Oz v'Tiferet

Studies in Trauma-Informed Congregational Practices

Molly D. May
Academy for Jewish Religion
Masters Thesis
Spring 2025

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

When trauma-informed care is discussed, many people mistakenly believe that "trauma-informed" means advanced preparation for targeted responses to trauma and measures for dealing with acute trauma situations. The need for trauma-informed practice is constant, but it is especially important in the post-acute phase, after a situation has calmed down, and people are attempting to move past a traumatic event. Working to avoid further harm is trauma-informed care; trauma responses are what is required in the moment.

Specific traumatic events change the landscape, particularly when thinking about Jewish experiences. As a Jewish professional who grew up in Pittsburgh and lived there again as an adult until the summer of 2022, I cannot avoid talking about my experience with the massacre at the Tree of Life synagogue, which was a mile and a half from my own congregation and a mile from my parents' home. The COVID-19 pandemic is a collective trauma that has affected everyone and has made its way into the lexicon of describing time. And the landscape of being Jewish and the relationship to Israel has changed since the massacre and the taking of hostages on October 7, 2023. Particularly when considering the Tree of Life shooting, the event has moved from an acute trauma that is at the foreground to a less recent traumatic event that is a part of the landscape, more so for some than for others.

The genesis of this project began before I had even matriculated as a seminary student. I became aware of the term "trauma-informed" at a PTA meeting for the local middle and high school arts magnet, in February of 2020. The timing, as it turned out, could not have been better. Or worse, in thinking about the worldwide response to the COVID-19 pandemic that had already begun and was only a few weeks from shutting the world down at the time of the meeting. I made it a point to attend this meeting to hear from Dr. Liz Miller, who is the head of adolescent

medicine at Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh-UPMC. Since I was personally acquainted with her, I wanted to support her work by attending the meeting, and she began by introducing the rather small group to the concept of trauma-informed educational practices.

Dr. Miller shared with us that trauma-informed educational practices are modifications and accommodations that are designed to improve the educational environment and provide protection for all students, rather than targeting only certain students who were known to have experienced trauma. She said that even if a student had not experienced trauma or hardship, they likely had other reasons why an accommodation or modification would work for them. Dr. Miller also shared the work that she had done on prevention of dating violence in teens. The program "Coaching Boys Into Men" was based around her research. The program did not target specific people based on trauma history; rather, the program targeted athletes because they were an easy group to select. Additionally, athletes work with adult mentors who are not parents or teachers; the informal relationship changes the dynamic, and kids are often more receptive to adults in the coaching role.

The idea of proactive intervention was intriguing. Proactive interventions rather than only targeted reactive responses are measures that prevent further trauma to those who have already experienced it, and these interventions are beneficial to many others, whether they have been harmed previously or not. The textbook *Directions in Psychiatry* explains:

> Trauma-informed care is not a treatment per se; it is an approach that starts with the premise that practitioners do no (more) harm, and proceeds with sensitivity to the distinctive issues that arise in the context of trauma and broader client centered principles of practice. Some have described the trauma informed perspective as a paradigm shift

inasmuch as this perspective represents a change in the framework for understanding clients and the context of their presenting complaints.[1]

I considered what other trauma-informed interventions looked like. I remembered Richard Meritzer, disability coordinator for the city of Pittsburgh, who had only recently died of cancer at that time when I was learning about trauma-informed care. Richard was a tireless advocate for physical space accessibility in a city that is full of hills and steps. Richard's work in inclusion felt trauma-informed to me. Even though the absence of inclusive measures does not necessarily cause trauma, Richard was sensitive to the distinct issues of people who live with disabilities, and he worked diligently so that people could have more agency in their lives and avoid the hurt that comes from repeatedly being reminded of their need for access. Richard wanted to be sure that people could get from place to place with ease and–ideally–without having to ask. One of his major projects in his role as disability coordinator was the "One Step Project," where building owners could more easily renovate their buildings to get rid of the one step (or more) that was often the only way to get in the door. Instead of going through several different permit processes, Richard created a process by which the building owners could take the "one step" of bringing a proposal to his office, allowing his office handle the permit process in a streamlined way because the office would handle many of these requests and would know how to get things done.[2] Rather than causing further harm by reminding people of what they cannot do (possibly reactivating a trauma related to injury or illness), building and physical space accessibility allows people to feel empowered in the performance of seemingly ordinary

[1] Butler, L. D., Critelli, F. M., & Rinfrette, E.S. "Trauma-Informed Care and Mental Health." *Directions in Psychiatry*, Volume 31, pp 197-210. January 1, 2011.
[2] Meritzer, Richard. "The One-Step Project: Paving the Way to an Accessible City." City of Pittsburgh Department of City Planning. August 2016, Pittsburgh PA.

activities. Although Richard's work does not directly inform this project, his work did provide part of my initial framework for understanding.

The Union for Reform Judaism's Audacious Hospitality initiative was another entry point for me into the world of trauma-informed practice by way of proactive intervention. The URJ continues to publish articles and helpful documents on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion that not only acknowledge the difficulties that Jews have with being accepted in society but also lifts up the challenges that certain groups of Jews may have more than others. Specifically, there are helpful guides written by Jews of Color which challenge assumptions about who is and is not Jewish. These guides illustrate how certain Jews enjoy social privilege in ways that other Jews do not. There are also a variety of disability inclusion initiatives as a part of this larger umbrella of Audacious Hospitality.

The intersection of trauma responses with events in the Torah became the centerpiece of this project. The expert in this area was Dr. Greg Siegle, from the department of neuroscience at the University of Pittsburgh. For many years, Dr. Siegle was by my side on the *bima* on Saturday mornings, adding his bright tenor voice and masterful countermelodies on guitar and mandolin to the music of prayer. He also added insights on Torah during those times when we would have a study session instead of a sermon, sharing his insights on scientific explanations for behaviors seen in the Torah and highlighting why we as modern Jews can still learn so much from these ancient texts.

Such an example of Dr. Siegle's masterful interpretation comes from his words during Shabbat morning services on November 20, 2021. We had just read from the portion in Genesis which begins with the story of Jacob preparing to meet his estranged brother Esau. That night, Jacob wrestles with a divine being who injures his leg, possibly his sciatic nerve. Siegle noted

that Jacob may have been experiencing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder after his previous conflicts and subsequent fleeing from both his brother and his uncle, which he describes as–among other things–an avoidance condition in which people store trauma in their bodies and try to block out sensation. On the eve of having to face his brother and the fear that his brother would still be angry with him and try to kill him, Jacob has a pain in his body that he cannot ignore. Siegle says that this anchors Jacob and brings him back to his body, enabling him to prepare for the confrontation of his fears.

Good congregational stewardship acknowledges that people are not living in vacuums and that everyone who walks through our doors may have had some sort of traumatic event that weighs on them. Having enough information and background in trauma and trauma-informed practice does not require leaders to be clinical experts; leaders can also cause further problems when stepping outside of their scope. Trauma-informed congregational practice is good congregational stewardship.

In crafting this work, I am favoring certain terms, and I feel the need to further define these terms. I have begun to define "trauma-informed" practice, which is the topic of this sourcebook. I will further elaborate on this definition in the first chapter and throughout this work. The next term is "congregational leadership." While I might use "clergy" when specifically referring to rabbis and cantors (or to those on the pulpit in other faith traditions), the term "congregational leadership" includes non-ordained professionals such as cantorial soloists, music directors, and educators. The term also includes board members and other lay leadership–any person who is front-facing in a congregation and may need to receive training. When I use "we" in the discourse of this handbook, I am generally referring to the all-encompassing term of congregational leadership.

The boundaries of this book are necessary to prevent this from becoming too large a project and something beyond my ability to manage. I am not speaking excessively about the current wave of antisemitism and anti-Israel sentiment (that is, starting from October of 2023 through the time of the completion of this work at the end of 2024) as that is beyond the scope of this paper. As of the time of this writing, there are still nearly 100 hostages held in Gaza, and campus anti-semitism is at a consistent fever pitch–there is still too much acute trauma, and events are still unfolding. There is not sufficient distance for analysis of these events.

Congregational leaders are not expected to be trauma therapists. This work acknowledges the limitations of congregational leadership and is an exploration of Jewish texts that focus congregational efforts on those trauma-informed practices that are within their purview. Congregational leaders should gather community resources and understand the boundaries of congregational work while still remaining informed about trauma, mental health, psychological pathologies, and developmental concerns. The task is great, which is why information is so powerful.

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Rabbi Beth Naditch, whose expertise in trauma recovery as well as clinical pastoral education made her the ideal choice to help me with the completion of this project. I am grateful to Rabbi Jef Segelman, who was supervising me in my fieldwork placement during a difficult time and said something to the effect of, “If you don’t get to do all you meant to do because of this experience, then navigating through this experience is what you learned.” This thesis topic ultimately became my topic because of that lesson. And I am eternally grateful to Rabbi Sharyn Henry and Don Megahan, who steered me in the direction of the cantorate in the first place.

As a part of this project, I interviewed several people. With the exception of Dr. Greg Siegle, the rest of the people to whom I spoke will be referred to anonymously, with no identifiers except that some may be Pittsburgh Jewish professionals speaking about their experiences at the time of the Tree of Life shooting. I am thankful for my interview with Dr. Siegle–this conversation was one of many in which he led me through an exploration of Torah and neuroscience. I also feel very fortunate to have spoken to several people who responded to my requests to help me bring more life to this project.

My mother is a retired reading specialist and educational advocate. Her guidance helped me to see the ways in which people required tools to get their jobs done or could use extra accommodations to be successful. She also taught me the value of generosity, including but not limited to feeding people. Being sure that people are fed without barriers is, itself, a trauma-informed practice. I am also grateful to my husband and my family for being a sounding board and source of incredible support.

This work combines scholarly research, Torah study, and personal interviews to create a book of connection around an essential topic for modern Jewish congregational leaders. The synthesis begins with ideas drawn from educational and disability advocacy, adds them to trauma-informed pastoral care guides from other traditions, and centers around Jewish texts. It is a part of my vision for a community that does not need to ask the question of "what happened to you"--much less "what's wrong with you"--in order to say "we're here for you."

CHAPTER 1 - What is Our Strength and What is Our Might: Defining Terms

מָה אָנוּ מָה חַיֵּינוּ מָה חַסְדֵּנוּ, מַה צִדְקוֹתֵינוּ, מַה יְשׁוּעָתֵנוּ, מַה כֹּחֵנוּ מַה גְּבוּרָתֵנוּ?
What are we? What is our life? What are our acts of kindness? What is our righteousness?
What is our deliverance? What is our strength? What is our might? (traditional morning liturgy)

In any work dealing with the concept of trauma-informed care, it is essential to clarify a definition of both trauma and trauma-informed care as we are using it. The field of a trauma and trauma studies has changed dramatically over the course of the past 40 years. In 1980, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (the DSM-III) was the first edition of this manual to define Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, stating, "catastrophic events such as war, rape, and natural disasters create ruptures within the personal and/or collective psyche."[3] According to the DSM-III, these are traumatic occurrences. This definition marked an entry into the understanding of trauma and post-trauma reactions from a psychological perspective. Before the official diagnostic category of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, the word commonly referred to physical injury, but a more expansive lens was needed to describe what continued to happen to people who had experienced major world-shaking events and were unable to return to their baseline. The label of PTSD helped people to understand their struggles and seek help. This work was building on the the treatment of soldiers in WWI in England, and researchers recognized the experiences of military personnel in subsequent wars.

The definition of individual trauma from SAMHSA–Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration–is more comprehensive and brings in a subjective component, explaining that events are not necessarily in an of themselves traumatic, but trauma response includes how the event is experienced by the individual, based on their previous history or other elements. "Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that

[3]American Psychiatric Association. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. American Psychiatric Publishing, 1980, 1994, 2012, 2022

is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being."[4] This definition takes into account the way that a person feels and does not require a diagnosis of PTSD to understand that a person may have experienced trauma in their lives. While it is beyond the scope of this sourcebook, it interesting to note that the work of Judith Herman and others moved our understanding of trauma from something purely psychological to being situated in cultural and political contexts–it does not occur in a vacuum of a singular person but is also affected by the community.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, as described in the 2012 update to the DSM-V is an extreme version of what happens to some people who experience traumatic events. When thinking about trauma, it is important to note that not everyone who experiences a potentially traumatic event develops PTSD or even suffers from post-traumatic effects. Approximately 70% of American adults will experience some trauma in their lifetime, but only a small percentage–about 6%--will go on to develop PTSD, according to the Department of Veteran's Affairs.[5] The VA states that most people will experience some kind of trauma in their lives that could lead to PTSD, and their website contains further descriptions, while also noting that it is difficult to determine percentages. The DSM-V definition of PTSD is included at the end of this work, for further reference.

Distinguishing stress from trauma is important. Stressful situations may cause trauma, but stress can be experienced in a range from tolerable to toxic. Stress is, itself, not trauma. A trauma-informed system will be responsive to both stress and trauma, and will be an essential

[4] https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/trauma
[5] https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/common/common_adults.asp

tool in helping to address extreme stress so that it does not veer, untreated, into the realm of trauma.

Nick Haslam and Melanie McGrath, of the University of Melbourne, wrote about the "creeping concept of trauma" in their article with that very title. They wrote about the ways in which language evolves in such a way that words do not mean the same things as they did before. One of their examples is the word "addiction" which, though previously only applied to substances, has expanded to include shopping, gaming, gambling, and sex. Haslam proposed the idea of concept creep in 2016 and cites himself in 2020:

> "[Concept creep] is first and foremost a claim that a set of psychological concepts have undergone a progressive semantic expansion in recent decades so that they now refer to a much broader range of experiences, actions, or people than they did previously. Second, it is a claim that this semantic broadening takes two distinct forms. Third, it proposes that the set of inflating concepts has a common, unifying theme. Fourth, it makes a series of claims about the influences that are driving that inflation. Finally, it speculates on what the impacts of semantic expansion may be."[6]

Haslam and McGrath describe "vertical" and "horizontal" creep in referring to trauma. Vertical creep is defined as instances of lesser intensity being described as trauma, whereas horizontal creep extends outward to include new phenomena. The sharp increase in use of the word "trauma" and the horizontal expansion of the definition began with the DSM-III in 1980–the first DSM referred to trauma primarily in relation to effects from head injuries. Haslam and McGrath say that "the standard understanding at this time was that traumas normally involved threats to life and limb" whereas later DSM editions allowed for subjectivity in people's degree of distress. They write this as a critique of societal and linguistic change–including a

[6] Haslam, N., & McGrath, M. (2020). The creeping concept of trauma. *Social Research, 87,* 509-531.

broader definition of what constitutes trauma–and do not seem to be in favor of the change, based on their usage of the words "promiscuous" "hyperbolic" and "bleaching."

As professionals who serve religious communities in a distinctively non-clinical role, we must recognize the symptoms of acute stress and of potential PTSD, but as we are not trauma therapists, it is not ours to diagnose or evaluate a person's experience using psychiatric language."[3] We can be aware of concept creep and careful about our language while still being open to the idea that there are degrees of trauma, and many of our congregants have experienced adverse events on an individual level in addition to what they may have experienced as part of a collective. It bears repeating: as religious professionals, it is critical to be aware that "trauma-informed" practices are not the same as practices which address acute trauma, and that most clergy are not trained trauma therapists.

Knowing about clinical and pathological issues can help congregational leadership to make decisions that are trauma-informed and reduce harm. It is important to maintain a referral list of therapists and organizations which can help people with psychological or psychiatric trauma treatment.

Having defined trauma and acknowledging its expanding colloquial definitions which can make it hard to pin down, the next important definition is that of trauma-informed practice. Congregations are well-served when their staff and leadership understand the clinical perspective, even though the staff and leadership should not be expected to serve as clinicians. This framework from the *Directions in Psychiatry* textbook gives helpful guidance for trauma-informed practice in a clinical setting:

> "To be trauma-informed is to understand clients and their symptoms in the context of their life experiences and cultures, with an appreciation that some symptoms may

represent efforts at coping. Consequently, and importantly, the clinical understanding emphasizes "what happened to the person" rather than the implied judgment of "what is wrong with the person." Additionally, efforts are made so no more harm is done and client safety is ensured by minimizing the possibilities of injury or retraumatization in clinical or other service settings."[7]

As an example of trauma-informed practice in a classroom, we can look at what happens when instead of assuming ill-intent or bad behavior, a teacher might ask what happened to a student rather than accusing them of always misbehaving. Teachers are encouraged to ask students who arrive late if everything is okay, reducing shame and leaving possibilities for the teacher to learn about the student's experience. In the case of children, it is often the adults in their lives who are responsible for getting them where they need to go with the required materials. An accusatory tone toward a child who may be missing needed support at home can cause more harm. In a trauma-informed system, teachers learn to tell chronically late or absent students that they are glad to see them, rather than opening up the conversation with an accusation.

Sandra Bloom, leader of the team which created the Sanctuary® Model (not specifically religious, surprisingly enough, although of course the model can and should be applied to congregations), says that "it is critical that we design cultures that are less traumatizing and that offer more opportunities for individuals and families to recover from exposure to violence. It is possible that simultaneous individual and institutional change could redirect the course of social evolution in a less destructive direction."[8] Bloom is specifically looking at the aftereffects of the

[7] Butler, L. D., Critelli, F. M., & Rinfrette, E.S. "Trauma-Informed Care and Mental Health." *Directions in Psychiatry*, Volume 31, pp 197-210. January 1, 2011.
[8] Bloom, Sandra L. "An Elephant In the Room: The Impact of Traumatic Stress on Individuals and Groups." *The Trauma Controversy: Philosophical and Interdisciplinary Dialogues* (pp.143‑169). SUNY Publishing, 2024. Albany, NY.

terror attacks on September 11, 2001–what were some of the individual and group traumatic effects, how some of the coping mechanisms backfired and became further problems, and how the aftereffects of this event increased general interest in the study of trauma.

The emphasis in a trauma-informed organization is not to target specific people or specific incidents for remediation, nor is the goal to be reactionary and wait for adverse events to occur. The Sanctuary® Model–one of the resources I commend to you after reading this sourcebook–is a toolkit for creating a trauma-informed organization. "A trauma-informed organization is one that recognizes the inherent vulnerability of all human beings to the effects of trauma and organizes system-wide interventions aimed at mitigating the negative effects of adversity and stress that are manifested in the clients served and the organization itself."[9]

The Crisis Prevention Institute provides a framework for best practices in trauma-informed care, with an eye toward educational settings. In their materials, they cite guiding principles for a trauma-informed organization, provided by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Trauma-informed organizations should strive for both a culture and atmosphere of:

- Safety
- Trustworthiness and transparency
- Peer support and mutual self-help
- Collaboration and mutuality
- Empowerment, voice, and choice
- Consideration, recognition and provision for cultural, historical, and gender issues[10]

[9] The Sanctuary Institute. "Sanctuary Model." https://www.thesanctuaryinstitute.org/about-us/the-sanctuary-model/ Accessed September 24, 2024
[10] "How Trauma-Informed Schools Help Every Student Succeed." *Crisis Prevention Institute (CPI)*, www.crisisprevention.com/blog/education/how-trauma-informed-schools-help-every-student-succeed/

With these principles in mind, we start to see how trauma-informed practice might also apply to Jewish congregational settings. After all, synagogues and Jewish cultural centers provide care and support for people at all stages of lifeThey provide opportunities for collaboration and mutuality, and empowerment, voice, and choice are key components of crafting an organization that sees the image of God in every person.

There is some overlap between trauma-informed practices and responses to specific traumatic events. Congregations care for people who are experiencing traumatic events and complex transitions, and congregational leaders care for people who may have difficult histories. When terrible things happen, a community may go through an acute trauma response phase, and then move on to ongoing care for its members. One specific example is the community community response to the Tree of Life synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh.

I interviewed several Pittsburgh Jewish community members to try to understand their experiences through the lens of trauma-informed care, adding to my own experience of having grown up there and having been a Jewish professional in Pittsburgh at the time. Some stepped forward into leadership roles to help others get through the most vulnerable time. Other community members told me that they simply appreciated being able to participate in events and to take advantage of services–both social services as well as additional prayer services–that were provided at the time, without needing to lead or direct. In a trauma-informed system, people can choose roles that are compelling to them as they work to handle acute events.

In the acute phase, the Pittsburgh Jewish community rallied together for vigils and prayer. Support professionals of all sorts came to help. Nine funerals (there was one funeral for the married couple and one for the pair of brothers) were attended by hundreds of people, with a few services drawing over a thousand people. The three affected congregations were welcomed into

temporary homes in other synagogue buildings. As time passed, the institutions in the community needed to transition from the role of acute trauma response to that of ongoing support. By the one year mark, there was an established center for healing at the JCC that grew out of the efforts initially in those first few weeks. Jewish institutions in Pittsburgh were all affected by this trauma and continue to carry it with them.

The Tree of Life shooting happened in October of 2018, and in about a year and a half, the entire world was thrown into the collective trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic.

With little exception, everyone in the world who was conscious of current events at that time was thrown into some level of traumatic experience. A person who runs an Internal Review Board for hospital research said that the education experiences during the acute phases of the pandemic would not be an experiment that would ever get their approval, due to both the great potential for disease transmission as well as the struggles of pivoting to online learning and extremely isolating situations. However, researchers had these opportunities given to them by these unfortunate and cruel circumstances to study traumatic effects. The Center on Great Teachers and Leaders at the American Institutes for Research defines trauma-informed or trauma-sensitive schools as having "a multitiered approach to addressing trauma that includes universal and targeted interventions."[11] Their definition is applied specifically to COVID-19 responses in education but can be applied universally. These researchers found that adaptable and supportive relationships, mastery over life circumstances, strong executive function and self-regulation, safe and supportive environments, and affirming faith or cultural traditions were the key resiliency factors.

[11] Center on Great Teachers and Leaders at the American Institutes for Research. "Supporting Student Resilience and Well-Being with Trauma-Informed Care." April 2020. Washington, DC https://gtlcenter.org/sites/default/files/Supporting_Student_Resilience_Well-Being_Self-Assessment_Planning_Tool.pdf

How does this apply to Jewish congregational approaches? We learn in the first chapter of the Torah that each person is created in the image of God. Each person has a story, and each person deserves the courtesy of curiosity. Walking through life as a congregational leader means taking to heart the notion of each person having a history, a family, stories to tell, likes and dislikes, and profound reasons for feeling the way that they do. The Jewish approach also includes arguing, debating, and "two Jews, three opinions." Furthermore, in *Mishnah Sanhedrin* Chapter 4, we read that one who takes a life, it is as if he has destroyed a world; one who saves a life, it is if he has saved an entire world. Seeing trauma in acute situations, or knowing that trauma exists for many as a chronic problem, is all a part of seeing people for who they are, as being created in the image of God, and being equal to an entire world.

CHAPTER 2 - In Days of Old, In Our Time: Recognizing Trauma in Text and in Front of Us

בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם בִּזְמַן הַזֶּה
In days of old and in our time (Amidah, special addition to Thanksgiving blessing)

In February of 2024, my youngest son sent me a text message letting me know that his school bus had broken down. I drove to his location to discover that the bus was smoking and was on fire. The bus driver had safely moved all of the children off of the bus and far away from where the bus was located. I took my son home and learned that the bus had actually exploded. My son, a 12 year old who took nothing seriously (and continues to be this type of person as he gets older), responded in his typical manner by saying "ugh, don't you just hate it when your bus blows up? So annoying." I also had to let my older children know that their bus would not be picking them up–because they had the same bus and driver–and that I would come to get them at the end of their day (for clarification, in our school district, the middle schools start and end earlier than the high schools. The school district has made intelligent decisions with regard to teens and sleep, for which we are grateful).

It happened to be a Friday afternoon when the bus explosion occurred, and that evening, my youngest son and I went to Shabbat evening services (at the time of this writing, I am not serving a congregation where I need to be in attendance for every Friday night service, but since I work for multiple congregations in varying roles, I find myself in different places from one Shabbat to the next). While there was not an opportunity to *bentsch gomel* on a Friday night (to recite a specific blessing after surviving a difficult ordeal including an accident, typically as part of being called to the Torah at the reading), I felt called to pray in community anyway because this situation with the school bus could have been much worse. My son was mostly just humoring me, but I appreciated that he was there with me.

These days, one would be hard-pressed to find a Jewish adult (a member of the community aged 13 or older) who has not experienced some sort of adverse event, either directly or indirectly. Whether this event was on a smaller scale (such as my son experienced with his school bus) or whether the event affected a community such as the Pittsburgh Jewish community with the Tree of Life shooting (or indirectly affected Jewish communities around the US and the world by prompting them to employ additional security measures), adverse events require community response. Furthermore, entire countries or even the entire world experience life-changing adverse events all together–the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, and the more recent (and not entirely finished) COVID-19 pandemic. I only mention Jewish adulthood as an arbitrary cutoff because there may be some fortunate younger children whose experience with traumatic events only exists on the periphery of their lives, not having had direct encounters themselves.

Trauma affects the speech centers in the brain, which can cause an inability to articulate a problem. Bessel Van Der Kolk, one of the leading researchers in trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder, found proof of this after-effect in brain scans. People suffering from PTSD and other trauma symptoms showed a distinct decrease in activation in Broca's area of the brain, which is one of the speech centers in the brain. He notes that stroke victims often experience a lack of blood flow to this area, which affects their speech. People are unable to put their thoughts and feelings into words without a functioning Broca's area. By contrast, Van Der Kolk found additional activation in Brodmann's area of the brain, which is a region in the visual cortex that processes images at first sight.[12]

[12] Van Der Kolk, Bessel A. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Penguin Books, 2015. New York, NY.

What does this all mean to congregational leaders? Karen McClintock writes about pastoral care from the recent perspective of ministering to a traumatized world during and after the acute stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Though she is a Christian minister, she seeks to provide support to various faith leaders who wish to provide trauma-informed care, and Jewish congregations have much to learn from her wisdom as both a minister and a mental health professional. She frames her discussion by saying, "Trauma can be the result of circumstances outside of our control–things that happen to us…but trauma also has a second component–what happens inside our bodies during those experiences, the way our central nervous system fires up so we can escape pain or death and live to talk about it another day."[13] Connecting this statement with Van Der Kolk's discovery about the processing of initial images being strong as compared to the speech centers being mostly inactive, it paints a picture of people being fired up with vivid imagery and memory, without always having the capacity to explain why. The people in our communities may have stories of traumatic events to tell, and some may have been more profoundly affected than others. A job of a trauma-informed congregation is to be proactively aware of the types of things that may have happened to people and may have affected them, understanding that the question of what has happened to people should always lead the discussion when dealing with stressful situations.

McClintock cites Van Der Kolk, by saying, "Trauma is initially an external experience with an internal response, but without therapeutic intervention–and even sometimes with it–trauma lingers in our bodies. Trauma then becomes an internal experience with an external response."[13]

---

[13] McClintock, Karen. *Trauma-Informed Pastoral Care: How to Respond When Things Fall Apart.* Fortress Press, March 1, 2022. Minneapolis, MN.

Sarah Emanuel's paper "Trauma Theory, Trauma Story" analyzes the book of Ezekiel as an example of how biblical text can be viewed through a lens of trauma and abuse. She says that "because posttraumatic recall and the experiences therein blend both past and present, one might question the extent to which the past is remembered, especially in the face of cognitive shutdown."[14] She also says, ""Let me be clear when I say that this work is embodied work. Rather than exegete from a distance, biblical trauma theory calls us to pay attention to our minds and our bodies, and to question along the way how readings of biblical passages impact real lives."[14]

Our religious texts are full of traumatic experience and can, themselves, traumatize us and our congregants. Emanuel's example of Ezekiel is that he is a vulnerable person who is dehumanized by God and used only as a tool. The next few examples are sexual and/or violent in nature. However, sexual trauma and the trauma of assault are real factors to be recognized among those we serve. While we cannot and should not try to apply our modern sensibilities to biblical texts in order to make them more palatable, we can try out different analytical perspectives in order to make meaning. Still, sometimes it feels better to forego these readings, just as a caretaker may be mindful of trying not to retraumatize themselves.

Reading Sarah Emanuel's paper prompted me to reread the entire book of Ezekiel. In Chapter 7, Ezekiel prophesies doom, over and over, as the word that came to him from God. In Chapter 16, Ezekiel describes Jerusalem as a female abomination, from birth, and through lineage, and continues describing Jerusalem as a prostitute. It is just as well that only a few chapters of the book of Ezekiel are shared regularly during the readings of the prophets. This

[14] Emanuel, Sarah. "Trauma Theory, Trauma Story: A Narration of Biblical Studies and the World of Trauma" Brill Publishing, November 4, 2011, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, CA.

selective showing of wisdom is an interesting metaphor for the Jewish people who are walking around with great ideas as well as great traumas.

Continuing with the theme of sexual trauma, the story of the rape of Dinah in Chapter 34 of Genesis activates Dinah's father and brothers in a terrible story of revenge and disgrace. Shechem the Hivite "lies with" and disgraces Dinah during a time when she walks around to see the goings-on in the surrounding lands. The text then says that he liked her and wanted to have her as his wife. The text does not allow for her to consent (not that she did, but it was not even considered a possibility), and she has no agency in this story to decide what might happen next. What happens next is that Jacob's sons negotiated for the men of the town to be circumcised in order that the people would become one kindred and be able to marry across families, and when the men were still healing, Simeon and Levi slaughtered all the men of the town and brought Dinah back home. Jacob's response to Simeon and Levi? "You have brought trouble on me, making me odious among the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites; my fighters are few in number, so that if they unite against me and attack me, I and my house will be destroyed." (*Genesis 34:30*)

Unfortunately, it is all too common for families to keep secrets and to be more concerned with their own safety and their image than with solving the original problem. This story checks a lot of boxes in terms of setting the stage for post-traumatic reactions:

- Sexual violence ("Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, chief of the country, saw her, and took her and lay with her and disgraced her" - *Genesis 34:2*)
- Women being treated as property and tokens instead of as people with agency ("And Hamor spoke with them, saying, 'My son Shechem longs for your daughter. Please give her to him in marriage. Intermarry with us: give your

daughters to us, and take our daughters for yourselves: You will dwell among us, and the land will be open before you; settle, move about, and acquire holdings in it.'" - *Genesis 34:8-10*)

- Murder and deception ("All his fellow townsmen heeded Hamor and his son Shechem, and all males, all his fellow townsmen, were circumcised. On the third day, when they were in pain, Simeon and Levi, two of Jacob's sons, brothers of Dinah, took each his sword, came upon the city unmolested, and slew all the males. They put Hamor and his son Shechem to the sword, took Dinah out of Shechem's house, and went away." - *Genesis 34:24-26*)
- A focus only on the implications for the family's reputation without showing concern for their daughter and acknowledging the wrong done to the other people only in terms of how it affects their status (Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, "You have brought trouble on me, making me odious among the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites; my fighters are few in number, so that if they unite against me and attack me, I and my house will be destroyed." But they answered, "Should our sister be treated like a whore?" - *Genesis 34:30-31*)

On the one hand, a story such as the rape of Dinah is traumatic, and people often avoid reading and studying this story. On the other hand, it is precisely *because* this story checks so many boxes that it is worth studying. We can question our ancestors at every turn, while also being careful to acknowledge the possibilities for real parallels to modern life. Dr. Greg Siegle, of the University of Pittsburgh Western Psychiatric Institute, teaches this piece of Torah as an ideal text for confrontation, due to its traumatic roots. As I mentioned in my introduction, I spoke with him and several other people in order to bring this handbook to life, and he has given me

permission to quote him. He says that we ignore the trauma in the Torah at our own peril and that if we want the Torah to speak to our lives, we should continue to study the very real people in the Torah. He also gives an example of leading study groups with teens and young adults and teaching about the parts of the Torah that are unsettling, because we are a people who can confront difficult ideas.

Siegle explains that many parts of our brain are devoted to processing fear. Our limbic system regulates our fight-flight-freeze response, and high arousal from panic can feel the same as high arousal from joy. Congregational leaders are with people in some of their most joyful and sorrowful times, and congregational leaders are also, themselves, human beings with real emotions.

Siegle also notes that "there was never a commandment to calm down," particularly for the Levites. In the Torah, Levites were the musicians, they were simultaneously warriors, they were in close proximity to death on a regular basis, and they dealt with an abundance of emotion and grief. The Levites were asked to create beauty in terrible moments, rather than just seeing what was terrible and complaining about it. Dr. Siegle and I spoke about a particularly challenging moment in the generally chaotic Book of Numbers–the end of chapter 15, where a person was stoned to death for violating the Sabbath, followed by the commandment to put fringes on garments (*Numbers 15:37-41*), followed by the uprising of Korach in the next chapter. Korach was one of the Levites, and he may have been generally dissatisfied with his job or with his lack of inheritance. He may have been upset that a man was stoned to death, or he may have had issues with this seemingly obscure instruction to tie fringes on the corners of garments. He expressed his concern through an accusation of Moses, claiming that Moses had placed himself above the congregation. "[Korach and his men] combined against Moses and Aaron and said to

them, 'You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and God is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above God's congregation?'" (*Numbers 16:3*).

Thinking about the story of Korach from the perspective of a modern congregational leader, the first assessment might be to say that Korach is behaving as an aggrieved congregant. Moses, a leader with presumed training in mental health and social sciences due to his position (or whatever approximation of leadership training existed in those times, given that he was empowered to adjudicate for the rest of the Israelites), has an opportunity to counsel Korach and uncover the hidden meaning behind his accusations. After all, there are some cases in congregational life where a person comes into the clergyperson's office and they are very upset about the way that something was handled, or they are dissatisfied with a change that has been made, or they have an issue with something that was or was not said in a sermon. The person is really struggling with something else, and they use the congregational complaint as a cover.

However, Korach is not just any ordinary Israelite. Korach is a Levite of the line of Kohath, and those of the line of Kohath are responsible for handling the most sacred objects. A separate census of the line of Kohath is taken in order that they be counted for the performance of their specific jobs. "When Aaron and his sons have finished covering the sacred objects and all the furnishings of the sacred objects at the breaking of camp, only then shall the Kohathites come and lift them, so that they do not come in contact with the sacred objects and die. These things in the Tent of Meeting shall be the porterage of the Kohathites." (*Numbers 4:15)* And yet, in Numbers 7, we learn that the Kohathites did not receive oxen, because they were expected to carry the sacred objects themselves. Perhaps Korach was a disgruntled employee, or a disgruntled family member, as Moses was Korach's cousin.

Korach misses an opportunity by rising up so quickly instead of trying out fringe-making. "That shall be your fringe; look at it and recall all of God's commandments and observe them, so that you do not follow your heart and eyes in your lustful urge." (*Numbers 15:39*) When fear systems activate, it can be difficult to maintain fine motor skills. Siegle recommends dealing with fear and arousal through physical action–through creating a relationship to the physical response so that the fear is no longer in control– and he recommended fringe-making as an alternative to uprising for Korach.

Moses also misses an opportunity by not being a good leader in response to Korach's uprising. Instead of trying to figure out what was really bothering Korach, Moses immediately responded to the challenge with another challenge.

> "Then he spoke to Korach and all his company, saying, 'Come morning, The Eternal will make known who is [God's] and who is holy by granting direct access; the one whom [God] has chosen will be granted access. Do this: You, Korach and all your band, take fire pans, and tomorrow put fire in them and lay incense on them before The Eternal. Then the candidate whom The Eternal chooses, he shall be the holy one. You have gone too far, sons of Levi!'" (*Numbers 16:5-7*).

It may be that Moses is terribly exhausted at this point, or wary of public confrontation, and Korach is supposed to be a member of a supportive team but instead, Korach tries to burn the whole thing down. Might Moses have changed the outcome by connecting with Korach over a certain part of his statement? "For all the community are holy, all of them, and God is in their midst." (*Numbers 16:3*).

This encounter results in the famous episode where God opens up the ground and those involved in the uprising are swallowed up into Sheol, with no chance for redemption. One might

say that God also experiences a failure of leadership and misses an opportunity. God addresses Aaron and Miriam's conflict earlier in the Book of Numbers by saying about Moses, "With him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of ה׳. How then did you not shrink from speaking against My servant Moses!" (*Numbers 12:8*). He strikes Miriam with leprosy, she is shut out of the camp, and the people wait seven days for her to heal before marching on. Might Korach and his compatriots have deserved similar treatment–separation from the camp and time to heal?

In those days and in our time, we are people with stress, trauma, and brokenness. We must recognize that people come into our communities with a variety of stories. Many times, they are seeking the opportunity to pray with others and express gratitude. Other times they come to study or to enjoy work or play. People may also not be in their ideal frames of mind when they come to us, in prayer, study, or service. Understanding that an activated limbic system can cause diminished capacity for logical behavior can help us to lead people through challenging times by providing structure. Even when someone as enraged as Korach comes to our doors.

CHAPTER 3 - What If: They are Stiff-necked, But They are Looking Over Their Shoulders

"וּמַלְתֶּם אֵת עָרְלַת לְבַבְכֶם וְעָרְפְּכֶם לֹא תַקְשׁוּ עוֹד:"
"Cut away, therefore, the thickening about your hearts and stiffen your necks no more." (*Deuteronomy 10:16*)

The *Amidah*–the central set of blessings in every Jewish prayer service–begins by invoking God's relationship with the three forefathers, as well as the four foremothers for those whose liturgy includes them. God invokes the three forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob when first connecting to Moses (*Exodus 3:6)*. Jacob and Laban make a pact invoking the names of Isaac and Abraham, as well as Nahor (*Genesis 31:53)*. Declaring ancestry was a way that our ancestors–as well as God–established the presence of a relationship in anticipation of building more connections. So, too, do Jewish people arrive, seeking community in congregations, with their own stories of how their immediate ancestors' stories brought them there. People's history is significant as they seek to build their futures. Some people are arriving at our doors with Jewish ancestry and lineage, with Jewish stories that likely included immigration and persecution. Other people are arriving as first or second generation Jews, with stories of spiritual journeys that led them to Judaism and compel them at this moment to continue to choose Judaism.

In Chapter 10 of Deuteronomy, as part of Moses' long oration, Moses instructs the people concerning God's demands that the people show love and reverence, that they walk in divine paths, and that they keep God's commandments. Moses implores the people to "cut away the thickening of your hearts and stiffen your necks no more." Moses' charge is to love and serve God and to be open-hearted. "Stiffen your necks no more" is an interesting commandment, given the number of times in the Torah that God refers to the Israelites as a stiff-necked people (Exodus 32:9, 33:3, 34:9; Deuteronomy 9:6, 9:13, 31:27). The crafters of Jewish liturgy have also taken this scolding to heart–the expression *k'shei-oref* (stiff-necked) appears in confessional prayers,

saying that being stiff-necked is a flaw to be corrected and that being stiff-necked is in contrast to the previous requests of showing love and reverence and keeping the commandments.

We may be stiff-necked, but we are also turning our heads to look over our shoulders. This has been the reality for Jewish people throughout much of history, and it is certainly true in modern times. Our congregational practices must be grounded in awareness of the reasons that we are glancing over our shoulders, as those reasons go back to the time of the Torah.

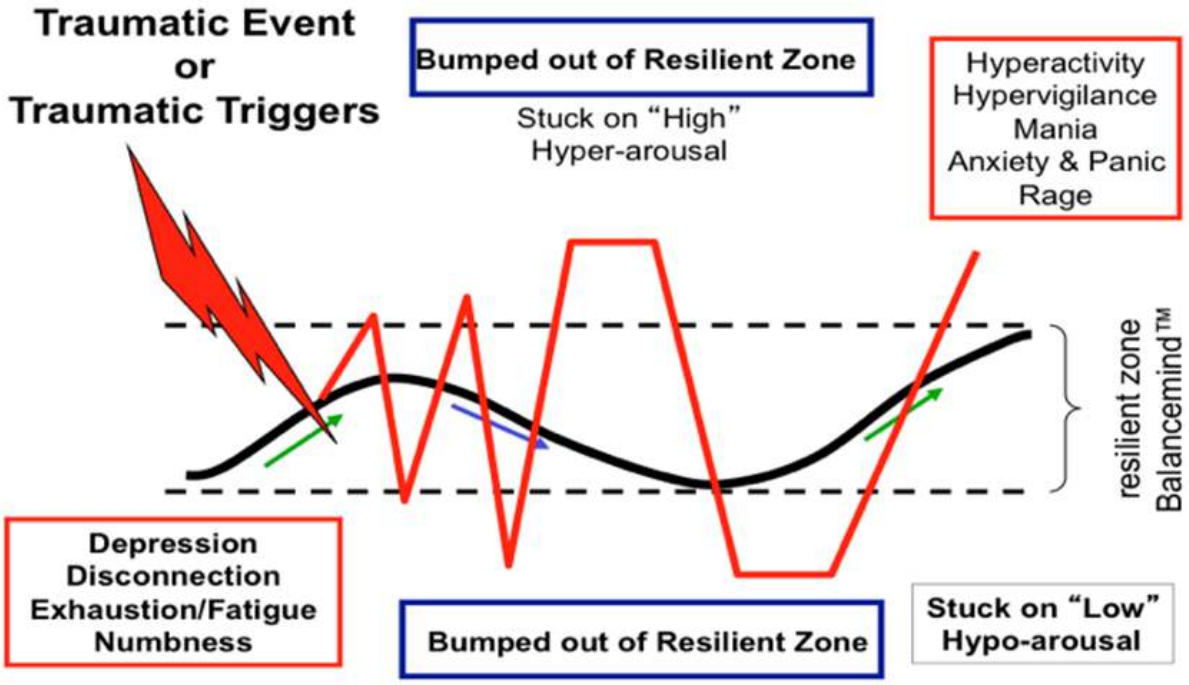
In the Academy for Jewish Religion Haggadah supplement, Rabbi David Greenstein writes about the "*Dayenu*" section of the narrative portion of the Haggadah, and he begins by analyzing the first word of the text–*ilu.*[15] The world *ilu* means "if" in a conditional sense–the original *Dayenu* poem states that "if God had only brought us out from Egypt and not carried out judgments against [the Egyptians], it would have been enough for us!" and continues on in such a fashion. That if only this mighty deed had happened, and not the next one, it would have been enough and we would have still been grateful.

Greenstein says that the Jewish people maintain an "*ilu*" consciousness, in which we are "remembering our pain and terror and despair along with looking forward to singing a new song."[1] *Dayenu* sets before us an optimism and a sense of joy that all of these events coalesced to form the wonder of the Exodus from Egypt, wherein we were able to journey towards our freedom to worship God, the sovereign of our ancestors. *Dayenu* is also about "what-if." What if this part of the story did *not* happen? What if we had made a different choice that day? I know a person who worked in the World Trade Center in New York City but was not in the office on September 11, 2001. I know of congregants at the Tree of Life Synagogue who were not as early for Shabbat morning services on October 27, 2018 as they usually would have been. Holocaust

[15] Greenstein, David. "Ilu." *Seder Interrupted: A Post-October 7 Haggadah Supplement*. Academy for Jewish Religion, 2024. Yonkers, NY.

survivor Judah Samet, a long time congregant of the Tree of Life congregation who only recently passed away, was on his way to Shabbat morning services but had not arrived yet on the morning of the shooting. How many of our congregants are harboring a different painful "*ilu*" story?

People can either get stuck in a highly aroused state as a result of traumatic experiences, or they can experience a depressive lack of response. Being able to stay in a middle-ground state of being is known as the "resilient zone," wherein people experience high and low points as a part of their existence, but they do not get stuck in high arousal or depressive states as a result of stressors. Hypervigilance is a trauma response, when the "*ilu*" becomes overwhelming. Here is a common illustration of this concept:



The Pittsburgh Jewish community has heightened its "*ilu*" consciousness since the shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue, although community members have responded to the changes in different ways (as is to be expected). One Pittsburgh Jewish professional remarked that in larger cities–whose leadership may have made security decisions based on the terrorist

attack on September 11, 2001–people have had guards and even metal detectors at their synagogues for as long as they could remember. Even so, the person was not certain that these security measures would have made an appreciable difference in terms of the response on that morning. Another Pittsburgh Jewish professional feels more strongly impacted by the national problem of gun violence, and that they are more afraid to go to movie theaters (such as the one in Aurora, CO, site of yet another mass shooting) than Jewish institutions.

As Greenstein reminds us, we are charged with holding both our painful memories and our greatest joys at the same time. "'*Ilu*' consciousness demands that we remember the powerlessness and despair of our past precisely at the same time that we are released into history, into the opportunity and the challenge to address the real possibilities that we can achieve–though these may be only incomplete states of redemption." The Jewish people are accustomed to holding joy and sorrow together. At the end of all of our prayer services (as well as toward the beginning of the morning service if there is a quorum for prayer at that point), we take time for Mourners' Kaddish, in order that those who are in a period of mourning or are marking an anniversary of a death can say this prayer in community. We add the psalms of memory–*Yizkor*–to the liturgy for our three pilgrimage festivals and to Yom Kippur prayers. At the Passover table, we celebrate our freedom while spilling out some drops of wine to remember the agony of the plagues that God sent to our captors.

In focusing on Passover, we confirm our obligation to tell our own stories, and we understand that the commandment of retelling the Passover tale is to tell the story in the first person. "And you shall explain to your child on that day, 'It is because of what God did for me when I went free from Egypt.'" (*Exodus 13:8*) We are to take the story upon ourselves–we read about the story in the Torah as a series of events that happened, but we tell the story of leaving

Egypt as if we were there ourselves, using "I" and "we" statements. *Ilu hotzi-anu*. The *-nu* suffix throughout the Haggadah text means that we are talking about ourselves. *B'tzeiti mimitzrayim*. "Upon MY leaving from Egypt." In advance of exiting from Egypt, Chapter 13 of the Book of Exodus states multiple times that we are to tell our children that God delivered *us* from Egypt. The different instructions have become the story of the Four Children at the Passover table. The narrative is in the third person, but there are sets of instructions which are directed toward us in the second person and punctuated with an instruction to teach these rituals to our children.

Lest we forget–our Passover celebration was one of triumph over the trauma of slavery and captivity. Dr. Karen McClintock describes the progression from victim to survivor and then to thriver.[16] In thinking about Jews through the ages telling the Passover story, we may have been in different phases of this progression–hopefully as a whole, we are coming from at least the survivor mentality, if not that of the thriver, but perhaps some years we step back and feel like victims all over again. Our community needs to be able to express having taken steps back when that happens, because within the "*ilu"* consciousness, there are times when the less desirable result comes to pass.

"Being traumatized is not just an issue of being stuck in the past; it is just as much a problem of not being fully alive in the present."[17]. Furthermore, neuroscience research has shown that "we possess two distinct forms of self-awareness: one that keeps track of the self across time and one that registers the self in the present moment." These perspectives come from Bessel Van Der Kolk, mentioned earlier, whose book *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* has become an essential text for those seeking to understand trauma and

[16] McClintock, Karen. *Trauma-Informed Pastoral care: How to Respond When Things Fall Apart.* Fortress Press, March 1, 2022. Minneapolis, MN.
[17] Van Der Kolk, Bessel A. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Penguin Books, 2015. New York, NY.

how people carry trauma in the body. A person who is *too* tied into the past cannot fully live in the present, but a person cannot be without roots either. These two types of self-awareness of past and present, when functioning in harmony, integrate and form the more successful version of the "*ilu*" consciousness.

Bringing our stories with us can also mean bringing our intergenerational trauma–not only our own stories but the remnants of the practices of our ancestors whom we may not have even known. People often wonder about texts that describe God as "visiting the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generations." (*Exodus 34:7*) Rabbi Tirzah Firestone explains that "the Bible is simply pointing to a universal fact, one reflected in [many stories]: the violations and heartbreaks that are suffered in one era often continue to travel through time, creating a legacy of new suffering until they are finally faced and felt."[18] Before we ever knew about intergenerational trauma, epigenetics, or the danger of family secrets, we had God's declaration in the Ten Commandments (as well as in other moments where Moses is asking God to forgive the people) that the sins of the parents would be visited upon the next several generations. Firestone says that she has learned "how often hardened hearts were the tragic byproduct of wounds incurred long ago and never healed." Hardened hearts, and stiff necks.

"At its most basic level, relational trauma theory maintains that humans make sense of the world in relation to other humans. Forced exile, for example, can hinder one's sense of agency and replaces it with distrust, disorganization, and panic. If such exile is connected relationally with the divine realm, the distrust can become especially complicated."[19] The

[18] Firestone, Tirzah. *Wounds into Wisdom : Healing Intergenerational Jewish Trauma*. Monkfish Book Publishing, 2019. New York, NY.
[19] Emanuel, Sarah. "Trauma Theory, Trauma Story: A Narration of Biblical Studies and the World of Trauma" Brill Publishing, November 4, 2011, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, CA.

Passover story is one in which we celebrate leaving Egypt and setting out for the Promised Land, and the book of Ezekiel takes place much later in our history. The people had returned to the land but were exiled, and the stories in the book of Ezekiel speak of more exile as well as eventual redemption. The previously mentioned study by Sarah Emanuel dives into the text and illustrates the ways in which Ezekiel himself was traumatized and even abused in his service to God.

Emanuel's focus on the storytelling aspect of the book of Ezekiel orients the reader to the idea that "stories, in creating their own networks of cause and effect, generate new networks of orientation within us" and she refers to the Passover seder as "theologically motivated trauma contemplation" through a communal narrativized meal. Rabbi Beth Naditch expresses this as well, saying that "Modern trauma theory eventually recognized what the rabbis knew instinctively: where trauma overwhelms, provide sensory grounding and order."[20]

Sensory grounding and order can be a challenge in a modern world that is so intense. Taking the time for communal ritual helps to bring people together. What do we do when the world is more intense than usual and we are constantly looking over our shoulders? Rabbi Beth Naditch reports on a time when she was "Building the airplane in the air." During the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, people were not gathering in person due to fear of disease spread. Those whose practice permitted online gatherings were meeting via the internet to tell the Passover story on that holiday. And that summer of 2020, when Rabbi Naditch was supposed to be working with a new group of Clinical Pastoral Education interns, she found that it would be impossible to bring a new group of interns into a nursing home during a pandemic. She instead created a new format for that summer's CPE group, which was fully online and had a different methodology around patient contact. Her work with this group of chaplain interns helped these

[20] Naditch, Beth. "Order." *Seder Interrupted: A Post-October 7 Haggadah Supplement*. Academy for Jewish Religion, 2024. Yonkers, NY.

students to respond to a world on fire, giving them tools to function, and allowed them to do meaningful work which served this community in need:

> " Given the context in which we were living and working this summer, it was not always possible to limit exposure to intensity. During a summer which contained a global pandemic, the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and the subsequent mourning and protests, political unrest, a spiraling economy, and a world which at times was literally on fire, intensity ran high. What we could do as educators, however, was to remind students that our bodies, our hearts, and our souls were having normal and expected responses to an abnormal situation. Helping them to contextualize gave students language which they could then use with staff and patients."[21]

Passover is a celebration of the realization that once we were in a narrow place (*Mitzrayim*) and now we are free. The life of isolation and uncertainty during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic is now a hazy memory, with our orientation in time skewed just as Van Der Kolk described (our sense of the past as well as our registering ourselves in the present). These days we are still battling the scourges of racism and racially motivated violence, as well as gun violence, antisemitism, and wage theft. It feels difficult to limit intensity, but we can provide comfort. Congregational leadership can create moments of meeting where people can share optimism. People may also want to take time and avoid talking about the outside world too much, and congregational leadership can provide these spaces and moments. We are thankful for all that has improved since the time of our ancestors, and we look toward a future where we can find our way out of the current narrow spaces. Though we may be looking over our shoulders, and we remember what has happened, we still work our way forward.

---

[21] Naditch, Beth. "Building the Airplane in the Air: Trauma-Informed Clinical Pastoral Education during COVID-19 Summer." *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry.* Mar 21, 2021

CHAPTER 4 - All the Days of Our Lives: Families and Life Cycles

אַךְ טוֹב וָחֶסֶד יִרְדְּפוּנִי **כָּל־יְמֵי חַיָּי** וְשַׁבְתִּי בְּבֵית־יְהוָה לְאֹרֶךְ יָמִים׃
Only goodness and steadfast love shall pursue me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for many long years. (Psalm 23)

Religious spaces are containers. Congregational leaders are supposed to be experts in rituals and religious texts, and people look to their leaders for guidance around "how to do" life cycle events. Depending on the level of joy and sorrow and the particular event, families may be more or less receptive to the specifics of the laws and rituals, particularly if the laws and rituals are at odds with what they may have in mind. *Halakhah*–Jewish law–is deeply rooted and is also alive and changing. Congregations may be more or less *halakhic* in practice, and individuals and families may have different responses to the *halakhah* in question. Even for less *halakhic* congregations, knowledge becomes a starting point for clergy and leadership–start from an outline and then see what the people need. Humanity drives life cycle planning, because without the humans, the life does not cycle.

Although most life cycle events are not necessarily traumatic themselves, even a seemingly routine event can bring out trauma patterns in families. Jewish practice does a great job of prescribing a formula for mourning a death. At the time of death, there is a focus on care of the deceased, while those who have just experienced a loss are not permitted to have ritual responsibilities. The most intense mourning happens right at the beginning after burial, with the sitting of *shiva* for seven days, and then people get up from their most intense mourning but continue to mourn. Each year, a person is remembered on the anniversary of their death as well as during those times of year (the three pilgrimage festivals and Yom Kippur) when they may have been a part of celebrations. Rabbi Tirzah Firestone describes this as "containment." She says that "containment is one of the important functions of a religious community. And while

community is an important ingredient in the work of healing trauma, anyone–with or without others–can adopt the practice of containment. It is based on the principle of allowing grief, yet putting boundaries around our need to remember and mourn."[22]

The traditional timetables are helpful reminders, although personal care may drive some modifications. Some people have complicated relationships with their departed loved ones, and congregations should be careful not to assume that everyone wants to memorialize their loved one or pay attention to their *yahrzeit* in the same way. Congregational staff made some assumptions about one of the people with whom I spoke, who had suffered a loss a number of years ago. The staff was trying to force this person to take part in certain traditions that were more important to the congregation than to the person. Rather than doing what would have been best for the person, the congregational staff made an assumption that "everyone" would want to participate in the same memorial practices. A person with whom I spoke noted that congregations are carrying a lot of people's personal information. Boundaries and guidelines are essential, particularly when congregant volunteers are privy to information about other congregants.

Another interviewee who has a wide range of experiences around death in the Jewish tradition said that they were grateful to have congregational presence after the death of their mother. There were people who brought food and people who continued to check in after the initial periods of mourning. They lamented the loss of more regular community *minyanim* outside of Orthodox congregations, as well as the difficulty in gathering enough people for *minyan* for *shiva*. They admit that this is a reminiscence of a time when more people were going to services in general, as well as prioritizing daily worship and being counted. Being in

[22] Firestone, Tirzah. *Wounds into Wisdom : Healing Intergenerational Jewish Trauma*. Monkfish Book Publishing, 2019. New York, NY.

community is essential to Jews, as evidenced by the Jewish requirement that ten must be present in order to recite the Mourner's Kaddish, but people are not seeking out this community in the same numbers and with the same regularity.

Creating community around all the stages in the Jewish life cycle is something that congregations can facilitate. B-mitzvah families can have meetings and study sessions in order to make their way through this monumental occasion where they may feel like glorified party planners. Rabbi Jef Segelman at the Academy for Jewish Religion would teach that the time leading up to B-mitzvah is a great time to model additional observance of commandments and taking on of Jewish responsibility. Rabbi Segelman recommends that parents of teenagers try engaging in their own text studies or–even better–model a heightened observance of the commandment to honor their own parents, and explain to their children why they are doing so.

From a congregational leadership perspective, B-mitzvah preparation is a time for heightened awareness in family discussions in order to make this time as enriching as possible without causing harm through assumption or exclusion. The rabbi at our [Reform] congregation notes that even in families where two parents are Jewish, there is a likelihood that there are non-Jewish family members. There may be opportunities to include additional traditions as a part of the celebration, and curiosity should guide the conversations.

The disgruntled congregant who is rarely present but has strong opinions about their lifecycle event should still be treated with tenderness and kindness. Trauma-informed practice demands that a person's return after absence be met with joy at seeing them rather than admonishment for having been gone. This notion should guide us when we preside over life cycle events–whether a person is an established pillar of the community or whether they are new people seeking guidance and structure.

CHAPTER 5 - And Your Name Shall Be Called Yisrael: Wrestling

וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יַעֲקֹב יֵאָמֵר עוֹד שִׁמְךָ כִּי אִם־יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי־שָׂרִיתָ עִם־אֱלֹהִים וְעִם־אֲנָשִׁים וַתּוּכָל׃

Said [the being], "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel,
for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed." (Genesis 32:29)

Jacob received a new name in advance of his reunion with his estranged brother Esau, a name that is still ours today. "Yisrael" comes from a word that means to contend with or, in Jacob's case, to wrestle. As Jewish people, we pride ourselves on being able to wrestle with God and wrestle with our texts. In the midrash *B'midbar Rabbah* 13:15-16 we learn that there are seventy faces of Torah, and "Seventy Faces of Torah" shows up as the name of institutions and learning groups. It also shows up as a part of the values statement for other institutions and learning groups, including the Academy for Jewish Religion. We wrestle with the divine and we have massive volumes of text that records ancient arguments (the Talmud). The Talmud reports on multiple opinions even if a decision is made to align with only one of them, and the Talmud is studied not because it teaches the law but because it emphasizes the Jewish love of logic and discourse.

The common expression "two Jews, three opinions" demonstrates our ability to fight with each other and still remain civil. In the story of Korach which I referenced earlier, Korach is often criticized because he was not arguing for the "sake of heaven," that he did not bring a "*makhloket l'sheim shamayim*." This expression–also a the title of a book by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, *Arguments for the Sake of Heaven*–comes from *Pirkei Avot* 5:17. The Mishnah contrasts Korach's arguments with those of Hillel and Shammai, who often disagree but are able to continue to respect each other. Our rabbinic texts will show multiple opinions even if one prevails over the rest. While we understand the story to be complicated, the story of Korach is referenced to teach the lesson that if we fail to remain civil and argue in ways that cause harm,

we run the risk of perpetuating further damage. Perhaps the example of Korach is a bit extreme–we do not want to propose that the ground should open up and swallow people into Sheol for wont of a more merited argument.

Jews fight with God and may even feel as though they need to take a step back or a step forward. Thankfully, Judaism does not require absolute faith in order to be counted among the "family." Congregations do not ask people about their personal beliefs in order for them to become members, although new members may have a discussion with clergy about their faith journey, be it their conversion journey, their Jewish upbringing that aligns with their current congregation, or their different variety of Jewish upbringing. Included in such a conversation might be someone's reasons for stepping away from Judaism and then returning on their own terms.

Rabbi Tirzah Firestone writes about her family struggles and the intergenerational trauma that was passed down through a dogmatic adherence to tradition. She sought an escape from what felt like a scourge to her, but she found her way back. She says,

> "In retrospect, I realize that it was never Judaism that I had rebelled against; it was the unintended repercussions of unhealed trauma that I was attempting to flee. Despite the astonishing lengths that I went to in an effort to deny it, I discovered that my ancestors were incontestably alive within me–with all their foibles and fears. And just as my grandparents' values had coiled down the twisted ladder of their DNA to me–love of learning and the written word, community, and, yes, heavy food–so had the pain and injury of being a Jew."[23]

[23] Firestone, Tirzah. *Wounds into Wisdom : Healing Intergenerational Jewish Trauma*. Monkfish Book Publishing, 2019. New York, NY.

Feeling this way about her heritage caused her to come back to her roots and learn more about her family's past. The Judaism which is hers is not the Judaism of her parents, and Rabbi Firestone was able to wrestle with the reality of her family's traumatic past.

Our congregants may also have challenging pasts. Some, like Rabbi Firestone, may be the children or grandchildren of people who experienced traumatic events such as the Holocaust, pogroms in Eastern Europe, or expulsions from Middle Eastern countries. They may come from families that held fast to tradition and dogma from a place of fear instead of a place of love. They may have had certain practices that were passed down from generation to generation without fully understanding the reasons, and the next generation felt compelled to rebel against those practices and pull away, as was the case with Rabbi Firestone.

With people's challenging pasts and present statuses may come psychological and psychiatric needs, and a reminder that psychological and psychiatric treatment is outside of the purview of congregational leadership is always warranted. However, we can take pieces of learning from those arenas and apply them to our work in caring for people without overstepping boundaries and causing harm by acting with insufficient knowledge and skill. The textbook *Directions in Psychiatry* describes a move away from treatments being forced upon people and instead giving them agency. "The experience of collaboration [in psychiatric treatment] is best instantiated in an atmosphere where the client is treated as the expert on his or her own life. In such a climate, the practitioner and client work with each other, rather than the more traditional treatment approach of things being done to or for the client."[24] Congregational leadership may have certain expertise, and they bring it to people who seek it. People coming to us from

[24] Butler, L. D., Critelli, F. M., & Rinfrette, E.S. "Trauma-Informed Care and Mental Health." *Directions in Psychiatry*, Volume 31, pp 197-210. January 1, 2011.

religious trauma experiences– either Jewish or from another faith tradition–have come to us for a reason, seeking to wrestle with God and their spirituality, accompanied by expert help.

One of the pitfalls with leaning more into religion and spirituality while wrestling with life is an idea called spiritual bypassing. Robert Masters cites the term first named by John Welwood, a psychologist, in 1984. He says, "Spiritual bypassing is the use of spiritual practices and beliefs to avoid dealing with our painful feelings, unresolved wounds, and developmental needs."[25] This is where being conscious of developmental needs and psychological issues, even while not being the expert, can be trauma-informed practice. It is not enough to be an expert on spiritual matters and expect that our solutions can only come from a Jewish ritual or textual place. We fashion our congregations as containers for ritual and spirituality, with regularly scheduled prayer services and study sessions as well as services for life cycle events and counseling through these events. However, we run the risk of spiritual bypassing if our answers are only "pray about it" "meditate on it" or "try these texts" without accompanying people in an earnest way. Our responses to pleas for help must come from a place of caring, from a place of recognizing each person as being created in the divine image, and our recommendations for ritual/spiritual/textual solutions should come as a response to the person in front of us, not just because those solutions seem to be correct.

Our Jewish capacity to struggle and fight back has given us a survivor mentality. Bessel Van Der Kolk assesses humanity as a "hopeful species."[26] This piece of wisdom resonates especially for the Jewish people, as our texts around survival and struggle are rich and varied. "Literature produced by these survivors (and their descendants) and observers—survival

[25] Masters, Robert Augustus. *Spiritual Bypassing: When Spirituality Disconnects Us from What Really Matters*. North Atlantic Books, 2010.
[26] Van Der Kolk, Bessel A. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Penguin Books, 2015. New York, NY.

literature— including poetry, narratives, or culturally specific histories that attempt to give voice to and bear witness to those traumatic events, can legitimately be construed as a type of history (posttraumatic history), or at least as the result of credible effects of those traumatic events on survivors and/or witnesses."[27] This quote comes from a trauma-lens analysis of none other than the Book of Lamentations.

Today's writers are recording traumatic events as they happen and after. One person with whom I spoke has been expressing themself through poetry, particularly since the massacre at Tree of Life and with renewed intention since the massacre on October 7, 2023, in Israel. Other modern writers and artists have also taken on the mantle of telling these stories as they happen. In congregations, we can lift up new art and new expressions while also being mindful of possible reactions.

Putting a trauma lens on such a text as Lamentations opens the door to the conversations about why bad things happen to good people. Our congregations need to be open to these conversations, and our congregational leaders need to have resources to answer these questions. There is a book by that exact name–*When Bad Things Happen to Good People*–by Rabbi Harold Kushner (which I am not including in my work, but it is worth knowing about and worth reading), and there are numerous other works around theodicy and reward-punishment theology. Again–it is not enough to give someone a text or give someone a ritual as an answer to a question. However, our congregations should be places where these difficult discussions can persist, knowing that we are constantly wrestling and searching for answers.

> "'Diagnosing' an ancient prophet with PTSD does not diminish the troubling, often terrorizing, aspects of the prophet's "words." Similarly, reading biblical texts as survival or post traumatic literature does not lessen the troublesome, often bizarre, complexity of

[27] Yansen Jr., James Washington Sydgrave. "Daughter Zion's Trauma." Dissertation, Boston University. 2016.

the texts so labeled. Rather, trauma oriented readings highlight the imprints of traumatic events and their effects on relevant biblical writers and literature while recognizing and affirming the relevance of ongoing critical, referential and compositional queries informed by insights from trauma studies."[27]

Our modern knowledge might allow us to impose diagnoses on biblical figures in order to understand them more fully. It can be satisfying and can help us to understand our ancestors and our history. Dr. Greg Siegle would frequently identify neurological trouble spots in our *Tanakh* text and provide clinical explanations such as fight/flight/freeze moments–a person's limbic system may be fully engaged, which means that their rational and logical cerebral cortex is not. These interpretations through a modern viewpoint do not solve everything, but they help to create additional avenues for discourse. Talking about real conflict with the Torah as the scene can also lead to safe arms-length discussion of real issues, still confronting them without without spiritual bypassing.

Karen McClintock's text asks, "Why me? Why evil? Why God?" from a Christian perspective–though the questions can be asked in the same way for Jews–and cautions that a trauma-informed clergy person should not attempt to be the final authority on these answers.[28] Is prayer the answer? Again, spiritual bypassing is a real concern. However, Dr. McClintock says that prayer can decrease the fight/flight/freeze response in an acute situation or in a time of general distress. "Prayers in many traditions include set patterns and repeated phrases. When these prayers are offered during calm states, the body learns how to re-create a similar relaxation state even in new or threatening circumstances." Siegle affirms this–a state of high arousal comes

[28] McClintock, Karen. *Trauma-Informed Pastoral care: How to Respond When Things Fall Apart.* Fortress Press, March 1, 2022. Minneapolis, MN.

from the same areas in the brain whether those emotions are positive or negative. Creating spaces for struggle that include rituals for prayer can help people to create and recognize patterns.

McClintock writes about a situation where a woman was disillusioned with God and struggling to pray to someone or something that seems to have let her down. McClintock challenges the woman by asking, "What if you called God by what you need?" Jewish text has so many ways to talk to God, and people are able to come up with additional names based on what they have learned. Jewish musician and educator Eliana Light refers to "g?d-wrestlers" in her translation of Yisrael in the *Shema* prayer. God is also the Rock of Israel, God is the Holy One Blessed Be God, God is the Maker of Peace. God may also be *Avinu Malkeinu*–Our Father, Our King–if that image works for some. For others, they may want to call God by another name, by what they need. God Full of Compassion, Source of Strength, Giver of Clarity, or–in the case of McClintock's praying person–Non-Abandoning One. This person needs God to be there and not to abandon her. This exercise was meaningful to this person because McClintock used her wisdom and knowledge as a pastor while making the experience personal and coming from a point of relationship.

Our congregations should be places of struggle and healthy disagreement, while also providing love and care, because if everyone felt the same way, we may wonder what is going wrong. As Yisrael, the ones who wrestle with God, we can continue to look at our text and come up with a variety of answers. Jewish leaders invite people to continue their own struggle, to use the container of the synagogue community in order to find their own meaning in Jewish life.

CHAPTER 6 - Not Only One, But In Every Generation: Discrimination and Trauma

וְהִיא שֶׁעָמְדָה לַאֲבוֹתֵינוּ וְלָנוּ. שֶׁלֹּא אֶחָד בִּלְבַד עָמַד עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ,
אֶלָּא שֶׁבְּכָל דּוֹר וָדוֹר עוֹמְדִים עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ, וְהַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא מַצִּילֵנוּ מִיָּדָם.
And this is [the promise] that has stood for our ancestors and us, that not only one alone rose up to destroy us, rather, that in every generation [people] rise up to destroy us, but the Holy One, blessed be God, saves us from their hand.
(from the Passover *Haggadah*)

From generation to generation, the Jewish people have felt the scourge of discrimination and attempts at elimination. The text "V'hi she'amda" from the Passover Seder is a reminder of this adversity, while it also reminds us to strengthen our connections to each other and to God. This text has been especially meaningful at the time of this writing (the end of the year 2024), in the current climate of war in Israel and antisemitism worldwide. When this text says that people rise up to destroy "us," there is no distinction. As described in the "*ilu*" stories, all who are members of the Jewish community are members of a group of hypervigilant people. Yet each story is unique, different generations have their own defining moments, and there are varying types of people who make up our Jewish community.

Diversity is a strength, yet as Jews experience discrimination in the wider world, so too do Jews make mistakes in discriminating within our own community. Greater awareness of discrimination becomes a form of trauma-informed congregational practice, from the perspective of proactive inclusion and welcoming. Trauma-informed practice includes support for all Jews and Jewish-adjacent family members when they experience discrimination due to their being Jewish. Trauma-informed practice also includes support specifically for community members who may experience discrimination from other Jews, and–more importantly–education for community members who might perpetuate this discrimination, knowingly or unknowingly.

In looking at discrimination against people for being Jewish, sometimes we worry that certain initiatives have left Jews out. While I do not have the space to examine the complexities of all Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives, I can state that diversity, equity, and inclusion

are important values for a congregational community. DEI initiatives are meaningful–they ask who is not included, who is not being represented, and what may need to change in order to include and represent more people? People who do meaningful DEI work are also paying attention to the idea, "nothing about us without us." This quote has a variety of origins, but it has been used in disability activism circuits for the past few decades. "Nothing about us without us" can guide our thinking when it comes to advocating for ourselves in secular spaces (such as getting involved in discussions of public school calendars and which Jewish observances should be considered when making calendar decisions, instead of expecting people to look it up without having knowledge). "Nothing about us without us" should also guide our thinking when trying to accommodate specific subgroups within our community (such as creating programming for families with young children, making changes to physical spaces in order to make congregations more physically accessible, and being welcoming to Jews of color).

The Anti-Defamation League notes that addressing Jewish concerns as part of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives is essential and not guaranteed. Their read of DEI work is that "inclusion means that every employee feels safe, welcome, embraced, and empowered in their organization."[29] People should not feel beholden to conform to whatever the default may be in their workplace and have to hide their Jewishness in order to feel safe. A trauma-informed practice in a Jewish congregation might be to create more places and times for people to discuss concerns at work and school about discrimination and perhaps even have congregational leadership advocate for their people.

A younger person with whom I spoke about the current climate of antisemitism reflects back over the past six years since the shooting at Tree of Life and refers to a current "fever pitch"

[29] "Speak out against Antisemitism in the Workplace" www.adl.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/2023-02/ADL-DEI-Speak-Out-Against-Antisemitism.pdf

of antisemitism, where people are hiding their Jewish accessories and talking about these issues with other Jewish friends. Some younger people are becoming more expressive in their Judaism; others have lost the connection, and some may be afraid. A different person said that while they do not necessarily feel as though they have to hide their Judaism, they sometimes feel isolated at work–having worked for years as a Jewish professional and now working in a different field, it can feel lonely to serve a community that is kind enough but does not fully understand.

In looking at Jews in relationship to the general public, as well as at how some Jews treat other Jews when making assumptions about their Jewishness, a word that comes to mind is "microaggressions." Microaggressions are–as their name suggests–small utterances that can hurt people. It is trauma-informed congregational practice to be aware of where microaggressions can happen and to teach people not to commit them. Getting more specific–microaggressions happen to marginalized people and can be perpetrated by people who are more or less empowered in a particular arena. Bringing microaggressions to the conversation about trauma-informed practices is especially important when considering that the expanded definition of trauma does include repeated emotional harm. The Crisis Prevention Institute and SAHMSA directly reference cultural awareness as a part of trauma-informed practice.

How does this awareness play out in spaces that are primarily Jewish? Antisemitism is not necessarily the primary source of microaggressions in primarily Jewish spaces. Instead, a Jewish institution may have issues with their "defaults" causing microaggressive behavior. The Union for Reform Judaism gives several examples in its literature on microaggressions: repeatedly misgendering someone (beyond the scope of what could be considered an honest mistake), singling out people of color for security checks, being surprised that people of color are Jewish or know so much about Judaism, assuming heterosexual parentage, or giving conditional

compliments ("you're so pretty for a trans person" or "you look good for someone who uses a wheelchair" or "Oh really? You don't look Jewish").[30]

Some microaggressions in Jewish spaces are born of assumptions around Jewish background. Some Jews are Jews by choice. Some Jews have family members who are not Jewish even if their specific household has only Jewish members. And contrary to the harmful stereotype, not all Jews have a lot of money. The Union for Reform Judaism's literature on microaggressions is under the umbrella of their "Audacious Hospitality" initiative. The goal of those resources–much like the goal of this handbook–is to raise awareness and to provide an additional set of alerts that "ping" for decision makers.

In discussing microaggressions with people of varying ages, there are certain types of microaggressions that are more likely to be perpetuated by our elders, because they may not be aware of the impact of their words. Some of our elders may have grown up in atmospheres that were less inclusive. While ignorance does not excuse poor behavior, some of our elders have an image of the way things were, and perhaps they were less inclusive of mixed-faith families–for example–because their upbringing was more dogmatic in opposition to intermarriage and they are more protective of the preservation of tradition due to their own adverse experiences. Perhaps they were less aware of Jews of color because they had less opportunity to mingle with other Jews outside of their own individual communities.

Adherence to "the way things were" is not automatically negative. After all, the Jewish people are keepers of an ancient tradition. It can be challenging to teach community members who are stuck in their ways that they need to reexamine their mindsets. Rabbi Tirzah Firestone

[30] "How to Identify Microaggressions & The Importance of Disrupting Them." urj.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/Microaggression_Resource_May_2023.pdf. Union for Reform Judaism, May 2023

describes an extreme example that is unfortunately all too well-known. She describes a visit to Europe, decades after the Holocaust:

> "As my sister and walked into the towns where our ancestors are buried, looked at photographs, and listened to the stories of today's inhabitants, I imagined these places as they once were, teeming with Jewish life. Kneeling by our great-grandparents' graves, I sensed the absence of all those who never had the privilege of burial. And I understood all the more the ancestral pressure–and my own parents' dogged will–to recreate a way of life that had been crushed by the Nazis."[31]

I bring this up because there are people who are very protective of their ways and have gone through tremendous struggles–or their parents have gone through tremendous struggles–to preserve their way of life and their Judaism. Their insular ways may cause them to be protective of themselves and exclusive of others, to the point of perpetuating microaggressions and causing harm. Congregational leadership needs to tend to guide them toward a more inclusive perspective.

Rabbi Firestone writes in her book about growing up with parents who were strict and dogmatic about their Judaism to the point where she was completely turned away for many years, before finding her way back on her own terms. Some older community members are working their way from stubborn self-preservation to an open-minded acceptance that embraces the "seventy faces of Torah" from B'midbar Rabbah 13:15-16. Looking at the chronology (and at the age of my own parents), some of the venerated elders in our congregations may have been raised by parents such as Rabbi Firestone's parents. Ancestral pressure is real, but so is the need

[31] Firestone, Tirzah. *Wounds into Wisdom : Healing Intergenerational Jewish Trauma*. Monkfish Book Publishing, 2019. New York, NY.

to adapt. Trauma informed practice includes careful handling of situations with elders who may need information. A congregational leader needs to act mindfully and with care to all parties.

Jews of Sephardi or Middle Eastern ancestry remember a different set of intergenerational trauma than those of Ashkenazi/European ancestry. While some of these communities remember the impact of the Holocaust as it affected their Ashkenazi kin, their intergenerational trauma is more rooted in their expulsion from Arab countries. A notable situation that connects both Nazi Germany and Jewish struggles in Arab countries is that of the Jews in Tunisia, researched in detail by Rabbi Niema Hirsch in her thesis a few years ago through the Academy for Jewish Religion. These Jews experienced the Holocaust more directly. There are many assumptions about Jews being "white" and having roots only in Europe. Aside from the fundamental untruth of Jews ever being "from" Europe, there are many Jews whose families lived in Morocco, Tunisia, Persia, and Syria, among other places in the Middle East. It is itself a microaggression to assume that all Jews feel at home with bagels, matzo ball soup, gefilte fish, and cholent, instead of bourekas, couscous, schug, and lavash.

The Union for Reform Judaism addresses the issue of assumptions born of privilege in their Jews of Color Resource module. Unfortunately, many Jews of color continue to experience discrimination and microaggressions both from within the community and in the world at large. The Jews of Color who helped to create this educational module wrote a checklist on White-Ashkenazi awareness:

> "The entirety of the Jewish community experiences forms of anti-Semitism that impact us all negatively, however Jews who are perceived as white receive privileges in our society that are denied to Jews of Color. In order to create a fully welcoming community we need

to be able to have a clear understanding of where those experiences differ for someone who is not seen as Ashkenazi, white, or of European descent."[32]

There are a variety of items on this checklist, some of which include, "At my synagogue, religious school, JCC, or camp I can walk in with my family and not worry that they will be treated unkindly because of the color of their skin." "I do not worry about being seen or treated as a member of the janitorial staff at a synagogue, school, JCC, or camp or when attending a Jewish event." "People never say to me, "But you don't look Jewish," either seriously or because they thought it was funny." Some of the items on the checklist are inclusive of many Jews of color. Others may apply more specifically to Jews of Sephardi or Mizrahi backgrounds. Additionally, not all Jews of Sephardi and Mizrahi backgrounds "look like" people of color.

What we can learn from these resources is that we should approach people with curiosity. Let people share their stories, and let people disclose as much or as little as they like, but be wary of assumptions. Jewish congregational leaders can also be mindful of ever-present antisemitism that affects all Jews, some in different ways than others, and be ready to assist community members. The current climate at the time of this publication is one where supporters of progressive causes sometimes choose to leave Jews out, but our Jewish values demand that we continue to love the stranger, to love our neighbor as ourselves, and to protect each other and our community. There is a balance to strike in understanding moments of power and moments of vulnerability and how the balance shifts for different community members. Expounding upon our Haggadah text–there is not just one instance of this happening, but in every generation, someone or something rises up against us. Every time, God saves us from the hand of those who rise against us, and Jewish congregational leaders need to facilitate unity.

---

[32] "Ashkenazi Awareness Checklist: Examining Privilege"
https://urj.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/ashkenaziawarenesschecklist.pdf
Union for Reform Judaism, October 2021

CHAPTER 7 - And They Shall Build Me a Sanctuary: Building Sacred Workspaces

וְעָשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹכָם׃
And let them make me a sanctuary, and I shall dwell within them. (Exodus 25:8)

This line from *Parshat Terumah–v'asu li mikdash v'shakhanti b'tokham*–does not say that we are to build a box and put God in it. Rather, we are to build sanctuaries, and God should dwell within *us*. We can come to our sanctuaries in order to remind ourselves that we are holy and that God is within us. We can also take what we learn in our sanctuaries out into the world, because God is within us wherever we are. This chapter explores some of the specific ways that we might build our communities.

One of the most important components of building our sanctuaries is the manner in which we treat our builders. Much of the focus on trauma-informed practice is dedicated to the congregant, or the student, or the patient/client. Synagogues should demonstrate their values by caring for their staff as well as the congregational leaders. Among education advocates, there is a common phrase that states, "teacher working conditions are student learning conditions." If teachers feel supported and safe, they are better able to do their jobs which include making sure that students feel supported and safe. The parallel is not perfect between schools and congregations, because the leadership structure is much more clear and much more vertical in schools. Congregations have organizational charts which determine the reporting structure for staff, but the organizational charts do not account for the congregants. Furthermore, the board of the congregation is comprised of congregants, who would otherwise not appear on the organizational chart except that the clergy and staff are chosen to serve by the board.

This oddity in the organizational chart is one of the reasons why recovering from trauma that is specific to a congregation can be so challenging. That is to say, the people who are serving as staff and leadership experience trauma in the same ways as the congregants. How does

a congregation recover while still trying to keep up with operations? Susan Nienaber writes from a Christian perspective about congregations that go through the process of recovering from adverse events. She says that the average length of recovery period from the onset of trauma or conflict to the final stages of recovery was approximately 4.75 years. Her description of how to deal with conflict describes a journey that begins with choosing to heal and facing pain, and she goes on to say that staying spiritually grounded and listening with care and equanimity helps to keep the congregation aligned with the big picture. "In my consulting experience I've learned that it's easy for leaders in crisis to become rigid, to get locked into positions–into their own ideas of who is to blame and what is the solution."[33] Nienaber's additional recommendations included marking progress on the anniversary of the traumatic event, and–most importantly–informing people of new developments, or informing people that there have been no new developments. When people wait for too long to get information, they worry that no work is being done. Sometimes people will also speculate and allow themselves to be pulled in a direction of fabrications.

Jewish professionals in Pittsburgh experienced the trauma of the massacre at Tree of Life, whether they were associated with the congregations in that building or not. Some congregations welcomed the three communities into their spaces immediately following the shooting, taking on the task of caring for them and accounting for them in their logistics. Many professionals in the area with whom I spoke expressed a feeling of not knowing whether they were permitted to make use of the community resources that had been established in response to the shooting. Some local organizations received a lot more support than others, and some board-level leadership was more helpful to their staff than others. New organizations and initiatives were

[33] Nienaber, Susan. "Leading into the Promised Land: Lessons Learned from Resilient Congregations." *Congregations*, Summer 2006 (vol. 32, no. 3), The Alban Institute, Inc., Herndon, VA.

established specifically in response to the shooting, both for acute trauma care and for more long term assistance, but people still felt as though they could not ask for help, particularly if they were in the secondary and tertiary groups of people who were affected. Jewish leaders felt a sense of overwhelm because there were so many steps toward rebuilding and so many different types of care to offer to others, even as the leaders themselves were also need need of care.

That feeling of overwhelm is familiar to me as a parent of a child who went through a major medical event during his toddler years. Many people would say "let me know if you need anything" but few people would say "I am here at your house with sandwiches and I'm taking your laundry for wash and fold." Some people were so overwhelmed and they needed someone to say to them, "Yes, you have experienced trauma and harm, you are continuing to experience trauma and harm, and these resources are for you. We strongly recommend that you take advantage of them, and we will be sure that your work schedule can accommodate the time needed to get this help."

Whose job is it to care for staff? What about clergy and congregational leadership? The answer may be "no one" or "we've never thought of that." Knowing that staff care and workplace happiness is also a part of building a sanctuary, perhaps a board member paired with a staff member in a congregation could look out for staff needs. While this gets tricky because board members are congregants as well, that board member could be the person who compiles resources and makes connections. That board member could also help with "staff appreciation" in general, even if the climate is not one where staff members would approach a specific board member for help other than that. Dr. Greg Siegle recommends that people not hide their emotions excessively and be honest about having feelings. Calling into work for a mental health day, he says, should not be a joke or an exaggeration–if a person is truly having a depressed day or

having an emotionally volatile day, they may have a hard time doing their job. In referring to the time not long ago where people wore masks more often in order to protect against illness, Siegle says that maybe in addition to wearing a mask to prevent the spread of disease, a person might put on a mask to avoid showing their scowl. He says that people can care for each other in a Jewish way, being sad together, without being mean to each other or taking their negative feelings out on each other.

According to Susan Nienaber's timeline, the final stages of recovery from the trauma of the shooting at Tree of Life might have otherwise occurred in the summer or fall of 2023, but most Jewish professionals with whom I spoke felt that between the COVID-19 pandemic, other complex issues going with leadership and clergy in some of the congregations, followed by the massacre in Israel on October 7, 2023, there has not been time to come up for air.

Several Jewish professionals–not necessarily in connection with Tree of Life or specific to Pittsburgh institutions–said that they try to bring new ideas for staff care and staff appreciation into the culture of their institutions, but they experience pushback. A few people went so far as to say that their institutions' treatment of staff is not in line with Jewish communal values. Different staff members have different levels of respect for Jewish observance and the Jewish calendar. Synagogues may wrestle with such decisions as *kashrut* standards, exactly what time should be considered the end of Shabbat or a holiday, or blocking off the synagogue calendar for holidays so that outside rental clients are not able to book on those dates. Some people feel that large-scale trauma events have disrupted their congregational lives and that their institution has not been given proper tools to recover.

Many complexities are at work when it comes to staff care in Jewish institutions. Workplace boundaries are tricky in fields where people are serving others (Jewish communal

institutions in addition to schools), and congregants can sometimes forget that their clergyperson is entitled to take time off and is allowed to have personal space. People might get upset that the rabbi was unable to make a particular *shiva* call, and people fail to respect that their leadership may be overbooked or may simply have a day off (and a singular *shiva* call is not an emergency).

Clergy in particular has an on-call nature about their job. A discussion with other Jewish professionals evoked some controversy when some people said that they should have two days off just like other professionals, while others said that it is not realistic due to the nature of the work. For example: a congregational education director may have a dedicated full day off during the week, the entire afternoon and evening off after Shabbat services, and certain days during the week for either going home early before returning in the evening or for coming in late. The schedules of Jewish professionals cannot look like those of other professionals because plenty of the face time for Jewish professionals is outside of other people's working hours. However, flexible working hours with enough built-in off time is a way to honor staff, clergy, and other leadership.

A culture of caring among staff can translate into a culture of caring among congregants. The community can remember birthdays and celebrate joyous times, and the community can reach out in times of trouble to care for people who are experiencing illness or loss. A few professionals with whom I spoke lamented the fact that their roles in the congregation required them to reach out to others and provide this type of care, but no one remembered to do this for them, so they would either forego it entirely or make the arrangements themselves.

A Jewish leader with whom I spoke said that in their congregation, there is a lot of tension around a relatively recent traumatic event, specific to their congregation. They say that new colleagues who had not been a part of that event are noticing reactivity among the members

of staff that were affected. In the mind of the person with whom I spoke, the staff needed more help to get through the situation and they could have used more training in listening and de-escalation, particularly during and immediately after the event in question. Small group trainings might have been valuable, and staff and leadership needed to learn how to talk to each other. There is a baseline of assuming good intentions when working for an institution that is supposed to be guided by a set of values, but according to this leader, the staff is too overwhelmed to set that baseline.

Concerns about workplace environment in congregations mirror those in the rest of society. People are not willing to work for leaders who do not show basic respect, and people are concerned about work-life balance. Building and maintaining a sanctuary means "accepting gifts for [G-d] from ever person whose heart is so moved" (*Exodus 25:2*). The Hebrew "*yidvenu libo*" means that one's heart will be willing; the Torah goes on to talk about the specifics of what materials were needed and what specifications were given for the building of the tabernacle. The effort begins with people whose hearts are generous. The consensus among the professionals with whom I spoke? It is impossible to be generous of heart unless you are being cared for.

CHAPTER 8 - Go In Peace, Be Messengers of Peace: Conclusion

צֵאתְכֶם לְשָׁלוֹם מַלְאֲכֵי הַשָּׁלוֹם:
Go in peace, you messengers of peace.

"May the door of this synagogue be wide enough
To receive all who hunger for love, all who are lonely for friendship

May it welcome all who have cares to unburden,
thanks to express, hopes to nurture.

May the door of this synagogue be narrow enough
To shut out pettiness and pride, envy and enmity.

May its threshold be no stumbling block
To young or straying feet

May it be too high to admit complacency
Selfishness and harshness

May this synagogue be, for all who enter,
The doorway to a richer and more meaningful life.

–Sidney Greenberg, from *Mishkan T'filah*, the prayerbook of the Reform movement

The balance between "open" and "secure" has been tricky, particularly in times of heightened awareness and looking over our shoulders. Our "*ilu*" consciousness (from Chapter 3) calls upon us to leave the door wide open for joy and sorrow, to remember the joy in spite of the sorrow, and balance mourning and dancing. Our sanctuary doors should welcome us into a place of safety, where we can seek the stability of ritual. However, as the poem states, boundaries can make spaces more open. The boundaried practice of our rituals are a part of the comforting aspect–there are certain things that only Jews do. There are boundaries that shield against harmful behavior by making sure that rules are followed. There are boundaries which allow Jewish practice to take precedence in a society that often calls upon us to hide our faith or prioritize other causes, never making time for our own. Sadly–and not without controversy–there

are boundaries of increased security, including police presence, because the *ilu*, because the "what-if," has become reality on too many occasions.

Our reality is one in which we are all trauma survivors, whether we are making our way through collective traumas or whether we have experienced acute trauma on an individual level. Trauma-informed practice in congregations requires that we create spaces that feel safe and provide stability in ritual, while being sure that the ritual serves the people who are actually in front of us. Seeking help is normalized and available–both for congregants and staff/leadership. Congregational leadership can provide a layer of help and support, and they also should have plenty of referrals to make in case someone has an issue that is outside of their purview.

In addition to being able to take care of ourselves from within, our congregations can make a difference and cause healing instead of harm by creating positive change. Sarah Emanuel's study of Ezekiel adds a queer lens, and she says, "The centering of queer positivity creates a never-ending impacting loop. The more individual brains that shift, the more societal discourses that shift. And the more societal discourses that shift, the more individual brains that shift."[34] This is also true, of course, for the work in dismantling stereotypes and eliminating microaggressions. Changing mindsets, one person and then one group at a time.

The word "*mal'akh*" means an angel or a messenger. The word also connects with "*mal'akha*" which is work or craftsmanship and is the type of work that one is traditionally forbidden from doing on the Sabbath. God also is supposed to rest on the Sabbath, and we are not supposed to make requests of God during this time. The *Amidah* for Shabbat forgoes all of the blessings that are asking God to do something…except, this is not entirely true. The nineteen blessings are replaced with seven, and blessings five and seven are requests. We are asking God

[34] Emanuel, Sarah. "Trauma Theory, Trauma Story: A Narration of Biblical Studies and the World of Trauma" Brill Publishing, November 4, 2011, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, CA.

to find favor in our prayer (which is technically still a request) and we are asking God to put peace into the world (which is definitely a request). The *mal'akhei hashalom* must still be at work on Shabbat, and if the blessings of the *Amidah* are correct, the desire for peace never rests.

Today is a challenging time to build a sanctuary that truly feels like a sanctuary for American Jews. Differences of opinion on politics, on conflicts in Israel, as well as typical disagreements about ritual and practice, make for potentially reactive situations. These days, people want to hear more from their congregations about the values that the congregation holds, but it can be tricky to "choose sides" on every matter. Tensions are high at the writing of this work due to the US elections. Congregations have encouraged people to vote and have even participated in non-partisan voter initiatives. Congregations need to lead with their values, rather than with decisions on sides to take, leaving room for different opinions among congregants. For tax-exempt purposes, clergy are certainly not advised to endorse candidates, but in some cases the values held by the congregation make it fairly clear which way most congregants–but not all–choose to vote. Even though some Jews disagree with the majority of their congregation about politics, or about Israel, there is still enough that is shared, and they continue to be in community with those in the congregation.

Congregational activities are not always serious. Regular worship services are usually followed by social time and food. Other activities that congregations might offer include card games, movie nights, and hands-on social justice work, all of which give people the opportunity to meet each other and build friendships. Creating a sanctuary space where people want to be during the non-serious times will help to build connections when people are in need.

Bessel Van Der Kolk says that "collective movement and music create a larger context for our lives, a meaning beyond our individual fate."[35] His words can apply both to praying in community and to sacred art. Sometimes theatre, music, or visual arts programs can be very healing, and sometimes, as Van Der Kolk notices, people who are traumatized can feel out of sync. They may have trouble joining in at services or in activities because they are struggling internally. That is not to say that communal prayer or a visual art activity is not beneficial for people who are traumatized and/or are dealing with acute trauma, but the person should lead the way and decide what is comfortable for them.

> "The last things that should be cut from school schedules are chorus, physical education, recess, and anything else involving movement, play, and joyful engagement. When children are oppositional, defensive, numbed out, or enraged, it's also important to recognize that such "bad behavior" may repeat action patterns that were established to survive serious threats, even if they are intensely upsetting or off-putting."[2]

Van Der Kolk also observes that children especially have the need to engage in arts and movement in order to reinforce healthy development and recovery from any adverse events. I have noticed in my work with kids and teens that they are receiving less and less arts instruction. There is not a standard set of children's repertoire, either Jewish or secular, that kids may be expected to know. Through the lens of a former public school educator, I have mixed feelings about standard children's repertoire because much of it is of questionable origin. Children's party play songs may have racism in their backgrounds, for example. Even though the repertoire may need adaptation, kids do not sing enough, and they do not dance enough.

---

[35] Van Der Kolk, Bessel A. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Penguin Books, 2015. New York, NY.

I am not going to vilify technology, nor blame technology for the issue of children not singing and dancing, because technology certainly has its place. Ideally, today's kids are using their technology to expand their worlds and are also making real connections. Kids are overscheduled, with "free play" being much harder to come by, but they are also socially aware and much more accepting of difference. Our congregations have had to make adjustments and use expanded resources and technology in order to continue to reach kids, and the choices that congregations make in the expansion of their technological capacity must be in line with their values.

The closing charges: people come to us with their own stories, they are all created in the image of God, and some of these stories contain unique traumas. Additionally, some of these stories contain trauma that is common among many others in the congregation and is not so unique. Knowing that something happened to a person and not focusing on what is "wrong" with a person is an essential mindset for caring for them in a trauma-informed way. Being proactive and anticipating trauma-related sticking points is an essential part of creating spaces that are both wide open and protected. The title "Oz v'Tiferet" is aspirational, calling on congregations to be places of strength for their people. I hope that this sourcebook of sacred text, scholarly text, and the text of personal experience can help with building sanctuaries that provide spiritual care for all who enter.

Notes

The DSM-V, in 2012 placed PTSD in category for trauma and stressor-related disorders, and the authors laid out certain diagnostic criteria, whereby a person had to have at least one item from each category in order to receive a diagnosis of PTSD (as opposed to simply having experienced trauma). These categories are as follows:

- A person was exposed to: death, threatened death, actual or threatened serious injury, or actual or threatened sexual violence
- The traumatic event is persistently re-experienced
- Avoidance of trauma-related stimuli after the trauma
- Negative thoughts or feelings that began or worsened after the trauma
- Trauma-related arousal and reactivity that began or worsened after the trauma
- Symptoms last for more than one month
- Symptoms create distress or functional impairment (social, occupational)
- Symptoms are not due to medication, substance abuse, or other illness
- Additionally, a person experiences high levels of either depersonalization (being detached from oneself) or derealization (feeling as though things are not real)

Works Cited

Bloom, Sandra L. "An Elephant In the Room: The Impact of Traumatic Stress on Individuals and Groups." *The Trauma Controversy: Philosophical and Interdisciplinary Dialogues* (pp.143‑169). SUNY Publishing, 2024. Albany, NY.

Butler, L. D., Critelli, F. M., & Rinfrette, E.S. "Trauma-Informed Care and Mental Health." *Directions in Psychiatry*, Volume 31, pp 197-210. January 1, 2011.

Emanuel, Sarah. "Trauma Theory, Trauma Story: A Narration of Biblical Studies and the World of Trauma" Brill Publishing, November 4, 2011, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, CA.

Firestone, Tirzah. *Wounds into Wisdom : Healing Intergenerational Jewish Trauma*. Monkfish Book Publishing, 2019. New York, NY.

Greenstein, David. "Ilu." *Seder Interrupted: A Post-October 7 Haggadah Supplement*. Academy for Jewish Religion, 2024. Yonkers, NY.

Haslam, N., & McGrath, M. (2020). "The Creeping Concept of Trauma." *Social Research, 87,* 509-531.

Hill, Albin, and Yancey, Gaynor. "Trauma and Congregations: The Importance of Trauma Sensitivity in Local Religious Congregations." *Social Work & Christianity*, 49 (2), 181-196. August 29, 2022. https://doi.org/10.34043/swc.v49i2.191

Masters, Robert Augustus. *Spiritual Bypassing: When Spirituality Disconnects Us from What Really Matters*. North Atlantic Books, 2010.

McClintock, Karen. *Trauma-Informed Pastoral care: How to Respond When Things Fall Apart.* Fortress Press, March 1, 2022. Minneapolis, MN.

Meritzer, Richard. "The One-Step Project: Paving the Way to an Accessible City." City of Pittsburgh Department of City Planning. August 2016, Pittsburgh PA.

Naditch, Beth. "Building the Airplane in the Air: Trauma-Informed Clinical Pastoral Education during COVID-19 Summer." *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry.* Mar 21, 2021

Naditch, Beth. "Order." *Seder Interrupted: A Post-October 7 Haggadah Supplement*. Academy for Jewish Religion, 2024. Yonkers, NY.

Nienaber, Susan. "Leading into the Promised Land: Lessons Learned from Resilient Congregations." *Congregations*, Summer 2006 (vol. 32, no. 3), The Alban Institute, Inc., Herndon, VA.

Yansen Jr., James Washington Sydgrave. "Daughter Zion's Trauma." Dissertation, Boston University. 2016.

Van Der Kolk, Bessel A. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Penguin Books, 2015. New York, NY.

"How Trauma-Informed Schools Help Every Student Succeed." *Crisis Prevention Institute (CPI)*, www.crisisprevention.com/blog/education/how-trauma-informed-schools-help-every-student-succeed/

"Speak out against Antisemitism in the Workplace" www.adl.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/2023-02/ADL-DEI-Speak-Out-Against-Antisemitism.pdf

"Ashkenazi Awareness Checklist: Examining Privilege" https://urj.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/ashkenaziawarenesschecklist.pdf Union for Reform Judaism, October 2021

"How to Identify Microaggressions & The Importance of Disrupting Them." urj.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/Microaggression_Resource_May_2023.pdf. Union for Reform Judaism, May 2023

Center on Great Teachers and Leaders at the American Institutes for Research. "Supporting Student Resilience and Well-Being with Trauma-Informed Care." April 2020. Washington, DC https://gtlcenter.org/sites/default/files/Supporting_Student_Resilience_Well-Being_Self-Assessment_Planning_Tool.pdf

The Sanctuary Institute. “Sanctuary Model.” https://www.thesanctuaryinstitute.org/about-us/the-sanctuary-model/ Accessed September 24, 2024

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) “What is Trauma?” https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/trauma Accessed December 20, 2024

https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/common/common_adults.asp