

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Can a world crisis make us a better people?



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Religions and nations have often faced crises, but never before have we faced them all at the same time. Never before have we come together as a world community to fight a common, but invisible enemy.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, former chief rabbi of Great Britain, in a recent interview on BBC said that bad events like the spread of the new coronavirus can bring out the worst in people, but can also bring out the best. He pointed to communities throughout the world coming together as a "we." They are asking "How can I help?" The medical and health community is on the front lines, but also supermarkets and pharmacies are gearing up to make basic supplies and medicines available. Media, especially social media, are playing a critical role in keeping people informed and connected.

Sacks, who has often been critical of social media, observed, "The split attention with everyone looking at something different that has so disaggregated our culture is going to change. Because we're all pretty much watching the same news, reacting in pretty much the same way, so although we're physically not together, mentally and emotionally we will be."

We all have circles of interaction, from families and communities to nations and even families of nations. He continued, "But right now I don't know when we've been more embraced, every one of us in a vital and personal way, with this huge circle of humanity. ... Just a few weeks ago we could say this is happening to someone else, somewhere else, a half a world away. All of a sudden, it's now affecting every one of us, so I think that the physical isolation is nonetheless going to go hand in hand with emotional and even moral sense of solidarity."

A simple but powerful example of the crisis bringing people together is illustrated by the picture that went viral (in the good sense) on Instagram. It was taken in Jerusalem by a co-worker of two paramedics, Avraham Mintz and Zohar Abu Jama, working for an emergency response service. One of the men is Jewish, the other, Muslim. When it was time for the late afternoon prayer, they had a break that allowed them to step out of their vehicle to carry out their respective prayers. As described in a CNN (Jerusalem) article, "Mintz, a religious Jew, stood facing Jerusalem, his white and black prayer shawl hanging off his shoulders. Abu Jama, an observant Muslim, knelt facing Mecca, his maroon and white prayer rug unfurled underneath him."

Let this image inspire each of us to reach out, not only to family and friends, but to the broader circle of humanity.

Religious leaders from all faiths are also responding to the crisis with calls for solidarity, and, according to the Council on Foreign Relations, making appeals to their followers "to not only take safety precautions but also to embrace their spirituality to help confront the health, social and economic challenges ahead."

Locally, various religious traditions are making accommodations during this challenging time. Last week, the local news and media website, The Rapidian, posted an article summarizing some of the approaches being taken in the area's faith communities.

Online streaming services have been used in many congregations and are being expanded. St. Mark's Episcopal Church reports that this is likely the first time since the church was built in 1848 that the church complex has been locked down. They are expanding their use of Facebook, YouTube and Zoom conferencing.

Similar approaches are being taken by the Grand Rapids Buddhist Temple and Westminster Presbyterian Church, both of which are using the Zoom app for meetings with stu-



Two paramedics pray March 24 outside an ambulance of the American Friends of Magen David Adom: Avraham Mintz, a Jew from Beersheba facing Jerusalem, and Zohar Abu Jama, an Arab from Rahat facing Mecca. Submitted by Magen David Adom/AFP via Getty Images

dents and youth. Other congregations, from Congregation Ahavas Israel and the Masjid At-Tawheed, to the Diocese of Grand Rapids and St. George's Orthodox Church, have adjusted to more online interaction. The Sikh Society of West Michigan, Temple Emanuel and the West Michigan Hindu Temple have done so as well.

The Kent County Health Department participated in a conference call with more than 140 church and religious leaders, which led to the formation of a countywide Church Response Task Force. The group is led by pastors from Ada Bible Church, Brown-Hutcherson Ministries and Iglesia de Cristo Misionera. (Read the full article at: bit.ly/Religious-responses.)

The Kaufman Interfaith Institute has also been involved in assisting faith groups from many different traditions to cooperate in this new environment. One of the institute's book groups has moved to an online medium and a second group is starting this week. If you are interested in a weekly online interfaith discussion, contact the email address at the end of the Insight for details.

"Now more than ever, the Kaufman Interfaith Institute is committed to fostering respect and cooperation in order to augment that necessary work," said Kyle Kooyers, associate director at the KII. "Even with all the craziness unfolding around us, I am confident that together we will witness and inspire the best of human compassion and kindness in our community."

Rabbi Sacks is not surprised about the positive response being made throughout the world. In his interview, he said, "We are social animals, and it makes us feel better when we are altruistic, when we help others, when we make someone else's life better. ... We will come through this with a much



Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, former chief rabbi of Great Britain, said in a recent interview that he hopes the coronavirus crisis will bring out the best in people.

stronger identification with others, a much stronger commitment to helping others who need help. This, in a tragic way, is probably the lesson we needed as a nation and as a world."

He also found hope in the way that "one tiny microscopic virus has brought the whole of humanity to its knees. We cannot be indifferent to nature anymore, so this is going to make us more sensitive to issues like climate change."

Sacks described our situation as the nearest thing to a modern revelation in that, "We suddenly see our vulnerability. We've been coasting along for more than half a century in unprecedented affluence, unprecedented freedom, unprecedented optimism, and all of a sudden, we are facing the fragility and vulnerability of the human situation. At the end of the day, even without a faith in God, we have to say either we work together and survive or we work separately and perish."

Sacks is convinced this would change every one of us, and as hard as it seems today, we will emerge better people as a result. As we do all we can to stay safe and healthy, let us also take hope, with Rabbi Sacks, that we will emerge better people, more caring, and more aware of our common humanity.

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