

BEGINNING AGAIN

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Big questions have been circling around our minds over the past few weeks: How do we begin again after the pandemic that has so upended our lives, our communities and institutions? Are we turning or returning? Where are we heading and how do we get there?

The pandemic hit in way that amplified prior weaknesses and brought out new strengths in the Jewish community. Even before Covid-19, religious affiliation, participation, and identification in America were shifting. We saw synagogues close or merge at the same time we saw the birth and growth of alternative congregational forms like unaffiliated synagogues and independent minyanim. The pandemic struck an already dynamic world and sent it spinning. For congregations, the main hit was twofold—inability to gather and inability to be in their space (let alone the possibility of gathering in the space).

Over a year later, schools are reopening, indoor dining and movie theaters are slowly returning. States, cities, and industries are in the midst of planning for life post-pandemic. Synagogues have their own issues to consider during this transitional time. What should they do with their virtual services and classes, with the participants from across the country and around the globe who found them on the web, or with the “normal” expectations and costs of synagogue membership? How can we best work with Jews who may be rusty in their davening, removed from their usual Jewish practices, or who found new ways to engage (that may not include your synagogue)?

Our particular interest has been in relatively small congregations and congregations in small Jewish communities, which are often one in the same. Small size has its challenges, but it can also come with especially strong community and agility. As the saying goes, it is much easier to change the direction of a kayak than of an ocean liner.

What we offer here are guidelines into and through the post-pandemic period. Although our focus is on small congregations, we believe that these guidelines are applicable to many different settings in the Jewish community. The guidelines are organized as a set of questions to pose in your synagogue. We would encourage you to set up various forums for conversation in order to be as inclusive, productive, and creative as possible. We begin with our insights into how congregations weathered the Covid storm and then turn to key questions for planning how your synagogue will begin again.

How Congregations Weathered the Covid Storm

Our observation of Jewish organizations and congregations over the past year has shown some of the characteristics of those that successfully navigated the pandemic. Some credit the work

they did pre-pandemic—particularly in building community and in raising up their practices. Strengths developed over the years served them well during the pandemic. Without the earlier work, they believe they would have drowned in the storm.

Some of these congregations saw a gift of time in the pandemic and used it to take a step back and begin strategic planning for the unknown future. Given all of the uncertainties, this would seem counterintuitive. But, in fact, these efforts were motivated by the rich possibilities of the unknown and the need to revisit the purpose and essence of the congregation in changed times.

Those that weathered the pandemic pivoted to virtual meetings and conversations which kept them in regular touch with members, donors, staff, and other stakeholders. Rather than go silent when the doors closed, they became more conscientious than before in maintaining ongoing, regular—albeit virtual—touchpoints.

Covid stimulated their creativity. They embraced new approaches and tools for prayer, learning, and community. In some cases, they set aside halachic concerns with the use of technology and welcomed hundreds of Jews who learned how to mute and unmute themselves—both items we could not have predicted.

How to Begin Again

Post-pandemic, synagogues need to attend both to individuals and to the organization. In our work with and research on synagogues, we separate concerns with congregants (with all of their needs, interests, aspirations, and relationships) from concerns with the synagogue per se (with its services, programs, leadership and membership, budget and building). This distinction is especially important now as Covid-19 has profoundly affected us as individuals and has challenged our institutions and the broader community. This dual level of impact--on our lives and on our institutions--amplifies the stress we have experienced but also amplifies the support we have witnessed and felt. This we believe is manifest in every Jewish congregation.

Tending to the Community

At their best, congregations are there to celebrate their members' simchas and to support them in times of loss or distress. If your synagogue has developed such strength, now is the time to exercise it. Your members and participants are returning from fear, loss, isolation, and a disrupted year whose meaning is not yet clear. From there, they are entering into uncharted territory. As the surrounding society reopens, they may be feeling gratitude for the simple pleasures of life and life returned but also, perhaps, lingering fears, grief, or guilt. Suffice it to say we are in a highly emotional, liminal space.

How can your community support its members and participants in processing their pandemic experience?

- What happened to your constituents Jewish life, sentiments, understanding, commitments, and practice during the past 14 months? We suspect, for example, that many non-Orthodox Jews barely observed Pesach this year. They seemed to lack the energy for cleaning, preparing a feast, designing a new kind of *seder*. They groaned at the thought of a yet another Zoom seder. At the same time, we are seeing record numbers of people joining online learning programs and significant growth in the offerings from the movements and other educational providers. Where do your members stand—for better or for worse?
- How do you cultivate people’s newly-found gratitude—to retain what it felt like to be in the wilderness, to recall the kindness of others, to remember what the absence of touch felt like?
- How do you help them understand what they have gained and what they have lost during the pandemic? what they want to keep from the past year and what they want to let go of?
- What kind of rituals, conversations, groups, services, or activities could you create to help congregants pivot from what was to what will be, both for themselves as individuals and as part of a caring community?
- How do you help families compensate for their virtual lifecycle events? For example, can you compensate for a virtual shiva with a new ritual for the unveiling? Can you have a special blessing for the babies born during the pandemic that will celebrate their Jewish names? If an event passed with little Jewish meaning, is there a way now to coat it with religious or spiritual meaning?
- What Jewish history, texts, or teachings can enlighten your members’ understanding of what they are going through in the post-pandemic period? What wisdom, comfort, or motivation can we derive from our Jewish tradition?

Rethinking the Synagogue

The pandemic has also upended the synagogue. Many synagogues see their building as their core. It is their largest asset (and expense); it is the site for worship and activities; it is a home for the community. Covid-19 not only prevented congregants from gathering in person but literally closed the doors of the synagogue. It threw up a barrier to Jewish lifecycle events—the bris, bar/t mitzvah, wedding, funeral. All of these entail close physical contact, hugs, and shared food—all prohibited by coronavirus.

Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis¹ posits that the pandemic created a fundamental rupture in communal life at the same time that it created an historic moment to consider what comes

¹ Ephraim Mirvis is Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth. His article appeared in The Jewish Chronicle (The JC) on March 27, 2021.

next. Mirvis foresees a paradigm shift characterized by new appreciation for lifecycle events and scaled down, less ostentatious, celebrations; smaller, more personal home-based prayer experiences (in addition to synagogue services); hybrid events with their global audience, greater accessibility, and reduced dependence on presence in the building; shorter Shabbat and holiday services; more caring outreach to members. This is his list. What is yours? What does your institution have to do in order to pivot from what was to what will be?

Here are some questions to prime your planning for your (re)turn?

- What have you gained over the months of the pandemic? What do you want to keep from these gains (“Covid Keepers”) and what do you want to let go?
- Over the past year, what have you learned about your synagogue and congregation? For example, what strengths did your congregation manifest during the pandemic?

What have you lost? Of these losses, what do you want to recoup, reinvent, reject, or memorialize (i.e., hold in the congregation’s memory but not bring back to life)?

- As seen through post-pandemic eyes, what does your congregation value? Does your building, location, fabulous Kiddush, or large gatherings still hold the same place of importance? What do you now understand to be your treasures?
- Finally, what have you learned about the Judaism to which your congregation adheres? History has proven Judaism to be a highly adaptive tradition. American Judaism was in flux before the pandemic and was further affected by circumstances. What does that look like in your synagogue?

Conclusion

We are not at the end of the Covid journey and may not be for some time. We are not returning to a familiar “normal” but rather are in uncertain territory. Congregations need to solidify their identity, strengths, and values. They need to revisit their story and its meaning. They need to take full advantage of lessons learned from Covid. At the same time, our congregations need to learn how to function with a fluidity that matches that of the world around them. Now is a time for creativity and growth.

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