The Future of Work: Lessons for Clergy from the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Prior to March 2020, the role of a congregational rabbi and the nature of the synagogue as a workplace were already beginning to change. I, like many others, explored technology as a way to connect; I held one-on-one meetings in coffee shops; I began looking to remote tools like Zoom and Slack to engage with congregants and staff. Our profession, overall, has made important strides in work/life balance, gender equity, and staff supervision. However, many of us still struggled with many or all of the enduring challenges of our careers, including long hours, outdated workplace culture, the difficulties faced by women to ascend to higher positions of leadership, and a lack of staff accountability structures.

In March 2020, our world changed forever. We were thrust into completely or partially remote work environments, separated from colleagues, family, friends, and congregants. The COVID-19 pandemic hastened these nascent and glacial developments in our professional field and shined a spotlight on the challenges many of us were already facing. While some of us had previously dabbled in technology, all of us were unprepared for the dramatic changes to our daily work and life. Fareed Zakaria considered the impact of the pandemic in this way:

What exactly are the consequences of this pandemic? Some have suggested that it will prove to be the hinge event of modern history, a moment that forever alters its course. Others believe that after a vaccine, we will quickly return to business as usual. Still others argue that the pandemic will not reshape history so much as accelerate it. This last scenario seems the most likely outcome.1

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With a profession unexpectedly dependent on virtual tools for human interaction, the conversation about the future of work is newly relevant for our field. Initially applicable in more tech-centered sectors, “the future of work refers to the changes that technology . . . along with new employment models . . . will bring about in how we work, where we work, who we work with, and the skills and capabilities we need to work.”\(^2\) The rich conversation around the future of work provides significant insights into the next phases of work in our field. Prompted by the necessary social distancing and closures of the pandemic, each of us have opened new pathways to propel our profession into the future.

In addition to my own research into the secular field of the future of work and my personal experiences as a congregational rabbi during this unprecedented time, I spoke with several colleagues at different stages of their careers, in various geographic locations, serving a range of synagogues sizes. I asked each colleague two key questions:

1. What are you doing now in your professional life that you didn’t do before the pandemic?
2. What do you imagine you will keep doing after the pandemic that you did not do before?

I enter this conversation with a caveat. Working has been challenging during this time of global pandemic. This has been a time of crisis and challenge. This has been a time of economic stress, of personal and professional illness and loss. This has been a time of limited social interaction and little access to support systems. As Claire Cain Miller notes:

In a sense, remote work during a pandemic is not actual remote work. It’s made much harder by the circumstances of the crisis, including the lack of childcare, anxiety about getting sick or losing a job and the inability to work in person even if it’s desirable.\(^3\)

Nevertheless, many of us found ways to innovate, disrupt, and elevate our congregations during this time period. Many of us worried about membership and simply keeping our communities going. While there are many lessons to glean from this extraordinary time period, we can only effectively picture how they will impact our field going forward if we look beyond the associated
immediate stressors of living and working during a global crisis. Therefore, when we imagine the future of work in our synagogues, we do so against the backdrop of renewed access to social interaction, social services, health, and emotional stability.

Our communities, professional styles, staffing structures, geographic locations, and pressures differ across our synagogues. However, several consistent themes emerged that resonate with the leading concepts that I gleaned from the broader future of work best practices. The COVID-19 pandemic affords us the opportunity to take stock of the necessary changes we made to survive and thrive in this time period and imagine how we can transform our profession for the future. These are the key takeaways:

1. **Technology Creates New Opportunities**

While some of our communities previously made a livestream available for services, opened a conference call for a board member unable to make a meeting, or explored virtual classrooms for adult or youth education, the depth and breadth of our use of technology increased exponentially during the pandemic. Technology became the main way for us to continue many if not all aspects of our jobs.

Many of us are already leading or participating in important conversations about what level of technology we will retain in our services, classes, one-on-one or small group conversations, and life-cycle events as the social distancing necessities of the pandemic subside.

Of note, technology has opened new pathways for connection. One colleague had always wanted to start a Rosh Chodesh group and had never had a critical mass commit to participate in a weekend, in-person gathering. When she offered the opportunity on Zoom during the pandemic, this virtual option was extremely successful for her. She is confident it wouldn’t have worked before the pandemic necessitated a virtual experience, opening the door for those who wouldn’t normally attend. These participation barriers exist across the age and life-stage spectrum: those with children, those who couldn’t make an after-work commuting commitment, or those who shied away from driving at night due to darkness or weather concerns. In looking forward, this colleague believes that the virtual modality of the Rosh Chodesh
group is here to stay, because it enabled so many to participate who would not otherwise have joined before. Looking forward to a time of safe gathering, she anticipates bringing the group together two times per year in person to cement the bonds among the group.

If not in the realm of program or education, many of us have found an increase in attendance or participation in one or more areas of synagogue life due to the lowered barriers of access that technology has afforded us.

2. Place-Based Judaism Is Only One Form of Connection and Community

Due to the challenges of the pandemic and the opportunities of technology, many of us moved some, much, or all our work out of our physical synagogue buildings. I heard stories of virtual shivah minyanim, High Holy Day services from closets and laundry rooms, and staff meetings replaced by Slack channels. We understood, on a whole new level, that a synagogue truly exists in holy time, not only in holy place.

My congregation, like many others, has a segment of our population that spends the winter months in warmer locations. For the first time in recent memory, our winter service and class attendance remained strong, if not elevated, because technology enabled them to engage from anywhere. The physical location of congregants, and any interested participants, was not limited by our geography. The same was true of our staff and board members, who have worked from everywhere and anywhere throughout the pandemic. And the same was true of me: I have worked from home for most of the pandemic.

As Jeff Schwartz explains, COVID radically disturbed the pre-pandemic conception of the workplace:

The sudden work-from-home requirement as we sheltered at home turned many long-held assumptions about work on their head and fostered opportunities for transformation . . . Our mental models of where work has to be performed to be optimized were disrupted. For centuries we have improved physical spaces and the physical experiences that work provides to workers, customers, patients, and students. The powerful linkage was blown up so quickly that many were left disoriented.
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The technology is ready but humans, social creatures that we are, may not [have] been.⁴

These accelerated pandemic trends are natural outgrowths of the move toward one-to-ones in coffee shops and pop-up Tot Shabbat in a park. For many of us, the pandemic was the push we needed to look beyond our regular, building-centric habits. Many colleagues shared that this was particularly liberating with regard the hours spent in the office during the workweek.

3. Workplace Flexibility Affords Greater Work/Life Balance

With pandemic-instituted practices of either working completely from home or working from our offices and conducting meetings remotely, we experienced a dramatic increase in flexibility in our schedules. Here again, it is important to note the initial caveat about working under the crisis conditions of the pandemic. Many colleagues shared that their schedules were perhaps less flexible than ever before, splitting their attention between work and virtual homeschool and childcare or the support of an aging parent.

However, the flexibility about where many of us worked has opened post-pandemic opportunities for health and balance. As Schwartz notes, “How we divide our time among different workplace options will be determined by two factors: the kind of work we are doing, and how we balance our lives and our work.”⁵

A key example shared by several colleagues is the end of the in-person 7 p.m. committee meeting, once and for all. For many, prior to the pandemic, an 8 a.m.–9 p.m. in-office schedule was the norm for every or most every workday. Many chose not to leave the office at 5 or 6 because of a 7 p.m. meeting. It simply was not worth the commute time when, due to the schedule of our lay leaders, a post-work meeting was required.

Whether colleagues were working daytime hours in their offices or at home during the pandemic, they were much more frequently able to take a break to pick up kids from school, support an older relative, make a healthy dinner, take a dog for a walk, exercise, read a book, and generally pause their workday before picking back up for a virtual evening meeting. Many noted that they will never conduct those meetings in person again but would not have considered it possible prior to the pandemic.
4. An Increase In Gender Equity Is a Natural Outgrowth of Greater Workplace Flexibility

The ability to work fully or partially remotely during the pandemic has opened our field to a previously underutilized pathway toward gender equity in the workplace. The predominate mode of working in our society has had an impact on those most at risk in our workplaces. As Miller noted early in the pandemic:

The expectation of long hours at the office has been particularly hard on parents—especially mothers. Women, young people and people with disabilities have for years been among those on the forefront of pushing for more freedom in where work gets done. Perhaps not surprisingly, employers have offered many reasons they can’t give people quite so much autonomy. People can’t be trusted to get their work done on their own, they have said. Clients expect in-person, round-the-clock service. Running into co-workers in the hallway is sure to spur serendipitous ideas, right? And, people need to attend meetings, as well as meetings to prepare for those meetings and meetings to debrief after them. But in the last few months, it has become clear to everyone what was really going on. Corporate America just didn’t want to change.6

While women represent half of all entry-level employees, they make up only a third of senior managers and a fifth of C-suite level positions in the corporate world. As Jean-Nicolas Reyt explains, “One of the reasons women have a harder time advancing professionally is that they are much more likely than men to prioritize their family responsibilities over their careers. Giving employees more flexibility in choosing when and where they work can increase gender equality.”7

The pandemic showed us how our lives and careers interact during a time of crisis and lack of access to basic services and support. Further, with the level of stressors amplified by the pandemic, many clergy were able to be more open and honest about the challenges of balancing home and work responsibilities. Of note, the colleagues with whom I spoke who had the greatest success in this area had open lines of communication with their staff teams and lay leaders about the challenges they were facing during the pandemic, which provides an important model for our future work. We should seize this opportunity to continue to level the playing field in our profession and beyond.
5. We Need to Write a New *B’rit* of Trust with Our Staff and Co-Workers

When the pandemic hit and many of us immediately began working remotely and predominantly from home, this shift exposed many of the weaknesses and bad habits of our staff cultures. Too many of us, for too long, relied on the ability to drop in, unannounced, to a fellow staff member’s office to discuss a pressing (or not so pressing!) matter. While there are incredible benefits for innovation and collaboration from these spontaneous meetups, this unstructured approach is generally less effective, less productive, less reliable, and often places the burden on the less senior clergy or staff to drop everything and bend to a superior’s schedule.

What’s more, many colleagues agreed that in the early weeks of the pandemic, they often did not know when and if their fellow staff members were working at all, because the idea of “seeing” someone work in their office is so embedded for us in the idea of “doing” work. Those staff teams that already had a strong culture of regular staff meetings and established one-on-one supervision with their direct supervisors or those they supervise were naturally much better prepared to enter a remote work environment.

As Vinod Kumar described in a secular context, “We’re seeing a massive rewriting of the social contracts between employers and employees as a result of Covid-19.” We can explore what it means to have a new *b’rit* of trust with our fellow clergy and staff, putting in place or continuing supervision structures that are nimble enough to function remotely, in-person, or in a hybrid modality. Additionally, there are new opportunities to explore employing staff members for challenging-to-fill positions who may be completely remote. In fact, as Schwartz notes, “The coronavirus pandemic taught us the advances in technology can facilitate collaboration across and within teams despite operating from disparate physical locations.”

Many of the key lessons for the Future of Synagogue Work apply to where we will work, when we will work, how we will work, and what we will work on. Taking these changes that are both technical and technological, we can begin to make the adaptive changes that will open the most significant question of all: Why do we do this work that we do? Removing some of the stressors, challenges, and old habits of the pre-pandemic mode of many of
our daily work lives has enabled us to open our eyes to what can be. We can improve the creativity, innovation, flexibility, mental health, gender equity, and staff cohesion in our field. Let us make the most of this unexpected blessing to reshape the rabbinate for the future.

Notes


