



Lessons From Transitioning In The Pandemic

By Rabbi James Greene

In February, I left the JCC in Springfield, MA where I was the assistant executive director for the past 5 years to become the Executive Director of another Jewish agency, Camp Laurelwood in Madison, CT. Jewish camping is deep in my soul, and having the chance to lead a Jewish agency was a professional goal that had been 15 years in the making. Although I was sad to leave my team and community, it was an opportunity that I could simply not pass up. The Executive Director of the JCC was supportive of my decision and excited for me to take this next step. We set a timeline of late-April to transition, and I made my announcement to the staff and Board the following week. Then, in early March the world changed forever, and my role at Camp Laurelwood went from incoming ED to Crisis Manager.

Now twelve weeks into my new role, things are seeming to stabilize as we settle into the new normal. As I reflect on what has been an incredible period of challenge and possibility, there are several guiding lessons that I am carrying with me in my work. Although I don't believe that I have mastered any of these core practices, they are goals that I keep printed out on my work-from-home desk and are core values that I have shared with my lay leadership and my staff team as we navigate choppy waters. These are also not my ideas alone. I am incredibly lucky to have exceptional mentors and leaders who have supported my growth and are invested in my success.

1. **Transition Timeline is Meaningless in a Crisis**

In late-March, just two weeks after I announced my departure, the COVID-19 crisis fully consumed the world community, the JCC where I had worked for the past five years needed my leadership to stand up virtual programs that would keep us going for the next several months. The organization was not accustomed to virtual programs or remote work, and this required significant shifts in workflow and learning curves from staff members who did not have appropriate technology at home and those who were trying to master unfamiliar technology to maintain contact with the community. At Laurelwood, we were also struggling to understand the crisis and brace for the financial impact of losing a full year's revenue 2/3 of the way through the fiscal year.

The board was working through needing to apply for loans and secure investments from donors and stakeholders.

Although I was not supposed to fully transition until late April, it became clear that I could not hold off jumping in. I had been hesitant, initially wanting to be very intentional in how I left my role at the JCC and set my team up for future success. As the focus of the crisis became more clear, I saw that the transition timeline was meaningless. I needed to step up into my new role and trust my team at the JCC to allow me to step back. At the end of March, with the virtual programs fully standing, I arranged with the leadership of the JCC to leave early so that I could focus my attention on Camp and help the organization and leadership stabilize.

The timeline I had in my head and that I had so carefully crafted to provide a smooth exit and onboarding to bridge my work at these two organizations went out the window. As soon as I was able to recognize that, and move on from it, I was able to actually better serve both organizations. In the crisis, I learned that while the process I had structured for the transition was helpful, the timelines I built for the transition were meaningless.

2. Teams matter. Relationships matter. Process Matters

In my leadership, I prioritize relationships. As the pandemic first began to unfold, one of the toughest challenges I faced with leading a new team became even more complex; building relationships with my new staff team, lay leaders, campers and parents, key funders, and stakeholders. I could not visit in person with anyone. Even to this day, I still have not met the person charged with organizing fundraising efforts for Camp. Knowing that these relationships were going to be key to our surviving the pandemic, I set about guiding my work around building these relationships that would help us weather the pandemic, and also nurture Camp well into the post-pandemic future.

For our staff, this meant organizing virtual check-ins on a daily basis. My team needed to get to know me, and I needed to get to know them. This was the only way we were going to build trust in an uncertain moment. In addition to our virtual check-ins, I left notes and small gifts for the staff as we rotated through the office. They learned about my love of lavender when I left small bottles of lavender scented hand sanitizer on their desks. And, they learned about my homestead when I brought fresh eggs and left them in a fridge in the office. And, in the feedback I got from those interactions, I learned about their journeys, what brought them to Camp, and why they have stayed connected.

For our campers and parents, it meant an even more intentional kind of communication plan. We held parent and camper Zoom meetings so I could get to know the community, share a bit about my vision for Camp, and hear about the things that they loved about Laurelwood. Most of these interactions included joyful activities like playing Camp games virtually, learning about favorite Camp meals and activities. It was an easy way to connect and speak directly to parents during this challenging moment. I was then able to share that feedback with our donors and lay leaders to help them see how we could support our Camper community. We were able to guide Camp's response through those relationships and that process in meaningful ways toward virtual programming, and also toward in-person Family Camp experiences in the wake of our summer residential camp programs being canceled.

Working backward from my end goals of a staff team that trusted one another, a camper and parent community that trusted the staff team and me as a new member of the family, and stakeholders and lay leaders that were willing to invest the deep time and resources necessary to move Camp past this moment, we were able to develop a process that would bring us there. And during this uncertain time, the certainty of a process, and the trust that it bred, allowed for the relationships to form and grow, even in this unusual time.

3. **Don't Just Do Something, Stand There**

In my first Wilderness First Responder training class, my instructor used this as a mantra. His lesson was that when we rush into things, we make mistakes or don't see the whole picture. That action can put the rescuers at even greater risk.

As the pandemic unfolded, there was so much intensity and energy to immediately shift and stand up programs, workflow, and finances in ways that felt hectic and rushed. We were all running a marathon at the pace of a sprint, and we were headed for burnout. Most importantly, as we rush to shift and stabilize, we run the risk of making critical errors. When I came on board, we did make some immediate shifts. But, those shifts were about the safety of the organization and the immediate critical needs of our community. As we took in information, got our bearings, and planned a thoughtful response as a team, we became better prepared to handle the shifting ground underneath us. It made us better as an organization, stronger as a team, and helped us to succeed. Most importantly, it allowed us to see the opportunity through the crisis, not just the chaos.

4. **Know Your North Star**

A colleague used to ask me, what is our north star? In moments of challenge where important decisions are being made quickly, we need to know what guides us, and

what guides our work. That personal vision, and the personal narrative that is behind it, played an important part of my own values-based decision-making process. It was how I connected early on with parents, stakeholders, and board members. It was also how I supported my staff team as the crisis unfolded, particularly in the difficult moments where our Camp was forced to close due to our Governor's order.

My north star was the relationships. I recognized that, if Camp was going to survive and meet the challenge of this moment, then we needed to know that all we had in the moment was one another. We quickly stood up a series of camper and parent virtual meetings, I scheduled virtual coffees and check-ins with as many board members as I could, had one-on-one discussions with many of our key stakeholders and partners, and met daily with our staff team to ensure that everyone was in the loop. In every decision we made, we talked openly about how it would impact our relationships with the community, campers, stakeholders, and staff. And it guided us to ensure we did not lay off staff, prioritized open and frank communication with parents, and helped guide our refund policy and virtual programming offerings. Although I made mistakes along the way, understanding and articulating our north star allowed for a framework of trust that proved successful.

5. **Keep a List For The Day After**

In 2019, I began working with a mentor as part of the Mandel Foundation's Executive Leadership Program. Allan, who has since become one of my most powerful teachers and guides, remains a critical support person who helped me navigate during my transition and through the beginning of the pandemic crisis. During one of our phone calls, he gave me a critical piece of advice that I knew, but was not acting on: he reminded me to keep an eye toward the horizon, and to keep a list for what I needed to do and where I wanted to lead after the crisis stabilized. It stopped me in my tracks, because Allan was reflecting back to me that I had been looking down at the problem, instead of looking out to see what was ahead. That is a key role of a leader, and something I needed to keep in the forefront of my mind.

Since then, I keep a list on my notebook of horizon items. They are things that, although important, may not be possible right now. It includes things like culture shifts I want to support within my agency, a warehouse of programmatic ideas, ritual and identity changes for Camp, and other things that might have happened during my first year in this role. Obviously, this year now looks dramatically different than I initially envisioned. But, that work that I imagined when I accepted this role in February, is still there. It is just on the horizon for the moment. And, spending time dreaming about that horizon is what gets me out of bed in the morning and calls me to this work.

6. **Leaders Lead in Hard Moments and Create Abundance**

Perhaps more than at any moment in my career, the crisis brought out a sense of scarcity within the Jewish professional world. Organizations around the country shunted resources to their core out of a belief that their resources would dry up. I saw this from both national and local organizations. Even when organizations put funding into the field, they often did so in ways that were not as useful or bred that culture of scarcity. One notable exception to this was the Harold Grinspoon Foundation and the JCamp 180 program, which quickly stood up the All Together Now matching grant program. It preached a culture of abundance, and allowed camps to present from a place of strength when we approached our stakeholders to invest in the future of Jewish camping.

Leaders lead in hard moments. Rather than shunting to our core, I advocated for a different approach where we would instead consider ourselves to be a resource for the greater community. That belief drove our decision-making because we believed that if we made decisions in service of the community, that the resources would be there to sustain us. We opened up Camp for folks who needed to get out of larger urban areas to come and self-isolate. Our staff team stood up virtual programming that was free and open to everyone, and we partnered with other organizations to ensure we were not duplicating efforts. I reached out to our area JCC day camps and started a collaborative meeting space for camp directors to process information, collaborate on resources, and share PPE. And, when we canceled our programs for the summer, we sent out a letter to our families encouraging them to send their campers to JCC day camps in their home communities. If our goal is to be in relationship with our families, then we need to look out for them. At times, it was scary because we were not always met with that same sense of abundance and support by others. But, we continued to ask the question of how we could be a resource for other community agencies. That question led us to a place of service, and eventually to a sense of abundance that we could share in this difficult moment.

7. **The Crisis Sped Up the Evolution of Jewish Life – But It Was Already Happening**

When the pandemic first began, I had moments where I was filled with concern that the Jewish world I loved was going to be forever changed in ways that were not in keeping with our values; that we would let the pandemic and financial crisis guide our decision-making and lose sight of who we are. In fact, I have come to believe the opposite. While the crisis dramatically sped up the revolution happening in Jewish life across our continent, the evolution was already underway. Organizations who have realized that and have leaned into it have been the ones who have shifted most effectively. I am comforted that, as we swim in this moment, we are still in the same stream; even if we are moving a bit faster now toward that emerging future.

There is a beautiful Jewish folk story of King Solomon, who asked an artisan to craft a piece of jewelry that had inscribed on it words of eternal truth. The artisan returned with a ring that had the words “*gam zeh ya’avor* – this too shall pass” etched in it. The artisan said that in moments of joy, King Solomon could look at the ring and appreciate the joy while knowing it would not be eternal. And, in moments of sadness he could look at the ring and know that the moment would pass.

These last few months have been an insanely complicated time to transition into my first executive role. There is no rule book or guide for navigating a moment like this. But, I am fortunate to not be in this work alone. I have mentors, friends, colleagues, and lay and staff partners who have been with me at every step. They have taught me core lessons, held me accountable to my own values, and supported my leadership. Most importantly, they have helped breed a sense of abundant possibility, and allowed us to invent a future that we can move toward with confidence – knowing that, just like Solomon’s wisdom, this moment will pass. When it does, I believe the story we tell about our values and actions during the pandemic will reflect the best of us.

Rabbi James Greene is the new Executive Director of Camp Laurelwood, in Madison, CT. Prior to his current role, James worked in the JCC movement for the previous decade. He is a board member of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association.

<https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/lessons-from-transitioning-in-the-pandemic>