



6 Key Takeaways in Developing a Powerful New High Holiday Experience

By Rabbi Esther Lederman, Amy Asin, and Rabbi Leora Kaye

Like all of you, we at the [Union for Reform Judaism](#) know that the High Holidays in our congregations will have to be different this year. It is not simply a matter of choosing which platforms to use – Zoom or Facebook Live. The way the Jewish people are going to experience this moment in our calendar will be very different from years past.

We also know that our talented clergy, educators, executive directors, and lay leaders are carrying enormous burdens, not only in reimagining Jewish life in an era of quarantine, but in managing financial concerns, building management, and the ongoing trauma that they and their congregants now face.

We also know we are uniquely positioned to create something additive for congregations and their people. Instead of wondering how we can replicate the experience of previous years, we set out to ask a very different set of questions focused on human needs and values.

Thanks to a generous gift from the [Righteous Persons Foundation](#), the URJ engaged in a human-centered design process with the help of two highly skilled firms, [Mobius](#) and [IDEO](#). Through a series of conversations, we dug deep into the human needs of the Jewish community this year and tried to break down the High Holidays to their core essences.

The outcome is the URJ Reflection Project, a series of three signature experiences curated at reflect.reformjudaism.org. We at the URJ are now in a period of reflections focused on key takeaways and lessons learned. Here are a few of them.

1. Always start with the why.

When approached by the Righteous Persons Foundation, we were thrilled by the interest in funding something creative – and in this moment of financial strain, who wouldn't be excited by the influx of some needed funds? But both the foundation and the URJ were clear from the beginning: We needed to have bold vision of *why* we were doing this. What difference could this make in the world? We didn't start with strategy and tactics; rather, we began the conversation with purpose and vision.

2. Create a product that reflects that purpose.

For us, the product that would help us achieve our purpose was an experience, not a particular program or piece of liturgy. The care and beauty that went into building the URJ Reflection Project came from a desire to give people an invitation to something deeper, just for them.

3. Work with people you usually don't speak to.

As part of the discovery process, we brought together a diverse group of people that included clergy, other congregational leaders, creatives, and individuals who are Jewish-adjacent. Mobius helped us bring to the table an eclectic mix of thinkers and practitioners from other spiritual traditions and professions, including people who practice Islam and Buddhism, someone who studies loneliness for a living, someone who built an app for greater social connection, and many more. As beloved outsiders, they are able to imagine and see things that those of us on the inside just can't see.

4. Get into the hearts and minds of the humans who will ultimately use the product.

During the discovery process, we asked: What do people really *need* during the High Holidays? If the answer was, for example *Avinu Malkeinu*, for example, we asked them to go deeper: What does the music and liturgy symbolize for you? We continued asking deeper questions about how our final product would be used: What might be best for already-strapped congregational leaders? How would this work for someone who lives alone, or for a family with young children?

5. Speak to the audience you want, not just the audience you have.

We knew when we began this process that we had the possibility of reaching the people we usually reach (“Jews in the pews,” as we sometimes call them), but we also

wanted to reach those we don't always engage, like spiritual seekers. As we developed the URJ Reflection Project, we built that audience into our thinking – but in doing so, one of the struggles we faced was whether we would get pushback from the latter group about whether our final product had enough Hebrew or whether its Jewish essence was obvious enough. Still, we knew that if it looked like something that we'd always done, it wouldn't be bold enough to reach the new audiences we aimed to engage.

6. Judaism and its teachings are eternal, and we need to find new ways to translate its ancient wisdom into contemporary vessels.

Our deepest learning is an echo of a lesson taught to us by Casper ter Kuile, the Reverend Sue Phillips, and Angie Thurston of “[How We Gather](#)” and [Sacred Design Lab](#): Judaism and its teachings are eternal, and we need to find new ways to translate their ancient wisdom into contemporary vessels. The signature experiences we developed with IDEO and Mobius are an example of new ways of bringing Jewish insight and guidance into people's lives.

We invite you to visit reflect.reformjudaism.org and experience something new. Then [learn more](#) about the project, including key questions that were critical to guiding our creative process with design experts Mobius and IDEO.

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