

Tishrei Holidays During the Time of Pandemic

Topic

Tishrei Holidays (Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, and Simchat Torah) During the Pandemic

Relevant Vocabulary

פְּקוּחַ נֶפֶשׁ (<i>Pikuah Nefesh</i>)	Saving a Life
יָמִים נֹרָאִים (<i>Yamim Nora'im</i>)	The High Holidays (literally: Days of Awe)
וַיִּקְרָא (<i>Vayikra</i>)	Leviticus
חַז"ל (חֲכָמֵינוּ זְכוֹרֵנוּם לְבָרְכָה) (<i>Hazal / Hachameinu Zichronam Livrchah</i>)	Our Sages of Blessed Memory

Grade Level(s)

5th – 12th

Big Ideas

Using critical thinking to comprehend situations and anticipate problems can help confront future trouble.

Learning Targets

Students will:

1. Understand the importance of *pikuah nefesh* by using critical thinking to comprehend situations and anticipate problems they will encounter in the future
2. Identify the way Jews found ways to celebrate the Tishrei holidays during the 2020 pandemic through viewing pictures and newspaper excerpts
3. Learn lifelong skills "seeing" or "reading" and "interpreting"
4. Construct a narrative about the way Jews celebrated the Tishrei holidays in 2020 using the pictures and newspaper excerpts
5. Apply the concept of *pikuah nefesh* to develop ideas on new ways to celebrate the Tishrei holidays

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Materials / Technology Needed

- Pictures of people observing the Tishrei Holidays in 2020 and before 2020 (available as separate download). (Please feel free to use your own pictures)
- Newspaper excerpts (available as separate download). (Please feel free to use your own newspapers' excerpts)
- Virtual bulletin board such as [Padlet](#) (available for iOS and Android) (optional)
- Google Sticky Notes (optional)
- Paper/pencil, sticky notes, or laptops (both)
- Screen
- Tape for attaching items to walls (optional)
- ["Three Who Ate"](#) by David Frishman in Hebrew (optional)
- "Three Who Ate" excerpt in English (available as separate download) (optional)

Background for Activity

Jewish communities have congregated for holiday celebrations for millennia (e.g., *Pirkei Avot* 5:5 and Bartenura there s.v. *tsefufim* and *umishta'avim*) However, the COVID-19 pandemic forced many to make difficult choices. How is one to reconcile between staying healthy in a global pandemic and participate in communal activities such as attending High Holiday services, large family holiday gatherings, large crowds dancing, and singing in proximity?

Jewish tradition teaches that human life is precious and that preserving a life takes priority over just about anything else.* Hence, *pikuah nefesh* should take priority over other *mitzvot*, even if this means breaking some of the Torah's laws. The pandemic forced Jews to innovate to observe the Tishrei holidays while taking into consideration the concept of *pikuah nefesh*.

The biblical source in *Vayikra* 18:5 states:

Vayikra 18:5	ויקרא יח:ה
You shall keep my laws and my rules, which a person shall do and live through them —I am YHVH.	וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת-חֻקֹּתַי וְאֶת-מִשְׁפָּטַי, אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אֹתָם הָאָדָם וְחַי בָּהֶם אֲנִי יְיָ

Hazal taught that the phrase "וְחַי בָּהֶם" (*va'chai ba'hem*, live through them)" means that people shall live by the laws, not die by (or for) them (Tractate *Sanhedrin* 74a). The sanctification of life is imperative and is the main purpose of our lives. One can transgress laws from the Torah in order to remain alive (Mishnah *Yoma* 8:6).

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Mishnah Yoma 8:6	משנה יומא ח:ו
[In the case of] one who is seized with the [life-threatening illness] <i>bulmos</i> , [causing him unbearable hunger pangs and impaired vision,] one may feed him even impure foods on Yom Kippur or any other day until his eyes recover.	מִי שֶׁאֶחָזוּ בּוֹלְמוֹס – מֵאֲכִילִין אוֹתוֹ אֶפִּילּוּ דְּבָרִים טְמֵאִים, עַד שֶׁיֵּאָדָּרוּ עֵינָיו

*Traditionally the three categories that do not take priority over *pikuah nefesh* are laws prohibiting idolatry, forbidden sexual relations, and murder.

Moreover, the 13th-century French scholar Hezekiah ben Manoah (*Chizkuni*)** teaches that the words **וְחִי בְּהֶם** are spelled out to clarify that failing to perform the commandments will not bring about those people's deaths, physically or figuratively. In other words, the “transgressors,” who are the ones who break the laws of Torah to save themselves, will not lose their connection to the Jewish people or be cut off from the community.

Description of Activities

Trigger:

- ❖ Students use five sticky notes or use the app Google Sticky Notes to write ways on how their lives changed during the pandemic. Students post one idea (or one drawing) on each sticky note. Students share highlights with the class. Teacher asks students why their lives changed so much and introduces the concept of *pikuah nefesh*.
- ❖ Ask students to fast forward, imagine that they fell into a time warp, and they jumped from September 2020 to September 2060. The events of 2020 are new to them. Prompt: “Imagine you are helping your parents clean the attic and came across several pictures and newspaper excerpts. You are curious and want to find out the story behind the pictures and the words.”

Activity:

- ❖ Display the pictures and the newspaper excerpts around the room or project the pictures and excerpts on a screen. Also, display the verse from *Vayikra* 18:5 in Hebrew and in English and the words **פִּקּוּחַ נֶפֶשׁ** – *pikuah nefesh* in English and Hebrew.

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- ❖ Use the routine of STW: See, Think, Wonder*** to stimulate students' curiosity and inquiry. Students follow this routine:
 - Divide a piece of paper in 3 columns: 1) See, 2) Think, 3) Wonder. Students should fill out the paper as they work through this activity. This can also be done on a computer or on a tablet. Open and share a Padlet to record students' answers. (Optional – have students juxtapose the pre-pandemic pictures with the ones from the pandemic).
 - **See:** What do you see? (Ask students to refrain from interpretation at this point. Students should describe what is on each picture without interpreting.)

**He titled his commentary *Chizkuni* (חִזְקוֹנִי) from the word חָזַק (strong), so readers could remember him and become stronger.

***Making Thinking Visible: How to Promote Engagement, Understanding, and Independence...PUBLISHED: 2011 AUTHORS: Ron Ritchhart, Mark Church, Karin Morrison.

- **Think:** What do you think? What is the story behind the picture? Is something missing in the picture? What, if anything, is missing in the picture? Students should offer their own interpretation about what is happening in the picture. Students should reflect on how and why people changed behaviors and how their actions were indicative of *pikuah nefesh* (or not).
- **Wonder:** What are you wondering? What are the big ideas and issues raised in the pictures? What can be learned for future pandemics.
- **Share:** Teachers lead the discussion while students share their thinking after each step and for every picture.
- ❖ Select three newspaper excerpts of your liking and ask students to apply the STW routine to them.
- ❖ Share students' thinking at every step, so students can learn from one another and from their thought process. Ask the students to read the newspaper excerpts and match them to the pictures (optional). Have students discuss their thinking with other students. What are the words conveying? Ask students what other words or titles they would choose for the picture(s).
- ❖ In small groups, discuss what the Tishrei holidays look like in 2060. What else has changed in the world? Why? Ask students to brainstorm innovative ways of celebrating the Tishrei holidays. Do we have to innovate only because of *pikuah nefesh*? What else can be a good reason for it? Ask students to come up with their own innovation to help them find additional meaning for the Tishrei holidays.

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Differentiation Options

Knowing that students learn in a variety of ways and modalities, the following options are provided to adjust the above lesson to meet the unique needs of your learners.

For learners who need more assistance

- Students may record their answers or dictate the answers to a teacher or to another student.

For learners who need extension opportunities

- Students read and analyze the story *Three Who Ate* by David Frishman either in the [original Hebrew](#) or excerpted English translation (see Materials Needed).