



Remote Possibilities: Sermons as Religious Support during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Psychological and sociological studies have reported that highly religious people have better mental health overall, which was also confirmed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Little investigation has been undertaken to understand the actual enablers of religious coping that contextualize these mental health results. Australian pulpit rabbis were invited to submit sermons delivered on the eve of the first Sabbath of the pandemic. These sermons were conceived as “artifacts” of religious support and Nancy Ammerman’s (2021) multidimensional model of lived religion—in particular, the narrative, embodied and moral dimensions—served as the conceptual framework for analysis. Religious support was evident in the sermons in the ways sacred texts and values were deployed to encourage shifts in conceptions associated with congregational gatherings and agency in private religious beliefs and behavior. By tapping in on faith in God, familiar religious concepts, and values, congregants were encouraged to abide by health directives, endure them, and sustain hope for a redemptive future. The contribution of this qualitative study lies in its identification of a dimension of religious support and how it assists people of faith during difficult times.

Keywords Religious support · Mental health · COVID-19 pandemic · Lived religion · Australian Jewry · Sermons

Introduction

In this study, we focus on sermons delivered on the eve of the first *Shabbat* (Sabbath) of the Australian lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sermons are understood as artifacts of religious support and are examined to afford insight as to

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why it is argued that religious people have better mental health. Analysis of the sermons revealed similarities and differences in how the rabbis interpreted the weekly Biblical reading and offered guidance to their congregations - especially encouraging shifts in conceptions associated with in-person gatherings for prayer and Jewish life, as well as embracing more proactive approaches to private religious belief and behavior. We contribute qualitative corroboration for existing research concerning the role of religion in supporting well-being during times of crisis by analyzing rabbinic sermons delivered in the Australian Jewish community on the eve of the first Shabbat of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. We focus on Australian Jews, an under-researched population, to bring scholarly attention to a population whose pandemic experiences have barely been studied, with only one publication to date that focuses on Australian Jewry during the COVID-19 pandemic (Rutland 2021).

COVID-19 Globally and in Australia

Global awareness of the pandemic began on January 10 2020, when the World Health Organization (WHO) first reported that a novel coronavirus (nCOV-19) was the cause of a pneumonia outbreak in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China (WHO 2022, 18–20). COVID-19 was the name chosen by the WHO on February 11 2020 for the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, the virus designated as SARS-CoV-2) WHO 2022, 28). By March 11 2020, the WHO officially declared the outbreak of COVID-19 to be a pandemic (WHO 2022, 35).

The first reported case of novel coronavirus in Australia occurred on January 25 2020 (Hunt and Murphy 2020). On March 18 2020, Australian states and territories instituted coordinated measures to limit the spread of infection, including bans on non-essential travel and indoor gatherings of over 100 people; visitor guidelines for aged care facilities; and social distancing guidelines (see, for example, Hazzard 2020; Andrews et al. 2020). Most of the states and territories closed state borders between March 19–24 2020 (Storen and Corrigan 2020), and international borders were closed on March 19 2020 (Morrison et al. 2020). There was substantial variation between state policies relating to closure of borders; businesses and schools; curfews and movement restrictions; mask mandates; and contact tracing. Victoria, for example, experienced the most protracted and severe lockdown in the world, lasting for 262 days, or close to 9 months from March 2020 (Jose 2021). During Victoria's Stage 4 restrictions—the most severe phrase—leaving home was only permitted for essential shopping and exercising (within a 5 km radius of home for 1 hour maximum and with only one other person); curfews were in place from 8:00 pm to 5:00 am; use of face masks was mandatory; non-essential retail stores were closed (including hairdressers and gyms); restaurants and cafes were open for takeaway only; weddings were not permitted; funerals were limited to 10 mourners; schools were open only for remote learning; and childcare and kindergartens were closed.

As of May 5 2024, there have been 7,047,741 COVID-19-related deaths reported to the World Health Organization (WHO 2022, 2024). By May 22 2024, in Australia, there had been 24,468 COVID-19-related deaths (COVID-LIVE 2024).

During the pandemic period, there was substantial variation among the states and territories in terms of infection control policy and mortality rates.

COVID-19 in the Jewish Community

There are 117,000 Jews in Australia, comprising just under 0.5% (Graham 2021) of the total Australian population of 26 million (ABS, 2023). Twenty-nine percent of Australian Jews identify as Orthodox (Bankier-Karp 2023). There are 103 operational synagogues in Australia, of which 83% are Orthodox.¹ There were myriad challenges—physical, economic, psychological, social, and educational—posed or exacerbated by the pandemic and related lockdowns. In many ways, Orthodox Australian Jews experienced these challenges as others did. However, the pandemic and lockdowns posed unique challenges due to obligations and needs associated with congregational prayer (Bankier-Karp and Shain 2021). Orthodox Jews may be distinguished from other Jews by observance of *halacha*, or Jewish law (Bankier-Karp and Shain 2021). Jewish law details daily and also highly regular observances including thrice-daily prayer, Torah study, and Shabbat observance, as well as laws governing permitted foods, dress, and other all-encompassing observances. Belief in the omnipotence and benevolence of God are also part of Orthodox belief. In contrast to most religions and non-Orthodox Jews, Orthodox Judaism does not permit the use of electronic devices on Shabbat and Jewish festivals; moreover, prayers conducted using such devices and platforms are not regarded as congregational, meaning that such platforms do not enable Orthodox Jews to fulfill their religious obligations to pray in a *minyan*, or quorum (“Halachot Related to Coronavirus—Halachipedia”, 2020).

Despite these disadvantages, however, Orthodox Jews had some distinct advantages, given certain more portable sources of support. These are outlined below.

Religiosity, Mental Health, and the Pandemic

There is a strong research basis to the claim that religiosity has strong positive effects on mental health (Aten et al. 2019; Counted et al. 2020; Paloutzian et al. 2013; Pargament 2001; Prati and Pietrantoni 2009) and human flourishing (Upenieks and Schieman 2022). Religiosity entails highly “portable” support resources and “independent faith-based coping strategies including prayer, meditation and comfort in their belief system” (Abbott and Franks 2021, 2406). The study of religious texts also inspires and sustains religiosity through congregational and private meaning-making.

Hayward and Krause (2014) conceive of religion as promoting the development of three religious resources that are associated with mental health and well-being. These include *social resources*, which are the fruits of religious communal

¹ An Australian national synagogue census was conducted as part of a recent Australian Jewish community study (Bankier-Karp and Graham, 2024).

belonging; *psychological resources*, which emanate from religious convictions; and *social identity resources*, which are attained as a consequence of acceptance as a group member. These religious resources are thought to underpin strong mental health through their promotion of *religious coping*, defined as a distinct form of coping derived from religious axiomata, rituals, happenings, feelings, and forms of social connection (Pargament 2001; Pargament and Abu-Raiya 2007, 23). *Positive religious coping*—which is predictive of superior mental health and well-being—is founded on an assured divine connectedness, the bonds of spiritual community, and gazing upon the cosmos through a faithful lens. Positive religious coping also entails surrendering one’s life to the divine in such a way that they are then able to envisage themselves overcoming the challenges before them (Counted et al. 2020, 71). *Negative religious coping*, in contrast, is associated with a fragile relationship to the divine, religiously or spiritually fractured social bonds, and a more portentous worldview (Pargament 2001). A systematic review of 394 published English-language research papers investigating the relationships between religious coping and mental health indicators found statistically significant homogeneity of results related to the relationship between positive religious coping and flourishing, but significant heterogeneity of results related to the relationship between negative religious coping and flourishing (Pankowski and Wytrychiewicz-Pankowska 2023).

A systematic review of studies on religious coping in diverse religious groups provides sufficient evidence that people of different religions (or none) deploy different coping mechanisms when faced with adversity (Abu-Raiya and Pargament 2015), necessitating research focusing on Jewish populations to understand the relationship between Jewish religious coping and indicators of mental health and well-being. Studies focusing on Jewish populations prior to the pandemic have linked religion with mental health (Levin 2013; Rosmarin et al. 2009a, 2009b). Utilizing Pargament et al.’s (2000) Religious Coping Scale (RCOPE), Rosmarin and colleagues (2009c) developed the 16-item Jewish religious coping scale JCOPE, reporting that positive JCOPE scores were associated with lower levels of psychological distress, while negative JCOPE scores were related to elevated levels of distress (2009c, 680).

Research on the COVID-19 pandemic also confirmed that religiosity was associated with more positive measures of mental health. This positive association between measures of higher religiosity (reliance on God and religious coping) and better mental health (psychological distress, depression, anxiety, stress, or fear) were found in a wide range of populations, including those from Colombia and South Africa (Counted et al. 2020), Iran (Asadi et al. 2023, 6), Poland (Krok et al. 2021),² Tunisia (Fekih-Romdhane and Cheour 2021), Turkey (Altun et al. 2022), and the USA (DeRosset et al. 2021; Schnabel and Schieman 2021; Upenieks and Ellison 2022, 853). Not all studies, however, identified a positive association between high

² A study of Polish adolescents added additional nuance, using moderated mediation modelling to test the relationships between COVID-19-related fear, meaning-making, and mental health. Fears related to COVID-19 intensified the effect of religiosity on meaning-making, which then had positive effects on mental health (i.e., measures of life satisfaction and positive affect; Krok et al. 2021).

religiosity and high levels of mental health; in a continuous cross-sectional study conducted between June 2020 and November 2021 in Germany (during the second wave of the pandemic) reporting a decrease in well-being, prayer, and meditation among Catholics and Protestants, young and old, the authors suggested that these effects may have been a product of the sustained period of uncertainty and seclusion, which tested the religious coping of even the most religious people (Büssing et al. 2022, 471).³ Relatedly, non-religiosity/non-spirituality (measured by low-level institutional religiousness and individual spirituality) was found to exercise a significant negative moderating effect on the association between pandemic-related trauma intensity and psychological distress, utilization of coping mechanisms varying by non-religious/non-spiritual orientation (Abbott and Franks 2021; Galen 2018; Speed and Hwang 2019).

Studies of Jewish populations during the pandemic highlighted associations between the highly religious and more positive measures of mental health. A longitudinal study of 11 US Jewish Orthodox congregations during 2020 also reported positive effects of religion on mental health. As staying at home (measured using Google's Community Mobility data) increased in response to COVID-19 case rates, there were competing effects on religious resources: group resources (congregational prayer) decreased, but psychosocial resources (indices of existential meaning and closeness-to-God) both increased. As the closeness-to-God index increased, there was an improvement in mental health (indices of depression and anxiety, perceived stress, and loneliness; Bankier-Karp and Shain 2021). Another study of the US Orthodox Jewish population, conducted between March and April 2020, reported strong statistical associations between positive religious coping, intrinsic religiosity, and trust in God strongly correlated with lower stress (Pirutinsky et al. 2020). An early study of the pandemic's effects on mental health revealed that, when compared with non-Orthodox British Jews, Orthodox British Jews had better mental health, which was attributed to synagogue attendance (Graham et al. 2020) and the rich support and well-being that is synonymous with daily prayer in a religious community. While studies focusing on Christian populations have identified the role of Church leaders in supporting their congregants' well-being (see, for example, Osei-Tutu et al. 2021), no studies have been conducted to examine the role of Jewish pulpit rabbis in supporting the well-being of congregants during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Cut off from many of the social, psychological, and social identity resources from which the highly religious benefited in years prior, why did the highly religious fare so well during the pandemic? While some claim that sacred bonds are deeply linked to houses of worship (Counted and Zock 2019), and any health and well-being benefits come from participation therein (Aten et al. 2019; VanderWeele et al.

³ Although Büssing et al. acknowledge that Germany is a more secular country, and therefore, the religious trust and confidence might not have had the same kind of effects in the first place (2022, 760). Still the loneliness, social isolation, and lockdowns might have meant that people could not access the religious support they needed, as religious activity shift from public-congregational to private ritual and practice.

2016), others maintain that religiosity boasts other more portable aspects. Beyerlein and colleagues (2021) maintain that the highly religious were sustained during the pandemic by the social support of religious communities. They maintain that these strong and supportive relationships were formed with coreligionists in the years prior, the highly religious having rich wellsprings of religious support due to high-regularity attendance in houses of worship (Beyerlein et al. 2021. See also Michaels et al. 2022, 1758; Pargament 2001; Jacobi et al. 2022). Faith leader support—independently and in association with congregational—has also been identified as associated with better mental health (Acevedo et al. 2022:591), with the vitality and robust nature of congregations being a product of vibrant and cooperative pastoral leadership (Wollschleger 2018). Through their sermons, faith leaders not only offer support (Hayward and Krause 2014) but also may develop more accepting congregational cultures relating to matters such as mental health (Hankerson et al. 2018), thereby encouraging congregants to be more supportive of one another.

Beyond houses of worship, coreligionists, and faith leaders, religious coping is also undergirded by sacred texts, religious axiomata, and values. Faith motivates *benevolent religious reappraisal*, religiously motivated reframing of events to fit with notions of a benevolent, omniscient God (Beyerlein et al. 2021). Religious reframing such as this enables religious coping (Hayward and Krause 2014). Beyerlein and colleagues identified two theodic⁴ interpretations of the COVID-19 pandemic that were associated with an intensification of the faith of US believers. One involved inferring that COVID-19 constituted a divine call to humanity to change their lives and lifestyle, and the second involved accepting that God would offer protection from the virus (Beyerlein et al. 2021, 511). The supportive effects of these faithful interpretations on mental health were found to be partially mediated by religious coping, in particular private prayer (Beyerlein et al. 2021, 511–512). Another example of seeing events through a faithful lens includes the belief that “God has allowed the coronavirus pandemic for some reason at this particular time in history, and it coincides with the present booming age of technology that connects people both near and far at virtually no cost or risk to health” (Koenig 2020, 2208).

Faith leaders and the specific ways that they offer religious support constitute an under-researched subject in the general and pandemic research into religious coping and mental health.

Ammerman’s Multidimensional Approach to Studying Religion in Everyday Life: The Conceptual Framework

The lockdowns and social distancing policies implemented at the onset of the pandemic, which closed houses of worship and suspended religious gatherings, posed challenges to not only institutional and socially enacted religious practice coping and support but also related research. Nancy T. Ammerman is a sociologist and scholar known for her extensive research in the field of sociology of

⁴ Theodicy is the defense of God’s goodness and omnipotence in view of the existence of evil (Merriam Webster 2023).

religion. Ammerman has also pioneered the notion of *lived religion* and the ways in which religious practices are woven into the fabric of daily life (1997, 2020). Lived religion has a more expansive perspective on the sites and circumstances in which the sacred emerges, which is vital to investigating religious support during the pandemic. While including the institutional as well as the highly private and individualistic, Ammerman defines religious practices as an array of activities that are meaningful to the collective; they presuppose “understanding that is as much in our bones as in our heads, as much a product of habitual dispositions as of critical assessment” (Ammerman 2021, 15). Ammerman’s (2021) multidimensional approach to studying lived religion outlines six interconnected dimensions of life in which religious practice occurs. These are “embodiment, materiality, emotion, aesthetics, moral judgment and narrative” (Ammerman 2021, 24). The narrative, embodied, and moral dimensions are relevant to this study and are now outlined.

The *narrative dimension* focuses on the shared experience of communicating. One understanding of narrative is that “there are religious practices of storytelling, both specific stories to be told and shared ways of telling them,” the other connotation being that “practices are shaped by implicit stories about what is happening and why, and those temporal and relationship narrative structures are as important as the more overt practices of religious storytelling” (Ammerman 2021, 177). The narrative dimension attends to the stories people draw on; the ways in which internalized “characters” and “events” shape perspectives on current events. “We are never acting alone or without context and script,” explains Ammerman (2021, 177). The moral and fitting course of action—with implications for identity and belonging—is guided by the stories people use in meaning-making. Ammerman conceives of sermons and prayers as forms of narrative, each constituting approaches to making sense of the Divine in history, seeing the Divine in the present, and appealing to the Divine with aspirations for the future.

The *embodied dimension* highlights the physical and multisensory in religious practice. Phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (2002, 167) understands the body as “our anchorage in a world.” Merleau-Ponty argues for the centrality of the body as the instrument of comprehension and “the fabric into which all objects are woven” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 235). Sheets-Johnstone extends this to assert that the metaphorical fabric, the body, is a moving body, as we enter “the world moving. We are indeed either movement-born or still-born. When we learn to move ourselves, we do so on the basis of what is already there: an original kinetic liveliness or animation” (Sheets-Johnstone 2011, 200–201). Gatherings create community, wherein encounters with the sacred constitute shared experiences (Ammerman 2021, 81). Embodiment also focuses on conspicuous signifiers of membership, whether upon the personage of participants or in the ways that they inhabit and interact with sacred spaces. Religious practices, in their emphasis on the sacredness of life and wellness, emphasize that “Health and healing are central religious practices across traditions, but religious and cultural differences shape just how health is understood and how religious practices relate to ways of seeking health” (Ammerman 2021, 84). Focusing on the embodied dimension means also attending to the ways in which “agency and constraint are manifest, often in the same interaction” (Ammerman 2021, 92).

The *moral dimension* notes that people's perceptions, expectations, and reactions to daily happenings are influenced by powerful inner convictions regarding what is virtuous and what is sinful (Ammerman 2021, 159) and that these are moral practices. Religious identity and belonging in a religious community are bound up in the acceptance of moral standards and formation of the religious personality, both as a consequence of formal and implicit learning in the religious community. Living by the community's principles becomes synonymous with morality and is influential in encouraging and suppressing behavior. Ammerman recommends that "We should ask how any given religious practice articulates, embodies, and exemplifies the moral good of maintaining an existing social order" (Ammerman 2021, 168). Ammerman notes the importance of "pay[ing] close attention to how practices—from sermons and prayers to congratulatory announcements and gestures of honor—express the moral order, as well as the social hierarchy, of a group" (Ammerman 2021, 171). We acknowledge the intertwining of the three selected themes as the giving and sharing of narratives is enacted as embodied practice and is underpinned by moral meaning.

Making a Case for This Research

There is sufficient evidence of diversity in religious coping and the embrace of theodicies across religions and religious denominations (Beyerlein et al. 2021) with few studies that focus on Jews. This research is important, as it contributes to research on enablers of religious coping and support more broadly and related research in Jewish populations specifically. The Australian Jewish community constitutes an under-researched population, with only one publication to date that focuses on Australian Jewry during the COVID-19 pandemic (Rutland 2021), also providing further justification for this study. Finally, given the length and intensity of the lockdowns in states such as Victoria, studies are vital to understanding religious support in such challenging contexts.

Method

Data and Sample

Ethics approval was granted for this research (Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee Project number 31705). Participants were recruited by circulating invitations to participate to Australian rabbinic umbrella organizations and, where these did not exist, via relevant congregational leadership. These included Kehilat Kolenu (representing Humanistic Judaism), Masorti Australia (representing Conservative Judaism), the Rabbinical Council of Australia and New Zealand (representing Orthodox Judaism), and the Union for Progressive Judaism (representing Reform Judaism). Participation was restricted to those who had served as pulpit/congregational rabbis during 2020.

Nine participants volunteered to participate, all Orthodox males, from across the Melbourne, Perth, and Sydney Jewish communities.⁵ The participants served congregations across the Orthodox spectrum, including those described as open-Orthodox, Modern Orthodox, Chabad and Haredi (Strictly Orthodox). The participants returned informed consent forms and shared between one and six sermons each. The sermons took the form of emails, a published book, recordings of phone conference calls, YouTube clips, and WhatsApp voice messages. Five participants submitted pre-Shabbat sermons from the first week of the pandemic lockdowns; these are the focus of the current analysis. All nine participants also shared sermons that were delivered either prior to the Jewish festival of Passover or Rosh Hashana (Jewish New Year). All sermons were transcribed verbatim. Four participants agreed to be named, and one participant preferred to be given a pseudonym.

Analytic Approach

When only nine rabbis replied, we pivoted to focus on an in-depth qualitative analysis of their sermons. The initial analytic stage involved the three authors independently reading and rereading the transcripts. It was then decided that Ammerman's three dimensions of narrative, morality, and embodiment were most relevant to the research aims of identifying religious support in sermons delivered remotely.⁶ The second analytic stage involved each author taking one of the three dimensions and analyzing the sermons, identifying passages that exemplified that dimension. Once each of the three independent analyses had been written up, it became evident that there was substantial overlap in discussion of particular passages from the sermons, and that the narrative dimension was the most all-encompassing. The three discrete analyses were then re-written to synthesize the findings.

Results

The narrative dimension constitutes the superordinate structuring of the analysis. The embodied and moral dimensions are nested therein. Ammerman's narrative dimension highlights the importance of paying attention to "religious practices of storytelling, both specific stories to be told and shared ways of telling them" (Ammerman 2021, 177). Whether consciously or otherwise, internalized scripts,

⁵ This sample size, while small, covers 10% of Australian congregational rabbis. Given the speed with which the lockdowns were mandated and the level of fear in Australia at that time (Cater 2020, Richardson 2020), it is unsurprising that Australian rabbis would have been more likely to have focused on offering practical support and logistical arrangements, rather than composing and conveying sermons.

⁶ A fourth dimension, emotion, also featured in the transcripts. Emotions were present in the rabbis' messages that conveyed comfort; their reassurances, which sought to help people feel less guilty about not physically coming together; and the encouragement to make the first Sabbath after lockdown joyful. There were also references to happiness and contentment. Nonetheless, given that emotions appeared in only a minor way, we elected to focus on the three dimensions that featured more extensively in the transcripts and offered greater opportunity for analysis.

characters, and events are drawn upon by the storyteller, shaping both the content and delivery of the message. “Shared ways of telling” are discussed first, interwoven with the embodied dimensions. We then discuss the “specific stories” that are told, integrating the moral dimensions.

Religious Ways of Storytelling

Shared ways of engaging in religious storytelling, in the Australian Orthodox Jewish context, have a recognizable structure, albeit with some necessary adaptation given the government-mandated lockdowns. For Australian Orthodox congregations, the COVID-19 lockdowns necessitated changes in the materiality of rabbinic sermons, in terms of *location*—sermons were communicated to congregants via YouTube, FaceBook livestream, Zoom meetings, WhatsApp group chat voice notes and videos, conference calls, and emailed texts. Changes in *timing* were also necessary—sermons were disseminated prior to Shabbat since Orthodox compliance with halacha (Jewish law) precluded the use of these forms of technology on Shabbat itself. Many of the sermon’s distinctive *features*, however, were retained, in particular their familiar structures and habits, which were critical to their conveying of support. As was evident from the sermons delivered in audio-visual form, some of the rabbis delivered sermons from synagogue pulpits, with the Ark in the background, the filming of the sermons from the pews allowing congregants to imagine they were sitting in their regular seats and, for several minutes, conveying a semblance of normal routine and order. Even when government directives mandated the closure of synagogues, the rabbis often recorded their sermons with bookshelves containing religious texts in the background, with the familiar sacred space aesthetics and authority supporting the conveyed messages. For example, Rabbi Shua Solomon, of Bondi Mizrahi Synagogue, Sydney, stated, “I decided that... I would give everyone a taste of shul and give [the sermon] from where I usually would speak.”

The familiar structures and habits utilized in conveying support via sermons is seen in the structure of the sermons themselves. A shared way of Jewish storytelling and related meaning-making takes the form of an exegetical analysis of a verse, value, or topic found in *parshat hashavua* (the weekly Bible reading, *parasha*, for concision), with rabbinic commentary often used to offer insight and a relevant contemporary message. The basis for this practice lies in the rabbinic premise that “the actions of the patriarchs are a sign—or, more accurately, a foreshadowing of what is to come—for their descendants” (Midrash Tanhuma 9, cited in Nachmanides’ commentary on Genesis 12:6). The *parasha* of the first week of the Australian lockdowns (Saturday March 21 2020) was Vayakhel-Pikudei. The rabbis, keenly aware that the word “Vayakhel” means “to gather or congregate,” were faced with a jarring contradiction between the Biblical description of physical gathering and the government-mandated measures implemented to limit social gatherings.

Three of the rabbis focused on the seeming contradiction between the *parasha*’s call for community-building and the government-mandated social distancing measures, each offering a different kind of resolution to that incongruity. Rabbi Dr. Benjamin Elton of The Great Synagogue, Sydney, was one of several examples.

I think that the first words of the first *parasha*—Vayakhel—are incredibly relevant to the situation we find ourselves in at the moment. It says, “*Vayakhel Moshe et kol adat Bnei Yisrael*,” Moses assembled—*vayakhel*, he made a congregation—out of the children of Israel... Moses did that in the desert and we’ve been doing that in conventional ways all these years—by assembling for prayer on a daily basis, on a weekly basis, by having classes and by having other events. That’s not possible for the time being. But *vayakhel*—the imperative, the command, the instruction, the mission—still applies” ... it’s still essential that we turn ourselves from a group of individuals into a congregation and maintain ourselves as members of the congregation.—Rabbi Elton

Faced with the challenge of locating a Biblical-traditional basis for social distancing—ironically during a week whose Biblical reading opens with the command of physical gathering—Rabbi Elton identifies the common outcome of the gathering efforts of the Biblical figure of Moses and Jewish people over the course of history, namely transforming “individuals into a congregation.” For Orthodox Jews, faced by the specter of closed synagogues on the eve of Shabbat—the day of the week when Jews attend synagogue in the highest numbers—Rabbi Elton’s message of support lies in his identification of how social distancing may be regarded as a community-building effort, and how his congregants could continue living religiously purposeful lives during the pandemic.

Rabbi Solomon’s sermon to his synagogue on the eve of the same Shabbat also offers a resolution to the contradiction between gathering and isolation, however one which is ethical-philosophical and touches on themes of character refinement and peoplehood.

Rabbi [Jonathan] Sacks points out that throughout the ages there have always been ... three different types or groups of people. There is the *eidah*, the group of like-minded people that come together because they are like-minded, to do something ... they all believe in. There is the concept of *tzibur* ... a group of people who are completely different but come together for one specific purpose. And then of course we have at the beginning of our *parasha* the concept of *kehillah*, a group of people that are not necessarily like-minded that come together to form a community and to be part of something that’s much greater than themselves.”—Rabbi Solomon

Rabbi Solomon’s reinterpretation of gathering as an aspirational striving for connectedness calls on his congregation to make a conscious decision to embrace a belonging “that’s much greater than themselves,” namely a deliberate, selfless, and higher sense of Jewish peoplehood. Citing Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, a well-known and admired Jewish philosopher-theologian, would have added to the authority of the message.

The sermon of Rabbi Alon Meltzer, of Or Chadash Synagogue, Sydney, to his synagogue on the same day is more expansive than the previously cited calls for community-building in one’s congregation of people, asking instead that his congregation focus on the connectedness that emanates from a shared sense of humanity.

This week the *parasha* opens with the idea of gathering... We are gathering, but we are gathering in different ways. We are gathering in thought, we're gathering in prayer, we're gathering in real empathy and care and emotion [with respect] to the rest of humanity.—Rabbi Meltzer

Rabbi Melzer's interpretation of gathering is more humanistic and universal in tone, casting the outcome of a hoped-for heightened sense of compassion as the pandemic's "silver lining." Rabbi Meltzer also reminds his congregation that, while congregational prayer is the ideal form of prayer, private prayer is still extremely valuable, highlighting an important mode of religious expression in which his congregation may engage to express their concerns for humanity.

Rabbi Ralph Genende, of Caulfield Shule, Melbourne, in contrast, appeared not to dwell on the resonant word in the *parasha*, instead focusing his sermon on offering supportive frameworks. After opening with a humanizing personal anecdote, Rabbi Genende shared a Hasidic insight that had proven helpful for him in adjusting to the closure of his synagogue and the loss of his rabbinic role on Shabbat.

The insight of the eighteenth-century Jewish mystic Baal Shem Tov was particularly helpful. He suggested there are three ways in which we cope with crises. The first is *hachna'ah* (yielding), which is about accepting realities and letting go of any hopes, expectations, and dreams. The second is *havdalah* (discernment), which is about grasping the complexity of our new situation and looking for the sparks of light in the darkness. The third is *hamtakah* (sweetening), which is about finding the opportunities for growth."—Rabbi Genende

Rabbi Genende's confessional tone, seen in words such as "helpful," imbues his sermon with a less preachy quality. In quoting the Baal Shem Tov, he offers advice on response to crisis: accept and strive for optimism and growth. By couching this message in storytelling mode, sharing his discovery of an answer for his predicament, he shares his meaning-making process—combining the emotional (be comforted) and moral (strive for optimism). The rhyming of the three Hebrew terms also gives a sense of order and purpose. The forward-focused nature of the three rhyming recommendations touches on Ammerman's description of narrative practices as "reframing the past... [encouraging] reinterpret[ation of] the present and suggest[ing] a new future."

The centrality of embodiment is also evident in the storytelling of the rabbis. For the rabbis who are quoted here, there are tensions between the enforced stillness and isolation of the constrained body that should be moving in communion with their congregations. Their sermons touch on ideas of uneasy stillness, the need for acceptance, and yearnings for a return to embodied sharing.

There is a clear friction between the physicality of what is and what should be. At the beginning of his sermon, Rabbi Elton announces "I'm standing in the sanctuary of the shul where normally on Shabbat I would give a sermon." He speaks from where he feels he should be, his authoritative, present body anchoring the community watching from an ethereal distance. His solid presence in the appropriate place—albeit at an inappropriate time—harkens to a rightness of bodily presence in a situation where

congregational gathering is denied by circumstance and mandate. Underlying his words is a sense of uneasiness, of wrongness—his bodily presence should not be isolated but rather should be surrounded by the comforting presence of others. In this context, it is not good for people to be alone, surrounded by empty seats; a single body is not a community. Being forbidden to access the synagogue amplifies this discomfort.

The closure of his synagogue was also a visceral disconnection to Rabbi Genende, who describes it as “like a body blow. I was shattered.” There are striking references to yearnings for the physicality of the synagogue, the bodily co-presence, music, and conversation.

I missed the rhythm of the daily services, the way they punctuated my day: the first capital letter, the full stop of my diurnal cycle. I felt the loss of the minyan camaraderie, the sound of the Torah being read aloud. Mostly, I longed for the spirited Shabbat services, the connectedness, catching up with members of our community and the Kiddush banter.—Rabbi Genende

Rabbi Genende’s expressed longings for the “sweet-singer,” the comforting sounds of psalms being chanted during prayer services, touches on the aural and emotional engagement often associated with prayer. Anticipating that congregants may feel themselves in exile not only from their synagogue but from prayer and spiritual uplift, Rabbi Meltzer emphasizes the importance of shifting—in body as well as mind—ritual from the synagogue to the home. In small family gatherings there can be singing, shared meals, and prayer, enhanced by special efforts invested in dressing in formal clothing usually only worn to synagogue. Rabbi Meltzer also urges families to gather “to sing *Havdalah* together as a *kehilla*,” highlighting the importance of all efforts to gather. Rabbi Solomon also touched on this admonition “to be together, to support each other, to see each other” in person, noting the importance of finding novel and creative ways of supporting fellow congregants when physical gathering was not possible. The embodied aspects of lived religion are evident in the concrete advice offered in the sermons, clear steps toward practical action offering support during times of uncertainty.

The sermons of the rabbis reach out to disembodied congregations, the solid almost weighty physicality of the rabbi in the synagogue, the lighter remembered longings for the moving bodies of shared commune, and the possibilities for embodied practice both in microcosm and shared across the virtual. By reinterpreting the imperative of congregation-building as the forging of emotional and spiritual bonds through Jewish learning, Rabbi Elton enables his congregation to conceive of community-building as possible during the lockdowns and to regard his Jewish lecture series as a unifying force and community-building experience for him and his congregants. The next section will focus on the specific stories, the messages that are told.

Stories to be Told

Religious practices of storytelling convey specific messages, establishing connections between people and offering a call to action (Ammerman 2021, 178). Often storytelling will reach back into the past for a fitting precedent to contextualize the present predicament, also offering a description of better days ahead. Religious

practices of storytelling are value-laden; Ammerman's moral dimension invites us to pay attention to the identifying of certain behaviors as worthy and important, religiously speaking, and how people are encouraged to engage in community-building around shared values (Ammerman 2021, 159). "Observing religious action," Ammerman explains, "means paying attention to what it says about how the world ought to be. Sometimes that will be very explicit, as in moral and ethical teaching, and sometimes it will be implicit in the community's stories and hopes" (2021, 173). The religious support evident in these sermons is seen in the clear guidelines offered for how to navigate government directives and psychological as well as religious challenges posed by the lockdowns. The rabbis generally give morality quite a large remit in the sense that being and acting as a moral individual is key to saving society, morally, and literally; moreover, they reinforce that it is God's will that this should be done. They acknowledge that there are behaviors that must be set aside, and others put in their place as a temporary measure, to continue religious observance, but in a way that is consistent with the imperative of saving lives. Several of the rabbis clearly outline what must be done, Rabbi Elton being one of them.

The time now is to hold back and do what we need to do in terms of social distancing and maybe even self-isolation, self-quarantine, in order to perform God's will, and in order to save the health and the lives of the people we live amongst and people we love as well.—Rabbi Elton

What is evident from the sermons is an entangling of morality and religiosity. Not coming together, abstaining from social engagements, was not just correct; the rabbis described it as the fulfillment of Divine will. The rabbis also framed inaction, the private decision to isolate, as a grand gesture impacting upon all of humanity. The rabbis advocated for doing the right thing as an expectation and a Godly, deliberate action to ensure a positive response and thus a positive outcome. As Rabbi Meltzer suggests, this compassionate conduct has both potential medical benefits as well as being morally rehabilitating.

Response of our community around the world, seeing innovation, changes and care ... has been missing for a long time. Respecting humanity by gathering remotely.—Rabbi Meltzer

There was also a sense that, the sooner we begin to take moral actions, the sooner we can come back together, with isolating behaviors having a redemptive hue. Ammerman suggests that moral assumptions are more visible during times of change and crisis (Ammerman 2021, 162), as can be seen in the rabbis laying out several specific morals with implications for personal conduct.

The morality alluded to in this sermon—what it teaches—is that altruism, gathering for collective benefit, is superior to focusing on personal concerns and agendas.—Rabbi Solomon

With this call for a mental shift from individualism to collective-communitarian concern, the rabbis suggest that a way to counter the fear and challenges associated with the loneliness of the lockdowns is to embrace and focus on belonging to the

collective. While co-presence was not possible, it is likely that this thinking would have encouraged people to be more proactive in supporting fellow congregants in other ways.

On the eve of the first lockdown Shabbat, the rabbis offered four main messages for their congregations, drawing on well-known religious texts to reinforce their calls for behavioral modification and offering inspiration and hope in their descriptions of an ever-watchful, attentive God who cares about interpersonal as well as intrapersonal relations, punishing misbehavior but also offering clear guidelines for conduct leading to redemption.

***Pikuach nefesh*: Save Lives**

Pikuach nefesh refers to the halakhic imperative to abstain from or transgress commandments to save a human life (cf. Talmud tractate Yoma 84b; see also Koenig 2020). One of the main messages of the rabbis in the first lockdown sermons was that social distancing—abstaining from congregational prayer and other communal observances—was a form of *pikuach nefesh*. This recasts the suspension of religious services to protect human life as a form of religious sacrifice, a path to divine love and neighborly love (Vanderweele 2020).

Rabbi Genende explained that the imperative of *pikuach nefesh* was the rationale for the closure of his synagogue.

At first, I argued against the early closing. (We were among the first synagogues in Melbourne to close.) But in the end, I accepted the advice of our medicos, the concern of the Board and the necessity of caution and *pikuach nefesh* (preservation of life is paramount).—Rabbi Genende

Rabbi Elton went further, arguing that even pre-emptive, life-saving measures were appropriate, and that the halakhic response was to socially isolate, not because there was a high infection rate in his city at that time, but rather because little was known about the coronavirus, and, he argued, pre-emptive measures were as binding as actual life saving. This moral message is also identity-affirming—we are the people who in these times do not gather—a bonding and unifying message.

We know that “*pikuach nefesh*”, that saving a life, even “*safeik pikuach nefesh*”, even a question or a doubt about whether a life is at stake, requires us to put aside the entire Torah with only the exceptions of murder, adultery and idolatry, and to do whatever we need to do in order to save life ... There’s a time when God wants us to do and there’s a time when God wants us to step back from doing. To cease to do. To hold ourselves back. And it can be very hard to hold ourselves back. We want to go out, we want to see people, we want to socialize, we want to do all the things which are the marks of a regular happy functional life. But that’s not the time now. The time now is to hold back.—Rabbi Elton

The idea of regarding social distancing—a refraining from rather than a proactive doing—as a religious act is a core message conveyed by the rabbis. It is likely that

those keen to do something would have therefore felt less guilty about not attending congregational prayer services with this message of reassurance and support. Isolating was imbued with religious meaning and divine approval.

Rabbi David Cohen, of a congregation in Melbourne, also touched on the importance of complying with medical guidelines and refraining from arranging secret congregational prayer gatherings. Quoting Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, a revered rabbinic leader and guide for that synagogue, Rabbi Cohen reinforced the importance of social isolation. Asking rhetorically why the Jewish people living during the time of the Biblical book of Ester (cf. Ester 4) were allowed to fast for three days that coincided with the festival of Passover (when fasting is generally forbidden), his response was that the fear of death—even in absence of an imminent threat to life—constitutes *pikuach nefesh*.

This concept of fear, suffering emotional threats, is found in the writings of Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky ... The fear of death in its own right is so severe that it elevates the situation to one of *pikuach nefesh* and justifies the overriding of [the observance of] commandments. And therefore, to alleviate the fear of death, the decree was enacted to fast and merit salvation, even if that meant the cancellation of other commandments.—Rabbi Cohen

Rabbi Cohen draws on a rabbinic exegesis taught by a rabbi revered by his congregation to explain that the fear of COVID-19 at that time justified the suspension of religious observance. What is novel here is that normative practice is not being set aside to safeguard life; it is being set aside to allay people's concerns about dying. This is one step removed from suspension of religious practice in the presence of actual danger to human life and is quite remarkable in that it elevates mental health to the level of physical health. Quoting Rabbi Kanievsky would have lent the necessary authority to Rabbi Cohen's directive to his congregation.

Mikdash Me'att: Make the Home the Spiritual Center

The *Mikdash Me'att*, or mini-Temple, refers to the divine abode that replaces the Jerusalem Temple during the exilic period (cf. Ezekiel 11:16), interpreted most commonly as referring to the synagogue or house of study (Talmud tractate Megilla 29a). Drawing on the *parasha* and Talmudic precedent, albeit with minor reinterpretation, one of Rabbi Melzer's calls to his congregation was to transform their homes into their spiritual center.

Our Sages tell us that the Mishkan, this Mikdash, this holy place, is the house in which God dwells. That Mishkan would become the Temple and the Temple would be destroyed, and our Sages tell us that the house becomes the *Mikdash Me'att*, the small Mikdash. The Shabbat table in our homes becomes like the Altar ... It is ironic that we are not gathering. But at the same time, we have an opportunity to transform the way in which we see our homes... we have the opportunity to really bring the Divine Presence into our homes. We have the ability to transform our homes, transform our tables, to really being

a place that resembles and mimics the Temple that we discuss in this week's *parasha*.—Rabbi Melzer

By recasting the home as a legitimate proxy for the Temple, Rabbi Meltzer offers reassurance that tremendous meaning is possible when the home is regarded as a temple and people have the opportunity to find novel ways of “continuing” the Temple service. In addition, the idea that transforming their homes into a place where they will be able to continue the religious practices usually performed only in synagogue—and that this will bring God into their homes—is a remarkably comforting message. Rabbi Meltzer emphasizes that this message is found in the *parasha* of that week, which, for those who believe in divine providence, would have had even greater meaning. The messages in this sermon provide a course of action for the present that comforts, reassures, and inspires.

***Gam Zu Le'tova*: Searching for Silver Linings**

Gam zu le'tova, or “this too is for the good,” refers to the faithful conviction that all events have some underlying goodness in them (Talmud tractate Taanit 21a), a worldview that encourages belief in divine providence—as well as reward and punishment—as evidence of an ongoing divine relationship. The sermons delivered on the eve of the first lockdown Shabbat offered spiritual support by urging people to make the most of their situation, to seize opportunities to be kind to others, and to search for silver linings. This idiom would have been familiar to the Orthodox congregations to whom the rabbis delivered their sermons, casting it (as with the other stories to be told) as an authentic message.

Rabbi Elton called for his congregation to invest effort in making their first lockdown Shabbat joyful.

These days of social isolation shouldn't be days of spiritual isolation or a lack of spiritual inspiration. And that's why... we'll be sharing a lot of material with you on the Internet in different forms and also sending emails to our members, to make sure that our morale stays high and our connection stays strong even in these difficult times. He wants us to have a beautiful, peaceful and joyous Shabbat, please God, ahead of a week of healing and improvement in the situation across the whole world.—Rabbi Elton

Discovering silver linings was something that Rabbi Genende modeled in sharing some of his positive experience during the lockdowns. Touching on his discovery of the beauty of prayer was a way of inviting others to try and discover the same.

It was, however, the slow but definite changes in my prayer and Shabbat that caught me by surprise—at times, astounding me. The pace of daily *tefilla* in many shuls is fast and furious ... At home, I could set the pace. I found the unhurried speed produced unexpected results. The nuance of particular words and phrases caught my heart ... I had a newfound respect for the psalmist and his well-earned epithet, “sweet-singer of Israel.” I appreciated Leonard Cohen's incisive insight that many of David's hallelujahs are bro-

ken ... I plan to hold on to my newfound respect for this gift called Shabbat and speak with even more conviction about its benefits, just as I hope to retain the rich insights of prayer.—Rabbi Genende

Rabbi Genende's earlier reference to Psalm 34, which forms part of the Sabbath morning liturgy, and reference to Leonard Cohen would have resonated with his Modern Orthodox and Traditional audience, offering comfort that the lockdowns and home-based prayer offered opportunities for discovery. His interpretation offers a way of explaining the present through the psalm. Narrative religious practice highlights the texts in people's cognitive libraries, inviting them to take those texts down from the shelves and read them in light of current events. This may be a source of comfort for the audience. His concluding words, wherein he arrives at a new understanding of synagogue and prayer, reference the end of the pandemic, when he hopes to return to synagogue enlightened and enriched by the lockdown experience—that it will not be a return to normal; normal will be enhanced. This not only engages in a reinterpretation of the present but suggests a new future if opportunities are seized in the present.

Rabbi Meltzer calls upon his congregants to use the lockdown period to improve relationships—with family and God, drawing in the Divine Presence. His continuous use of the “we” highlights the social layers in the narrative—the “public narrative” about “who we are”—used here to inspire collective belonging and offer comfort. He suggests that people have the capacity not only to change their mindset and not be despondent about social isolation on Shabbat but also to feel empowered by the opportunities to transform their present into something superior. Similar to Rabbi Genende, he reinterprets the present as an opportunity to innovate, care, and become unified. By pointing it out and praising it, there is encouragement to follow suit.

Yes, we are not gathering all of the Jewish people together. But in a way we are becoming much more unified. The response of our community, around the world and here in Australia has been really incredible. We are seeing innovation, and changes and a care, a unity, that has been in my view a long time missing ...If it takes something like this virus to do that, then perhaps that's the silver lining.—Rabbi Meltzer

Another example of making the most of the situation is unity of purpose and shared commitment. Rabbi Meltzer, highlights the importance of having a schedule and investing effort in making the Sabbath special and sees all people doing the same thing as creating unity. There is a connection between the storytelling aspects of “who I am” and “who we are” in the sense that all private action impacts on the family and wider world (i.e., minimizing infection through social distancing). And there is an emphasis on individuals making decisions to gather—to maintain connections with family and community. “This is who we are”—gatherers, even during lockdown.

Set a schedule. Join us tonight on Zoom as we daven with many members of the Sydney Jewish community. Wear Shabbat clothes. Set your table as

you would normally. Have shabbat meals as you would normally. Get up tomorrow morning and daven. Daven with your families. Daven out loud. Don't rush through things. Take a moment to learn; read through the *parasha*. Go for a walk in the morning or in the afternoon. Set some time to do things with your families ... And then towards the end of Shabbat, lift your voice in song as *we* sit down for seudah shlishit ... And then come on Zoom at 7.55 tomorrow evening, to sing Havdalah together as a *kehilla*.—Rabbi Meltzer

Whether understood retrospectively or as living in the moment, the *gam zu le'tova* mindset is recommended as a path to religious support. Psychologically and spiritually, this mindset invites people to live with the assumption that there is good in the present moment that may be uncovered by those who search for it. Living with the expectation of finding the silver lining may in fact contribute to personal well-being and positive social dynamics. Social interactions are likely to be approached with a friendlier attitude, which can in turn foster richer social connections. Optimism and a positive outlook can lead to greater feelings of happiness and contentment.

Onesh V'tshuva: Punishment and Atonement

The notion of punishment for bad behavior and as impetus for atonement is grounded in Biblical and Rabbinic sources (Leviticus 26; Talmud tractate Sanhedrin introduction to chapter 9; Maimonides Laws of Repentance 1–2). Religious practices of storytelling are also about sensemaking; as Ammerman explains “practices are shaped by implicit stories about what is happening and why, and those temporal and relational narrative structures are as important as the more overt practices of religious storytelling” (Ammerman 2021, 177). Most of the rabbis did not attempt to offer explanation for why the pandemic was occurring, instead (as mentioned earlier) focusing on what their congregants could do to most resiliently navigate the lockdowns and, ideally, emerge inspired. Rabbi Cohen offered what he believed was the explanation for the pandemic: namely punishment with the related opportunity for atonement.

The coronavirus is unfortunately a punishment for us. We have to recognize that and respond to it. Most severe, as I mentioned before, is that we are prevented from having *minyanim*—we don't have all the prayers that can only be said in the context of a quorum—all these things are canceled because of the virus. And we have to try and understand why God has done this to us. It is a form of rejection, and therefore we have to see what we can do to persuade God that we do not deserve rejection. Sincere repentance is treasured by God, it will cause Him to want to bring us back to Him, and hopefully this will overcome the virus ... May we receive full atonement for our sins. And may we soon praise Him in the Temple Rebuilt, may it come speedily in our times.—Rabbi Cohen

Drawing on a Biblical interpretation of suffering as punishment, Rabbi Cohen maintains that the opportunity exists to repent, to “see what we can do to persuade God

that we do not deserve rejection,” a striving to demonstrate “merit in order to have God answer our prayers” and have their freedoms restored. The sermon concludes with an expression of hope in Messianic redemption, which is also a key structural component of religious storytelling. Religious practices are shaped by implicit stories about what is happening and why—the plague fits in with Biblical/Talmudic scripts both clear and mysterious. Plagues in the Bible and Talmud are framed as having clear causes and actions that bring about redemption and healing. Perhaps this offers comfort for the congregation, as the pandemic they lived through—once mapped out onto the more familiar Egyptian plagues—may have appeared less terrifying, once an all-powerful God was in charge and the current pandemic was within God’s power to remove.

Searching for opportunities to engage in redemptive conduct or, as Rabbi Genende urges, to lean into this “fearful frailty” is an important, humbling experience, perhaps a necessary corrective to humankind’s arrogant invincibility in the modern scientific and technological era. The lockdowns should be regarded as an opportunity to slow down, take time to think, and regain a healthier and more spiritual perspective with which to return to life—enriched—afterwards. As with the search for silver linings, the theme of punishment and atonement provides a clear course of action. And while the apparent need for punishment is potentially unsettling, the promise of a redemptive future following atonement is a message of comfort and hope.

Discussion

Crises pose challenges for mental health and well-being. Researchers have long observed that people with higher levels of religiosity also report higher levels of mental health (Aten et al. 2019; Counted et al. 2020; Paloutzian et al. 2013; Pargament 2001; Prati and Pietrantonio 2009) and human flourishing (Pankowski and Wytrychiewicz-Pankowska 2023; Upenieks and Schieman 2022). In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, it became evident that the effects of lockdowns, isolation, and fear on mental health varied across a wide range of populations. Highly religious people (Schnabel and Schieman 2021; Upenieks and Ellison 2022) and, in particular, religious Jews (Bankier-Karp and Shain 2021; Graham et al. 2020; Pirutinsky et al. 2020) had better mental health outcomes compared with the less- or non-religious.

Ammerman’s multidimensional model of lived religion—in particular the narrative, embodied, and moral dimensions—brought into sharp relief the ways in which religious support was offered through the rabbinic sermons. While Ammerman (2021) notes the overlapping and intersecting nature of these dimensions, we found that, in the case of religious support offered early in a global pandemic, the narrative dimension was the most salient, and it provided the overarching structure within which moral and embodied aspects were communicated.

Religious support was evident when paying attention to the narrative dimension. The regularity and continuity conveyed in the customary sermon structure, as well as decisions where possible to broadcast from within familiar sacred spaces, provided stability and reassurance to congregants. Marshall McLuhan’s famous adage

“the medium is the message” (McLuhan 1964) is pertinent here, as the very structures and pedagogies with which the messages of support were conveyed were themselves comforting due to their familiar structure and form. This enabled congregants to feel comforted by the messages these structures conveyed, and not be dispirited by the novel methods necessary for their delivery.

By attending to the embodied dimension, it became evident how normative and vital in-person gatherings had been, how visceral congregational prayer and gatherings are, and how much guidance was necessary to ease people into the notion of a more imagined community belonging, with the related need for greater agency and proactive engagement at home. The guidance offered about how to continue religious life beyond the synagogue was physical as well as spiritual—attributes of the mini-Temple spirit appearing to be found in the details of Sabbath clothing, special foods, and sitting together as families.

Finally, the moral dimension brought into sharp relief the value-laden nature of sermons, which emphasized behavior that not only would elevate the individual but would safeguard the health of the larger collective. The message of *pikuach nefesh* not only reconciled the contradiction between the weekly Bible reading’s description of gathering and the isolated circumstances of the sermons’ audiences but also provided reassurance that remaining at home fulfilled a higher religious imperative, rather than constituting a regrettable compromise. The sermons that reassured people they were part of a greater collective that was saving lives by their conduct were also supportive and identity affirming, fostering feelings of peoplehood and unity of purpose. The message to make the home a *Mikdash me’att* offered comfort by fostering a sense of agency and purpose, highlighting important work to be done and reassuring that there would be positive repercussions long after. Firing imaginations, agency, and creativity was also affected through the message of *Gam zu le’tova*, advocating for a spiritual growth mindset, and encouraging people to search for the good occurring in their lives. In times of fear and uncertainty, the search itself for silver linings was comforting. In addition, by sharing personal examples (such as that of Rabbi Genende), a sense of hope was conveyed that, if proper energies and focus were invested, character growth that under normal circumstances would not have been feasible under these contingencies would occur. *Onesh and teshuva*, while constituting an example of negative religious coping, goes beyond declaring the pandemic to be a consequence of sinful shortcomings, also outlining a course of action and promising redemption. Outlining redemptive possibilities also highlights the importance of personal agency and responsibility. The first three themes appear to constitute positive religious coping (Counted et al. 2020), the latter negative religious coping (Pargament 2001), all providing reassurance of an enduring connection to God, leaders, and community.

It is unsurprising when seeds grow and thrive in fertile, well-tilled soil. The same may be said about religious support offered to religious people during times of crisis. Or as Acevedo and colleagues note, “the impact of clergy leadership on advancing the mental health of their members, is most salient in circumstances where clergy messaging is aligned with the views of their membership” (Acevedo et al. 2022, 594). Religiosity for Jews is often associated with belief in the omnipotence and benevolence of God, together with daily and highly regular observances that invest

daily life with comfort, structure, and order in ways that may be supportive during uncertain times. Religiosity for Jews is also often associated with a high degree of literacy in sacred texts, which means that the verses and values highlighted in the sermons were likely to have been familiar. Where congregants already had strong bonds with their rabbi and congregation, the salience of these sermons would have been more powerful and perhaps more comforting. The pandemic made it necessary for in-person congregational life to be suspended, and the ways that people were guided in making that transition appear supportive. Part of religious support for these people lay in the reassurance that this period of isolation was God's will and that, as a consequence of proper conduct, not only would lives be saved but something redemptive was forthcoming. This guidance, comfort, and hope that was already part and parcel of Orthodox belief and practice—but that was given additional reinforcement through the rabbinic sermons—offers qualitative corroboration for studies reporting that highly religious people had superior mental health during the pandemic. The content of the sermons communicated the messages that their conduct—specifically, isolating during the early days of the pandemic—was Divinely sanctioned and, despite isolation, they were not alone. To those who are “living inspired”—for whom lived religion permeates daily life, and for whom belief and ritual not only elevate but imbue choices and behavior with Divine approval—the everyday lived experience appears to provide a psychological–philosophical framework for addressing some of the large moral questions about the meaning of life (Ammerman 1997; 2020). While we do not presume all people with excellent well-being are highly religious, nor that the highly religious all have excellent well-being, the dailiness and everyday quality of Orthodox Jewish life that informs the sermons appears to constitute rich soil into which seeds of support were sown by their rabbis.

Our analysis identifies ways in which the sermons contributed to social, psychological, and social identity resources (Hayward and Krause 2014) by reaching out to congregants, comforting them, and highlighting their important place in collective circles of belonging - congregations, the country, Jewish people worldwide, and humanity. By encouraging people to conceive of congregating in novel and creative ways, the sermons sought to strengthen these forms of belonging, identity, and thus support. It cannot be known from the evidence presented whether religious observance supported better physical or mental health. Also, it remains unknown what effects the rabbis' sermons had for those who heard or read them. By analyzing the sermons that the rabbis delivered to their congregants, we contribute qualitative corroboration for existing research concerning the role of religion in supporting well-being. The impact on the congregants themselves is a topic for future study.

While this study identified sermons as artifacts of religious support, there are other potential sources of support that were not examined. The understanding of religious support would benefit from further exploration of the strength of congregational-social and faith leader bonds and their association with religious support and well-being. The salience of fluency in religious texts may also be examined for its possible associations with religious support. The data for this study were produced during the first week of the pandemic, meaning that it could not capture passage-of-time effects. As was indicated by Büssing and colleagues (2022), the later waves of

the pandemic proved testing for the faithful; it is unclear to what extent these and later sermons supported congregants as the lockdowns wore on. The understanding of how religious coping is experienced over time would benefit from longitudinal studies with repeated measures over time. Ammerman's themes (narrative, embodiment, and the moral) were salient in our study, but we realize this may have been in no small part due to the specific time period, the Orthodox faith and convictions of the population, and religious support artifacts of our study. Future studies that focus on different events, groups, and artifacts may find other themes described by Ammerman to be more pertinent. Given that the data in this study were from the first week of the pandemic lockdowns in Australia, it is unclear whether the conditions of isolation and lockdowns enabled new or alternative ways of expressing community, ultimately strengthening religiosity both during and after the crisis. Research on later stages of the pandemic would clarify whether religiosity was strengthened by innovation or weakened by stasis, illuminating the sociological understanding of the pandemic's lasting effects on religious belief and practice. Finally, it is regrettable that there were no submissions from the Conservative, Reform, or Humanist faith leaders, which would have broadened the understanding of religious support among Australian Jews and would benefit from examination in future studies.

Capturing the words of rabbis during the pandemic depended on the happenstance of data preservation. That many rabbis who contacted us conveyed that they did not preserve their sermons—due to the immediacy of the crisis, many spoke off the cuff or ceased delivering sermons altogether as the demands of their congregants and families intensified—underscores the importance of redacting congregational communications. This study highlights the value of preserving evidence of religious support to continue supporting people in challenging times, now and in the future.

Conclusion

The current study examines an artifact of religious support to better understand why religious people have better mental health. The current study extends existing research on the role of religion in supporting well-being during times of crisis by analyzing rabbinic sermons delivered in the Australian Jewish community on the eve of the first Sabbath of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. Our study suggests that, for the highly religious, one of the reasons why they felt supported during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic was because, in mind, soul, and body, they were not alone.

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