

The Future of the Synagogue Post-Pandemic

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“Never let a good crisis go to waste.”

This aphorism, attributed to British Prime Minister Winston Churchill at the Yalta Conference with Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin and United States President, Franklin D. Roosevelt, in February 1945, may or may not be accurate. Like many such quotable sayings, the veracity of authorship is hardly important. It is the kernel of truth that resonates, especially during the global pandemic we are currently suffering.

The purpose of the Yalta Conference was for the three victorious countries to chart out the future of the world after the devastation of World War II. The purpose of this paper is to venture some thinking of how synagogues will be different – or the same – post-pandemic.

I am neither prophet nor prognosticator, but I will offer some thoughts, garnered through conversations with many leading rabbis, cantors, educators, executive directors, and lay leaders about their view of what will likely remain the same and what will likely change in synagogue life in the aftermath of the Covid-19 crisis.

The Hebrew word for crisis is *“mahshbear.”* Yet, in the Torah, the same word is used to describe the “birthstool,” the “point of birth” (Isaiah 37:3), (Kings 19:3), (Hosea 13:13), quite literally the “cervical opening.” In other words, “crisis” is equated with the “moment of birth,” the moment of something new.

What is “new” in synagogues that will be born of a pandemic? Permit me, then, to briefly explore Ten Suggestions.

1. *Synagogues will continue to embrace technology.*

When it became clear that every synagogue, along with every other organization and business in the world, would need to lockdown in early March 2020, synagogues turned to the internet as the vehicle for providing worship experiences, programs, and social connection. Few members of congregations had ever heard of the word “Zoom” and most had no idea of its functionality. Some clergy and staff had used Zoom for online conferences, but it was not widely in use. Likewise, most synagogues had no idea how Facebook Live or YouTube Live could be used to broadcast their programming. They may have had a Facebook page, but it was static. Some synagogues, mostly in the Reform Movement, offered their worship experiences as a “livestream,” but others might have thought “livestream” was something you found in the mountains. At best, these congregations had rudimentary technology – a single static camera fastened to the ceiling in the back of the sanctuary.

Miraculously, and I underline this word, nearly every synagogue in the world was forced to offer all its worship services and programming virtually overnight. This herculean task initially led synagogue leaders to learn how to livestream on Zoom and other platforms and then, when faced with planning the High Holy Day services in the Fall of 2020, many synagogues had to “up their game” by transforming sanctuaries into television studios, even though there was no budget to cover the costs that ran into the thousands, sometimes tens of thousands, of dollars.

“There is no going back . . .” – a common refrain among leading rabbis. If there is a silver lining to the pandemic for synagogues, this is it. The response to online worship and programming has far exceeded expectations. Especially for those who are elderly or infirm and unable to physically come to the building, the enhanced access provided by livestreaming has been invaluable. Yes, there was a learning curve both on the part of providers and viewers. Seniors needed help navigating their computers but, on balance, the response to nearly every offering has been positive. Now that so many people have learned how to use the technology, synagogue members will continue to expect the convenience of participating from the comfort and safety of home, even when synagogues can once again gather in “congregant settings.” A “hybrid” combination of in-person and livestreaming is likely to be common practice for the near and far future.

2. ***Worship services will be streamlined.***

The move to online prayer forced changes that would have been unthinkable before the pandemic, particularly in the Conservative Movement. Shabbat morning services that typically ran three hours were cut down to ninety minutes. The very long High Holy Day services were shortened to a couple of hours. Conservative rabbis appealed to the Committee on Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly for responsa on many issues, including this one. Was it permitted to slice portions of the *Pesukai d'Zimra*, the preliminary prayers? Could congregations eliminate the repetition of the Amidah in favor of a “*heicha kedusha*,” a quicker version? What about cutting the Musaf additional prayers altogether and a “triennial cycle” Torah reading? All these cuts were seen by many rabbis and cantors as absolutely necessary, even though they realized the traditionalists in the congregation would be appalled. Yet, there is a reality to “Zoom fatigue” as evidenced by the keen eye watching the numbers of “Participants” steadily drop the longer the service continued. To be blunt and realistic, before the pandemic a large number of congregants “voted with their feet,” arriving at 10:30 for a 9:00 service, effectively creating de facto 90-minute experiences of prayer.

Clearly, some synagogue will return to the longer service when congregants return in person. Among Orthodox congregations, there has been no streamlining of davening, although one Modern Orthodox rabbi reports: “The all-day Yom Kippur davening is unlikely to continue in my shul.” In fact, some synagogues have kept daily minyanim, Shabbat and holiday worship available throughout the pandemic in backyards, neighborhoods, and even in small groups within synagogue buildings.

Yet, among the liberal movements, more than one rabbi and cantor, not to mention the Jews in the pews, are quite pleased that the pandemic presented the opportunity for this significant change in synagogue practice. One rabbi put it to me this way: “Prayer must be conceived, organized and presented as an experience. We must be more attuned to the experience of the congregation before us than we are loyal to the authority of tradition dictating a traditional liturgy.”

3. *Synagogue Religious Schools and Day Schools Will Rethink Crafting Culture*

Our colleague Dr. Bruce Powell explored the impact of the pandemic on schools in his paper for this series, so I will reflect briefly on this topic. Distance learning has been a disaster for some kids, while others seem to be handling it well. The number one motivation to join a synagogue is school enrollment; one wag quipped “The best predictor of synagogue affiliation is when a couple gives birth to a 7-year-old child.” In synagogues with preschools, giving birth to a 3-year-old is the more likely scenario. The carrot of Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation is still salient in many communities, although in the larger Jewish urban areas, independent clergy and teachers offer both training and officiating a Bar/Bat Mitzvah at a much lower price point than typical synagogue dues. The time pressures on children from after-school activities has led to a steady decrease in the number of days and hours in supplemental religious schools.

Years ago, many Conservative synagogue schools went from three days a week to two to be competitive with the Reform temples that often offered programs of two days, or even one day a week. Online religious school has reduced contact time and like streamlined worship, there may very well be a demand from parents to continue this trend post-pandemic. As Dr. Powell will explain, synagogues with in-house day schools have experienced a boom in enrollment as parents fled closed public schools. The question remains: will the day schools be able to hang on to these “Covid Kids.” Whatever the school, the pandemic has raised the question of how to craft an embracing, relational culture among the students, faculty, staff, and families.

4. *Some synagogues will merge and/or collaborate.*

One striking realization that has swept over congregational leaders during the pandemic is this: a synagogue is not a building. When the doors were locked and all gathering moved online, the question arises: “Do we need all this infrastructure?” Hundreds of millions of dollars, precious valuable assets in the Jewish community are tied up in land and buildings that quite frankly are filled to capacity only a few times a year. The costs of maintaining these buildings, especially older facilities, are significant. In recent years, the necessity for heightened security has added enormous expense to keep people safe. We are

already seeing mergers of synagogues. Here in Los Angeles, Wilshire Boulevard Temple and University Synagogue announced a merger. There are other synagogues in serious deliberation. Some have already begun the collaborating by combining religious schools and/or youth groups. Throughout North America, there are mergers and, in some cases, synagogues going “out of business.” Some of these conversations happened before the pandemic as synagogue affiliation has declined; once again, the crisis has accelerated these moves, a consolidation that is likely to continue in the future.

5. *Synagogue operations will move online.*

There are many challenges facing synagogues seeking to engage lay volunteers. People are very, very busy. Traffic can be difficult. Two working parents of young children have tremendous time pressures. Moreover, synagogues often do a poor job of recruiting members onto committees, failing to do the basic work of learning about each person’s particular talents, passions, and gifts. Instead, new members are handed demographic forms which list the various committees doing the work of the congregation and an invitation (plea?) to join one. This strategy mostly fails. People know that if you volunteer for a committee, you will likely be made the chair immediately . . . and it will be a “life sentence” – you’ll never get off the committee.

The 20th century model of engagement was centered on volunteer committee work. People did find meaning in the work and established relationships with the other members of the committee – an important opportunity to become connected to the congregation and to new friends in the community. Given all these challenges, well-resourced synagogues have become almost exclusively staff-directed, with lay participation reduced to oversight. Some have reimagined “committees” as “teams,” with time limited on-ramps and off-ramps. The pandemic has demonstrated that the volunteer meetings are easier to do online than in person, a trend that it is likely to continue when the crisis subsides.

6. *Synagogues will ramp up mental and physical health efforts.*

Loneliness. Depression. Loss of job. Fear of going to the hospital. Anxiety. These are the terrible consequences of a nearly total lockdown of “normal” life for more than a year. Congregations have done an extraordinary job in reaching out to do whatever they could to serve people – with regular phone calls, pastoral counseling, deploying

volunteer psychologists, distributing food, sending gifts, reducing dues, and networking resources. These efforts will need to continue post-pandemic. Just as it took years to recover from the financial collapse in 2008, the devastating effects of the pandemic will be “long haul,” likely to require synagogues to pay attention, especially to those most vulnerable. We may see synagogues hiring a staff social worker or nurse.

7. *Synagogues will decentralize.*

In the *Relational Judaism Handbook*, my book with Rabbi Nicole Auerbach and Rabbi Lydia Medwin, we describe how congregations can mount a relational engagement campaign, both to deepen the connection between members and the congregation and, perhaps more significantly, between the members themselves. The critical strategy is to encourage the development of dozens of small groups of congregants, organized by affinity – what people enjoy doing together, demography – life stage, geography – where people live, and availability – when people can gather. The goal is to move from a congregation *with* small groups to a congregation *of* small groups. There is anecdotal evidence that the synagogues embracing this relational work have fared better during the age of Covid than those whose members are primarily in a transactional relationship with the congregation. Small groups have continued to meet online, in breakout rooms, and even in neighborhood gatherings with masks and social distancing. As the vaccine rollout continues and small groups of inoculated friends can gather, synagogues that embrace this work by hiring “engagement directors” will find a significant return on the investment.

8. *Membership models will continue to evolve.*

In 2013, the Synergy Project of the UJA Federation New York (UJA/FedNY) published a groundbreaking study titled “Connected Congregations: From Dues and Membership to Sustaining Communities of Purpose.” Building on the pioneering work of Dr. Dan Judson, the paper outlines the growing interest in “voluntary dues” as a revolutionary change in how synagogues bring in revenue. While a detailed examination of this membership model is beyond the scope of this paper, suffice it to say that the move of synagogue programming online will beg the question: “Why should I pay thousands of dollars in dues if I can now pray with the most engaging worship services in synagogues

anywhere in the world and learn from the most charismatic rabbis and teachers in the world for free?”

Undoubtedly, we will see more “Jewish digital vagabonds” who dip into different services and programs both through livestreams and archived content. This begs the question: “What is the value offer of membership in a congregation?” It must be a sacred community of sacred relationships that leads its members on a path toward *Meaning* – what is life all about? *Purpose* – what am I to do with my God-given talents and passions? *Belonging* – who will be with me during good times and bad? And *Blessing* – a community of relationships within which to celebrate the many lifecycle moments in my life? A number of congregations have gained members when they moved to the “sus-tainability” model.

9. *The emergence of international congregations.*

Certainly, many engaged members of congregations stayed with the offerings from their own synagogue during the last High Holy Days. But with the word-of-mouth circulating in the Jewish community about the highly produced services of congregations such as Central Synagogue (Reform) and Park Avenue Synagogue (Conservative) in New York City, intimate and challenging services at IKAR in Los Angeles and other Jewish Emergent Network “independent minyanim,” we may see the emergence of international congregations for the first time in modern Jewish history. These popular synagogues are fully aware of and concerned about this potential to overshadow neighboring congregations. The truth is that any congregation can now attract participation from all over the world, including the vast majority of Jews who do not belong to any synagogue.

10. *A global synagogue “homecoming.”*

Imagine the day when it will be safe for the pre-pandemic crowds to return to their spiritual homes. The moment will be electrifying. Hundreds of people streaming through the doors of synagogues to gather again in community. Even though masked, these vaccinated Jews and those in partnership with Jews will turn the lights back on in our sanctuaries, rededicating the synagogues of the world with song and dance.

Every synagogue leader is anticipating this moment. No one believes it will be September 6, 2021, the first night of Rosh Hashana,

5782, with thousands of people can gather in “congregant settings.” But maybe, perhaps, by Hanukkah, a most appropriate time of rededication, synagogues will “welcome home” large numbers of people. When I learned of the annual reunion in many churches called “homecoming,” I immediately imagined how wonderful it would be to invite synagogues to join together in a global network of synagogues celebrating the transition from “mourning to dancing”, as described in Psalm 30, verse 12. We would call it “Hanukkah Homecoming.” The community needs an aspirational goal, an imagining of a return to our relationships and a bright future for our synagogue communities. (Postscript: “Hanukkah Homecoming” featured 306 gatherings, both in person and online, in congregations throughout the world.)