהודית לא"י) בע"מ (חל"צ)  
**The Jewish People Policy Institute** (Established by the Jewish Agency for Israel) Ltd. (CC)

This paper represents the chapter on the coronavirus challenge that appears in the executive report of JPPI's 2020 Annual Assessment for presentation to the Israeli Cabinet.

## The COVID-19 Crisis and the Jewish People: Implications, Dilemmas, and Recommendations

- The Jewish world's decision makers are being required to make decisions with long-term significance at a **time of uncertainty** that demands **flexibility**.
- **Signs of change in the world order pose a challenge to the Jewish people:** Globalization has been beneficial for the Israeli economy. The prosperity of Western Jewry rests on the values of the liberal-democratic system.
- **The crisis intensifies the need for public trust in government** to facilitate maximum cooperation in navigating an exit from it.
- The health crisis presents an **opportunity to encourage Aliyah** to Israel.
- Diaspora communities must ensure that there are adequate **resources to maintain Jewish institutions, assist Jews in distress, invest in activities with the potential for future growth, and assist the general community**.
- Jewish communities should **prepare for a period of significantly heightened anti-Semitism**. This preparation should include, among others, proactive defense, coalitions, lobbying, and tools for times of emergency.
- **Ties between the Haredi leadership and state authorities must be adapted** to allow for the rapid identification of crises that demand a suspension of the distrust inherent in relations between Haredi and non-Haredi sectors.
- After the crisis has passed, communities will need to strike an appropriate balance between the advantages of the **tangible-activity space** (which produces commitment) and those of the **digital-activity space** (quick connection).

## Introduction

The health, economic and governance tumult that has swept the entire world as a result of the coronavirus does not distinguish between Jews and non-Jews. Most of its effects are not unique to one group or another – except when speaking of the older age cohorts. At the same time, there is reason to examine how the crisis will affect the Jewish people in its distinctive contexts – among other reasons, as an aid to policy planning at a time when the crisis is at its peak and after it ends.

We will present in brief the arenas that the crisis impacts and, following the analysis, we will lay out some main questions unique to decision makers in the Jewish people. This document will not address issues that are clearly global or medical-professional, unless they have an element that touches on the Jewish people and requires special treatment.

## Main Arenas of Impact on the Jewish People

The pandemic's short- and medium-term effects on the Jewish people relate to the following aspects:

**Change in the Global Agenda.** The impact of this change is apparent in the shift of major focal points of attention to new and urgent arenas. For example, the world is less free to deal with the Iran nuclear issue – while Iran itself is also less

free to allocate resources to the struggle against Israel. In the medium and long term, the corona pandemic is also likely to impact the domestic political arena in many countries, as well as the global balance of power. Countries that deal with the crisis effectively will recover quickly and strengthen compared to other countries likely to weaken as a result of the consequences of their flawed response. For the long term, we must include in the impact ecosystem the possibility that the crisis will strengthen nationalist and isolationist trends and damage globalization processes and international cooperation.

### **The Power of the State of Israel**

Israel has been affected by the COVID-19 crisis in terms of its political and economic stability, the robustness of its health, and its public cohesion. It should be noted that Israel embarked on its response to the crisis while enmeshed in a political crisis that lasted more than a year. This latter crisis did not stop the process of decision making within either the political-governmental or the professional-bureaucratic echelons, but it does require the incoming government to make especially painful decisions. The resolution of the political crisis and the establishment of an emergency unity government with a parliamentary majority will confer greater legitimacy to these difficult determinations. Israel is still in a deep economic crisis; the road to recovery will be long, not least because recovery entails parallel progress in dealing with the coronavirus and its global economic impacts.

**The Strength of Jewish Communities.** The crisis has disrupted Jewish communities both economically and in terms of their ability to hold regular activities. In some communities, mainly Haredi, the virus wreaked a heavy toll on human life. According to preliminary estimates, the proportion of Jews – those infected and those who have died – is much higher than their population share in their countries of residence (except Israel). The accompanying economic crisis has reduced community resources and diminished the strength of organizations (synagogues, clubs, *chavurot*, etc.), and has forced communities to redirect resources according to new priorities. This reduction, whose extent is difficult to estimate at this early stage, has come at a time of almost complete cessation of traditional gatherings and communal activities. Only the online Jewish arena has continued to operate and has even expanded rapidly. This requires communities to re-gear along these lines with creativity and innovation.

**Changes in Activity Patterns.** In addition, a marked change is evident in the traditional activities of Jewish engagement as expressions of identity and community belonging. This change affects communal religious gatherings (synagogues) as well as those for cultural purposes (study, social activities). In certain communities, mainly among the Orthodox, this has brought significant hardships, whether in getting their members accustomed to observing harsh regulations or in finding

reasonable solutions to unfamiliar problems (including Halachic issues). These hardships have accelerated initiatives to expand digital Jewish engagement and have sparked internal debate processes over the need to adapt to a new reality (the debate over Zoom Passover Seders was a clear example of this).

**Relations Between Jewish Communities.** Diaspora - Israel relations, as well as the ties of mutual responsibility common to all the world's Jews, also face a new challenge. At first, this manifested on the technical level: prohibitions on travel and meetings; a halt of tourism; the cancellation of plans to visit or study in Israel; the recall of Israeli *shlichim* (emissaries) serving in the Diaspora, the cancellation of the March of the Living in Poland. Many of these activities have moved to the virtual arena, whose experiential power is different from that of the physical. Also affecting these relations is a refocusing of attention on one's immediate surroundings, with pressing concern for the family's health and employment situation. That is, Jews (like the rest of the world) are consciously busy handling immediate and urgent problems and are less available for their ties with distant communities. At the same time, many Jews who have been sitting at home found that having nothing (professional) to do freed up time for them to communicate with other Jews, to study and read, and for exposure to Jewish content and culture.

**Attitudes toward Jews.** Historical experience teaches that political crises often lead to the spread of anti-Jewish propaganda. The COVID-19 crisis has also unleashed outbursts of anti-Semitic propaganda among certain groups, although at this stage it is too early to state that the crisis has caused serious damage to the Jews' image and security. Continuing the trend observed even before the pandemic, reports of anti-Semitic incidents are increasing not only in Europe but also in the United States.<sup>1</sup> The ADL's annual Audit of Anti-Semitic Incidents, released in May 2020, found that in 2019, American Jews were subjected to more anti-Semitic incidents than in any year of the last four decades.<sup>2</sup> ADL leaders said that this essentially reflects the "normalization of antisemitism" in the United States. This was the situation even before the health and subsequent economic crisis, which is liable – as social crises do – to lead to a strengthening of radical groups, including those that harass Jews.

## Dilemmas for Decision Makers in Israel and the Diaspora at a Time of Uncertainty

Leaders and heads of organizations throughout the Jewish world are required to make decisions with likely long term significance in a period when uncertainty is a major factor that demands flexibility and the capacity to change

direction on the go. In the following paragraphs, we describe a series of areas in which questions influenced by the corona crisis are likely to arise in the medium and long term and how to deal with them. Of course, in this context, we relate only to matters that have an explicit connection to Jewish people issues.

## Foreign and Defense Policy

Even before the coronavirus pandemic erupted, the geopolitical picture and its implications for Israel and the Jewish people were problematic and laden with uncertainty. The situation has worsened due to the pandemic and its multi-system economic, social, and security repercussions. Israel will now be facing old and new challenges with relatively fewer resources than in the past, due to the pandemic's damaging impact and the huge burden of economic and social recovery. **The need to set strict priorities in dealing with these challenges should be emphasized.** In the geopolitical sphere, the challenges stem from several interrelated issues: emerging changes in the world order, especially with regard to declining US stature; chronic Mideast instability; Iran's efforts to achieve nuclear military capability and regional hegemony; the fragility of the Israeli-Palestinian arena, and frictions within the strategic Jerusalem-Washington-American Jewry triangular relationship.

**The World Order:** The COVID-19 crisis struck a world characterized by systemic “dis-order”: erosion of the Western-liberal ethos that had shaped the world order and global institutions since the end of World War II; a rise in the relative power of autocratic China and Russia; a growing awareness of the pitfalls of globalization; waning American interest in world leadership; and a weakening European Union. A lack of cooperation between the leaders of the world powers compromises the effectiveness of international institutions and makes it hard to reach consensus on controversial issues. This trend was particularly evident during the early stages of the coronavirus crisis, revealing a world reality of “every country for itself,” both in terms of healthcare and in terms of coping with the pandemic’s accompanying economic crisis.

Public and professional discourse regarding the pandemic’s implications is rife with apocalyptic forecasts; caution would seem to be in order vis-à-vis the prognostications currently circulating. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the weighty questions the crisis poses: How will the global economy be affected? How will the inter-power balance, especially between the US and China, change? Will there be social shockwaves? Should we expect regimes to topple and “failed states” to proliferate? What will be the future of globalization and the migration waves? Will we witness a rise in nationalism and a growing tendency toward closed borders and autarky? And how will the crisis affect the Middle East?

The fate of the Jewish people is bound up with the answers to those questions. For example, globalization and free trade were well-suited to the comparative advantages of an export-oriented Israeli economy. However, a world order characterized by protectionist impulses could hurt Israel. Similarly, the flourishing of Western Jewry depends largely on the liberal-democratic system’s core values. Societies not committed to these values could witness rising anti-Semitism/hostility toward the Jewish minority, and a weakened sense of obligation to protect that minority (more on this below). Accordingly, Israel should exercise caution in its relations with countries and political parties that display great friendship for Israel but whose leaders are distancing themselves from democratic norms, especially those under whom anti-Semitic elements are thriving.

**Regional Threats:** The COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on the Middle East has been less pronounced on the health plane than on the economic plane (declining oil and gas revenues, a tourism freeze, a drop in money transfers by migrant workers in the Gulf). This economic blow could intensify social and political trends that threaten the stability of a region already marked by war, terrorism, waves of refugees, humanitarian crises, stagnating economies, corruption, unemployment, and failed systems of governance. In light of these growing pressures, rulers in the region could try to spark internal agitation against Israel. On the other hand, the

economic crisis and dwindling resources could also put the brakes on this trend. Against this background, the question remains of whether the pandemic will soften or harden Teheran's aggressive policy orientation (the aspiration to nuclear military status and regional hegemony). One way or another, emerging trends in the United States make it likely that Israel will be reaching a crossroads where it will have to decide whether to bear the burden of action on the Iranian nuclear issue alone, with only "external" American support.

Alongside the Iranian threat, Israel faces the danger of a slide into violence on one or more fronts – vis-à-vis Hamas, Hezbollah, Syria, or in Judea and Samaria. The threat of Iranian and Islamic terrorism is causing a convergence of interests between Israel and the Sunni states promoting deeper security cooperation between them. **The coronavirus crisis**, and the sense of shared destiny that it may awaken among the peoples of the region, **have presented Israel with an opportunity to strengthen its cooperation with the Sunni countries.**

**The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict:** The first stage of the pandemic prompted Israeli-Palestinian cooperation (Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) established a "joint operations room" to fight the spread of the disease, although official PA sources advanced conspiracy theories that Israel was deliberately spreading contagion among Palestinians). The pandemic also halted

the rounds of violence periodically initiated by Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and it could potentially result in a long-term cease-fire in Gaza (though Gaza's descent into humanitarian crisis could also produce a renewal of terrorist activity). Developments over the months prior to the coronavirus outbreak testified to the Palestinian Authority's instability: In the wake of the American "deal of the century," which the Palestinians perceived as biased in Israel's favor, the rift between the PA and America widened. The cutback in American aid deepened the economic crisis. The intra-Palestinian split entered its 13th year with no resolution in sight. And beyond all this, internal machinations have intensified against the specter of leadership change, fueled by the sense that PA head Mahmoud Abbas is nearing the end of his tenure. The Palestinians fear that Israel will take advantage of President Trump's support, and the current international preoccupation with COVID-19, to annex West Bank territories. The firmer such Israeli intentions appear, the louder the regional and international outcry over annexation will be, with some voices warning of retaliatory and punitive measures.

Israeli public debate over unilateral annexation is not divorced from ideology, but **both supporters and opponents of annexation need, at this moment of crisis, to conduct a strict cost-benefit analysis.** On the one hand there is a window of opportunity, while an exceptionally pro-Israel US president is in office, to (at least

partly) delineate the border as Israel sees it. On the other hand, there is a lack of international support and legitimacy, including on the part of the US Democratic Party and its presumptive presidential candidate, Joe Biden. Annexation could also further alienate progressive Jewish circles from Israel. Added to this is the danger that Israel could slide into a binational reality that would threaten the state's Jewish character. There would be security, economic, and regional consequences to annexation above and beyond the challenge of economic and societal recovery from the damage wrought by the coronavirus.

**The Jerusalem-Washington-American Jewry Triangle:** Within this triangle, which is a strategic resource and a decisive force multiplier for Israel and the Jewish people, trends are emerging that threaten to weaken its resilience. Waning American interest in world leadership, a trend liable to intensify due to the raging pandemic, could potentially cause a gradual erosion of Israel's deterrence and perceived power, which depend to a great degree on its friendship with the American superpower. Such a trend could also raise questions in Washington regarding the continuation of annual aid to Israel (Israel would have to become more compliant with the demands of the US, which isn't pleased with the burgeoning economic ties between Israel and China). Israel cannot, of course, guide the direction of American foreign policy, but on specific issues of importance to Israel, **measures capable of persuading the US**

**to be present and involved in our region cannot be ruled out.** These measures would have to be taken with due circumspection, and without Israel appearing to act against US interests. It is unclear to what degree a change of leadership, following the November 2020 US elections, would alter American foreign policy writ large. We can, however, discern that Joe Biden, the Democratic candidate, represents a different approach to that of Trump on many US foreign policy issues. Among other things, he attaches importance to international treaties and institutions, and sees a need for greater global solidarity and for a US return to the world leadership stage.

Other factors complicating Israel's special relationship with the US include the difficulty of maintaining bipartisan support for Israel, due to widening ideological rifts in the US, and tensions between the Israeli government and segments of American Jewry. Seventy percent of American Jews oppose President Trump and support the Democratic Party, while some also object, in varying degrees, to Israeli governmental policy. **Israel should, therefore, take great care not to be perceived as interfering in the American elections,** or as working to make support for Israel party-dependent; it should also seek **dialogue with the entire spectrum of American Jews,** including those who express criticism of the Israeli government's policies.

## Economic Priorities

The Jewish people and its institutions are rich in resources, though these of course are not unlimited. In normal times, too, there is a constant “tug of war” out of the desire to advance different, sometimes competing agendas. In times of emergency, when the routine is broken, renewed thought is required about the priorities of the Jewish people as a whole, of its organizations and institutions, and of the funders that drive its activity. The crisis provides an opportunity to identify anew what is essential and what less essential. This reevaluation is critical in ensuring that depleted resources are not directed to areas that are not vital and allows for changes and reforms that would be more difficult to accomplish in more routine days. This chapter will cover the subject of economics only briefly, since this relates mostly to decisions taken on the explicitly professional level (deficits, interest rates, income support, etc.).

**Israel:** The allocation of economic resources occurs mainly through the government according to its priorities. In times of crisis, extra attention should be focused on these allocations to ensure they are directed to the most urgent purposes for the short and long term. Crisis also increases the need for public trust in the government and its priorities. When the public is asked to pay a price (in unemployment, taxation, cuts in assistance, etc.), its cooperation is conditioned, among other things, on accepting that the price is essential, and

on the recognition that the required price results from constraints that are acceptable to all. The manner in which the current governing coalition was established, as well as its unprecedented size, has certainly eroded to some extent the required public trust in the efficiency of government institutions. But after more than a year of political crisis, the creation of the emergency unity government was also received with a degree of relief that balanced out the picture. In the end, the real test will be how effectively the institutions, ministries, and other bodies working on the government’s behalf function, and the results they achieve.

According to these principles, Israel must also assist all the world’s Jews. This assistance should be directed toward critical needs that can be explained to a public forced to pay the price (more on this below).

**Diaspora:** Organized Diaspora communities have **four main goals** in setting budgetary priorities in this time of crisis: 1. To ensure that the community has the **resources to maintain its main institutions** so that they are able to recover after the crisis. 2. To **aid Jews in distress** within the community, be they individuals or groups (e.g., retirement homes). 3. To invest in activities arising from the crisis that have **potential for future growth** (e.g., Judaism online). 4. To join, in the name of the Jewish community, in **assisting the general community**, whether for reasons of essence (Jewish values) or of image (to boost

Jewish visibility as a force for good). This is the time to utilize cash reserves and community funds designated for emergencies.

To achieve these four goals and to safeguard the community's future, the crisis should also be seen as an opportunity to refresh budget priorities, and to reevaluate institutions and organizations, the need for them and the significance of their activities. It is appropriate to ensure – even more than in normal times – that the natural impulse to protect the status quo, even when it has become outmoded and superfluous, does not deplete the community's resources and leave it without sufficient means to maintain relevant future-securing activities. The move hinted at by the president of the Reform Movement, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, for an administrative union of America's progressive Jewish movements (Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist) is an example of the kind of thinking required at such a time.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of whether such a merger occurs or not, and without going into the specific question of its desirability, there is need for cross-cutting examinations of many other institutions and organizations and for raising clear-eyed questions about them.

## Israel-Diaspora

Israel's readiness in dealing with a health crisis (or any other) is of critical importance, since it is the largest Jewish community and is under a

central and elected government. In other words, if Israel does not maintain a policy that protects its citizens against pandemics, the damage to the Jewish people could be quick and dramatic. It is clear that, in this context, the coronavirus crisis sharpens the Jewish people's perpetual dilemma relating to the question of being gathered in one place, with all its benefits (shared national and cultural life in a space protected from harassment), as opposed to being scattered in different communities, whose advantages include an aspect of risk diffusion). One way or another, as the very core of the Jewish people, the State of Israel's decision makers must pay heed to a number of issues that directly affect the state's actions in the wider Jewish context during the coronavirus pandemic.

**Aliyah and Absorption:** For several reasons, the health crisis is an **opportunity for Israel to encourage Aliyah**. **First**, it is traversing the crisis relatively well, relying on a strong universal healthcare system. **Second**, it allows for the continuity of Jewish life, even when gathering in traditional Jewish institutions (synagogues) is not possible or more complicated, and it safeguards a strong Jewish identity. **Third**, it provides Jews with a space that is relatively protected from harassment by radical elements exploiting the crisis atmosphere for incitement and fostering hate. **Fourth**, economic crises have historically been a major engine of migration. Although Israel has its own economic crisis, someone who has lost his or her financial base elsewhere may

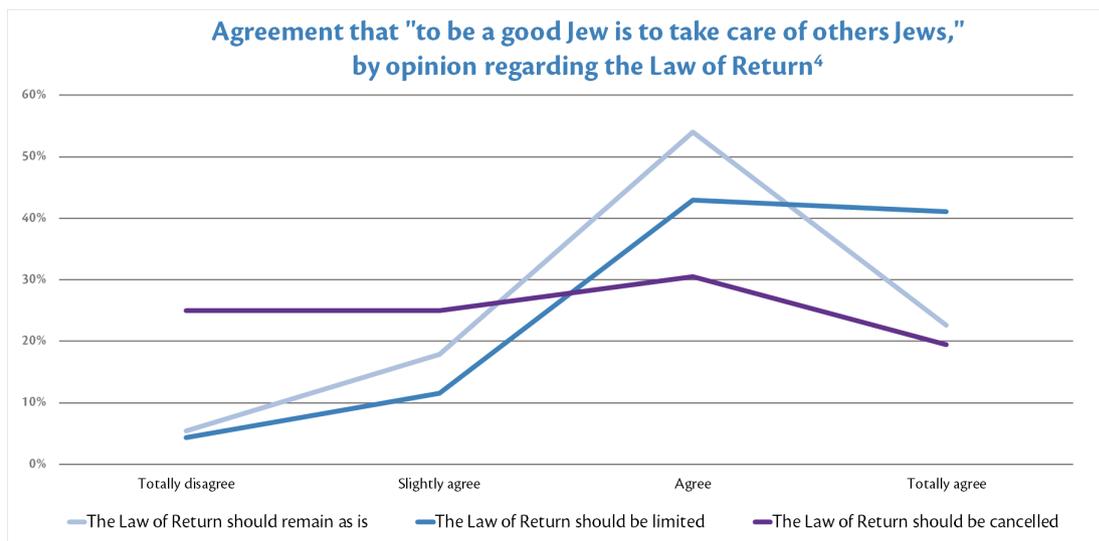
consider migrating to Israel (if only because, without the economic consideration, the other factors mentioned above come into play).

At the same time, the opportunity to increase Aliyah involves quite a few dilemmas. Israel is itself in a complex economic situation, which the extra costs of immigrant absorption would not help. Such an additional burden would not only have economic implications, but also psycho-social ones that could increase tensions between veteran Israelis and new immigrants due to competition over resource allocations. By the way, this tension existed in the past during large-scale waves of Aliyah. But, in the end, Aliyah to Israel has contributed both to Israeli society and to its economy.

Aliyah under pandemic conditions also presents and complicates public health challenges. The desire to bring new olim must be tempered by measures to avoid importing more COVID-19. In such conditions, arguments over the

immigrants' identity (their places of origin and their degree of Jewishness, etc.) are likely to intensify. According to JPPI data, a third of the Israeli Jews already support narrowing the scope of the Law of Return. This perspective is likely to increase in conditions of large-scale Aliyah at a time when absorbing immigrants (a significant proportion of whom are eligible under the Law of Return but are not Jewish) poses a greater challenge than usual.

Israelis living abroad constitute another group that should be considered in light of the crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted Israel's effective management of the crisis compared to other countries with large concentrations of Israelis, such as the United States and the United Kingdom. This creates an opportunity to bring Israelis back to Israel. We must work to ensure re-acclimation tracks for these returnees and provide special encouragement to those whose contribution to economic growth is high.



Among Jews in Israel, those who want to limit the Law of Return tend to be more concerned with the welfare of other Jews.

**Aid to Communities:** The COVID-19 pandemic threw some Diaspora Jewish communities into crisis or brought them to the brink of one. This occurred for several principal reasons. **First**, high infection rates and widespread fatalities; **second**, damage to community institutions and resources, which makes it difficult to continue providing services to community members; and **third**, diminished security of Jews resulting from heightened social tensions. These three crisis factors demand that Israel determine whether and how it is able to aid communities to improve their situation and, of course, the extent to which it is obliged to do so.

There are not many options for how aid could be extended.

Allowing and even **encouraging Aliyah** is one type of aid, which to some extent offers a solution to the third problem (harassment of Jews), but does not offer a solution to the first (health) or the second (economic). In effect, the most reasonable scenario is that encouraging Aliyah would actually cause even more economic harm to the communities, which would lose families and resources, especially if Israel prioritizes the immigration of young professionals.

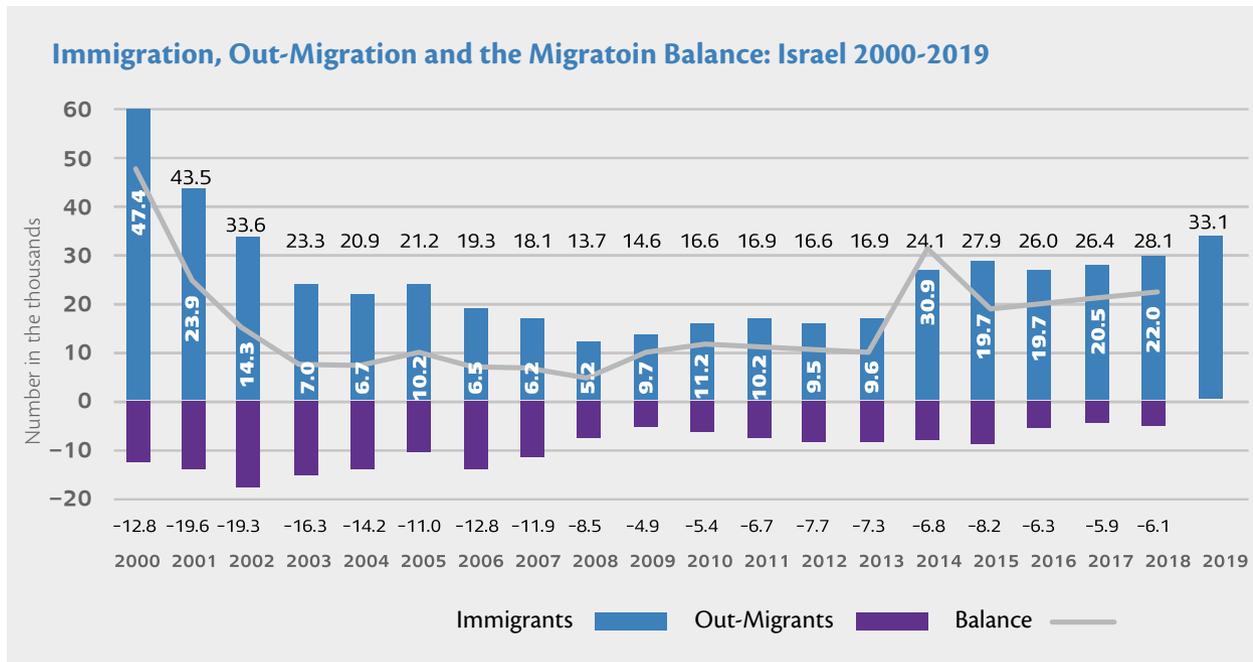
**Medical aid** is a complicated matter for Israel, certainly when dealing with countries that have well-developed healthcare systems, and at a time when Israel itself is stretched to the limit ensuring that its own population's needs are

met. At the same time, Israel should consider the possibility of providing such aid for two reasons and in two ways. First, symbolic aid that expresses Israel's aspiration of mutual responsibility. Second, limited emergency aid to Jewish communities in countries where healthcare systems are straining to handle the load. Such aid could take the form of advisers (physicians, social workers) or equipment (medicines, masks, etc.).

**Economic aid to communities whose resources are exhausted** is also not a simple matter. Israel, too, must deal with tough dilemmas in the area of resource allocation, although limited amounts of financial assistance could be provided to communities that have been especially hard hit. Polling on this subject has shown that around half of Israeli Jews support aiding Diaspora communities (48 percent), although it has also found that only about a third of Israelis would donate from their own pockets to such an initiative.<sup>5</sup> It would be preferable that an economic initiative be managed as a partnership between Israel and strong Diaspora communities to aid weaker, more needy ones. If Israel wishes to take such a step, it is appropriate that it assess whether there are people within the community itself who could raise assistance funds, as well as whether its institutions are sufficiently well run to justify outside economic aid. Israel and the organized Diaspora community do not need to strive to save every Jewish institution

in financial straits, but rather to ensure that resources are provided to institutions and organizations for which there is good reason to be saved and whose activities serve a clear and

essential purpose. Economic crisis creates an opportunity to condition necessary financial aid on reforms whose time has come.



### Relations Between Jews and Non-Jews

The pandemic crisis is also likely to affect relations between Jews and non-Jews in various ways. Several key factors will drive these influences. **First**, social and economic crises carry a radicalization danger. Experience teaches that societies in a state of tension and polarization are often unfriendly to Jews. **Second**, because of the crisis, we are likely to see the radicalization of specific population groups that are not fans of the Jews and who are liable to exploit the pandemic to build their following. **Third**, governments in countries hit by the

crisis may have difficulty directing political and economic resources to the protection of Jews. **Fourth**, perceptions of Jews as a group are likely to be influenced by the actions of individuals and groups during the pandemic, whether negatively (the Jews do not take care to keep to the rules and harm the general population) but certainly also positively. During this period, the Jewish people can highlight its commitment to and participation in the common war of all of humanity to defeat the virus through financial donations, volunteering, technological and medical innovation, etc. **Fifth**, Israel's actions

in dealing with the crisis affect how Jews are perceived worldwide. This applies to both its internal response and its external aid (as discussed, through development of inventions, technology, assistance to communities in need, etc.)

The following are several of the issues that the Jewish people's decision makers must deal with in this regard:

**Anti-Semitism:** The growing scale of anti-Semitic incidents was apparent years before the coronavirus crisis broke and had already begun to erode the sense that had prevailed among certain Jewish groups that this phenomenon was a thing of the past. Historical experience over many years teaches that social, political, and economic crises – including those spurred by epidemics – serve as fertile ground for the spread of Jew hate. Accordingly, if the crisis continues, and the worse its social and economic outcomes are, Jewish communities must **prepare for a period of significantly elevated levels of anti-Semitism.** This preparation should include a range of instruments: proactive defense measures, coalition building with supportive groups, joint endeavors with various law-enforcement agencies, lobbying activity by organizations and individuals who are close to those in power, strengthening the sense of community partnership, contingency plans for responding to and dealing with emergencies, trauma, etc.

Israel's role in relation to this phenomenon has three critical strategic elements. **First**, it should improve its absorption capacity as a refuge for Jews in the event they are forced, or desire, to leave the countries in which they live. **Second**, it should optimize cooperation with Diaspora Jewish communities and the organizations that represent their interests. Israel must bear in mind that Diaspora Jews have a better understanding of their environments and the means at their disposal; for this reason it is best that it work in coordination with these Jews as much as possible (including, in significant cases, considering accepting a degree of damage to Israel's direct interests to advance the war against anti-Semitism). **Third**, it should engage in covert and overt activity to protect Jewish communities by utilizing various agencies available to the state in areas such as intelligence, investigations, security, etc. Israel must also prepare for an extended period of such activity and ensure that its agencies and institutional structures are at the ready organizationally to undertake it effectively and on an ongoing basis.

**Aid to Others:** The Diaspora Jewish communities, and Israel too (perhaps, advisedly, also within a cooperative framework) must find ways **to highlight the stabilizing aid Jews provide to groups and individuals shaken by crisis.** Jews, of course, engage in supportive action all the time, through donations and volunteering, but in this time of crisis it is important to emphasize

that such action is connected to the Jewish community. Action in the community’s name is necessary first and foremost as a matter of principle – the calling to assist vulnerable groups and demonstrate solidarity with all humanity in a period of crisis. Such action would also improve the image of the Jewish community at a time of tension and will ease the process of finding coalition partners to counter anti-Jewish harassment.

Israel can and must find in the crisis opportunities to improve its ties with countries and groups to whom it is able to offer help.

Of course, at a time when resources are tight and needs are pressing, the question of when it is and when it is not possible to help others should be seriously considered (“The poor of your own city come first”). It is clear, however, that sometimes reasonable aid can be given with considerable benefit over the long term. As such, decisions concerning aid to other countries or organizations during the crisis should be handled by an integrative body such as the National Security Council, and not by those whose purviews are limited to a specific arena (Treasury, Health, Strategic Affairs, etc.).

### Anti-Semitism in Western Europe and the United States

Data Point	Anti-Semitism in Western Europe and the US	Trend	US	France	UK	Germany
Hold anti-Semitic views (%) <sup>6</sup>		▼	10 (10)	17 (37) <sup>7</sup>	36 (39) <sup>8</sup>	16 (27) <sup>9</sup>
Hold anti-Semitic views, among Muslims (%) <sup>10</sup>		▲	-	49 (83)	58 (54)	70 (62)
Rise/decline in incidents (%)		▲	+12	+27	+7	+13
Violent assaults		▲	61 [39]	151 [183]	157 [124]	98 [62]
Total incidents (extreme violence, assaults, damage, desecration, threats)		▲	2,107 [1,879]	687 [541]	1,805 [1,690]	2,000 [1,770]
Rate of incidents per 1,000 Jews		▲	0.37 [0.33]	1.5 (1.2)	6.2 (5.8)	17.2 (15.3)
Anti-Semitism is a very serious or fairly serious problem (%)		▲	73 (76)	95 (86)	75 (48)	85 (40)
Considered emigrating because they do not feel safe in their countries (%)		▲		44 (46) <sup>11</sup>	29 (18)	44 (25)
Avoid places in their neighborhood because they do not feel safe there as Jews (%)		▲	8	35 (20)	68 (37)	35 (28)

Note: Numbers without parentheses are for the year 2019/2020. Numbers in square brackets are from 2018, while those in parentheses are the most recent figures available.

## The Haredim: Tested by Corona

The Haredi Orthodox may be a minority group among Jews but its significance exceeds its numerical size for several reasons: its high birthrate, profound degree of engagement in Jewish life, unsurpassed Jewish literacy, and strong and stable relationship to Jewish tradition and the Jewish people.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the COVID-19 crisis exposed weaknesses in the community's structure and practices.<sup>13</sup> The reason a separate section in this report is devoted to the Haredi community, in Israel and elsewhere in the world, is that they have been harmed by the pandemic at far higher rates than other communities, Jewish and non-Jewish alike. Among other reasons, it was apparent that the community had difficulty in adapting to the rules of conduct required during the pandemic. Educational institutions and synagogues (mainly, but not only, in the Haredi community) shuttered late, which permitted massive infection among members of the community. Leaders, among them prominent rabbis, were slow to recognize the necessity to act according to the directives of the civil authorities. The result was a harsh blow to health (with many lives lost) and to their way of life – and also to the community's image in the eyes of Jews and non-Jews.<sup>14</sup>

This state of affairs demands that the community and its leadership reorganize, as many of them admitted after the fact (notable

in this was Aryeh Deri in an interview with the newspaper, *Kikar HaShabbat*).<sup>15</sup> It also demands that the other Jewish institutions and leaders – the Israeli government and organizations in the Diaspora – reevaluate the networks of connection between the non-Orthodox and Haredi worlds. Below are several aspects that should be examined in light of the pandemic's impact on the Haredi community:

### **Haredi Relations with Civic Leadership:**

The Haredi community excels in managing social policy that delineates clear boundaries of conduct and community life-style, their preservation and their enforcement. The community is also adept in exercising power, particularly political-electoral power, to secure budgets and other benefits. This management has withstood claims that it contradicts the demographic, economic and security realities of the modern world. What the Haredim were asked to do in the face of the coronavirus was to forgo practices that represented a significant part of their collective identity. They were not asked to disregard Halacha, which makes it clear that saving a life supersedes all other mitzvot. And indeed, once it sank in that this was a matter of saving lives, the top rabbis called for strict compliance with government instructions. The problem was the time it took before community leaders understood that this was a case of saving life. Until that point, most assumed that the instructions were yet another assault on their collective identity and

reacted as they usually do in their struggle to preserve this identity.

A central and important tenet of the Haredi-Orthodox world is separateness from the secular world. This goes to the essence of the group's educational and communal philosophy and enables Haredi Jewry to rear their children to continue along the path of the previous generation. The health crisis exposed the difficulty of discerning the urgent need to lower the fences separating the Haredi world from the secular authorities, and to accept, under exigent circumstances, directives from officials whose priorities are totally different from those of the Haredi leadership. The difficulty in making such a sharp transition is understood. When the secular state leadership orders the yeshivot closed, the group's leaders are suspicious – with some justification – that the yeshivot are not as important to the secular as they are to the rabbinical leadership. This suspicion leads to the assumption that the order was issued lightly, with little appreciation of its consequences, and should not to be heeded without time for additional consideration. Under pandemic conditions, this extra time led to a serious infection crisis with a high incidence of disease and death.

Given the outcomes, we can state that relations between the Haredi-rabbinical leadership and the secular authorities need to be adapted to allow for rapid identification of crises

that require sharp reprioritization and the suspension, at least for a while, of the inherent distrust between the Haredim and the non-Haredi world. The most suitable candidates for institutionalizing these adaptations are the Haredi sector's representatives who are part of the secular government (even if they don't always accept its ideological priorities) and enjoy the trust of the Haredi community, which is not accustomed to suspicion-free dialogue with secular institutions. These public representatives have a duty to find a way to rapidly implement emergency procedures in their community, including persuading the rabbis and spiritual leaders to act quickly according to the directives they have received. The secular government's institutions (mainly in Israel, though there are parallels in Diaspora community institutions) would do well if they too found a way to establish a format for emergency communications with a Haredi world that is relatively isolated from them. This is true in the technical sense (how to communicate with a population that largely doesn't use televisions or smart phones) but even more so in the substantive sense (how to foster relationships of trust in times of emergency without the need for an adjustment period).

**Halacha:** Orthodox Halacha is not shaped in policy institutes or organizational institutions, but rather through an ongoing multi-voice process of rabbinical discourse. This discourse

has its own rules and does not readily respond to outside pressures. That said, there is no doubt that those who run the discourse desire to maintain its relevance to the conditions in which Jews actually live. In the reality that has coalesced in recent months, these conditions include the coronavirus pandemic and its requisite “social distancing” – a means that constantly interferes with a way of life shaped by Halachic routine. From prayer *minyanim* to the learning community, from the extended family gathered for the Seder, to the congregation required for a funeral or *shiva*. The Orthodox community’s Halachic and social practices were severely disrupted by the demand for social distancing and require measures anchored not only in the epidemiological discourse but also in the Halacha.

As discussed, the Halachic discourse requires safeguarding human life. But it is not always clear what precisely this entails – in which areas or for how long. As of this writing, it is uncertain when and how the crisis will end, though we should take into account the possibility that it will require lifestyle changes for a long time, perhaps permanently. It falls to the rabbis and community leaders to develop tools for dealing with changing life conditions. So it is with regard to the rules of prayer and gathering, of purity and family life, and every other element that may be required to strike a new balance between keeping Halacha as it has taken shape until now and the necessity to protect life.

**Perceptions:** The COVID-19 crisis has resulted in two outcomes vis-a-vis the image of the Haredim and Jews in general. First, relations between Haredi and non-Haredi Jews – relations that were already fraught with escalating tensions over various issues (pluralism, religion and state, attitudes toward modernity, IDF service, etc.). JPPI’s annual Pluralism Index surveys attitudes toward different population groups in Israel. The Haredim consistently rank at the bottom of the ladder with respect to their “contribution to the country” (it isn’t that they don’t contribute but that other Israelis perceive them as not doing so). This year, their ranking was similarly low. In fact, in the weighted responses of Jews and non-Jews, the Haredi community, on average, ranked lowest of all groups measured in terms of contributions to the country. Moreover, this year it was clear that Israel’s secular population believes the Haredim enjoy preferential treatment over other groups. These and other data testify to the fact that attitudes toward Haredim took an even more negative turn during the current crisis.

On another level, the Haredi community’s comportment during the COVID-19 crisis has reflected on Jews in general. Conspicuous in their dress and ways, and easily identifiable as a Jewish group, **the Haredi community’s conduct has ramifications for non-Haredi Jews**. This fact was thrown into sharp relief when Bill de Blasio, the mayor of New York City, criticized the behavior of “the Jewish

community” following a Haredi funeral that broke the rules. His rebuke met with a sharp response from Jewish figures and organizations, Haredi and non-Haredi, which impelled the mayor to clarify his statement. It was hard, however, to shake off the impression already left: when a group whose Jewishness stands out breaks the rules, its actions affect attitudes toward Jews in general. This, of course, leads to further alienation between Jews and other Jews, but is also liable to lead to an erosion of the image of all Jews.

## Physical vs. Digital Judaism

Jewish tradition is based on gatherings of Jews for communal activities in a single space. So it is for families and friends on seder night, community prayer/worship, education in classrooms and between study partners, to give just a few examples. COVID-19 forced Jews to curtail or cancel physical space gatherings and move instead to virtual spaces. Online activities have a number of disadvantages but also some advantages. In light of the developments in recent months during the crisis, consideration should be given to how to best design the Jewish space for the coming years and decades. Of course, the process of rethinking the balance between virtual and physical venues is not unique to the Jewish arena. It is underway in many contexts: schools and universities, the workplace, health care,

sports and more. At the same time, the Jewish sphere has special characteristics, including the need for gatherings as the most appropriate way to meet with a dimension of intimacy and meaning, but also for shared rituals with tangible elements (it is impossible to taste bitter herbs from a virtual seder plate or to sit in a digital sukkah).

Based on the experience accumulated to this point, and given the possibility that digital activity will be necessary or even expand in the future, the following are among the considerations that must be borne in mind:

**Commitment and Participation:** Digital activity does not generate the same commitment as the physical space. It is easy to connect and easy to disconnect, the cost in time and money is low, the investment of time and money is felt less. These two facts are, of course, two sides of the same coin. Gatherings in physical space are harder to organize but produce a greater sense of community. Gatherings in the digital space are easier to organize but produce fairly loose connections. Translating this to the Jewish world, moving from the physical space to the digital can help enlarge the circle of Jewish interest and participation. It makes it easier to invite large audiences to “sample” Jewish life and perhaps find meaning in it. Cyberspace facilitates connections with young people, with those far away, with those who do not feel comfortable in community institutions and

those seeking a cautious way to explore before committing for the long term (or who wish to remain occasional samplers). Alongside these advantages are also clear disadvantages, including a community with thin attachment and low levels of emotional investment and commitment.

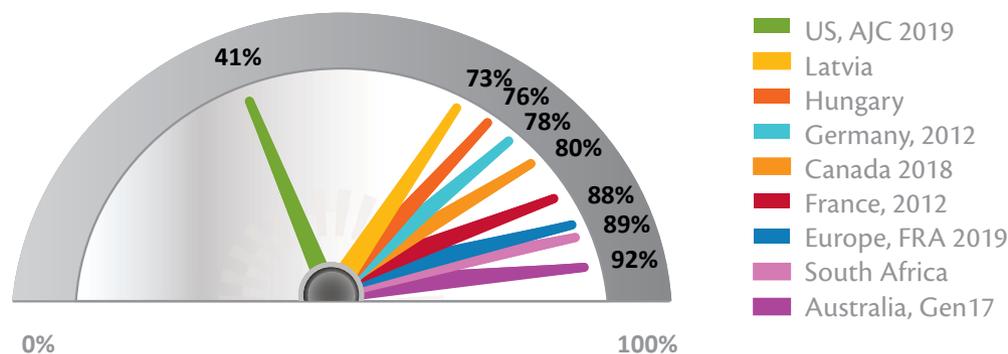
The damage the pandemic brought upon the Birthright and Masa programs, which have been among the Jewish world's most important and effective educational and identity building tools in recent decades, is inestimable. You can do a lot of things on Zoom, but a change in consciousness requires an unmediated interpersonal encounter, as happens on a long bus ride and in joint face-to-face activities between Israeli and Diaspora young people.

**Balancing the Short and Long Terms:** It is necessary to achieve a balance between these advantages and disadvantages that will be the product of two components. One -- reality and its dictates. In a world in which social distancing is required, the Jewish community

has no alternative but to continue investing in the digital space; it is only there that it will be possible to continue conducting regular activities for large audiences. Only once the world returns to some semblance of normality will it be possible for the Jewish community and its institutions to hold physical space gatherings on the pre-coronavirus scale. Second – modifying the relationship between physical and digital activity in an effort to **take advantage of the considerable achievements in the digital arena during the crisis as a lever for future action.** The goal of such a readjustment is to balance between the advantages of the tangible space (commitment, intimacy) and those of the digital space (expanded audiences, quick and easy connection). Of course, the optimal track is from digital to tangible. The digital space should be a portal that allows for daily accessible and inclusive connection – but which is also followed (to varying degrees) by connection in the tangible Jewish space which generates greater commitment.

## The Israel Visit Index

### Visits: Traveled to Israel at Least Once



In JPPI's 2019 Annual Assessment, we unveiled our Israel Visit Index. As mentioned, the question of visits to Israel serves as an approximation of the feeling of attachment between Israel and the Diaspora. The underlying assumption is that the higher the sense of attachment, the greater the desire to choose Israel as a travel destination and to visit at least once in one's life. One of the profound changes hitting the Jewish world during this coronavirus period is the almost total cessation of visits by Jews to Israel.

For most countries, there can be no updates to the index readings as no surveys have

been published showing changes since last year's data were presented. The exception is the Jewish community of South Africa, on which two studies were published in the last year. One, from November 2019, on the Cape Town community,<sup>16</sup> and the other, published in March 2020, on South African Jews in general.<sup>17</sup> According to the data, a large majority of South African Jews have visited Israel at least once (89 percent). Twenty-one percent of Johannesburg respondents have visited Israel more than ten times, compared to 15 percent in Cape Town and 10 percent in Durban.

## Endnotes

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