



Disruptive Judaism: Will Your Synagogue Be Beit Blockbuster or Kehillat Netflix?

By Rabbi Paul Kipnes

[Editor's note: While this post is directed to synagogue change, the lessons discussed apply to every organization in the Jewish world: from the most nimble and innovative start-up, to the [entitlement-driven] legacy organizations, including federations, to established funders. As Rabbi Kipnes writes, there are no sacred cows.]

Whenever we get stuck in the midst of a synagogue brainstorming session or change project, I trot out my cherished \$50 Blockbuster gift card. It reminds us that unless our synagogue is willing to reexamine, bust through sacred cows, and innovate, we are liable to fall into irrelevance and disappear. That gift card warns us all that our synagogue – every *shul* actually – is in danger of becoming *Beit Blockbuster*.

Once upon a time, that \$50 Blockbuster gift card would have offered a full weekend of fun: VHS movies rentals, a tub of popcorn, and a bottle of Diet Coke. Today it's worth nothing. Its value went the way of the company itself.

Blockbuster, once the darling of the business world having owned or franchised almost 10,000 video stores, was slow to respond to the profound changes in the movie delivery and entertainment marketplace. Seemingly invincible, it long ago shuttered its business, its demise fated by its own failure to innovate.

Blockbuster fell to a young startup named Netflix, which began renting DVDs, which soon morphed into sending rented DVDs by mail, which then morphed into online streaming of movies and TV shows as part of a low cost subscription service, which then transformed into the "Netflix Original" content generator. Netflix overtook Blockbuster because Netflix was creative, nimble, and willing to disrupt the marketplace – slaying its own sacred cows – again and again. More often than not, Netflix came to define its chosen marketplace.

Synagogues are Facing Disruption Too

It is no secret that the synagogue world, like every other "marketplace," has been facing disruption. Diverse market forces assault our religio-business model, combining new ways of

accessing Jewish knowledge, community and experiences to pressure our one-time monopoly.

These forces include, but are not limited to:

1. An ancient dues-based membership system that fails to respond to the flourishing economic philosophy of “pay only for what you will use.”
2. The loss of an automatic client base: recent generations are unwilling to pay for synagogue membership just because their parents did.
3. The disconnect between synagogue visions and the reality: just because synagogues say we are communities, caring, and inspiring does not mean we really are.
4. The collective inability to throw open the synagogue doors to offer an authentic, uncompromising audacious welcome to all Jews and Jewish families, individuals, and couples, of all household structures, gender combinations, ethnic/racial backgrounds, ages and economic statuses.
5. The desire of Millennials and others for a do-it-yourself (DIY) Judaism that is inspiring, socially just, radically welcoming, lower cost, and deeply meaningful.
6. Our failure to meaningfully engage new and growing market shares: Snapchat, Instagram, and Starbucks are reaching teens – why aren't we?
7. A growing over 65-year-old population who are releasing themselves from the shackles of job, mortgage, and family pressures to enter middleclass and sometimes retirement.
8. Young families – especially interfaith – still seeking an affordable but meaningful way in.
9. A philanthropic world so enamored with the new that they fail to partner with or fund legacy institutions that are committed to emulating Netflix.

Too Many Synagogues are Still Plodding Along

The above is far from an exhaustive list of the market changes synagogues face (for example, we must address how to better teach Jewish texts and traditions), yet as terabytes of data (zettabytes, soon enough) are collected and analyzed to explicate the market disruptions and personal forces at work, too many synagogues just keep plodding along. Like Blockbuster, they fail to make deep changes to how we do the business and ritual of synagogue life.

Like in many American synagogues, the leadership of [Congregation Or Ami](#), a small Reform Jewish synagogue in Calabasas, California, just 22 years old, is constantly evaluating the present and trying to divine the future. Listening to the prognosticators of disruptive Judaism, we have been taking risks, shredding sacred cows (a *korban* to draw closer to the Holy One), [revising our vision](#), and attempting to embrace a radical creativity that we hope will transform us into *Kehillat Netflix*.

Six Strategic Risks Toward Becoming Kehillat Netflix

Guardedly, we are experiencing some successes, which we attribute to six strategic risks:

1. Throwing Out Dues

When the [Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles](#) offered [workshops on alternative financial models for synagogues](#), we showed up and immediately embraced potentially painful choices. We asked successful business leaders, "If there were no sacred cows, and everything was on the table, how would you restructure the synagogue's financial model along successful business models?" We surveyed congregants for insights on what made the synagogue unique and worthy of their involvement and donations. As with all of our changes, we worked in a small group because we recognize that successful planning process ought not to be large, or consensus driven, so that we do not end up with the lowest common denominator. We invited a congregant with a Stanford MBA to do a big data analysis of our 5-year dues and giving trends. A nimble task force, headed by two Deloitte alumni congregants, studied at the feet of Rabbis Kerry and Avi Olitzky (authors of [New Membership & Financial Alternatives for the American Synagogue: From Traditional Dues to Fair Share to Gifts from the Heart](#)).

Within 11 months we transformed a clunky dues structure with 15 membership categories into a [partnership program based on a 4-tiers of benefits](#). We offered a low cost entry option into the synagogue, lowered the financial commitment for those whose children matriculated out of our educational programs, and created incentives for others to raise their financial commitment with Sustainer and Builder levels that offered tiered benefits (including the ability to give away a free year's partnership).

During year one, 18 former households returned to the fold, an additional 10 households converted their High Holy Day ticket costs to full partnerships, and we halved our resignation rate. Over four years we are experiencing meaningful growth and guardedly are optimistic about the future. (We believe an organization should always be "guardedly self-critical" in its financial analyses.)

2. Slaughtering Even the Most Beloved Sacred Cows

No program should be immune from analysis and when warranted, sunseting. Only with such laser-focused commitment to excellence will synagogues succeed.

[Rabbi Julia Weisz](#) and her nimble Educational Dream Team accepted the challenge of the Union for Reform Judaism's then [Campaign for Youth Engagement](#) to transform our teen program. They held parlor meetings with parents, took teens for ice cream, and after reflection, threw out our once innovative one-size fits all Temple Teen Night program.

In its place, we innovated [Triple T \(Tracks for Temple Teens\)](#), a multipronged approach to teen learning and engagement that offered multiple tracks for Jewish and synagogue involvement. Each year, for the last four, the tracks changed, and have included [Future Coaches](#), VolunTEENS, intergenerational *Tikkun Olam*, and the Madrichim Leadership Institute. Though the community is facing an inverse bubble of smaller class sizes, we are expanding our reach, giving teens significant responsibility (they [plan the 4-6 grade retreat](#) and have [led Yom Kippur Neilah services](#)) and provide real world skill development (lesson planning, event organizing, resume writing and interviewing skills development). Teen involvement and post-B'nai Mitzvah retention has grown dramatically. (Since this article was drafted, our Triple T Dream Team completed another analysis, and has rolled out its next generation teen program, now called [The HUB](#).)

3. Sunsetting the Once Brightest Stars

Our [Mishpacha Family Alternative Learning program](#) won national awards, served as the training ground for some 25 HUC-JIR masters of education students, and educated a large percentage of our synagogue's adult leadership. It birthed at least 6 copycat programs around the country. Yet we sensed that Mishpacha became tired and we needed to engage a slightly younger population.

So, based on Mishpacha Dream Team research and participant interviews, and emboldened by just the possibility of receiving a Federation PK-12 Transformation Grant, our Dream Team decided to sunset Mishpacha and create in its place an outreach effort targeting families with younger children, and especially the under-engaged and interfaith markets. We analyzed their interests, discovered a deep desire for parenting advice with a Jewish twist, and nostalgia for their Parent and Me experiences. We developed two financial models (one with, and one without, the Federation grant.)

Last year we introduced [Mensch-ify](#), a lower cost 15-session Jewish parenting workshop and pre-K to 6 learning experience. Participants discover how to "mensch-ify" their families, learning through Jewish texts and traditions to nurture kindness and compassion in themselves, their kids and their families. Now entering its second year, Mensch-ify is again beating its target projections. Saying goodbye to Mishpacha was difficult and pulled on heartstrings, but we realized that Kehillat Netflix could not be shy about innovating if it wants to avert the fate of Beit Blockbuster.

4. Keeping an Eye on the Changing Marketplace

Once a synagogue that focused on pediatric Judaism, we were moved by research showing that within twenty years, over 65 year olds would become 30% of the American population. This demographic has the time, interest, and, if inspired, the resources to engage. We transformed our staff-led program efforts into a volunteer-led CPC (Communications and Program Committee) with a mandate to create activities that feel like a value-added to synagogue partnership. The CPC in turn partnered with the Partnership Committee to build

relationships among distinct populations within the synagogue. People now show up, share dinners, and invite out newer partners to welcome them home. Our newest Dream Team is exploring how the Village movement can expand our shul's engagement with the over 50 population.

5. Realigning Program with Vision

Our strategic vision aims for the synagogue to be a magnet for families of young children (without opening a preschool). As such, we refocused our efforts for this group as well. Our new [Kid-ish Club, for tots and the families that love them](#), is laser-focused on creating value-added, open-to-the-community activities at places people like to go, including My Gym (*Toss and Tumble Tot Shabbat*), the Beach (*Beach Shabbat*), and the local Park (*Or Ami's Concert in the Park with Jason Mensches*). Most activities have no cost (except an occasional nominal fee for dinner). For those who want a more formal connection, we also reduced the Young family partnership fee to well-below the cost of a High Holy Day ticket. Also, without a Nursery School of our own (a strategic decision to remain focused on our core), we arranged with three local synagogue-based preschools for our partners to enroll at their synagogues' own member rate. It's a win-win: our partners get great schooling for their kids and those synagogues get to fill their classes and gain extra revenue. Our Kid-ish Club participation is doubling every nine months!

6. Doubling Down on Intentional Warmth and Hospitality

Business owners drilled into us that "it's all about customer service." Intentional hospitality is the hallmark of who synagogues must become. Our Marketing Team has utilized branding slogans including "No One is more welcome than you," "At Or Ami, people matter most," and recently "Congregation Or Ami: You're Home." People walk into *shul* and the staff has been trained to stop what they are doing to look up and warmly welcome with a smile. *Oneg* cookies in the fridge – available for the taking – reminds people that *Congregation Or Ami: You're Home*. Nametags at every event and service encourage people greet each other by name. At services, the cantor starts the services on time while the rabbis roam around to greet veterans and newbies alike. Before services end, worshippers are coached on approaching each other and shmoozing during the *oneg*.

Our High Holy Day services, and both our internal and external efforts, are filled with intentional rituals and messaging that "no one is more welcome at Or Ami than you!" We [publicly name and engage previously marginalized segments](#) of the Jewish world.

Additionally, we model clergy availability. Fourth graders on up receive their rabbis' cell phone numbers because when the crisis hits, we want to be accessible. Of course, we teach them and their parents about what is an appropriate reason to reach out and when calls should only be for real crises.

Synagogues Have No Inherent Right to Exist

I have come to realize that no individual synagogue has the inherent right to exist. Even as synagogues have holy purpose. If synagogue leadership can reach far out of our comfort zones and beyond our inner circles, we just might divine approaches to make our case and create on-ramps toward holiness and success.

While nothing guarantees our synagogue's creative survival in the marketplace of the changing Jewish world, we are constantly being thoughtful and strategically self-disruptive. Why?

Because resting on our past successes is a one-way ticket to our own demise.
Because an unwillingness to take on the real challenges facing the synagogue world will be our downfall.
Because believing our own marketing literature hides a sometimes uncomfortable reality.
Because failure is right around the corner.

Unless we are willing to consider slaughtering sacred cows.

Unless we strategically pivot.

Kehillat Netflix takes its name from a company that openly and confidently takes chances, risks failure, goes up against conventional wisdom, constantly pivots strategically, and thus has so far ensured both its survival and its success. *Beit Blockbuster* closed down.

The choice is pretty clear: *Kehillat Netflix* or *Beit Blockbuster*. Which one will your synagogue become?

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