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RS 301 Oral History: Interview with Dita Kruger

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Daniel Busch

Religion in America

Oral History

For my oral history project, I interviewed a friend of mine, Dita Kruger (pronouns they/them). Dita describes themselves as a mostly secular Jew, whose religious practice before Covid were primarily tied to the observation of Jewish holidays with family members. They have not been involved in synagogue worship for some time. “I haven’t been to synagogue in I don’t know how long... But I make a very strong effort to spend holidays with family... I would go to religious services once in a blue moon, but it was mostly about community... My community of practice is my family.” When impossible to see family over a holiday, Dita would search out friends and people in the area who were also celebrating to come together with.

This focus on family and friends and deemphasis on a larger religious community comes partly from a personal place of hurt. Dita told me about their experience as a nonbinary trans person at a Chabad house, a center of traditional Judaism in Arcata: “For a while I had dinner there, but being trans was super uncomfortable there, so I stopped... so I would say most of my practice before Covid was very much just making sure I spent time with relatives during holidays.”

This focus on close interpersonal community made Dita’s experience with the Covid pandemic especially hard. Individuals who regularly attend religious worship at churches, synagogues, etc. may find some solace in technological answers such as Zoom, which allow them to observe that practice despite a lack of physical closeness, but someone whose entire religious practice centers on close interpersonal celebration with family and friends (especially

when travel is involved) doesn't have much of a replacement.

When asked how their practice has changed during Covid, Dita said, "It's been really, really terrible because I haven't been able to travel to see family." This was compounded by personal tragedy as Dita's grandfather died at the beginning of the pandemic. The lockdown prevented Dita from traveling to partake in the funeral ceremony or attending synagogue at the "one time" they actually wanted to go to synagogue. "We tried our best to mourn over Zoom, but that was hard... There's really no substitute for that in person connection."

That's not to say Dita had no in person connections at all during the pandemic. A bright spot for them was when our friend group went over to their backyard to celebrate a socially distanced Jewish New Year with them. Only one other person in our friend group was Jewish, but we all came to celebrate with Dita. It was a great time. It was a small outdoors gathering and we were sure to wear masks and socially distance. "It was a very loose version of how you celebrate Rosh Hashanah, but it was still really nice to spend it with friends."

Dita's perception of technology based substitutes for religious community is overall negative. The inadequacy of Zoom and other adaptations as substitutes for in person community was a common theme in our interview. When asked if they foresaw long term change in how people worship based on these tech adaptations, Dita said, "No. I think it's there for when we need it.. but it's not a suitable replacement. I think ultimately as soon as we can go back to doing things like we used to, we will."

Dita also brought up the importance of food to Judaic tradition. Jewish food is a big part of these celebrations, and the element of community is deeply entwined with cooking. If you're getting together in person, you all share food. During the pandemic, when you're just cooking for yourself, it's different. "Like on Hanukkah I didn't make latkes, because I'm not just gonna

make them for myself. It's this long arduous process and I'm not gonna do that just for me, I'm not gonna do it all by myself in the way I would for my whole family... Until someone invents some way to digitally share food, I just don't see how that's replaceable."

Overall, Dita felt that their relationship to Judaism had weakened during the pandemic precisely because of this lack of community. "I don't know what it is, but there's this spiritual energy that's tangible, and you can't get that over the internet." However, this corresponded with a strengthening in their community with their non-Jewish friends in ways that wouldn't have happened otherwise. "I will say I've had to make more of an effort in certain areas, cause I didn't have my usual community of practice. So inviting a bunch of friend to sit in my yard and eat apples dipped in honey was something I wouldn't do usually.... I was so desperate I made that extra effort to invite people over... But overall, it's been a detriment." Dita closed our interview by discussing some of the experiences we all face during the pandemic, and talking again about their experiences with personal loss. All of us, even the non religious, are suffering from separation from community. "I'm not unique in my experience of death without community... and I held on to it a lot longer because I couldn't share it with somebody."

I think that is one of the most pernicious parts of the pandemic. A simple temporary lack of community can be terrible enough, but it can be gotten through with time. But experiencing grief and trauma in absence of community (whether religious or nonreligious), and thus being unable to process it properly, can have serious and long lasting psychological impacts. Tragically, far too many people have gone through this during this crisis, and I think it will leave permanent scars in the way we relate to each other.