

# COPING STRATEGIES FOR JEWISH PROFESSIONALS & LAY LEADERS IN CHALLENGING TIMES

Soon after the horrors of October 7th, I saw this image posted on Facebook.

To all my Jewish professional friends on social who are currently navigating all the big feelings and heartache and confusion and turmoil of your community- whose doors are always open- whose phones are always on- whose emails are always answered- who are answering prayers- navigating anti semitism- all while navigating your own big feelings- your own family's fears and anxieties- EVERYDAY- more so TODAY

I see you  
You are not alone in the weight that you carry  
&  
Know that you are a warrior  
A mensch



One Jewish professional to another

While I do not know the original author, it feels like something many of my friends and colleagues could have written. What was true in the immediate aftermath of October 7th still rings true today. Jewish professionals, clergy, and lay leaders have been trying to help their communities, send support to Israel, create meaningful and impactful programming, raise funds, bravely face antisemitism, and support those who are scared and hurting, all while also trying to handle the regular life and needs of their communities. It is draining.

Often in a time of crisis, the person in crisis can look to others (friends, family, colleagues) who are not as close to

the issue to help support and relieve some of the challenges. This theory was formally introduced by Susan Silk and Barry Goldman in 2013 as Ring Theory.

Ring Theory asks people to think of the person in crisis as being in the center of a circle, with a series of concentric rings around that person. Each layer further from the center is a step further removed from the crisis itself.

The basic idea is “Comfort IN, dump OUT.” As stated in Silk & Goldman’s April 7, 2013 LA Times article, “How Not to Say the Wrong Thing,” “The person in the center ring can say anything she wants to anyone, anywhere. She can kvetch and complain and whine and moan and curse the heavens...Everyone else can say those things too, but only to people in larger rings. When you are talking to a person in a ring smaller than yours, someone closer to the center of the crisis, the goal is to help.”

Silk also called this the Kvetching Order.

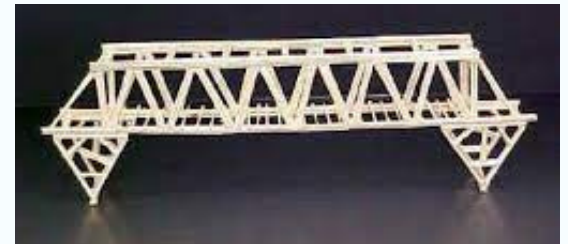


Using a “Kvetching Order” would be perfect for this moment, except for so many Jewish professionals, clergy, and lay leaders most of your close contacts are in the same level of the crisis circle as you (or are even closer to the center.) There’s nowhere to “dump out.”

In this situation, there are 3 things you can do:

### **Strengthen the Bonds Within Your Circle**

You may be familiar with the science class assignment to create a bridge made mostly out of toothpicks. The goal is to create a bridge that can withstand the heaviest weight. Most model bridges fail at the joints, but when built well with sturdy connections, these seemingly fragile objects can hold a significant burden. In fact, a toothpick bridge in Gardena, California in 2011 held 245 pounds!



Toothpick bridges show that strong bonds can help handle outsized pressure. This is true for people too. When you are in a situation where you and your closest contacts are all in the same ring and need support, the key is to find ways to strengthen the ability of your circle to hold up under pressure. This means creating strong bonds and ties within your circle, practicing interdependence instead of relying on only yourself. Clergy and leadership teams should see themselves as partners in creating resilience. This can manifest in a variety of ways. You could take turns giving each other a break so that everyone gets a chance to regroup and refresh. For clergy or community leaders, that may mean taking an extra day or Shabbat off while your colleagues cover services or meetings. Or you could divide and conquer tasks that are usually done together. It can also mean being a space for each other to vent frustrations without judgment and it can be as simple as saying “I see how hard you’re working and all you’re doing and I appreciate it.”

## Get Things Out of Your Circle (Temporarily)

In the best case scenario of Ring Theory, you can take things off your plate (emotionally or logistically) by handing them off to people in a ring further away from the center, but in this current moment it may be that there's no one to take things away from you because they can't handle anything else either. Yet, you still need things removed because when a crisis arises a whole new set of responsibilities come with it and there's simply no room in your



schedule or mind to do it all. So, you and your team have to be willing to remove items from your “to do” list or your emotional space - for now. This doesn't mean they will get moved to someone else. Rather they will be moved to some**time** else.

This transfer to a future time should be done methodically so it has the least impact on your community. The organization's leadership can work together to determine what can wait for another time. Review your calendar for the next few weeks and see where there's room to give. Can you push a particular meeting off for a few weeks? Is there an event or program that was supposed to be new and fresh that can be done with re-using a previous program and save the creation of something new for another time? Can you “black out” a whole week or one night per week for a month so there's a total break from programming and meetings (which gives the entire staff at least one night off?) Do this review of your calendar each week until the crisis eases to make sure that you continue to protect the time and energy of those trying to lead through this challenging time.

**Go Beyond Your Usual Circles** - Most often when we need help, we turn to those closest to us, but in these times you need to seek out those who aren't in your next closest circle or maybe even the one after that. One option is to think about who is in your regular social or professional groups who would not be your first call in a moment of need, but who would be very willing to help

you out. You can also look to those who haven't been in your circles at all who might be able to build a bridge to where you are. What are some unusual partnerships or alliances you can develop? Neighbors?

Local clergy of other faiths? Other lay leaders at the synagogue in the next town? Non-profit professionals in non-Jewish organizations? Finally, and importantly, do not forget the option of speaking with mental health professionals, even if you haven't explored this option previously.



You will have to ask for help and rely on a new group of people to expand your support system. It can be hard to be vulnerable, to let someone know you need help, and to show them your weaknesses. Yet, to handle the extra stress, strain, and work that can accompany an unexpected major communal need or crisis, you have to broaden your base of support and find others to be your help in this challenging time.

## **Good Questions Coaching can help you implement these strategies. Contact Tami to find out more.**

Thank you to Rabbi Cheryl Peretz and Rabbi Ayelet Cohen and the USCJ Convening Session “Rabbinic Leadership for Times of Crisis and Beyond” for some inspiration and ideas in this piece.



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