

Interview with Rabbi Lorge

Tue, 12/8 12:45PM • 49:28

SPEAKERS

Rabbi Lorge, Christopher Taylor

Christopher Taylor 00:14

So, Rabbi Lorge, thanks for joining me again. So one of the first questions that I have. Again the purpose of the interview is just to get a feel, and an understanding for how people have witnessed changes within their own congregations or how they see people express their faith maybe in different ways due to COVID and the impact that it's had. So the first question I've got for you is just with the spread of COVID, in what kind of ways have you or your congregation tried to reach out to one another to involve each other in the religious community?

Rabbi Lorge 01:00

So, our congregation has about 2500 families so it's a pretty big congregation. And, you know, we tend to gather throughout the week during normal times for classes and religious school worship, all kinds of different programs, so a lot of that really had to shut down when we realized, you know, that this pandemic was spreading. And some of those opportunities have kind of translated into our ability to do some of that work online. You know we've got -very quickly- our religious school up and running electronically so classes are still able to happen and our youth are still able to be engaged in that way. The head always streamed our services out to the communities and beyond. So we were able to kind of shift that and to outfit all of us at home with different technologies and you know, each week we got a little bit more adapted, adding lighting or microphones to try to get, you know, to try to increase the quality of our services to a little bit more approximate what people were used to worshipping with us. But, you know, I think some of the outreach has been most important and has been more personal, like one to one outreach, you know, a lot of the community ends up being pretty isolated, or feeling very shut in. And, you know, we had a small subset of folks who you might categorize as shut-ins, right, people who couldn't really leave their homes beforehand, due to illness or different things, you know, we had a pretty direct way of how to identify those people and attend to them and try to minister to them. When that all of a sudden becomes most of your congregations, it's more difficult so I'd say within about a month, we were able to train and identify leaders in the congregation, who were going to serve as, or to cover congregations to congregations calls, and we basically had a group of very involved members who ended up calling every other member family. So we've done about two to three rounds of those calls, everybody in the community in the last eight months or so has been called by another member at least two times just to check in and find out, you know, are you still living where you're living, how are you doing, you know, are there pastoral needs, you know, are there more urgent housing financial needs that are going on, you know, what's going on in your family, just trying to check in and get a sense of how people are doing. And that can be done or even other ways that we ended up being able to interact with those folks or connect with those folks, and we've started now around specific clergy calls

from our rabbinic and tentorial staff to the members who were able to kind of, you know, identify folks who don't tend to show up a lot or haven't gotten so much attention and, you know, tend to be more, for lack of a better word, peripheral members of the congregation, we're reaching out to them in another round of calls just to kind of follow up and see how they're doing. So those have been some of the more, I'd say important engagement, and then a lot of the other stuff we've mostly been trying to just kind of get back to where we were, you know, life cycles, trying to figure out how to continue to have life cycle events happen -weddings, you know, baby namings, b'nai mitzvah, things like that that would otherwise happen, you know we just had to very quickly find new ways to make all of that work. So I think it's both like the extra outreach that we're having to do during a pandemic because we're concerned about our people and we want to make sure that they're doing all right. And then, all the stuff that would be happening if it was regular, you know, regular life that we're just trying to keep going. So people have that sense of normalcy -marking time, grieving, celebrating, the kinds of things you usually turn to a religious community for.

Christopher Taylor 05:10

Yeah, and there's a lot of things in there that you mentioned that, that have come up in some of the interviews, and things that I didn't even necessarily think of initially, like I think when a lot of people think about religious services they just think of teaching the doctrine, listening to some kind of sermon. And the more people that I've talked to, it seems like, you know, they expressed although that's a part of it, and that's something that can be more readily kind of rectified by some kind of online platform, it's those kind of life ordinances that you're talking about, you know, the kind of rituals and those kinds of things that you do that have really been difficult. So it's good to see you've been able to reach out in a lot of different ways. With using social media, and it sounds like you said that you, you did use some of this before, and that's really good you had kind of that, that leg up on it. Do you feel like this is something that's going to be more involved in your, your community and your synagogue going forward?

Rabbi Lorge 06:04

Yeah, I mean, so, yes. Our services have always been, you know, streamed out through our website, we had been on a cable TV channel called the Jewish Broadcasting Service, which is a national cable channel if it's carried. We run Facebook Live, YouTube, stuff like that, so our services, and every now and then some classes and lectures, get, you know, pumped out to the world, but we dramatically ramped that up. In the last eight months, we started having a daily, we called it "coffee with clergy". Each different clergy person, (we have about 9 or 10 rabbis and cantors on staff and different roles), but all of us basically signed up once a week or so or, you know, every other week to basically run a program of our choosing. And that ended up getting piped out so we just started having many many more touchstones during the day that people can kind of come and be a part of. The other thing is people, there's nowhere to do that but in our homes, because here in New York City, we were really locked down for a while, you know, you could go out for groceries or events, the pharmacy, but that was pretty much it, unless you were an essential worker. So, I mean, people were just in homes for lack of a better way to explain it. People were in homes for worship and they were in homes for these programs, so there was a -I think there was like a sense of intimacy and getting a chance to know us, there was more and we ended up having to kind of produce more content. So, I like pickling produce and so I did like a whole pickling show that had several episodes to it, teaching people how to reduce

food waste and kind of make sure that they're able to kind of keep fresh produce around longer, they're not so much fresh after you pickle it. I'd say like, you know, some of it is I think there is going to be more content that we put out in the world, and some of it is also trying to think about, yeah, I'd say, you know, so we may have been putting our worship services out for people to watch, but our primary responsibility we always felt was to the congregation who was in front of us and we had, you know, 500-700 people on Friday night worship service. So that was our community, and people who are homebound or in hospitals or for whatever reason were watching us on a screen, that is great, but we plan services for the congregation who is in front of us. Now that the whole congregation has spent almost a full year just engaging with us over a screen, you know, we were wondering who's gonna prefer the internet. Our audience is bigger than it was because we do have the numbers. We have some rough numbers that are, you know, our viewership is about. So, you know, how do we create a hybrid model that honors the folks who are going to be walking into our building and the folks who aren't. And how do we program for both communities, you know, we don't have a membership for folks who aren't in our, in our direct area also, because I think one of the main things you know you come to a religious community for is pastoral care, life cycle moments that we can't really do -some of those things we've learned actually you can do from a distance, apparently, you know, weddings, baby namings, and I never thought I'd do any of that distantly over a screen and yet I have in the last several months, but you know, we've done a lot of funerals in the last few months and that's one you just can't do from a distance. I think we're wrestling with how this works in a hybrid world of technology being able to connect us in unusual ways.

Christopher Taylor 09:43

I was gonna say, especially with, you know, those kinds of life cycle events. I think those would be what's really tough to try to do over, over a distance like this and it sounds like you've, you've come up with a lot of different solutions to try to assist with that, which are the ones that you feel like have been the toughest, and you kind of touched on the idea of funerals and especially the, the intimate nature of, and personal nature of, I would say like a funeral, is not something that you ideally want to do over like a zoom meeting something like this.

Rabbi Lorge 10:21

Yeah, I think, you know, it's definitely been some of the hardest work in the last several months, you know. New York was an epicenter for a while, and we had a lot of folks in our community who died from COVID. And, you know, we as a community have tried often to reframe things in a positive light, right, there are silver linings to some of this, that, you know, are worth noting but there is just some stuff that feels like a loss, and death and mourning is some of that. I mean, it's really hard not to be in the room with the mourners, it's really hard not to be able to hug these people who you know and care about and you can see are, you know, so much of Jewish mourning practices are about ensuring that people who are grieving are not alone. For seven days we're supposed to surround these people in their homes and show up for them and show them that they're not alone that we care for them, and you know, no matter what they're feeling, their community's there. And, you know, we're not able to do that practice of shivah that practice of kind of going into a mourner's home for seven days and surrounding them. So we try to approximate some of that stuff over zoom. But there's significant chunks of time where mourners are alone, where we're not able to be around them. We're able to set up some times over zoom to kind of do some of that work, but it's hard, and I know as clergy we feel like that's a loss I know from mourners,

they are hungry for that and they, you know they try to do as much as they can that's meaningful and I know that for our community it's hard, you know, When somebody would otherwise show up to their house with a meal or something, and try to spend some time with them, and the most you can do is pop onto the zoom screen and, you know, you can't really schmooze or kibitz or, you know, share life, it's one person talking at a time otherwise you get that cacophony on zoom.

Christopher Taylor 10:21

Yeah.

Rabbi Lorge 11:36

So it's been hard but at the same time for funerals, or memorial services, people are able to come on from all over the world in ways that they haven't, right? There's the ability to kind of gather community in a larger way that we wouldn't have otherwise done so there are ways we try to leverage a technology for the good even though it's been such a limitation around, especially, definitely, morning.

Christopher Taylor 12:50

Yeah, that's great that you've been able to come up with a lot of different, not necessarily solutions but, you know, ways in which you can -like you said- approximate you know the way that things had been before. So you can give that feeling of, you know, comfort that religion is so good at doing. And there's such an expectation that religion in these difficult times can be kind of that support. For being in New York, talk a little bit more about so with, like with restrictions and so it's been really just coming all straight up just shut down for you then, like what are, what is allowed, or has been typically allowed for you and your congregation?

Rabbi Lorge 13:28

It's been a moving target, and I think, one of our guiding principles is pikuach nefesh. So much of Judaism and it's practices centers on the idea that life is the most sacred thing it's a gift and we have to do everything we can to value that gift and so we ended up shutting down the congregation to become a virtual congregation earlier than the city mandated it. But, you know, originally at the very outset it was trying, saying, you know, look here the at-risk categories of people the CDC and others are telling us about you know if you're over 65, if you have these kinds of health conditions, you know, it sounds like you're more at risk, we would encourage you not to show up to services. Service is a big gathering of hundreds of people and as much as we'd love for you to be there just doesn't sound safe and we urge you to be at home. And we communicated that in the next week, you know, and people who are over 65 and with health issues, because we know these people, we see them in the congregation, and we say, "you know, what are you doing here?", and they said, "well, you know, nothing's gonna stop me from being part of my community". And we felt at that point like we had a responsibility to stop because if they weren't going to stop on, you know, on their own, we got to, you got to do something to kind of make sure that we're not hampering anything from happening, or being a help. So we shut down the congregation to become a virtual one. And then, you know, over the course of March, April, New York wrestled with a bunch of different measures, but eventually when they announced that the city was, that New York City was going on pause and they called it. And basically gatherings were pretty much restricted, only essential workers were allowed out. You could go get groceries, you could go get medication, things like that. But, but otherwise you know you really weren't supposed to be leaving so

we did services remotely from our homes we did all of our programming remotely from our homes. Eventually, and I don't remember exactly what month it was in, we were allowed to have 10 folks gathered in a space at a time. And we started doing Friday night services, which for us has always been the most largely attended service, it's when our Sabbath starts. We were able to kind of bring our staff back into the building so we would basically have the clergy meeting services from the empty sanctuary. All our people of our community were still in their homes watching but we were able to do things like sing together, or, you know, just produce the service in a slightly different way because we were there in place. So we started doing that and then by the time we went to the High Holidays, we were able to have more staff involved. We still didn't feel comfortable with our community coming in and still haven't right now. New York would allow us, since we're a religious institution to have a percentage of our total occupancy in the building. But that would, you know if we did what the law suggests we could, I think we could have something like 300 people in our building, which to us just doesn't really seem prudent, right? And if we, if we can do it, it doesn't mean we should do it, and as we, you know, and we've had a lot of conversations in the team about this, and you know we argue about it and we debate it, because you know it's it's hard to know what's right or wrong right now but I think at the end of the day majority of the team right now has just felt that if we know it's safer, and we're still feeling that we're able to connect with people, you know, it's better to, you know, as staff we can go in and do that but you shouldn't be gathering 300 people or even, you know, 100 people. What we have done is for funerals, for B'nai mitzvah, for baby naming, for those kinds of lifecycle events again, we're allowing 20 people to be in the sanctuary masked, distanced, and we'll perform those ceremonies in those situations. But, we're pretty strict on that limit. What's difficult is, there's no uniform policy other than the maximum allowed. So, what we're doing is going to be different from the synagogue, or church, or mosque, etc. These present their own problems, as you can imagine, for one, if such-and-such of our nation allows 100 people, where we can easily have 100 people in our event, and that kind of thing, so that's where it becomes a little trickier.

Christopher Taylor 18:16

Yeah. Sorry about that announcement.

Rabbi Lorge 18:18

That's okay, I think my son's babbling too.

Christopher Taylor 18:20

That's okay. Yeah, that's really interesting. I've been interested in talking to some other people about just how congregations and people of faith have reflected on things like the government's responsibilities in or how we respond to, you know, stipulations placed on our community and it sounds like that's something that you guys have talked a lot about. And I'm sure that's something that's really tough. Do you feel like it's created any kind of tension or as you know like a rabbi, do you feel like you have to kind of step in and try to guide the congregation in understanding this is the reason why we are going to support these measures or how we're going to support these measures?

Rabbi Lorge 18:59

You know, I think at the end of the day people are really trying to come at it from a good place and I think there's a lot of goodwill. We try to be very deliberate about explaining our reasonings behind

different choices because at the end of the day now there are choices and not the government's anymore, you know, it was a lot easier when we could say, well the state says this. But there have been times when there's tension in the team as we're trying to discern what we think is the best. You know we're all bringing a sense of worry about us and our own families, we're worried about the congregation, we're worried about our community members, and those things all collide and then there is a level of tension sometimes between us and, you know, different families who are maybe looking to celebrate or mark moments. So 20 would mean, you know, somebody might say, well, 20 people might mean "I'm able to come with my immediate family and grandparents, and then, you know, these aunts and not these uncles you know how am I supposed to make these choices?" You know, I feel for them I mean it's difficult and I, you know, we're, you know, we say we're mourning that too, we would want your entire family to be here in this moment I mean for funerals too. You know these people feel very close to the deceased, how can we tell them they can't come? But, you know, we're doing what we're, you know we're trying to create guidelines that are sensible to create an ability to mark these moments still and we get guidance from people in our community who are hospital administrators and doctors, so we also are trying to ground it in something objective and scientific as much as possible. And what we've said throughout is that we're going to, as a community, at least in our congregation, we're going to err on the side of safety. We'd rather err on the side of safety than err on the side of, you know, aloofness with the regulations and then ultimately feeling like maybe we, you know, in the worst case scenario, you know, created a permissive atmosphere that allowed something to happen. So we'd rather people be angry at us right now for this than anything else.

Christopher Taylor 21:16

And I'm sure that's so tough, you know, but it's good to hear that your congregation, that they have such a -generally speaking- like a positive attitude towards it they're coming at it from a good place because it's not always been the case from what I've been talking to other people for.

Rabbi Lorge 21:29

Yeah, I mean, look, you know it's not just the impossible choices that people are having to make but a lot of people, I don't know, I think there has been a natural grieving and mourning process, not necessarily for people, not only for people who have passed away -a lot of people have passed away- but I mean so many of these families are are mourning for things that they pictured happening a certain way in their family, you know. And it's not happening that way but it could be things that they've imagined for decades or you know since their child was born, they pictured would be the way it was and the way that it had been just last year, and coming to terms with that is really hard, you know. So, you know, even, even when people are a little less reasonable than we hope they'd be, I feel for them and I know where they're coming from. But, but, yeah, there have been some hard conversations around it for sure.

Christopher Taylor 22:23

Have you noticed it, does anybody try to like put off I mean obviously you can't put off like a funeral, but like, weddings, or maybe baby blessings, or there's some of those kinds of events you see people trying to put off hoping that in a month or in a couple weeks or you know whatever it is it then things are all gonna be better magically, you know? Do you see people trying to push it off? Because like you

said, you know, it's not just mourning those that are gone it's those lost opportunities and I could see maybe people trying to push that off.

Rabbi Lorge 22:50

There were a lot of weddings, that I had scheduled with couples, working with couples, doing some marriage prep with them and they had dates and they ended up, many of them, -I've seen different things. A lot of them move the date, push the date out hoping to kind of have the wedding that they pictured. Slowly over time, a lot of those couples have come back and said, you know, look, at this point, we just want to get married, we really love each other, like the circumstances around you don't matter so much, let's just have the ceremony, and we'll figure out the celebration later. That's starting to happen a lot more. You know, originally it was everyone was just pushing the date out and saying, the world's gonna get back to normal, we'll do it then. And so we're seeing folks come back. The piece that's hard for us is we have a lot of b'nai mitzvah students. And there's just not a way for us to reschedule the numbers we have. We have somewhere between three and four, b'nai mitzvah students, a weekend. So there's not a lot of wiggle room to move people around. And it's one of those things where the tradition says you become 12 and 13, like, you know, another day you become a bar bat mitzvah the day you reach maturity in the Jewish community so you're beholden to all the commandments and observances and, you know, the nicest way to mark that is by taking on some of the most exciting ones, which for us is reading Torah. But, but you don't need to do that in order to have that coming-of-age moment. So, you know, we've been trying to explain to our community and reframe it for our community that, you know, there is something to be said about resiliency, and continuing to choose life and to choose happiness and joy in hard moments, you know. There are much darker chapters in Jewish history where Jews have become, not often because that's a relatively modern thing but where Jews have come of age, you know, and haven't had all of the beautiful trappings that we're lucky enough to have in America, around services being out in the open and, you know, to be a part of the fabric of the community and so it's hard in the pandemic but but it's not unprecedented for our people. So, you know, that's been helpful for some, but yeah, we try not to delay a lot of this stuff if we can avoid it.

Christopher Taylor 25:19

Yeah, eventually you're gonna delay it too long. It's like there's only so much you can do. I like what you were saying about you know like, the Jewish people have been obviously through historically, just so many different horrible, you know, events and been able to show the resilience. Do you feel like especially in a time like this are there particular stories that you find yourself turning to or, or moments in Jewish history that you turn to when you share with your congregation, kind of these uplifting moments that kind of give hope?

Rabbi Lorge 25:49

Yeah, since the beginning of the pandemic, you know people... It's the moment that begs people to start asking larger questions about themselves whether they were, you know, tuned into a religious community or not, you know, and I think we've definitely seen people searching for some kind of meaning making, you know, to be had in all of this. You know, we try to address it in sermons we try to address it in service we try to address it in different ways. We have, you know, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are major holidays. This year in September and October, so you know right in the midst of

everything, and we revamped a lot of those services to try to see and tap into some of those kinds of things, and I wrote a whole opening to our holiday services which our senior Rabbi delivered, which was kind of like a welcome into the space, and the sanctuary was empty, and we talked about you know exile, as a theme and, you know, in Scripture, and in our lives as Jews, and talked about, you know, a tabernacle, right, that the Israelites used and wandered with while they were wandering in the, in the desert, and how, you know, that becomes the temple in Jerusalem, but it was originally something that was not rooted it was, you know, it was -it was something you can pick up and move around with you. And, and this idea that we create sanctuaries, you know, wherever we make the intention of creating a sanctuary. So we, we encourage people to think about how they were creating sanctuaries and in living rooms, and so they couldn't be in the sanctuary with us, and so that that theme of exile was one that I have been leaning on a lot. My sermon that holidays was about the destruction of the First Temple in 86 BCE and talking about how you know one of the response to that has been a prophetic response which you see in Jeremiah and some of the other prophetic books, you know, of looking at the brokenness that had taken place in Jerusalem, but also seeing that the Jerusalem before the destruction had grown quite corrupt, and the things that have existed, you know all the, a lot of the prophetic voices talk about a return to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of Jerusalem, but they're not talking about rebuilding Jerusalem the way it was before the destruction because it was quite a corrupted place and they had quite a lot of negative views about what they saw happening in society around them and in the temple and things like that so they reimagined Jerusalem was a better Jerusalem and I tried to use that as a framework for what we're seeing in America, you know. The fact that during the pandemic, you know one of the conversations in New York City was, you know, well we need to close the public schools because we think students are inadvertently bringing COVID to elders in their homes. Right. But then if you close the school systems, when there's a lot of kids who, you know, survive on meals -breakfasts and lunches- in the school cafeteria, you're basically going to starve children, and this is a ridiculous, terrible choice to have to make in 2020. It's not a moral -it's a morally embarrassing choice that you have to make in America in 2020, that that's something that we face. That's not, you know, the city's gonna have to be rebuilt. It wasn't razed to the ground but if we're having to reconstruct society and our norms and our values I mean we have to knock it back to normal, we have to do better than that. I tried to use that as a way to kind of think about the months after the pandemic too and what it meant to try to rebuild.

Christopher Taylor 29:37

That's awesome. That's a great perspective about, you know, reimagining, you know how we would do things and not just to go back to the way things were but to create it anew, to create it stronger, better than it was, so it can resolve hopefully some of these problems if they surface again like in the future. Do you feel like, like with your congregation, and I know you've touched on this a little bit before, but have there been many outreach programs to try to assist those people not just spiritually but temporally? Because the people that have lost their jobs and are having a difficult time trying to just take care of those basic needs.

Rabbi Lorge 30:11

Yeah, so I'd say, you know, on two levels. I think there's some programming that we've been doing prior to the pandemic that remains important work. So we have been, you know, since the 80's we've had a program where we serve a hot meal. And then a bagged meal. We're part of a consortium of churches

and synagogues in our area, who make sure that every day of the week, every meal of the day, there's a place you can come for a meal. So that work we found a way to continue throughout the pandemic, even as things were shut down, which felt like a necessary and important thing. And those numbers have increased in terms of the numbers of people who were serving right now. So that's continuing, we do more systemic justice work around criminal justice reform. And, you know, a lot of the reports coming out of prisons and other populations that are incarcerated you just see that the community was not been cared for or looked after amongst all this, and COVID has really ravaged those communities so we're doubling down and kind of reinvesting in efforts to try to think differently about criminal justice in New York City and in America. So some of that stuff is kind of sustaining work we've already done. And then, you know, we're, I think just, you know, I don't think we're fully at the full scope of what's going to be needed. You know, we know that, you know, the numbers of unhoused from insecure people are on the rise. You can see it very visibly as you walk around the streets here in the city. And there's going to have to be effort, both direct service and more systematic effort that's going to have to be trying to help people out economically, you know, we're identifying and trying to identify folks in the community, you know in our specific community who can help, because we are able, you know, we were able to help in a more direct quick way. You know, there's things you know as little as it costs some money to become a member of our congregation so we can, you know, relieve dues, and help lower those costs for people who are hurting in the short term. We have some funds to be able to help people with more acute needs, like rent and food. We try not to do it in a way that is going to be perpetual because we want people to be able to get back on their feet so we try to do it in conjunction with other efforts -we have a social worker on our staff who helps connect people to services that they need. But I think, you know, as we're starting to identify and really try to help with the needs of people directly in our community, you know, we feel responsible to the larger community around us so we're just starting to have conversations with other faith communities. We've partnered in the past to try to think about what's going on systemically. But I think ultimately there's going to have to be some kind of a push towards something federal and something statewide to try to help, to try to be a voice, holding some of our government officials accountable to try to do something. I think we were all pretty disappointed to see the Senate, and Congress, go on vacation, without any kind of relief for the American people. So, we'll probably end up at some point, getting vocal in that work.

Christopher Taylor 33:45

I say, in terms of getting vocal, like, have you seen much of a, especially within like the church leadership, or maybe encouraging regular members of the congregation, have you seen a lot of this kind of like interfaith work to try to encourage different political officers, local or federal too, to become involved, to kind of let them know what your concerns are, both in regards to restrictions in the church but also in the needs of the members of the community?

Rabbi Lorge 34:11

So we haven't done a whole lot in terms of restrictions. We felt that most of the restrictions that have been put on in our congregation, or congregations in general, have been relatively loose -not particularly restrictive. You know, I know, there's quite a, quite a, loud case that went to the Supreme Court recently around some of the restrictions in New York City. It wasn't in our, you know, our part of the city doesn't have those kinds of restrictions because we haven't been deemed the red zone, but we have lived under similar ones when the whole city was shut down. You know I think for us to be

different, I think, you know, we're a liberal Jewish community in the sense that we're happy to use technology, even on the Sabbath. An orthodox community might feel less so. Though I've seen more and more Orthodox conservative Jews start to, you know, in a moment of unprecedented need, use the technology, you know, but it's not their preference. You know, we're comfortable to do it and where we don't feel restricted to doing it. And so, we haven't been trying to lobby against those efforts cause they're sensical. But in terms of, we have been part of interfaith coalitions in the past and will continue to be on some of the justice issues that we care about working on. New York was one of two states along with North Carolina that would allow 16 year olds to be incarcerated with adults. So we were a part of a coalition with many other houses of worship and a few other organizations to try to get that law changed, which we were able to successfully do -the governor signed a law making that no longer the case. And then we're working on bail reform and a few other issues locally here. But, we'll probably try to continue to, to, you know, I think it's, it's more powerful to act and and to speak with other diverse communities and I think it's it's, you know, the faith community can be really powerful community when it draws itself together and elected officials, I think, still feel uncomfortable when they're held to account by, you know, a pretty broad based coalition of faith communities, which is good.

Christopher Taylor 36:37

Yeah, yeah. To do their job, right? It sounds like the church community has done a lot from kind of the top of the group, what do you see going on from like the base, just kind of the lay population? Is there any, not necessarily like specific stories to share, but is there any kind of surprised -maybe happily surprised -maybe a, you know, thought kind of disappointing, you'd like to see within just kind of the regular membership and things and supporting those needs, whether it be spiritual or material or whatever?

Rabbi Lorge 37:09

Yeah. You know, I think... I think one of them, you know, we have a lot of congregants who are aging and, and, you know, trying to figure out how to handle distance and there is a very particular who I, I speak with someone regularly. It's kind of on my watch I care about, and she's in her 90's, she lives alone, and it's been a really hard eight months. And a lot of folks in that population have kind of expressed, you know, you know, if I knew this was what the last few years of my life were gonna look like, I don't know that it'd be worth it, which is a hard thing to hear, a tough thing to hear. But, I've seen, not with my prodding or asking a lot of different members, just proactively reaching out and setting up times to call, now that you know it's getting colder again but it does create some other methods. For months, we'd go on distance walks with her, get her out of her apartment. They have, you can eat outdoors now in restaurants around here so people have been doing that with her and, you know, I think she probably gets a few calls a day, makes a world of a difference. And I'd say you know this is true. I think of any religious community that people who I think are reaping the benefits of that are the people who tended to invest in the community beforehand, or before the crisis. You know she's somebody who would become a really integral part of the community, she showed up to a lot of things, she had a long history of being a part of the community and so she's, she's known and people care about her and worry about her. There are other people, and I know that there are other people in similar situations who maybe are in more of the periphery who, you know, were happy to be a member of the congregation, but didn't particularly invest in the community in a real way, it's harder. You know, we have, we have people who are happy to make phone calls, we have people who are happy to check in.

I do think, you know, there's a different level of care or concern or commitment that people have when they feel like it's an organic relationship they've developed over time versus something that they're doing, you know, out of, out of love, or grace or a sense of it being the right thing to do. So, you know, I think it's also this whole thing that has been a reminder to some folks about, you know, what is the power and strength about being part of a faith community. And I think, you know, we've seen for decades a decline in people wanting to do, affiliate, you know, across all denominations and churches. For the most part you know that had been sort of the working sociology was that, you know, American faith was in decline outside of the evangelical circles or something like that, even evangelical churches I think in the last 10 years have said that too. I think moments like this kind of remind people about what you're, you miss when you're living alone, you know, and not outside of the community.

Christopher Taylor 40:17

Yeah. Do you think that, and that's something that I've heard a lot about and I've thought about even just within my own faith, do you feel like this is gonna -because of an event like this and I think a lot of people are gonna remember the rest of their lives you know like back in 2020 when everything shut down and you know all the kind of craziness of it- do you feel like this could have had ultimately a positive or negative influence on individual faith? It seemed like you've kind of addressed this a little bit, and it's probably a bit of a mixed bag, right.

Rabbi Lorge 40:45

Yeah, it's a mixed bag I'd say. I hope -I hope for a positive, I think, I think it's, you know, it depends on people's experience, right? I think, you know, if I was to do a poll of my community, I'd hope that they'd say that they felt like they've been, you know, serving them well that they've found the benefit and the good of being a part of the community during this time. And I think if that's true, and if, if that's true for most people then, you know, we'll, we'll see the rewards of that, you know. If we were able to write I mean if religious communities can't help people through challenging times, we're really failing at our mission. And so I think when we do well, people notice, and they talk about it and they see it and, and they want to be a part of that. So I think if we're doing our job well, and if we're, you know, kind of fulfilling our mission, hopefully, hopefully, you know, people will be more attuned, they want to pay it forward, they want to be able to give back, they want to be able to live their values out in a way that's meaningful and authentic. But, you know if people feel more alone, less connected... The other thing that I think that's hard is there's a theological question all this which is, you know, what caused this? Why is it happening? Right? And I've heard a lot of different people, people who maybe would have scoffed at ideas about theology and god, you know, all of a sudden, you know, the the superstition in them says well, I don't know what did cause this, and one person who I call regularly says they think it's a punishment from God. That's not my theology and I tried to warn her away from that theology because I don't think it's a helpful one; it's not particularly a liberal Jewish theology at all. But I do think, you know, there is a renewed sense of people asking questions about what is the meaning behind life and living and, you know, if, if, when you realize how fragile everything is. You asked different kinds of questions and I think people hadn't quite seen the fragility that was baked around us in this system that we live in. And now they can't help but notice it. Then we have a holiday in Judaism called Sukkot, that's our feast of foods, and it's all about kind of recognizing how fragile life is and I feel like this time has been a really long protracted Sukkot where it's just like, you know, everything is tentativeness, and it's been a crazy reminder of how tenuous everything is. And there's a way to lean into that and still find

joy, which is all about what Sukkot is about -it's about finding an ability to, even in a fragile life and in a fragile world, to still be able to wrestle out joy and blessing and goodness and feel, meaning and purpose behind it so if that's people's experience through religion in this time then I think it'll be for the good.

Christopher Taylor 43:43

That's awesome, man. It sounds like you're doing amazing work with a lot of those people, and really making a positive influence in them. Just with the last couple of minutes that we have, is there any particular topic or idea that you would like to address, or something that you've found interesting as we've kind of navigated our way through, (hopefully as we're nearing the end but who knows, right?) as they're navigating our way through this kind of journey of 2020?

Rabbi Lorge 44:09

I think, I'm trying to remember, I think one of the questions asked about different age demographics and they're responses to this. That struck me just because I do a lot of work with our teens and I do think, I don't think this is necessarily a religious thing in the sense that I think teens are having a really hard time. I, you know, I was curious, as a teacher yourself, you know, if you see that in your students. But in the students I work with I'm definitely seeing a lot more anxiety, you know, I'm not a clinician, but a lot of people are feeling, you know, we're trying to communicate to our community as we head into the winter here in New York. You know, we're not able to gather as much, and it's darker earlier. We're trying to tell adults and youth about warning signs around mental illness and stuff like that. Things they should be on the lookout for depression and anxiety because we've noticed a real spike amongst adults and teens. So, you know, we have a whole new renewed program that we just kind of came up with in the last week and a half -I guess a month now- really, three weeks trying to try to address what we're seeing is it's, it's kind of morphing from, you know, trying to, you know, try to take what we're noticing and apply it and be flexible enough to meet the needs we're seeing. I don't know if you see that in your school?

Christopher Taylor 45:31

Yeah, you know it's been, it's been something shocking, where more than any other year (this is my 10th year teaching) but there's just the apathy of students. And it's surprising even in little things, like if I give them 10 minutes at the end of class to work on an assignment. In a typical year, kids would be kind of working but also socializing and talking and stuff. And now when I give them time to work, it's just quiet. And it's like, like part of me is like, Oh, it's nice. But part of that bothers me and makes me worried for them because so many of them, even when they are in the midst of so many people, are isolating themselves. You know they don't chime in with questions I think because they feel like the mask is a hindrance or it just gives them an excuse not to say anything. And the number of students struggling is certainly higher than I've ever seen. And I think that a lot of it is due to that. And as a faculty and as teachers we try to come up with different ways to try to engage students with something. Now just shutting down this week again for a second time, in anticipation for it I was letting students know there's a decent chance this is going to happen again. And the first time it happened, I think a lot of students treated the shutdown as though like I'll figure out my grades and everything afterwards, and they kind of dug themselves in a hole and now I think they realize kind of the reality like, "oh, this year in school still does count, I need to figure things out". But now many of them do feel like they can't talk

or they don't want to talk or they just are dealing with so many difficult things, and I think a lot of students play it off like they don't care, like "oh, it's just school, whatever, I don't care" but I think a lot of them really are struggling with being home and like you said, I think it's missing out on what this year should have been -not going to homecoming, not going to football games, not going to, you know, the kinds of high school, these are valuable years in these kids lives, and for them to miss out on this, it really is difficult. And so it's nice to see when you do find those successes and you're finding a way to, to create something that's not the ideal, but you can approximate what you had hoped to be able to get, and you can see the happiness, and I've been really encouraged by how many students have reached out to me, emailed me, and just said, "hey thanks", you know, thanks for supporting us in these difficult times, thanks for understanding, thanks for, for validating my feelings for, you know, those kinds of personal moments that I think -especially in faith communities- you're able to touch people and let them know that people are thinking about them, people care about them. And I think that's what's almost been as important as anything. Obviously academics matter in my profession but, I think equally important that I need to, I want my students to know that, that I care about them, and the community cares about them, and that we want to help them through these difficult times as well. So, so definitely, yeah, with teenagers it's, it's a tough age group and I know they're struggling for sure as well. And that's why I'm glad that they have more than just a school, that there are religious, you know, faith groups that they can help promote them as well, because not everybody has a good home life not everybody has, you know that support from home so they need that those extra people to step into their lives and to kind of help, help fill those roles. I don't think we could ever fully take on the role of maybe father, or mother, or whatever but, but to be as best as we can and show them that care and concern. Well thanks man, again, I really appreciate it. It shouldn't have taken this long for me to reach out to you.

Rabbi Lorge 49:22

No worries, no worries., I'm really glad, glad we got to do this.