Embracing Synagogue Disruption of the “New Now” and Beyond

Rabbi Paul Kipnes and Rabbi Julia Weisz

“I’ll go back, but I’m not wearing nice/work pants.” So declared one Jewish professional during a Zoom session devoted to reimagining the post-quarantine working world. As the speaker raised a knee to show that of course they were wearing sweatpants, those gathered smiled at this moment of honesty.

Many of us want to return to our workplaces but few want to return to the kind of pre-pandemic environment that bred overwork, underappreciation, uncomfortable dress codes, and little time to exercise or stretch. We fear becoming locked once again into old work patterns that stifled creativity and promoted disequilibrium. More globally we wonder: After months embracing the silver linings of pandemic life, how do we secure silver linings as our standard operating procedure?

Welcome to the “New Now”

The New Now is our current reality, characterized by sweatpants and socks under a serious-looking top and an often-contradictory

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set of experiences depending upon one’s location, housing, economic situation, gender, and children in the home. For some, the New Now means healthier eating choices, cooking at home, midday exercise, putting kids to bed, meetings without a multi-hour commute, flex hours to meet the day’s vicissitudes, mission-specific priorities, and creativity on steroids to make meaning in the midst of a life-altering pandemic.

For others, the New Now involves more work with less time to do it, more ordering in or microwaved chicken nuggets, striving to serve simultaneously as children’s teacher and temple’s savior and feeling insufficient at both, starting meetings only to be interrupted multiple times by tantrums and whining, having to explain to the kids that although you are home, you cannot put them to bed tonight, and existential questions about whether to quit work or not.

For most, the New Now also brings silver linings into our lives that include meaningful moments with our families and rethinking priorities. In addition to disrupting our personal work habits, the New Now invites us to radically rethink the way we do the sacred business of being synagogues.

The New Now, like the “new normal,” recognizes that something significant has changed the very fabric of our existence. The New Now, in contrast, suggests that come “The Return” (our post-pandemic return to a pre-COVID-19-like life), the likely pursuit of normality threatens to wipe out healthier habits and reimagined priorities some have developed and embraced.

For many pandemic-era Jewish professionals, we now face a Red Sea moment in which we, like the Israelites of old, must decide whether to return to the Egypt that we once knew or move forward into the uncertain future we hope to create. In twenty-first-century speak, we ask, Will our often change-adverse synagogues and organizations be visionary enough to embrace the positive parts of the New Now to embed this disruption as our new normal?

**Critical Questions for the New Now**

Congregation Or Ami (Calabasas, California) joins countless communities, synagogues, and Jewish institutions around the world struggling to embrace these disruptions. In fact, we are focusing on three areas—philosophy, infrastructure, and programming—as
we grapple with the New Now dilemma and we consider critical questions. How would you and your institution answer these questions? (Note: You might substitute “organization” for “synagogue” and “Jewish professional” or “Jewish lay leader” for “rabbi” to personalize the questions for your situation.)

1. Rethinking Our Philosophy

Becoming Risk-Takers

Like the many restaurants, businesses, and professional services that went out of business or, trying to survive, pivoted to offering sidewalk services or shifting to smaller menus, or accommodating more take out or deliveries, synagogues will increasingly face an existential challenge—if we haven’t already—as we move through a post-quarantine period and into a PPP-less reality of regularity and realignment. Shrinking demographics, declining membership levels, devastating economic situations, and the expansive growth of Pew’s Jewish Nones are conspiring to convince us that the survival of any individual synagogue is neither a forgone conclusion nor a necessity. Post-pandemic, we have no choice but to face these facts. We synagogue professionals and lay leaders should be asking ourselves:

If the synagogue has no a priori right to exist, what are we willing to risk to hedge our bets for a future?

Returning to Normal OR Institutionalizing the New Now

After we acknowledge our unconscionable collective abdication of responsibility for the most vulnerable, which led to almost six hundred thousand American deaths, we might also concede that with this killer coronavirus comes an invitation and an exhortation to realign what we do and how we do it. As argued in “Disruptive Judaism: Will Your Synagogue Be Beit Blockbuster or Kehillat Netflix?” we must self-disrupt to survive. Synagogue disruption, once the painful process of pulling people-in-charge toward new possibilities, needs to become a near constant clarion call to deal deliberately with the New Now.

Do we have the vision to re-envision what was and to embrace a robust realignment of our new reality?
Pursuing a Plethora of Publics

Dr. Lawrence Hoffman speaks of multiple Publics, those unique populations that people our places of worship. Building upon his ideas, we posit these Publics:

**The Regulars:** Those who regularly enter the synagogue front door and keep coming back.

**The Transactionals:** Those who pay as members for certain experiences—b’nei mitzvah, funerals, occasional pastoral counseling—but rarely make the synagogue a significant part of their lives.

**The Near-But-Fars:** Those paying members, who while living nearby, have tasted the joy of online engagement, and for a variety of understandable reasons (see below) are unable or unwilling to schlep to shul.

**The High Holy Day-ers:** Those who purchase tickets to the Big Jewish Event and consider this to be their synagogue (and come calling when death or illness disrupts their lives) but refuse to become official members. This Public includes former members who wouldn’t miss these major Holy Days.

**The Connected Communals:** Those relatives or friends of current congregants who come around for Holy Days and, if shepherded warmly, might be open to enhanced connection.

**The Distanced Members:** Those living at a distance who have decided because of spiritually sustaining streaming experiences that your synagogue is their community. They are willing to go the next step, paying a certain amount (and perhaps donating even more) to be part of the community.

**The Them-Out-Theres:** Those living at a distance who find meaning in the synagogue’s online stream and show up, without formally affiliating.

Increasingly, people will find community, spiritual sustenance, and pastoral comfort in places that speak to their souls, regardless of physical location. While most synagogues focus primarily on The Regulars and The Transactionals, embracing the other Publics is our future. Successful synagogues are rising up in the New Now to minister to everyone: those in front of our faces, those hundreds
of miles away, and those whose physical location is close by but choose to engage from their homes or smart screens.

When Tip O’Neill, the former Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, said that “all politics is local,” his quip spoke also to the alignment of most synagogues. More recently, successful politicians (and business leaders) have learned that staying power is created through connecting (and fundraising) beyond local borders.

How willing are synagogues to realign our brick-and-mortar sacred businesses, developing a unique brand, targeted communications, and robust engagement options to grow our membership and engage other Publics that could be the key to our creative survival?

Collaborating Is Key, Even Amongst Once Competing Synagogues

Most Jewish clergy will point to online collaboration as the key to surviving and thriving during quarantine. Most professional organizations—including the Reform Movement’s CCAR, URJ, ACC, ARJE, and NATA (similarly in other movements)—delivered synagogue-saving resources, technical how-tos, and well-crafted forums to encourage and facilitate collaboration and sharing.

Rabbi Josh Lesser’s Dreaming Up High Holy Days Facebook group (now Dreaming Up 5781) sprung up, which served as a community for thinking together how best to approach the COVID-era High Holy Days 5781. Together Jewish religious leaders dreamt, planned, asked important questions, supported one another, and collaborated for the common good of the Jewish People. Elsewhere, groups of once-competing leaders set up regular Zoom sessions to reflect, commiserate, and plan together.

Local synagogues similarly strived for collaboration. Congregation Or Ami’s pop-up camps turned to Reform Movement camps to enhance our offerings. We were zooming in cooking specialists from URJ Camp Newman and theater directors from URJ 6 Points Creative Arts, while celebrating Chanukah with URJ 6 Points Sci Tech staff.

Will synagogues champion silo-busting collaboration as the best chance for survival into the New Now and beyond?
2. Rethinking Infrastructure

Declaring “Dues are Dead”

“What is the price point for which quitting or not joining the temple becomes impossible?” So asked a business leader at Congregation Or Ami (Calabasas, California). “Figure out that price point and our synagogue will grow organically instead of continuing to shrink.” The resulting restructuring of our synagogue financial model led to six years of exponential partnership/membership growth (28 percent in five years), reductions in resignations (by 50 percent), and a tripling of annual giving and gala donations. Risk-taking back then ensured we had retooled sufficiently to survive and thrive through the pandemic recession right now (our current partnership numbers are even with pre-pandemic).

Similarly, successful businesses don’t sit back and wait for clients to walk in the door (or wander onto their website). Instead, they create a strategic marketing plan to proactively identify and engage with potential clients. By contrast, too many synagogues have traditionally taken a relaxed approach to membership recruitment, waiting for people to walk through the door. Our financial model restructuring was married to a radical revamping of our partnership recruitment process, which wove together the best business strategies with intentional warmth and welcome. (Read about our experiences: paulkipnes.com/synagogue-dues-are-dead.)

Will synagogues similarly be willing to disrupt their increasingly failing model, to resuscitate their financial future?

Phoning in a Culture of Philanthropy

In philanthropic circles, serious fundraising is best accomplished in pairs, face to face. Yet when the pandemic prohibited such gatherings, many returned to the telephone or online meeting spaces to keep donors engaged, thanked, and giving.

Two weeks after Congregation Or Ami’s building closed in March 2020, a team at Or Ami quickly called a small cohort of givers to create an Emergency Tzedakah Fund to ensure that no congregant need quit because of money. Similarly in August 2020, a small team led by the rabbis called 25 percent of the congregation in the month prior to Rosh HaShanah to raise the total budgeted
amount of the High Holy Day appeal. A prerecorded appeal during streamed services and follow-up emails accomplished more, ensuring that the synagogue ultimately raised 50 percent more than our expected goal.

Most of this was comfortably attained through phone calls. Why? Ever since the 2008 economic recession, with guidance gleaned from the CCAR’s Shekels seminars, Or Ami has engaged in a strategic multiyear plan to nurture a Culture of Giving in the congregation. We realized that when the expectation to give becomes part of the culture, and especially when the need arises and the people prioritize personalized asking, the gifts seem to flow. Even by phone.

*Will synagogues strategically shift to embed a Culture of Giving in their communities that can transcend recessions and the need for physical distancing?*

**Syncing Staff Schedules with Silver Linings**

Relaxed dress, telecommuting, staggered staff schedules, and re-prioritized responsibilities drove many staff members and clergy to be more focused, and in many ways, more mission driven. By leaning into the realities of the pandemic and being able to embrace the silver linings of the New Now, many felt greater satisfaction and more control over their work and home lives. Others struggled with working on their own without the opportunity to collaborate, and as work-life separations disappeared.

For those who worked better, the New Now calls into question the necessity of formal, traditionally structured five- or six-day workweeks and uptight employee processes that made life often unmanageable and sometimes overwhelming. For those who struggled more, the New Now calls for a deep exploration of their needs now and going forward. Having succeeded in surviving, synagogues ought to convene intentional brainstorming sessions with staff and then with decision-makers to find a new norm, transforming how we once thought we had to work into what we learned could work.

Congregation Or Ami is exploring how to allow our staffs to choose partial telecommuting and differential or staggered workdays/hours as part of a future in-person employment environment.
We hope to allow different staff members different schedules, matching work schedules with work styles and needs. We believe that by enhancing everyone’s peace of mind—for office assistants and maintenance workers to the professional staff and clergy—we enhance morale and increase productivity.

*Will synagogues try to return quickly to business as usual and thereby ameliorate the advantages that this quarantine brought to the working world? Or will synagogues raise up employee needs to embrace unique modalities of working?*

**Learning from Loss: Investing in Not-In-Person**

While officiating at rituals for the deaths of eleven people in eleven days (surpassing the previous high of five deaths in a month), we changed the way we ritualized loss. During COVID-19 quarantine, more people attended memorial services and shivah minyanim, *b’nei mitzvah*, baby naming *b’ritot*, and other life-cycle celebrations, because the small square screens transformed “zooming in” into a more affordable, accessible option that only demanded an internet connection and a desire to be there.

Synagogues learned how support and solace can be shared and felt powerfully from a distance when the officiants are skilled in weaving together words, music, pastoral counseling, and computer-based communal participation. Even when airplane travel once again becomes safe and the norm, many still will want to zoom in without flying out.

As synagogues now contemplate moving into what Rabbi Elaine Zecher calls “mixed presence” (what others call “hybrid”), where we engage simultaneously with two groups—in-person and on-screen—we ought to think deeply about investing in tech. Moreover, we should invest in training clergy and teachers how to make the not-in-person experience more engaging than looking on from the back of a room.

Congregation Or Ami chose LiveControl.io as our streaming platform to transcend our inability to find and afford in-house expertise. LiveControl provides us with a personalized service complete with moveable cameras, dedicated offsite camera operators, and a robust slowdown-proof process to ensure we are seen and heard far beyond our four walls. Other solutions also exist.
Recognizing that leading for mixed-presence Publics requires new skills and time to practice those skills, are synagogues proactively planning strategically to tech-up and to train clergy and staff for these next-level skills?

Mindfully Morphing the Meeting Mentality

Many synagogues have experienced increased participation by once inaccessible groups: parents of younger children, older adults who don’t drive at night, and everyone in between who wanted to volunteer and participate but did not want to or could not commit to traversing the distance to the meeting or event by car or subway because of kids, family, distance, late hour, or dislike of dressing up. Others have increased engagement by rethinking the length of meetings, usually set at one hour, which might make more sense as thirty- or forty-five-minute gatherings.

Congregation Or Ami is exploring quarterly in-person board meetings with the remainder on Zoom. We are encouraging clergy to meet b’nei mitzvah students online, alleviating the need for one-and-a-half-hour round trips to the temple and often providing the youth with a more comfortable experience as they use Zoom from their rooms.

Synagogues are now wondering: must our events and meetings necessarily return solely to in-person?

3. Programming Post-Pandemic

Prioritizing Teen Mental Health

Teens everywhere are suffering enormously because their individuation is tied to a collection of COVID-banned behaviors, including binding friendships deepened and shaped by hours of hanging out together and in face-to-face encounters. These facilitate the integration of a range of “feels” (emotions) that are often new and overwhelming. But what happens when teens are separated from each other and must survive in close proximity to the very people (parents) from whom they are struggling to individuate?

Like many synagogues, Congregation Or Ami, once boasting a successful and well-attended teen program and teen wellness initiative, has struggled to tool and retool to meet the teens where
they are. Eschewing larger Zoom sessions, we have recently created “Cocoa Conferences,” gatherings of three to four teens and two synagogue professionals (rabbi and youth advisor). Initiated through a personal email sent to the parents and teens inviting them to join, participants enjoy personalized attention in agenda-less gatherings, over delicious noshes in mugs and popcorn containers (with packets of hot cocoa and popcorn) delivered to their doors. Incredibly time consuming, these Cocoa Conferences are nonetheless widely successful, and we have reprioritized staff time to meet the teens’ needs.

As the pandemic recedes, and teens especially break free of online-only restrictions, they are primed to re-embrace the in-person encounter and its concomitant necessity of actually talking to each other. Their desire for in-person interactions, however, may not match their current attenuated facility at being in-person with each other. Yet our national movements and some synagogues face decimated high school and college departments in response to real financial and Zoom-exhaustion pressures. Experts are telling us that teen mental health and wholeness necessarily needs once again to be prioritized, putting pressure on synagogues regarding staffing and resources, in an effort to place these nascent adults at the center of the synagogue ecosystem.

Will synagogues and national movements re-emerge quickly enough as devotees of the teen and college mental health? Or will our teens look beyond us to other more responsive modalities for compassion and connection?

Rewriting the Halachah of Mourning

What the online experience of shivah lacks in terms of the central physical expression of solace sharing—the hug—has been supplanted for the moment with new-old options: heartfelt condolences dropped in the chat box, heartfelt cards written and snail mailed, and warm memories of the deceased delivered to a central email address then shared with the mourners. Online memorial services following family-only burials at the cemetery and virtual unveilings to mark the first yahrzeit became de rigueur to provide new outlets for mourners and consolers to share sadness and sympathy. Clergy who often spent triple the time convincing
doubtful mourners of the value of such online gatherings witnessed the power of these new pandemic rituals to comfort and console.

*Will we embed said shivah and memorial rituals in a halachah (the way) of consolation, creating new must-dos for those who want to comfort that mourner?*

**Couch-Comfortable Judaism**

The pandemic pushed synagogues to offer a smorgasbord of spiritual, ritual, and programmatic innovations. Most synagogues can point to exciting, re-energizing efforts begun or re-envisioned during this period.

Congregation Or Ami developed a series of "couch-comfortable holiday celebrations" and well-attended Drive Thru Judaism events. Our pop-up Kayitz Babayit online camps provided Jewish experiences while providing parents with space to focus on their own work needs. Which of these do we retain? Given the popularity among some Publics of our Zoom services, we are planning post-pandemic a once-monthly streaming-only Shabbat service, which also allows us to easily zoom in guest musicians and speakers without added expense costs.

During this past year, synagogues were unable to run certain programs. In a world of shrinking resources and slower affiliation rates, the quarantine can become the excuse to finally sunset once beloved programs.

*Are synagogues, which like to kvell about our own creativity, willing to deeply evaluate recent years’ offerings to strategically retain the most creative elements while jettisoning on tired programs?*

Finally, back to the question of clothing.

**What Kind of Pants Are Required?**

Within widespread discussions of finally returning to synagogue buildings, leaders are exploring how pre-COVID dress codes, rather than serving to enhance the work environment, instead often created discomfort, reinforced gender stereotyping, and in many cases, were largely irrelevant to productivity. Some synagogues
today are envisioning an expansive, evolving list of expectations of dress depending on the event. Others are setting aside space for staff to keep clothing for when specific dress-up moments arise during the work week. While few will (or should) embrace “wear your pajama bottoms to work” days, we all might think deeply about whether wearing nice jeans or sweatpants would enhance comfort and thus deepen productivity.

Are synagogues ready to hold those open conversations with staff that could lead to collaboratively creating comfortable dress codes that still enhance the synagogue brand?

Embracing the New Now

COVID-19 changed the world, disrupting the way we work, live, and “do synagogue.” Those disruptions shook up the shul and birthed a life-enhancing creativity that might just lead to a brighter future for synagogues and the Jewish world. Or at least it could, if we remain risk-takers, innovation-embracers, and leaders unafraid to embrace for the long term the silver linings that sustained us through the communal coronavirus quarantines of 5780–5781 (2020–2021) and beyond.

Is your synagogue up to it?

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